

CHAPTER IV

THE DECREES OF GOD

By the decree of God is meant His purpose or determination with regard to future events. It means that things come to pass according to a Divine purpose rather than by a fixed natural law or blind fate or capricious chance. To deny the decrees or foreordination of God is practically to dethrone Him. It puts Him on the sidelines as an interested but helpless spectator to what is going on.

"A universe without decrees would be as irrational and appalling as would be an express train driving on in the darkness without headlight or engineer, and with no certainty that the next moment it might not plunge into the abyss" (A. J. Gordon).

"Plan and purpose as we may, the plans and purposes will turn only to the final end which God has predetermined" (Henry).

"We give thanks to God for blessings which come to us through the free actions of others, but if God has not purposed these blessings, we owe thanks to others and not to God" (A. H. Strong).

"The Scriptures make mention of the decrees of God in many passages and under a variety of terms. The word 'decree' is found in Psalm 2:7: *"I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee."* In Eph. 3:11 we read of His 'eternal purpose': *"According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord"*; In Acts 2:23 'determinate counsel and foreknowledge': *"Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain"*; In Eph 1:9 of his 'good pleasure': *"Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself."* God's decrees are called His 'counsel' to signify they are consummately wise. "Counsel is mine, and sound wisdom: I am understanding; I have strength" (Prov. 8:14). They are called God's 'will' to show He was under no control, but acted according to His own pleasure. *"Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will"* (Eph 1:5). When a man's will is the rule of his conduct; it is usually capricious and unreasonable; but wisdom is always associated with 'will' in the Divine proceedings, and, accordingly, God's decrees are said to be the 'counsel of His own will" (A. W. Pink).

"Victor Hugo, recognizing the overruling divine hand, said, 'Waterloo was God.' God in the exercise of His infinite wisdom and power, so personally directs and controls the free actions of men as to determine all things in accordance with His eternal purpose" (E. H. Bancroft).

Positive and Permissive Decrees

All things were not decreed in the same sense. Sinful acts of men were not decreed in the same sense as were righteous acts. God is the efficient cause of all that is good, while evil is only permitted and directed and overruled for His glory. The sinful acts of men which God decreed permissively will certainly be done, but in doing them men are giving expression to their own inherent depravity. *"Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee: the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain"* (Ps. 76:10). The good deeds of men are decreed efficiently, which means that God works in them *"For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure"* (Phil. 2:13).

"Careless seems the great avenger;
 History's pages but record
 One death grapple in the darkness,
 Twixt old systems and the Word.
 Truth forever on the scaffold;
 Wrong forever on the throne;
 But that scaffold sways the Future;
 And, behind the dim unknown
 Standeth God, within the shadow,
 Keeping watch above His own."

- Lowell.

God's Secret and Revealed Will

The decrees of God belong to His secret will; the commands of God belong to His revealed will. *"The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law"* (Deut. 29:29). God's secret will is the rule of His actions; His revealed will is the rule of our actions. God's secret will embraces all things; His revealed will embraces all we ought to do. The secret will of God is His program, according to which all things come to pass; His revealed will gives us our program according to which we are to work.

The decrees of God are not addressed to men, and have nothing to do with human responsibility. It may be that God has decreed a poor crop year, but that is no reason for failure to plant and cultivate. God may have decreed a famine, but that does not justify idleness. God may have decreed the death of the writer this year, but that does not keep him from regarding the laws of health and safety. God decreed the death of His Son, but that did not make it the duty of men to

crucify Him.

God's Decrees and Free Agency

God's decrees determine the free actions of men, that is, the decree makes their actions certain but not a necessity. God's decrees are not executed by compelling man's will, therefore they are not inconsistent with man's freedom. *"For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, For to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done"* (Acts 4:27,28). God's decree made the death of Christ certain, but it laid no necessity upon any man. None of the men were compelled to do the foul deed. In crucifying the Lord of glory they were giving free expression to their thoughts and feelings toward Him. They were fulfilling the Scriptures, and executing God's eternal purpose, without knowing it: *"Which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory"* (I Cor. 2:8). *"I speak not of you all: I know whom I have chosen: but that the scripture may be fulfilled, He that eateth bread with me hath lifted up his heel against me"* (John 13:18). *"But they cried out, Away with him, away with him, crucify him. Pilate saith unto them, Shall I crucify your King? The chief priests answered, We have no king but Caesar"* (John 19:15).

God's Decrees are Eternal

If God has any purpose concerning the happenings of the universe it must, of necessity, be eternal. To deny this is to suppose some unforeseen event that made it necessary for God to change His purpose. All of God's purposes were formed in wisdom, and since he has power to execute them, there is no reason for any change. *"Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world"* (Acts 15:18). *"Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure:"* (Isa. 46:9,10).

Practical Value of the Doctrine

It magnifies God in His wisdom, power, and sovereignty. It puts Him on the throne where He should be and is ever and always. There are no crises with God, no perplexing problems to ponder, no forces beyond His control. He moves with majestic step toward the consummation of His eternal purpose in Christ to the praise of His glory.

The believer is humbled at the sight of such a great God, and his soul is bowed in adoring wonder and worship. It will save the believer from undue familiarity with God in prayer and other acts of

devotion. Some men pray as if God were on their level; to them He is not the August Being the Scriptures represent Him to be. Much of the poetry and other literature coming out of this war is too irreverent and merely represents God as a sort of comrade in arms. But the Scriptures say that *"God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, and to be had in reverence of all them that are about him"* (Ps. 89:7).

"This doctrine is one of those advanced teachings of Scripture which requires for its understanding a matured mind and a deep experience. The beginner in the Christian life may not see its value or even its truth, but with increasing years it will become a staff to lean upon. In times of affliction, obloquy, and persecution, the church has found in the decrees of God, and in the prophecies in which these decrees are published, her strong consolation. It is only upon the basis of the decrees that we can believe: *"And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose"* (Rom. 8:28) or pray: *"Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven"* (Matt. 6:10)." A. H. Strong.