



God's Eternal PURPOSE

Our only sure source of information about God's purpose is God's word. William Paley in his famous work *Natural Theology* describes what a savage on some remote island would think if he found a watch lying on the shore of his island. Though uncivilized and thoroughly ignorant of watches, he would conclude that someone made the watch and that he had some definite purpose in mind in designing it as he did. Similarly, any unbiased mind considering the evident design of the universe must conclude that it is the work of a great designer who had a specific purpose in designing it as He has. The trouble is that since the fall, no man by nature has an unbiased mind. Before the fall, Adam could read the purpose of God in every part of His creation. But the fall "put man's eyes out," as Cornelius van Til says. The result is that sinful men have ever since been reaching false conclusions about God and His purpose.

Such human speculations are vain. God has spoken clearly about His purpose for His creatures. True wisdom bows humbly before that revelation and says, "Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight" (Matthew 11:26).

The *Shorter Catechism* reminds us that God's eternal purpose is the outworking of what He decreed from eternity: "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" (Question 7); "God executeth His decrees in the works of creation and providence" (Question 8).

The Eternity of God's Purpose

The Bible says that God "worketh all things after the counsel of His own will" (Ephesians 1:11). The events of time are not matters of chance or accident. There is a definite reason behind everything that happens and that reason is rooted in the eternal purpose of God. "My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure" (Isaiah 46:10). As the hymn says, "Before time began we were part of His plan."

How different is the plan of God from the plans of man. Man's plans have a beginning in time but God's plan is eternal and precedes time. Man's plans are often the result of consultation with others as wise as, or wiser than, he is. How different is the eternal plan of God. The triune God consults with no one but Himself: "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor?" (Romans 11:33–34). There is no one to whom God could make appeal, for His purpose begins and ends in Himself. Man's plans take shape consecutively, or bit by bit over a period of time; God's do not. His purpose is eternal and simultaneous. He includes all that ever comes to pass in one indivisible decree and has planned the end from the beginning.

The Execution of God's Purpose

Everything that happens does so according to God's eternal plan. He never changes His eternal purpose. "The counsel of the Lord standeth for ever, the thoughts of His heart to all generations" (Psalm 33:11).

Nothing happens that God has not planned; nothing He has planned can fail to happen. Man's plans are always subject to change. He may change his mind or discover that his original plan was flawed. He may lack the wisdom, skill, or power to implement his plan. Or the influence of other people or things may force him to change it. None of these things could ever be true of God's plan. It is unchangeable. What God purposed from eternity comes to pass exactly as He decreed. Even those things which men put down to accident or chance are included in His eternal purpose.

God's purpose includes the free choices of men for good or evil. He makes even the wrath of man to praise Him (Psalm 76:10). Peter clearly taught this truth on the day of Pentecost when he stated that the death of Christ was at one and the same time the result of God's decree and of man's wicked action: "Him being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain" (Acts 2:23).

Thus, God is not the author of sin. The fact that He has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass does not free man from his moral responsibility and accountability for his actions. The *Westminster Confession of*

Faith summarizes the teaching of Scripture on this matter: "God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established" (Chap. 3, sec. 1).

Simply put, though God has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass, men act according to the inclination of their own wills. They do what they desire to do and are therefore responsible for all their moral choices and actions. Human reason cannot penetrate the mystery of *how* God's sovereign purpose maintains His creatures' moral freedom and accountability within the control of His eternal purpose. Divine revelation simply states that He has done so.

The fact that God will fulfill His eternal purpose with complete success should be a source of great comfort to God's people. Amid all the difficulties and problems of life, they know that God is over all and in all and that "all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

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The End of God's Purpose

The good of His people, therefore, lies very close to the heart of the purpose of God. It is an end of which He never loses sight. But it is not the ultimate end of His eternal purpose. The ultimate end of all God's plan and purpose is His own glory. Everything else is a means to that end. Revelation 4:11 states this very clearly: "Thou art worthy, O Lord to receive glory, and honour, and power: for thou hast created all things, and for Thy pleasure they are and were created." Ephesians 1:11–12 makes the same point: "In [Christ] . . . we have obtained an

inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will: that we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ."

The execution of God's decree in this universe does not make God more glorious. That would be impossible to do, for the infinite God is perfectly glorious as He is. However, while His glory cannot be increased, it can be declared and manifested. God is pleased to display His glory in the fulfilment of His purpose in the lives of His creatures. That means that the highest privilege we can have is to declare the glory of our creator and redeemer. This is the supreme honour of those who, conquered by God's grace, live in joyful submission to His will to the praise of His glory. ■

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