

We Believe in God

Study Guide

LESSON
FOUR

GOD'S PLAN AND WORKS



THIRD MILLENNIUM

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HOW TO USE THIS LESSON AND STUDY GUIDE

This study guide is designed for use in conjunction with the associated video lesson. If you do not have access to the video, the study guide will also work with the audio and/or text versions of the lesson. Additionally, the lesson and study guide are intended to be used in a learning community, but they also can be used for individual study if necessary.

- **Before you watch the lesson**
 - **Prepare** — Complete any recommended readings.
 - **Schedule viewing** — In the Notes section of the study guide, the lesson has been divided into sections that correspond to the video. Using the time codes found in parentheses beside each major division, determine where to begin and end your viewing session. IIM lessons are densely packed with information, so you may also want to schedule breaks. Breaks should be scheduled at major divisions.
- **While you are watching the lesson**
 - **Take notes** — The Notes section of the study guide contains a basic outline of the lesson, including the time codes for the beginning of each section and key notes to guide you through the information. Many of the main ideas are already summarized, but make sure to supplement these with your own notes. You should also add supporting details that will help you to remember, describe, and defend the main ideas.
 - **Record comments and questions** — As you watch the video, you may have comments and/or questions on what you are learning. Use the margins to record your comments and questions so that you can share these with the group following the viewing session.
 - **Pause/replay portions of the lesson** — You may find it helpful to pause or replay the video at certain points in order to write additional notes, review difficult concepts, or discuss points of interest.
- **After you watch the lesson**
 - **Complete Review Questions** — Review Questions are based on the basic content of the lesson. You should answer Review Questions in the space provided. These questions should be completed individually rather than in a group.
 - **Answer/discuss Application Questions** — Application Questions are questions relating the content of the lesson to Christian living, theology, and ministry. Application questions are appropriate for written assignments or as topics for group discussions. For written assignments, it is recommended that answers not exceed one page in length.

Notes

I. Introduction (0:20)

II. Plan of God (2:16)

A. Biblical Perspectives (3:21)

The Scriptures use several different Hebrew and Greek terms related to the theological concept of God's plan or plans.

- Old Testament families of Hebrew words:
 - *chashav* (חָשַׁב) – to think, to plan, to determine
 - *zamam* (זָמַם) – to purpose, to plan
 - *yaats* (יָצַא) – to give counsel, to decree
 - *rahtsown* (רָצוֹן) – pleasing, favorable
 - *chaphets* (רָצוֹן) – pleasing
- New Testament Greek terms:
 - *boulé* (βουλή) – purpose, counsel, decree, will
 - *prothesis* (πρόθεσις) – purpose, plan
 - *theléma* (θέλημα) – will, desire
 - *eudokia* (εὐδοκία) – pleasure

The Scriptures often use similar terminology to signify different concepts and different terminology to signify similar concepts.

1. Divine Immanence (5:46)

The Bible teaches that God is immanent; he condescends and fully engages his finite, temporal and changing creation.

Passages that focus on God planning as a dimension of his immanent engagement with creation:

- Jeremiah 18:7-8 – God makes many historical plans (*chashav*) that come and go as he interacts with his creation.
- Luke 7:30 – God's divine purpose (*boulé*) within a particular historical setting can be rejected.
- 1 Thessalonians 5:18 – God's will (*thélema*) can be given as specific instruction.

Theologians often call this type of biblical instruction the "prescriptive will of God," or God's prescribed commands.

God's prescriptive will is often unfulfilled because his creatures disobey what he commands.

- Matthew 23:37 – Jesus longed (*thélema*) to save his people, but they "were not willing."

The historical plans of God are finite, temporal and quite often changeable.

2. Divine Transcendence (13:19)

Scripture also speaks of God's plan in ways that reflect his divine transcendence.

Passages that depict God's plan in sharp contrast to his historical engagements with creation:

- Isaiah 46:10 – God's purpose (*yaats*) and pleasure (*chaphets*) are unchanging, and cannot fail.
- Job 42:2 – God "can do all things; no plan (*zamam*)... can be thwarted."
- Ephesians 1:11 – God works out his plan (*prothesis*) "in conformity with the purpose (*boulé*) of his will (*thélema*)."

God's plan is:

- all-encompassing (includes everything)
- eternal
- unfailing (cannot be thwarted)
- Acts 2:23 – God's "deliberate plan" (*boulé*)
- Acts 4:28 – God's "will" (*boulé*)
- Hebrews 6:17 – God's "purpose" (*boulé*)

These verses refer to the "decretive will of God" — what God has ordained as a firm decree, something that will happen without fail.

- John 6:39-40 – The will (*thélema*) of God is his sovereign decree; it cannot be frustrated, or overturned.

B. Theological Positions (20:34)

Many Christians have emphasized only one side or the other of how the Scriptures speak of God planning.

1. Extreme Outlooks (21:40)**• Fatalistic Theology**

"Fatalism" explains everything that happens in history almost exclusively in terms of God's transcendent plan.

Fatalism fails to give due weight to what the Bible teaches about God's plans as he interacts with creation.

Those who adhere to this view answer several key questions in these ways:

- Does God plan something and then set it aside while interacting with creation? "Never."
- Are God's counsel or decrees ever frustrated? "Of course not."
- Can the will and pleasure of God ever be thwarted? "Impossible."

When the Bible indicates other answers, fatalists argue that it merely describes events as they appear, not as they are.

- **Open Theology**

This view explains nearly everything that happens in terms of God's immanence.

Open theology fails to give due weight to God's eternal, all-encompassing, unfailing plan.

In this view, other than a few events, the success of God's plans depends entirely on history and the choices of spirits and human beings.

Open theists generally answer key questions in these ways:

- Does God have an all-encompassing, eternal, and unfailing plan for history? "No."
- Are God's counsel and decrees ever frustrated by human rebellion? "It's almost always possible."
- Can the will and pleasure of God ever be thwarted? "Quite often."

Open theists insist that God's eternal, unfailing plan only refers to a few select events.

2. Centrist Outlooks (30:19)

The mainstream of systematic theology has affirmed both sides of what the Scriptures teach about God's plan:

- God has an all-encompassing, eternal, and unfailing plan for history.
- As God engages his creation, he forms many plans that are limited in scope, temporal and changing.

Evangelicals that hold to centrist outlooks would answer key questions in these ways:

- Does God have an all-encompassing, eternal and unfailing plan for history? "Yes."
- Does God make specific plans as he involves himself in the course of history? "Yes."
- Will the *eternal* plan, purpose, counsel, decrees, will and pleasure of God be accomplished without fail? "Yes."
- But can God's *historical* plans, purposes, counsel, decrees, will and pleasure be thwarted? "Yes."

Evangelical theology has sought to affirm both God's transcendent, eternal plan and his immanent, historical plans.

Differences among those who endorse centrist outlooks:

- **Order of Eternal Decrees**

The "order of God's decrees" refers to the logical order of the elements involved in God's eternal plan for history.

- supralapsarianism – "above (*supra*) the fall (*lapsus*)"

God's decree to save his people should be placed before his decree to permit humanity's fall into sin:

- 1) The decree to save
- 2) The decree to create
- 3) The decree to permit the fall
- 4) The decree to accomplish and offer redemption
- 5) The decree to apply redemption in Christ

- infralapsarianism – "beneath (*infra*) the fall (*lapsus*)"

God's decree to save his people should be placed after his decree to permit humanity's fall into sin:

- 1) The decree to create
- 2) The decree to permit the fall
- 3) The decree to save
- 4) The decree to accomplish and offer redemption
- 5) The decree to apply redemption in Christ

- sublapsarianism – "under (*sub*) the fall (*lapsus*)"

The decree to save came after God's decree to offer redemption, not before:

- 1) The decree to create
- 2) The decree to permit the fall
- 3) The decree to accomplish and offer redemption
- 4) The decree to save
- 5) The decree to apply redemption in Christ

Most evangelicals recognize that the logical order of eternal decrees is beyond what God has revealed in Scripture.

- **Eternal Decrees and Foreknowledge**

Three New Testament passages highlighted in these discussions:

- Acts 2:23 – Christ's crucifixion was according to “God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge.”
- 1 Peter 1:1-2 – God’s elect have been “chosen according to the foreknowledge of God.”
- Romans 8:29 – “those God foreknew he also predestined.”

Two ways evangelicals have applied these passages:

- God’s foreknowledge was the basis of his decrees.

God knew the course of history and, on this basis, decreed the eternal plan by which all events would unfold without fail.

OR

- God’s decrees are the basis of his foreknowledge.

God planned or decreed everything that would happen in history, which gave him foreknowledge of everything that would happen in history.

Despite debate, theologians can agree that Scripture teaches that God foreknows everything, and has foreordained everything.

“We, indeed, place both doctrines [of foreknowledge and eternal decrees] in God, but we say that subjecting one to the other is absurd” (John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, 3.21.5).

Both views reflected in centrist evangelical outlooks are crucial to the Christian life:

- Everything in life takes place as God has ordained.
- God turns history in one direction or another, often depending on the choices we make.

III. Works of God (44:24)

A. Creation (45:13)

God created all things *ex nihilo* or “out of nothing” (Genesis 1:1; John 1:3; Hebrews 1:2).

This understanding of creation is a rejection of:

- Polytheism – gods or god-like forces joined with God in the work of creation.
- Pantheism – identification of God with his creation.
- Dualism – creation has existed from all eternity alongside God.

Systematic theologians recognize a two-fold division of creation: "heaven and earth," or "visible and invisible" (Colossians 1:16; Genesis 1:1).

Creation is God's cosmic palace or temple, with heaven above and earth below, the invisible above and the visible below (Isaiah 66:1).

Israel's temple was modeled after this twofold arrangement of the creation:

- the most holy place, or "the holy of holies" – represented God's reign in the upper, invisible realms of creation.
- "the holy place" and "the outer court" – represented the lower, visible realms of creation.

The goal of history is that God's glorious reign in the upper, invisible world will fill all of creation, above and below, so that every creature will worship him forever.

1. Invisible Dimensions (50:22)

- **Arrangement**

The preternatural world:

- heaven or the heavens
- realms that are invisible to human beings, except when God grants supernatural visions of them.

The invisible, heavenly realms are arranged as the upper, exalted dimensions of God's cosmic palace:

- God's "roof chamber" (Psalm 104:3)
- "heaven, [God's] dwelling place" or "heaven, the place of [God's] enthronement" (1 Kings 8:30)
- "[God's] lofty throne, holy and glorious" (Isaiah 63:15)
- "the third heaven"; a "paradise ... [of] inexpressible things" (2 Corinthians 12:2)
- "the highest heavens" (Deuteronomy 10:14; Psalm 115:16)

- **Occupants**

God is the most glorious of all the occupants of heaven.

Heaven is a place where God sits on a throne and engages his heavenly creatures (1 Kings 8:27; Job 1:6-12; Daniel 7:9-11; Luke 22:31).

Jesus sits at the right hand of God the Father in the court of heaven. (Acts 2:31-33).

Heaven is filled with the departed souls of the faithful, as well as with spiritual creatures:

- "spirits" (Matthew 8:16; Hebrews 1:14)
- "sons of God" (Psalm 29:1; 89:6)
- "holy ones" (Psalm 89:5,7; Zechariah 14:5)
- "messengers" (Daniel 4:13; Psalm 91:11)
- "armies" or "hosts" (Psalm 148:2; Daniel 8:10)
- Some spirits are assigned responsibility for nations on earth (Psalm 82)
- Gabriel, Michael – prominent angelic leaders, serving God on behalf of his chosen people
- Cherubim – serve as guardians of God's holiness
- Seraphim – minister before the throne of God

Like the rest of creation, all of the heavenly spirits were first created good.

The "elect angels" remain faithful to God (1 Timothy 5:21), but some spirits rebelled against him (John 8:44; 1 Timothy 3:6; 2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6).

Satan and the other evil spirits continue to participate in the heavenly court (Job 1:6-12; Psalm 82; 2 Chronicles 18:18-22).

A place of eternal judgment has been prepared for fallen angels in the netherworld, along with human beings who rebel against God.

2. **Visible Dimensions (59:29)**

- **Arrangement**

Systematic theologians use Genesis 1–2 to discern how God arranged the visible aspects of his palace:

- Day 1: day and night; light and darkness
- Day 2: sky and seas
- Day 3: dry land and plant life

- **Occupants**

At times, occupants of the invisible heavens appear in the visible world to serve God's divine purposes.

The Bible also reports "theophanies" — visible appearances of God himself.

Genesis 1 focuses primarily on the visible occupants of the physical world:

- Day 1: light and darkness ... Day 4: sun, moon, and stars
- Day 2: sky and sea ... Day 5: birds and sea creatures
- Day 3: dry land and plant life ... Day 6: animals and human beings

Only humanity has the special role of being the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:28).

The goal of history was for the perfection, beauty and holiness of Eden to extend to the far reaches of the earth.

The primary instrument for this expansion of God's holiness and glory was humanity, his image and likeness.

When Christ returns, he will fill the earth with God's holy images and make all things new (Philippians 2:10-11).

B. Providence (1:07:00)

The Latin term *providentia* speaks of God “attending to,” “sustaining,” or “taking care of” creation as he works out his eternal plan.

Distinction theologians make when speaking about providence:

- God as the "First Cause" – the ultimate cause behind everything that happens in history
- "second causes" – different facets of the invisible and visible realms that also cause events to occur in history

1. Importance of Second Causes (1:09:28)

"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" (Westminster Confession of Faith, 5.2).

The expression “to fall out, according to the nature of second causes” has been the cause of much debate by theologians:

Some have argued that God is not just the "first Cause," but the *one and only* Cause (God as the "Cosmic Puppeteer").

Scripture confirms that God sustains all of creation and that “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

Scripture also teaches that God grants certain facets of creation the ability to function as significant second causes of historical events.

Three ways that aspects of creation function as historical causes:

- "necessarily" – the ways many aspects of creation accomplish God's purposes mechanically, or by consistent laws of nature (e.g., Genesis 8:22).
- "freely" – functions of second causes that are not mechanical, but are not necessarily intended (e.g., Exodus 21:13; 1 Kings 22:29-34).
- "contingently" – the ways that the intentional choices of human beings and spirits cause things to happen in history (e.g., Genesis 2:17; Romans 10:9).

2. God and Second Causes (1:17:49)

"God, in his ordinary providence, maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure"
(*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 5.3).

Two distinctions of God's providence made in the *Confession*:

- **Ordinary Providence**

God ordinarily "make[s] use of means," or works through the second causes he has created. (e.g., Romans 10:14-15; Psalm 103:20-21).

God's use of means leads systematic theologians to the subject of "theodicy": the vindication of God's goodness in view of the existence of evil.

Two ways God's ordinary providence helps us grasp how God can be holy and good when evil exists in his creation:

- God is sovereign over evil (e.g., Job 1:6-12; Luke 22:31-32; Matthew 6:13).

- God himself never *causes* evil (James 1:13-14).

The responsibility of evil rests on second causes that rebel against the commands of the One who made them.

- **Extraordinary Providence**

God is also “free to work without, above, and against [means], at his pleasure.”

- without means: God does things directly in history.
- above means: God goes beyond the normal effects of second causes.
- against means: God reverses the ordinary results of second causes.

The Bible highlights many examples of God's extraordinary providence.

Even today, God is free to do things in ways that we do not expect.

IV. Conclusion (1:28:13)

3. In verses like Colossians 1:16, we see the initial twofold division that God established in creation. What is this twofold division, and what does it mean that creation is God's cosmic palace or temple?

4. What does the word "providence" mean? What does God's work of providence entail, and how does God accomplish his providence in the world?

Application Questions

1. To what extent can human beings influence God and his actions? How does this shape your understanding of God's sovereignty?
2. What does it mean for God to change his mind? Support your answer with references from Scripture.
3. Think of a time when you or someone close to you disobeyed God. What were the immediate consequences? What effect do you think this disobedience has had, or will have, on God's plans for you or your loved one?
4. How can we avoid both fatalism and open theology in our preaching and ministry?
5. Review the different views on the order of God's decrees. Which view seems most logical to you? Why? What difference does your view make in your life and ministry?
6. The Scriptures teach that God foreknows everything and that he has foreordained everything, including eternal salvation. What do you believe is the basis for God's decrees? Are they based on his knowledge of our choices or simply on his good pleasure?
7. Is it freeing or limiting to know that God has an eternal plan for you and his creation? Explain your response.
8. How should the twofold division of creation and the understanding that all of creation is God's cosmic palace influence your life and ministry?
9. Demons exist and impact our world in a variety of ways. How should we as believers contend with the demonic forces around us in our life and ministry?
10. Only humanity has been made in the image and likeness of God. What does this mean to you personally? How should this truth affect the way we treat others who are different from us?
11. Even though God is the primary (first) cause of all things, he works through a variety of second causes to accomplish his purposes. How does this fact both comfort and challenge you?
12. How would you explain to someone else that God is holy and good when evil exists in his creation?
13. The lesson teaches that faithful followers of Christ should expect to experience God's extraordinary providence. Have you witnessed God's extraordinary providence in your own life? If so, how did this experience change you?
14. What is the most significant thing you learned in this lesson?