

The Sovereignty of God

Part 3: God's Purposes

God's Decrees and Foreordination

The Certainty of God's Purposes Being Fulfilled

Since God is clearly all-powerful and all-knowing, governs His creation by a mighty providence, and inevitably brings His plans and purposes to pass, we see that God's purposes are *immutable (unchanging and certain)*. The Bible plainly declares that God's purposes will be established in history because His counsel (plans and purposes) are certain.

Psalms 33:11: The counsel of the LORD stands forever, The plans of His heart from generation to generation.

Proverbs 19:21: Many are the plans in a man's heart, But the counsel of the LORD, it will stand.

Hebrews 6:17-18: ¹⁷In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, ¹⁸in order that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we may have strong encouragement, we who have fled for refuge in laying hold of the hope set before us.

Question #85: List words and phrases from the above passages that affirm the immutability of God's plans and purposes. _____

Question #86: If even one of God's plans and purposes failed to come about, what would we have to conclude about the Bible? _____

This discussion of God's decrees is clearly related to His sovereign authority. Since God is omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent, He necessarily decreed everything that happens. He has *declared* or *proclaimed*, according to His counsel and will, everything that comes to pass. This *decree of God* cannot be thwarted or hindered, because His *invisible hand* providentially carries it out in history. The Bible plainly declares that *God will bring to pass what He wills in His sovereign decree*.

Isaiah 46:9-11: ⁹Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, ¹⁰**Declaring the end from the beginning** And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, "**My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure**"; ¹¹Calling a bird of prey from the east, The man of My purpose from a far country. **Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it.**

Consider the words of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* on the Decrees of God:

Question 7: What are the Decrees of God? **Answer:** The Decrees of God are, His eternal purpose, according to the counsel of His will, whereby, for His own glory, He hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass.

Ephesians 1:9-11: ⁹He made known to us **the mystery of His will**, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him ¹⁰with a view to an administration suitable to the fulness of the times, that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things upon the earth. In Him ¹¹also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined **according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will**,

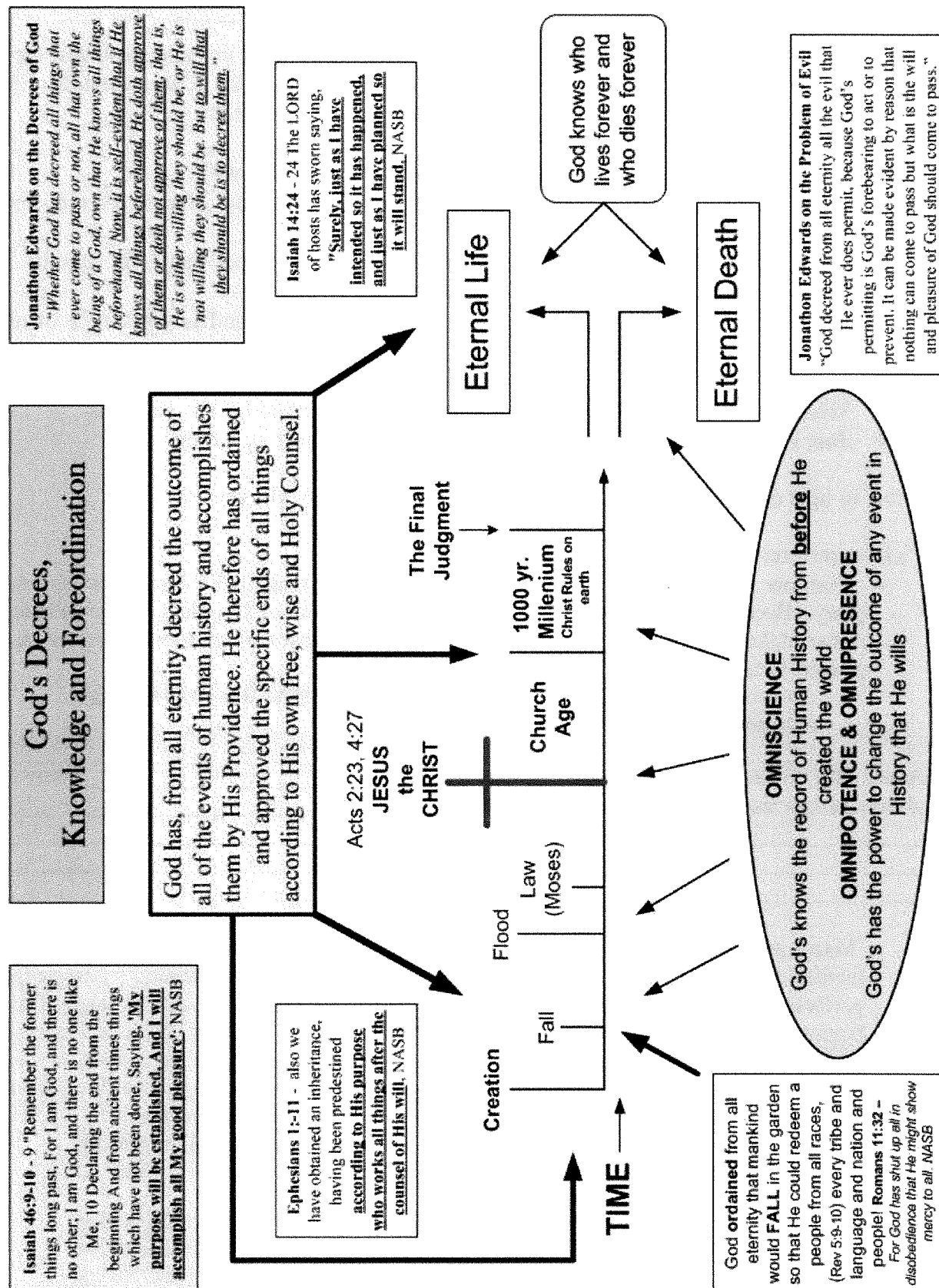
Whatever comes to pass has been **eternally decreed by God**. This means that God has **approved** (in the sense of permitting or preventing them) all of the events of history. This we call **foreordination**. God has **fore** (from before time began), **ordained** all that ever has happened or will happen in history. Jonathan Edwards described **foreordination** like this: “*Whether God has decreed all things that ever come to pass or not, all that own the being of a God, own that He knows all things beforehand. Now, it is self-evident that if He knows all things beforehand, He doth approve of them or doth not approve of them; that is, He is either willing they should be, or He is not willing they should be. But to will that they should be is to decree them.*”

Numbers 23:19: God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent; **Has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?**

Jonathan Edwards also addressed God’s decrees in relation to the problem of evil: “*God decreed from all eternity all the evil that He ever does permit, because **God’s permitting is God’s forbearing to act or to prevent.** It can be made evident by reason that nothing can come to pass but what is the will and pleasure of God should come to pass.*” (Job 12:13-22; Proverbs 8:14-16; Isaiah 40; Acts 2:23, 4:28) Learn then that history is the product of God’s eternally wise planning, creative purpose, providential preservation, and common grace. God fills space and time with His presence, sustains it, and gives it purpose and value. The omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent One is Lord of time and history, not vice versa. His purposes are providentially accomplished in time and space.

Isaiah 14:24-27: ²⁴The LORD of hosts has sworn saying, “**Surely, just as I have intended so it has happened, and just as I have planned so it will stand,** ²⁵to break Assyria in My land, and I will trample him on My mountains. Then his yoke will be removed from them, and his burden removed from their shoulder. ²⁶**This is the plan devised against the whole earth;** and this is the hand that is stretched out against all the nations. ²⁷**For the LORD of hosts has planned, and who can frustrate it? And as for His stretched-out hand, who can turn it back?**”

Question #87: On what basis (bases) did God foreordain whatever comes to pass? _____



The Nature of God's Decrees and Foreordination

As we consider the decrees of God (His eternal purposes and plans), let us understand that they reflect His very nature. Reflecting on God's attributes helps us define and understand His purposes. In relation to His decrees then we must recall that God's nature is:

- **Holy:** God is absolutely perfect and pure.
- **Omnipotent:** God is all-powerful and free to do all His holy will.
- **Omniscient:** God is all-knowing, having perfect knowledge of past, present and future events.
- **Omnipresent:** God exists in all space and in all of past, present, and future eternity.
- **Eternal:** God has always been, is now, and always will be.
- **Self-Existent:** God had no beginning, will have no end, and is the source of all beings, things, knowledge, and power.
- **Sovereign:** God is the supreme authority; His decrees are irresistible.
- **Wise:** God's plans all work together in harmony to accomplish His purposes.
- **Just and Righteous:** God cannot do anything evil, unjust, or wrong.

Therefore in light of God's nature, let us now consider the nature of His decrees.

God's Decrees are:

- **Glorious:** The chief end or final cause contemplated in all God's decrees is His own glory. Because God is infinite and perfect, the revelation of His glory and excellency is the highest of all existing purposes. All other purposes of creation, therefore, are properly and necessarily subordinate to that end.

**Romans 11:36: For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things.
To Him be the glory forever. Amen.**

Question #88: What is the chief end of all God's decrees? _____ Why is it right and proper that this be the chief end of all God's decrees? _____

- **Many and one:** God's decrees are all reducible to one eternal purpose. All of the manifold events of history form one great purpose or plan. Because God's knowledge perfectly encompasses past, present, and future, He approved of His plan, from beginning to end, at the time He made it. **Charles Hodge** explains, "*It is inconsistent with the idea of absolute perfection, that the purposes of God are successive, or that He ever purposes what He did not originally intend: or that one part of His plan is independent with other parts. It is one scheme and therefore one purpose.*"²²

Isaiah 41:4: Who has performed and accomplished it, **Calling forth the generations from the beginning? I, the LORD**, am the first, and with the last, I am He.

Isaiah 46:9-10: ⁹Remember the former things long past, For I am God and there is no other; I am God and there is no one like me, ¹⁰**Declaring the end from the beginning** And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying,

²²Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 537.

Question #91: Explain in your own words how divine foreknowledge necessitates that God's decrees comprehend all the events of human history. _____

- **Immutable:** God's decrees are perfect and therefore cannot change. This is to say that whatever God has determined will come to pass, because He has also determined the means by which they come to pass.

Jeremiah 4:28: For this the earth shall mourn, And the heavens above be dark,
Because I have spoken, **I have purposed, And I will not change My mind, nor will I turn from it.**

Psalms 33:11: The **counsel of the LORD stands forever, The plans of His heart**
from generation to generation.

Question #92: What specific comfort do you derive from the fact that God's decrees are perfect and therefore cannot change? _____

- **Inclusive of the ends and the means:** God's decrees ordain all of the means by which His purposes are established. Since God's purpose is being carried out in an infinitely complex world of causes and effects, His purposes include all of the causes and effects necessary to accomplish them. Clearly, His eternal plan includes all of the means by which His ends are attained. *The Westminster Confession of Faith (On Providence: articles 1, 2, 3)* explains:

1. God, the great Creator of all things, doth uphold, direct dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.

2. Although in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly, yet, by the same providence, he ordereth them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.

3. God, in his ordinary providence, maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure.

Consider how even the free choices of people ultimately accomplish the eternal purposes of God. Scripture clearly affirms that the decisions we make every day are part of God's means of fulfilling His decree.

Acts 4:27-28: ²⁷For truly in this city there were gathered together against Thy holy servant Jesus, whom Thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, ²⁸**to do whatever Thy hand and Thy purpose predestined to occur.**

Ephesians 3:8-12: ⁸To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, ⁹and to bring to light