

# We Believe in God

Lesson 4

God's Plan and Works

Manuscript



**thirdmill**

Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.

© 2015 by Third Millennium Ministries

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means for profit, except in brief quotations for the purposes of review, comment, or scholarship, without written permission from the publisher, Third Millennium Ministries, Inc., 316 Live Oaks Blvd., Casselberry, Florida 32707.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 International Bible Society. Used by Permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers.

### ABOUT THIRDMILL

Founded in 1997, Thirdmill is a non-profit Evangelical Christian ministry dedicated to providing:

#### **Biblical Education. For the World. For Free.**

Our goal is to offer free Christian education to millions of pastors and Christian leaders worldwide who lack sufficient training for ministry. We are meeting this goal by producing and globally distributing an unparalleled multimedia seminary curriculum in English, Arabic, Chinese, Russian, and Spanish. Our partner ministries are also translating our curriculum into more than 20 additional languages. Consisting of graphic-driven videos, printed instruction, and internet resources, Thirdmill curriculum is designed to be used by schools, groups, and individuals, both online and in local learning communities. We also offer free, structured, certified biblical and theological training in multiple languages through our Thirdmill Institute.

Over the years, we have developed a highly cost-effective method of producing multimedia lessons of the finest content and quality. Our graphic designers, illustrators, and producers adhere to the highest production standards and use state-of-the-art equipment and techniques. Our writers and editors are theologically trained educators, our translators are theologically astute native speakers of their target languages, and our lessons contain the insights of hundreds of respected seminary professors and pastors from around the world.

In order to accomplish our distribution goals, Thirdmill has forged strategic partnerships with churches, seminaries, Bible schools, missionaries, Christian broadcasters, satellite television providers, and other organizations. These relationships have already resulted in the distribution of millions of video lessons to indigenous leaders, pastors, and seminary students. Our websites also serve as avenues of distribution and provide additional materials to supplement our lessons, including audio sermons, lectures, electronic books, and materials on how to start your own learning community.

Thirdmill is recognized by the IRS as a 501(c)(3) corporation. We depend on the generous, tax-deductible contributions of churches, foundations, businesses, and individuals. For more information about our ministry, and to learn how you can get involved, please visit [www.thirdmill.org](http://www.thirdmill.org).

# Contents

<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>PLAN OF GOD.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Biblical Perspectives.....	2
Divine Immanence.....	2
Divine Transcendence.....	5
Theological Positions.....	7
Extreme Outlooks.....	7
Centrist Outlooks.....	10
<b>WORKS OF GOD.....</b>	<b>14</b>
Creation.....	14
Invisible Dimensions.....	15
Visible Dimensions.....	18
Providence.....	20
Importance of Second Causes.....	20
God and Second Causes.....	22
<b>CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>CONTRIBUTORS.....</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>GLOSSARY.....</b>	<b>28</b>

# **We Believe in God**

## **Lesson Four**

### **God's Plan and Works**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

---

At one time or another, many of us have made big plans for the future, things we hope to accomplish in life. Small children often imagine that fantastic things are in store for them. Young adults frequently set grandiose goals. But the older we get, the more obvious it becomes that we may succeed in fulfilling some of our plans, but not all of them. In the final analysis, we simply don't have the forethought or the ability to accomplish everything we want to do. Well, in many respects, the very opposite is true of God. The Bible reveals that God has a plan. But unlike the plans you and I make, God's plan will not fail. In the final analysis, he has the forethought and the ability to accomplish everything he wants to do.

This is the fourth lesson in our series *We Believe in God*. In this series we've been exploring the doctrine of God, or theology proper, in systematic theology. We've entitled this lesson, "God's Plan and Works." And we'll explore how evangelical systematic theologians have approached the plan of God and the works by which he accomplishes his plan.

As you'll recall, in earlier lessons we focused our attention on the attributes of God. Under the influence of Hellenistic philosophies, patristic and medieval theologians typically gave top priority to identifying and explaining the perfections of God's essence. And the same has been true for most evangelical systematic theologians throughout the centuries. But God's attributes aren't the only focus of theology proper. The doctrine of God has also given a great deal of attention to God's plan and to how he fulfills his plan.

Our lesson on God's Plan and Works will divide into two main parts. First, we'll consider what the Scriptures teach about the plan of God. And second, we'll look into the works of God. Let's begin by turning first to what we mean by the plan of God.

#### **PLAN OF GOD**

---

As we've seen in this series, apart from the variety of terms we use, evangelicals have held many beliefs in common about the attributes of God. But the same cannot be said when it comes to the plan of God. This topic has been quite divisive because it touches on controversial issues like divine foreknowledge and predestination. Well-informed evangelicals have held very different outlooks on these topics throughout the centuries. And it's unlikely that we'll ever come to complete agreement on them. So, our goal in this lesson will be to discuss these matters as much as we can in ways that promote mutual understanding and respect among various evangelical groups.

To move toward this goal, we'll consider the plan of God from two directions. First, we'll explore biblical perspectives on this subject — what the Scriptures say about

God's plan, or plans. And second, we'll note how these outlooks have led to various theological positions among evangelicals. Let's begin by looking at biblical perspectives on the plan of God.

## BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES

In systematic theology, the expressions “plan,” “decree” and “decrees of God” have had rather specific and consistent, technical meanings. But the Scriptures use several different Hebrew and Greek terms related to this same theological concept in a variety of ways. They speak directly of God's plan or plans, but they also refer to his purpose, his counsel or decrees, his will and his good pleasure. We have in mind the Old Testament families of Hebrew words related to: *chashav* (חָשַׁב) usually translated “to think,” “to plan” or “to determine”; *zamam* (זָמַם) normally translated “to purpose” or “to plan”; *yaats* (יָצַא), meaning “to give counsel” or “to decree”; *rahtsown* (רָצוֹן), usually rendered “pleasing,” or “favorable”; and *chaphets* (רָצוֹן) also translated “pleasing.” We should also add the New Testament Greek terms: *boulé* (βουλή), often rendered “purpose,” “counsel,” “decree” or “will”; *prothesis* (πρόθεσις), usually translated “purpose” or “plan”; *theléma* (θέλημα) meaning “will” or “desire,” and *eudokia* (εὐδοκία), which is usually translated “pleasure.”

In contrast with the ways technical terms are used in systematic theology, these and similar expressions in the Bible do not have specific and consistent meanings. As we've said many times in this series, the Scriptures often use very similar terminology to signify different concepts and they use different terminology to signify very similar concepts. In fact, the meanings of these and other closely related Hebrew and Greek terms often overlap in the Scriptures. They also appear in various combinations with each other and are used interchangeably at times. So, as we're about to see, the meanings of biblical terms related to the plan of God vary in different passages.

There are many ways to summarize this variety as we explore biblical perspectives on the plan of God. But for simplicity, we'll focus our attention on just two concepts that we discussed in a previous lesson. We'll consider what the Scriptures say about God planning in relation to his divine immanence. Then we'll consider how the Scriptures speak of God planning in association with divine transcendence. Let's turn first to what the Bible has to say about the plan of God and his immanence.

### Divine Immanence

**In the Old Testament, you know, God would walk with Adam and Eve in the garden. There was an immanence; there was a nearness and a closeness that God wants to have as part of his relationship with his creation and with his people. Sin, obviously, affected that. But it doesn't mean that God suddenly disappears. We see throughout the Old Testament, for example, God setting up a tabernacle to be with his people. And so, that immanence is that nearness, the presence of**

**God near his people, near his creation... In the New Testament we see it more in terms of the incarnation — John 1:14: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” And so, we see that desire of the Lord to be in his creation, to be with his people... It’s his desire to dwell with his people in the tabernacle. It’s his desire to be with his people in terms of Christ’s incarnation. He longs to be with us; he longs to be with his creation, to be near us.**

— Dr. Scott Manor

In other lessons, we learned how important it is to affirm the divine mystery that God is both transcendent and immanent. He transcends the limitations that characterize creation because he is infinite, eternal and unchangeable. But this does not mean that God is disconnected from, or uninvolved with his creation. On the contrary, the Bible also teaches that God is immanent. He condescends and fully engages his finite, temporal and changing creation. And when we survey the Scriptures, it isn’t difficult to see that biblical authors spoke of God planning in association with both his transcendence and his immanence.

We’ll look at what the Scriptures say about God’s plan and his transcendence in a moment. But for now, let’s turn to a few passages that focus on God planning as a dimension of his immanent engagement with creation. In Jeremiah 18:7-8, God said this:

If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned (Jeremiah 18:7-8).

In these verses, God spoke of something he had “*planned*” using the Hebrew verb *chashav* (חָשַׁב), meaning “to think,” “to plan,” or “to determine.” Now, in many circles when Christians hear of God having a “plan,” they automatically assume that the Bible refers to something God determined to do from eternity past. But this passage doesn’t speak of God planning in this way. On the contrary, this plan of God is cast in terms of his immanent involvement with creation. It is “announce[d]” in response to the disobedience of “a nation or kingdom.” It is God’s plan for such a nation “to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed.” And more than this, God explicitly declared that this plan could be reversed. As we read here, “if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned.” The Scriptures often report that God makes many such historical plans, plans that come and go as he interacts with his creation. Along these same lines, listen to the way Luke 7:30 refers to the “purpose” of God:

The Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God’s purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John (Luke 7:30).

As we see here, this verse refers to God’s “purpose,” using the Greek term *boulé* (βουλή), meaning “purpose,” “counsel,” “decree” or “will.” But, the “purpose,”

“counsel,” “decree” or “will” of God in view in this passage is clearly associated with God’s immanence, not with his transcendence. His divine purpose rose within a particular historical setting as the Pharisees and experts in the law were called to be baptized by John. And this purpose was “rejected” when they refused to submit to this decree. Now listen to 1 Thessalonians 5:18, where the apostle Paul said this about the “will” of God:

Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

Here Paul referred to God’s “will” using the Greek term *thélema* (θέλημα). But notice, once again, that this verse is not oriented toward God’s transcendence. Rather, in this passage, the will of God is Paul’s specific instruction: “Give thanks in all circumstances.”

Theologians often call this type of biblical instruction the “prescriptive will of God,” or God’s “prescribed” commands. Throughout biblical history, God required his people to obey his will. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of places in Scripture where God called his people to act, to feel, and to believe in certain ways. Now, these declarations of the prescriptive will of God always conformed to God’s infinite, eternal and unchanging moral character. But God expressed his prescriptive will as he engaged his people in different ways at different times. And the prescriptive will of God is often unfulfilled because his creatures often disobey what he commands.

As just one other example, listen to what Jesus said in Matthew 23:37 about his own “will” or desires:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing (Matthew 23:37).

In this passage Jesus said, “I have longed,” using the term *thélō* (θέλω), the verbal form of the noun *thélema* (θέλημα). This passage does not refer, however, to God’s transcendence. Many times in history, Jesus had longed, desired, or willed “to gather [his] children” in Jerusalem to protect them from their oppressors. But Jesus’ desire was not fulfilled because the people of Jerusalem “were not willing.” Israel rejected the prophets and even Jesus himself.

These and similar passages point to an outlook that appears many times in the Bible. The Scriptures often speak of God making plans, having purposes, giving counsel and issuing decrees, as well as his will and his pleasure, as factors of his immanent, historical interactions with creation. And these historical plans of God are finite, temporal and quite often changeable.

Now that we’ve considered how biblical perspectives on the plan of God focus on his divine immanence, let’s look at how the Scriptures also orient God’s plan toward his divine transcendence over creation.



## Divine Transcendence

As we've seen, the Scriptures frequently speak of God planning in ways that emphasize his immanent interactions with creation. But this is only half of the picture. We know that God *transcends* all of the limitations of his creation as well. So, the Scriptures also speak of God's plan in ways that reflect the fact that he is transcendent, that he is infinite, eternal and unchangeable. Listen to the way Isaiah 46:10 refers to the "purpose" and "pleasure" of God:

I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please (Isaiah 46:10).

It isn't difficult to see that this passage depicts God's plan in ways that stand in sharp contrast to his historical engagements with creation. God spoke of his "purpose" — from the verbal root *yaats* (יָצַו) — and he talked of doing, "all that I please" — from the Hebrew term *chaphets* (יָצַח). But he associated these terms with his transcendence. He spoke of the fact that he "make[s] known the end from the beginning" — a reference to his eternity. And he made it clear that his purpose is unchanging and that it cannot fail. As he said, "My purpose will stand"; "I will do all that I please." We find a similar outlook in Job 42:2, when Job confessed to God:

I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted (Job 42:2).

This association of God's plan with his transcendence also appears in the well-known words of Ephesians 1:11, where Paul wrote:

In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will (Ephesians 1:11).

Several key Greek terms appear in this passage. Paul referred to God's plan — *prothesis* (πρόθεσις) — his "purpose" — *boulé* (βουλή) — and his "will" — *thélema* (θέλημα). But notice Paul's orientation toward God's transcendence in this verse.

First, the "plan" of God in view here is not narrowly focused, but all-encompassing; it includes "everything." Second, the plan does not develop in historical circumstances; it's eternal. All who were "chosen" in Christ had "been predestined according to [God's] plan." And earlier, in this same chapter, in verse 4, Paul made it clear that God had chosen his people in Christ "before the creation of the world." Third, the plan of God in view here cannot be thwarted; it's unfailing. Paul wrote that God "works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will" — *boulé* (βουλή) and *thélema* (θέλημα).

In Acts 2:23, the term *boulé* is also rightly translated as God's "deliberate plan." In this verse, Peter said that "[Jesus] was handed over to [the Romans] by God's *deliberate plan*." And in Acts 4:28, *boulé* is translated as God's "will" when the church



prayed about what “[God’s] power and will had decided beforehand should happen.” And the same word is translated “purpose” in Hebrews 6:17 where the author of Hebrews referred to “the unchanging nature of [God’s] purpose.”

Now, we saw earlier that the Greek terms *boulé* and *thélema* are sometimes used for God’s historical, prescriptive will. But in Ephesians 1:11, when Paul referred to the “purpose” and “will” of God, he wasn’t talking about God’s prescriptive will. Rather, this verse refers to what theologians often call the “decretive will of God” — what God has ordained as a firm decree, something that will happen without fail.

**God’s eternal plan must also be immutable because God is immutable, meaning that he is unchanging. God being immutable says to us that he’s unlike us. He doesn’t, you know, have to learn, grow, develop over time... And since he is unchangeable, everything that emanates, from him as it relates to his eternal plan has to also be unchangeable... And so, we would know that even before Adam and Eve’s sin in the garden, Christ had already, before the foundations of the earth, had become the Passover Lamb who ultimately would take care, who would atone for sin as such. And so that, tells me that God’s plan, because of who he is, is unchangeable as well, and his eternal will is being accomplished.**

— Rev. Larry Cockrell

Jesus also spoke of the decretive will of God in John 6:39-40:

This is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day (John 6:39-40).

Jesus referred to “the will of him who sent me” and “my Father’s will” using the Greek term *thélema* (θέλημα). But this wasn’t a command from God that could be disobeyed. Rather, Jesus focused on God’s will as something certain, something that could not be violated. God willed or decreed that Jesus “shall lose none of all those [the Father] has given [him].” The Father’s will in this passage is that “everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life.” This will of God is his sovereign decree. It cannot be frustrated; it cannot be overturned.

From this quick survey, we’ve seen two orientations in Scripture toward the plan of God. Sometimes the Scriptures associate God’s planning, his purpose, counsel, decree, will and pleasure with his immanence — his limited, temporal and changing interactions with creation. At other times, they use very similar terminology with a focus on God’s infinite, eternal and unchangeable transcendence over his creation. And as difficult as it may be, if we hope to be biblical in our understanding of God’s plan, we must find ways to affirm both of these points of view.

With these two biblical perspectives on the plan of God in mind, we’re ready to turn to a second issue: the theological positions that evangelicals hold on these matters.

## THEOLOGICAL POSITIONS

Sadly, many well-meaning Christians have emphasized only one side or the other of how the Scriptures speak of God planning. In the past, it would have been relatively easy to associate these emphases with particular Protestant denominations. Through the centuries, distinct tendencies have characterized Baptists, Lutherans, Pentecostals, Methodists, Presbyterians, Reformed, Anglicans and other branches of the Protestant church. But in recent history, many lines separating denominations have faded, and many of these traditional orientations have all but disappeared. So, we won't speak here in terms of what one branch of the church or another believes. We'll simply sketch some general, basic tendencies that exist across denominational lines today.

We'll look at the variety of theological positions on God's plan in two steps. First, we'll briefly note two extreme outlooks that some evangelicals tend to follow. And second, we'll note what we may call centrist evangelical outlooks on these issues. Consider first some extreme points of view.

### Extreme Outlooks

One of the core values of traditional systematic theology has been to create logically coherent summaries of what the Scriptures teach on every topic. And evangelicals have worked hard to reach this goal as they explore what the Scriptures teach about the plan of God. But all too often, the desire for logical consistency causes us to go to the extreme of acknowledging only one or the other dimension of biblical teachings on the plan of God.

Time won't allow us to go into many details on these extreme outlooks, but we can speak in broad terms. On the one side, many well-meaning followers of Christ are inclined toward what we may call "fatalistic theology."

***Fatalistic Theology.*** Fatalistic theology has taken different forms. But on the whole, fatalism explains everything that happens in history almost exclusively in terms of God's transcendent plan. Now, as we've seen in this lesson, some biblical passages support the belief that God's plan, purpose, counsel, decrees, will and pleasure reflect his transcendence over creation. In this sense, everything that has ever occurred or ever will occur has been ordered by the all-encompassing, eternal and unchanging plan of God. But fatalism falls short of the full range of biblical teaching on this subject. It fails to give due weight to what the Bible teaches about God's plans, purposes, counsel, decrees, will and pleasure that develop as he interacts with his finite, temporal and changing creation.

**I am not a fatalist. I believe what I do counts. That's why there's a judgment seat. I believe I know what I'm doing. I'm not a robot. I'm actually doing it. But I also believe that God is not limited by my actions. He is able to take my obedience and my disobedience and still**

**solve his purposes. “God is sovereign and he draws straight lines with crooked sticks.” So, I may be a crooked stick, but he can still get his line drawn. So, what we have confidence in is not that God is so powerful he turns us into robots, but his power is so majestic that he creates us as free moral agents... That is the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. Free moral agency does not put God on the puppet string of humanity. Nor does the sovereignty of God put us on a puppet string. God sovereignly ordains our choices and accomplishes his purposes through what we are doing.**

— Dr. Harry L. Reeder III

If we were to have a conversation with someone who tends toward fatalistic theology, we might find that they answer several key questions in these ways:

Does God plan something and then set it aside while interacting with creation? Fatalists tend to say, “Never.”

Are God's counsel or decrees ever frustrated? In the fatalistic view, “Of course not.”

Can the will and pleasure of God ever be thwarted? Fatalists tend to reply, “Impossible.”

And, when the Bible seems to indicate other responses to these questions, fatalists argue that Scripture merely describes events as they appear to human beings, not as they truly are.

Now, with this tendency toward fatalistic theology in mind, it's important also to note that many Christians through the centuries have fallen into the opposite extreme outlook as well. On the other side, they've adopted a position that has come to be known in recent decades as “open theology.”

***Open Theology.*** There's a lot of variety among open theologians. But on the whole, this point of view explains nearly everything that happens in history in terms of God's immanence. We've seen that there's biblical support for believing that God forms many different plans as he engages his creation. And in this sense, as God interacts with the finite, temporal and changing world, his historical plans, purposes, counsel, decrees, will and pleasure don't always come to fruition. But open theology takes this biblical teaching to an extreme. It fails to give due weight to God's eternal, all-encompassing, unfailing plan. Many who hold to this extreme view agree that a few events have been set in place by God's infallible, eternal decrees. They often acknowledge that major events like the first advent of Christ, the time of his glorious return, and the final outcome of history are fixed by God's sovereign will. But other than these few events, open theologians usually maintain that the success of God's plans, purposes, and will are entirely dependent on history, especially on the choices that spirits and human beings make.

If we were to engage open theologians in conversation, they would tend to answer a few key questions in these ways:

Does God have an all-encompassing, eternal, and unfailing plan for history? Open theology says, “No.”

Are God's counsel and decrees ever frustrated by human rebellion? In this view, "It's almost always possible."

Can the will and pleasure of God ever be thwarted? Open theology replies, "Quite often."

From this extreme point of view, when Scripture indicates that God has an eternal, unchanging plan, open theists insist that it refers to only a few select events.

**Open theology, or as it's sometimes called, "open theism," is a variant of classical Arminianism. It holds a lot in common with that, but it's a more extreme version of that, especially in its view about God's knowledge of the future. They hold to a view called "presentism" that argues that God knows everything about the past, everything about the present, and much about the future, but not ... any free human decisions or anything that's dependent on free human decisions. And believers in all major Christian traditions throughout the history of the church have disagreed with that, affirming that God knows the future exhaustively... Psalm 139 talks about, God knows what is on our tongues before we even open our mouths and speak. There are predictions and fulfillments, especially in 1 Kings and 2 Kings. Isaiah 40–48 give a great teaching about how Yahweh distinguishes himself from the gods of the nations, especially through his knowledge of the future. When we get to the New Testament, Jesus assures us that our Father knows our needs before we even ask. He demonstrates his knowledge of the future by predicting his own passion, his death and suffering, by predicting both Peter's denial and Judas's betrayal. The reality is, is that there are many, many examples... In a context where Jesus is predicting both Peter's denial and Judas' betrayal, he tells his disciples that, "I have told you this before it happens so that when it does happen, you'll know that I am he." That is a claim for his own deity. And so, the question is, would God base such strong evidence for his own unique deity in Old Testament and New Testament on something uncertain, as if God only could predict things that happen in the future as opposed to exhaustively know that. For these reasons, believers in all major traditions have affirmed that God knows the future exhaustively in opposition to the teachings of open theism.**

— Dr. Steven C. Roy

With the extreme outlooks of fatalistic and open theology in mind, let's turn to other theological positions on the plan of God — what we'll call centrist evangelical outlooks on this aspect of theology proper.

## Centrist Outlooks

It's fair to say that, in one way or another, the mainstream of formal evangelical systematic theology has affirmed both sides of what the Scriptures teach about God's plan. Centrist outlooks agree that God has an all-encompassing, eternal, and unfailing plan for what happens in history. And they also affirm, with equal strength, that as God engages his creation, he forms many plans that are limited in scope, temporal and changing. It's not that only one or the other is true. Rather, unlike those who have tended toward the extremes, evangelical theologians have insisted that both perspectives are true.

When we embrace the ways the Scriptures speak of God planning, both in association with his transcendence and with his immanence, we face some of the greatest mysteries of the Christian faith. Human beings can understand these matters as far as God has explained them in Scripture. But we can never grasp them in ways that solve every conundrum, or in ways that answer every question that could be raised. Instead, it's wise to approach this issue much like we do the Trinity and the two natures of Christ. Rather than attempting to resolve every mystery involving God's plan, we should learn all we can about both sides of these biblical outlooks and admit that our human understanding is limited.

If we were to have a conversation with theologians who hold to more centrist evangelical outlooks on God planning, they would tend to answer some 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."

In other words, the mainstream of evangelical theology has sought to reflect both sides of the teachings of Scripture. It affirms both God's transcendent, eternal plan and his immanent, historical plans.

While these centrist outlooks have characterized the mainstream of evangelical systematic theology, there have been differences among those who endorse them. We'll mention two significant differences that have often moved to the foreground in traditional systematic theology. Consider first different points of view that have developed on the order of God's eternal decrees.

***Order of Eternal Decrees.*** When systematic theologians refer to the order of God's decrees, they have in mind the logical order of the elements involved in God's eternal plan for history. What are the interconnections among the major decrees that God ordained before his first act of creation? There have been many versions of these points of view, but on the whole it's customary to summarize them in three ways:

In the first place, we should mention supralapsarianism from the Latin terms *supra*, meaning "above," and *lapsus*, meaning "the fall." As this name implies, God's decree to save his people should be placed "above," or before, his decree to permit the

fall of humanity into sin. This view of the order of God's eternal decrees can be summarized in this way: first, the decree to save God's chosen people in Christ and to bring judgment against all others; second, the decree to create; third, the decree to permit the fall into sin; fourth, the decree to accomplish and offer redemption through Christ; and fifth, the decree to apply redemption in Christ to true believers.

In the second place, we should mention infralapsarianism from the Latin terms *infra*, meaning "beneath," and *lapsus*, meaning "the fall." As this name implies, God's decree to save his people should be placed "beneath," or after, his decree to permit the fall of humanity into sin. This view of the order of God's eternal decrees can be summarized in this way: first, the decree to create; second, the decree to permit the fall into sin; third, the decree to save God's chosen people; fourth, the decree to accomplish and offer redemption through Christ; and fifth, the decree to apply redemption in Christ to true believers.

In the third place, we should mention a view that is often called sublapsarianism from the Latin terms *sub*, meaning "under," and again *lapsus*, meaning "the fall." This view is sometimes considered a sub-category of infralapsarianism. As the name implies, God placed his decree to save his people "under," or after, his decree to permit the fall of humanity into sin. But in this view, the decree to save came after God's decree to offer redemption, not before. This outlook can be summarized in this way: first, God's decree to create; second, God's decree to permit the fall of humanity into sin; third, God's decree to accomplish and offer redemption through Christ; fourth, the decree to save those who believe; and fifth, the decree to apply redemption in Christ to believers.

It's important to realize that, for the most part, these different points of view developed to help theologians address *other* sorts of theological questions. Formulating different views on the order of God's eternal decrees has helped theologians wrestle with questions like:

How can we maintain the goodness of God when his plan permits humanity's fall into sin and only grants salvation to some?

How can God's offer of the gospel to all people be genuine when God has an all-encompassing, eternal and unfailing plan?

How can we affirm the moral responsibility of human beings when God is sovereign over our actions?

These are important questions. Still, most leading evangelical theologians recognize that the Scriptures don't give us enough information to identify the logical order of God's eternal decrees. So, by and large, while centrist evangelicals still tend to favor one view over another, most of us have rightly concluded that these matters involve a great deal of speculation. They are largely beyond what God has revealed in Scripture.

**Well, when one speaks of the order of decrees, usually such discussion is generated out of an attempt to provide a kind of logical order to the way God does things... Before there was anything, that we know of, as "time," God already existed, so there is some element of speculation in that we just don't know what that looks like to God. And that's why the best theologians, it seems to me, when they talk of the order of decrees, really aren't so much talking temporal sequence as logic, as coherence, and in that framework, it's a way of talking about things**

**in order to accommodate all that Scripture says about God, and the Fall, and the sequence of God's plans, and so on, in a logical sense, without it being a sequence in a temporal sense, in order to be faithful to the witness of Scripture.**

— Dr. D. A. Carson

In addition to differences among those endorsing centrist outlooks on the order of God's eternal decrees, evangelicals have also held different views on the relationship between God's eternal decrees and his foreknowledge.

*Eternal Decrees and Foreknowledge.* More often than not, three New Testament passages are highlighted in these discussions. In Acts 2:23, Peter spoke about the crucifixion of Christ occurring according to "God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge." First Peter 1:1-2 refers to God's elect who have been "chosen according to the foreknowledge of God." And Romans 8:29 says that "those God foreknew he also predestined." It's clear that these passages point to interconnections between God's eternal decrees and his foreknowledge.

By and large, evangelicals have applied these passages to the relationship between God's eternal decrees and foreknowledge in two ways. On the one side, many of us have held that God's foreknowledge was the basis of his decrees. In other words, in eternity, God knew the course that history would take. He understood how events would unfold — including his engagements with the choices that spirits and human beings would make. On the basis of this foreknowledge, he decreed the eternal plan by which all events would unfold without fail.

On the other side, there have also been many evangelicals who have held that God's decrees are the basis of his foreknowledge of history. In this view, God planned or decreed everything that would happen in history simply according to his own good pleasure. And this unailing plan gave God foreknowledge of everything that would happen in history.

The debates over these matters are often motivated by other theological concerns, like the goodness of God and the free agency of human beings. They also involve disagreements over whether biblical references to God's foreknowledge focus on God's mere foreknowledge of events or his personal, loving foreknowledge of the people that he's chosen for salvation.

But, we can all agree on some things. Do the Scriptures teach that God foreknows everything? Yes. Do the Scriptures teach that God has foreordained everything, including eternal salvation? Yes. So, as much as we may favor one of these outlooks over the other, in the end, we should all admit that God's decrees and his foreknowledge go hand in hand in many different ways. And we must always keep in mind that we're discussing God in eternity, so our normal ways of thinking don't apply. Being dogmatic about the logical priority of God's decrees or his foreknowledge is to go beyond what the Scriptures reveal. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 3, chapter 21, section 5, John Calvin argued:

**We, indeed, place both doctrines [of foreknowledge and eternal decrees] in God, but we say that subjecting one to the other is absurd.**



Calvin was well-known for his firm belief in God's sovereignty over all of history. As he pointed out here, the Scriptures don't spell out precisely how God's foreknowledge and eternal decrees relate to each other. So, "subjecting one to the other is absurd."

Ultimately, whenever we consider the plan of God, we must remember that both sides of the biblical portrait — those reflected in centrist evangelical outlooks — are crucial to the Christian life. God is sovereign over every trial and trouble in life. Everything in life takes place as God has ordained. At the same time, God is intimately involved with our lives. He turns history in one direction and then in another direction, often depending on the choices we make. If we deny either of these views, we rob ourselves of some of the most vibrant, life-giving teachings of Scripture. Both sides of biblical teaching on God planning, having purposes, giving counsel and making decrees, as well as his will and pleasure are crucial to our faithful service as followers of Christ.

**One of the perennial questions in theology has to do with the relationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom, between the choices that we make and the ultimate will and purposes of God. And I think you find many theologians that will emphasize one side of that perhaps more so than the other side of it. I think the really great theologians teach both of those things in their biblical fullness. But regardless of our view, I think there is something that we can learn from one another. I think people who emphasize human choice tend to minimize a little bit the biblical passages that talk about the sovereignty of God and how all-encompassing it is and how everything that happens ultimately is the purpose of God. And on the other hand, people that really like to emphasize the sovereignty of God may minimize the real choices that people make and the significance of those choices for what happens in the world. And I think it's tempting for all of us to gravitate a little bit towards the passages that agree with our theology and then to explain away a little bit or minimize the passages that might support someone else's view. I think the more that we engage in theological dialogue with one another, it helps us see the significance of every passage of Scripture and really wrestle with its implications.**

— Dr. Philip Ryken

Having seen how the Scriptures and systematic theology view the plan of God, we're in a position to turn to the second major topic of this lesson: the works of God. At this point, we'll explore how God works out both his eternal plan and his many historical plans for creation.

## WORKS OF GOD

---

The Scriptures focus a lot on what God has done, what he is doing and what he will do in the history of the world. The importance of these themes in the Bible has led theologians to give them special attention in theology proper. In theology proper, systematic theologians explore the fundamental characteristics of all of God's works — the patterns that underlie all of God's engagements with his creation.

Throughout the centuries, the topic of the works of God has usually been divided into two main parts: the work of creation and the work of providence. Let's look first at God's work of creation.

### CREATION

Systematic theologians have focused a lot on the moment when God created *ex nihilo* or "out of nothing." Passages like Genesis 1:1; John 1:3; and Hebrews 1:2 indicate that nothing apart from God ever existed until God brought it into existence. So, evangelicals have rightly rejected all forms of polytheism — every belief that gods or god-like forces joined with God in the work of creation. They've also rejected all forms of pantheism — any identification of God with his creation. And they've rejected all forms of dualism — the belief that what we call creation has actually existed from all eternity alongside God. Instead, evangelical systematic theology has consistently maintained the utter distinction between the Creator and his creation.

But systematic theology has also gone beyond the first moment of creation and has dealt with an initial twofold division that God established in creation. This twofold division of creation appears in Colossians 1:16, where the apostle Paul said this:

For in [Christ] all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible ... all things have been created through him and for him (Colossians 1:16).

Here we see that Paul referred to Christ as the one who created all things. And he alluded to the twofold division of creation between heaven and earth found in Genesis 1:1. But Paul went on to make a parallel division between the visible and invisible. This division of creation is exemplified in a number of important creeds and confessions that speak of God as the Creator of "all things, visible and invisible."

Now, before we go any further, we should mention that, in passages like Isaiah 66:1, the Scriptures bring both sides of this twofold division into unity. There we read:

Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool (Isaiah 66:1).

This passage succinctly explains an outlook that runs just beneath the surface of every page of Scripture. In effect, creation is God's cosmic palace or temple, with heaven above and earth below, the invisible above and the visible below.

In the Old Testament, Israel's temple was modeled after this twofold arrangement of the creation. It had an inner, elevated chamber known as the most holy place, or the holy of holies. This chamber represented God's reign in the upper, invisible realms of creation. And this elevated chamber was surrounded by lower levels of the temple known as the holy place and the outer court or courtyard. Both of these lower levels represented the lower, visible realms of creation.

This basic twofold outlook on creation helps us understand God's grand purpose for his creation. Simply put, the goal of history is that God's glorious reign in the upper, invisible world will extend downward and one day spread to every corner of the visible world. And in the end, God's glory will fill all of creation so that every creature, above and below, will worship him forever. This basic outlook underlies everything that the Bible tells us about God's work of creation.

**The goal of human history is the whole earth being transformed into the visible and immanent temple, garden, realm, throne of God. And it's the very same purpose with which the Bible opens in Genesis 1 and 2, that God made a world that was very good, but he made a garden in which his presence was immanent and visible, and it was a holy place, and the man and the woman were told to spread the garden, in effect, to the whole world by multiplying, filling it, subduing it. And of course, in the Fall, that program is interrupted, but yet in the promise in the garden, that there would be a seed of the woman which would bruise the serpent's head, that promise is ultimately fulfilled. And so the earth becomes a place where the glory of God is not hidden any longer, but it's an earth filled with the glory of God.**

— Rev. Michael J. Glodo

Because this twofold work of creation is so important, we should take a moment to look at both the upper, invisible dimensions of creation and the lower, visible dimensions of creation. Consider first, the invisible dimensions of what God has made.

## **Invisible Dimensions**

Modern materialism has influenced followers of Christ so much that many serious students of theology pay little attention to what the Bible teaches about the invisible dimensions of creation. To be sure, many sincere believers become overly preoccupied with what remains largely unseen. But, in academic study, we have to guard against the opposite extreme. So much of God's plan for his creation is initiated and furthered by what takes place in the invisible realms. So, as we study the doctrine of God, we must take into account what theologians often call the "preternatural world."

There are many ways to describe the upper, invisible dimensions of creation. But for our purposes, we'll look first at the arrangement of the invisible realms. Then, we'll

look into their occupants. Let's think first about the arrangement of the preternatural world.

**Arrangement.** The primary biblical term for this dimension of creation is “heaven” or “the heavens.” Both the Hebrew *shamayim* (שָׁמַיִם) and the Greek *ouranos* (οὐρανός), can be translated “heaven” or “the heavens.” But these words also refer, at times, to what modern people call the “sky” and “outer space.” So, in our discussion of the preternatural world, we'll just focus on the times when they refer to the upper realms — the realms that remain invisible to human beings, except when God grants supernatural visions of them.

The Scriptures don't give much detail about the arrangement of the invisible heavens, but they indicate that it's quite complex. For instance, passages like Psalm 104:3 speak of God's heavenly upper room or “roof chamber.” According to 1 Kings 8:30, and a number of other passages, this heavenly chamber is “heaven, [God's] dwelling place,” or as it may be translated, “heaven, the place of [God's] enthronement.” Isaiah 63:15 describes this same heavenly palace as the place of “your lofty throne, holy and glorious.” In addition, in 2 Corinthians 12:2-4, Paul drew from rabbinical theology and spoke of “the third heaven,” calling it a “paradise ... [of] inexpressible things.” And beyond this, Deuteronomy 10:14; Psalm 115:16 and a number of other passages refer to “the highest heavens.” These and similar biblical references alert us to the fact that the arrangement of the invisible world is quite complex and goes far beyond our comprehension. Even so, these and many other verses indicate that the invisible, heavenly realms are arranged as the upper, exalted dimensions of God's cosmic palace.

In addition to recognizing this complex arrangement, we should also take note of the occupants of the invisible dimensions of creation.

**Occupants.** Needless to say, the most glorious of all occupants of heaven is God himself. But we have to be careful here. Many think of heaven as the place where God exists in his full transcendence. But this is not the case at all. Heaven is a part of creation. It is finite, temporal and changing. Although, heaven is above the visible world, it is nonetheless a place where God engages his creation. Now, in 1 Kings 8:27, Solomon declared that God is so transcendent that “even the highest heavens cannot contain [him].” But, in the same prayer, Solomon spoke of heaven as the place of God's enthronement — the place where God hears and responds to his people's prayers. So, heaven is a place where God enters into the finite creation by sitting on a throne and engaging his heavenly creatures. We see this in passages like Job 1:6-12; Daniel 7:9-11; and Luke 22:31. God's heavenly throne room is exalted above the visible world. But it's nonetheless a part of his creation. And from the beginning of history, when God said, “Let there be light,” he has directed history as the King of creation from his heavenly court.

But God isn't the only occupant of the upper, invisible realms. For instance, although it's rare for physical creatures to enter heaven, it's not impossible. We know for certain that, according to Acts 2:31-33, Jesus ascended in his glorified physical body to the throne of his father David. And he now sits at the right hand of God the Father in the court of heaven.

But for the most part, heaven is filled with spiritual creatures, as well as the departed souls of the faithful. They and their activities remain invisible apart from

supernatural visions. They are called “spirits” in Matthew 8:16 and Hebrews 1:14; “sons of God” in Psalm 29:1 and Psalm 89:6; “holy ones” in Psalm 89:5, 7 and Zechariah 14:5; “messengers” in Daniel 4:13 and Psalm 91:11; and “armies” or “hosts” in many places, including Psalm 148:2 and Daniel 8:10. According to Psalm 82, some of these spirits are assigned responsibility for nations on earth. Gabriel and Michael are prominent angelic leaders, especially serving God on behalf of his chosen people. Cherubim serve as guardians of God’s holiness, and seraphim minister before the throne of God.

Scripture tells us that all of the heavenly spirits were first created good, like the rest of creation. In 1 Timothy 5:21, those spirits who remain faithful by God’s grace are called “elect angels.” But other heavenly spirits rebel against God. We see this in passages like John 8:44; 1 Timothy 3:6; 2 Peter 2:4; and Jude 6. We don’t know much about this angelic rebellion, except that it is widespread, and Satan — and perhaps other spirits — rebelled before the temptation of Adam and Eve. Passages like Job 1:6-12; Psalm 82; and 2 Chronicles 18:18-22 indicate that Satan, the adversary — also called the Devil or the accuser — and other evil spirits called demons, rulers, authorities and powers continue to participate from time to time in the heavenly court. They serve at the bidding of the court of heaven and fulfill God’s will on earth, though with evil intent.

But Satan and other evil spirits won’t serve the court in heaven forever. Instead, a place of eternal judgment has been prepared for them in the netherworld, along with human beings who rebel against God.

**What we’re talking here is about the angelic world; we’re thinking about heaven and the inhabitants of heaven. But we’re also including in that the cosmic powers, namely the demonic powers, the fallen angels. And the truth is God has just as much authority over the fallen angels as he does over the good angels... And we sometimes think that the fallen angels have more freedom than the good angels, because the good angels are under God’s absolute control in heaven and they serve him while the fallen angels get to do as much fun and as much mischief as they can down here on earth. But the Bible answer is very clear: God has complete authority over the fallen angels; everything that they do they do only because God has allowed it... And everything that Satan does, like if you look at Revelation 13:5-8, everything the Beast, the Antichrist, does during that final period of history, he does only because God has given him permission even to blaspheme the name of God. So, God is in total absolute control of the fallen world, and God is in absolute control of the heavenly world.**

— Dr. Grant R. Osborne

Now that we’ve considered the invisible dimensions of God’s creation, let’s turn to the visible dimensions of creation, the physical world of which you and I are a part.

## Visible Dimensions

We'll look at the biblical portrait of the visible dimensions of God's creation in the same way we viewed the invisible realms. First, we'll note the basic arrangement of the visible world. And second, we'll focus on the occupants of this world. Consider first the arrangement of the visible dimensions of creation.

As we said earlier, the Scriptures present all of creation as God's cosmic palace or temple. And throughout the centuries, systematic theologians have looked to the first chapters of Genesis to discern how God arranged the visible aspects of his palace. According to Genesis 1:2, the visible world was initially "formless and empty." But by the end of the first week, in Genesis 2:1-3, God completed the initial, pleasing arrangement of creation. And he rested on his heavenly throne. So, what was this initial arrangement of the visible world?

Well, we learn in Genesis 1 that on the first day, God established day and night, or light and darkness, in the visible realms of his palace. On the second day, God established the visible sky and seas. And on the third day, God established dry land and plant life on the floor of his cosmic palace.

**Well, as you look at the universe you see the incredible wisdom and power that God had in creating the universe. The design in everything is so fantastic, the distances and all. Our galaxies, we've got just hundreds of thousands of galaxies out there ... everything is so incredibly designed, and the wisdom of God just is so obvious and manifests itself. And God creates all these things, in a sense, out of nothing... The incredible wisdom and power is so obvious in all of creation, in the universe and all.**

— Dr. Frank Barker

With the arrangement of the visible world in mind, let's consider how the biblical account of God's work of creation also focuses on the occupants of the visible world.

Now, at times, the occupants of the invisible heavens appear in the visible world to serve the purposes of the divine King in heaven. And the Bible also reports numerous theophanies, or visible appearances of God himself in biblical history. He appeared to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. He appeared in dreams and visions, and in the pillar of smoke and fire to Israel. And of course, as the New Testament teaches, God appeared through the incarnation of Christ and his earthly ministry.

But the first chapter of Genesis focuses primarily on the ordinarily-visible occupants of the physical world. For instance, on the first day, God had divided the light and darkness. Then later, on the fourth day, he placed the sun, moon and stars to occupy and govern the day and night. On the second day, God had established the visible sky and seas. Then, on the fifth day he created birds and sea creatures to inhabit them. On the third day God had established dry land and plant life. Then, on the sixth day, he placed animals and human beings there. All of these occupants of the visible world play important roles in God's purposes for his creation. But according to Genesis 1:26-31,

only humanity has the special role of being the image and likeness of God. Listen to the words of Genesis 1:28:

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Genesis 1:28).

**So, what does it mean for humanity, both male and female, to be created in the image of God? There's been a lot of debate amongst theologians about what this actually means, but scholars in the Old Testament are aware of a find at Tell Fakhariyah in Syria where they found a statue of a ruler in that region, and it calls the statue “the image and likeness...” of that particular ruler. So, what this shines light upon Genesis 1 is that, how humans, as God's image bearers, are those who are to be, if you will, like statues for God, or representatives for God being the real King of this world. So, when I think “image bearers,” I think those who are called to represent or to reflect God in this world as they care for creation.**

— Andrew Abernethy, Ph.D.

As the second chapter of Genesis explains, in the beginning God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. This earthly sacred garden was so perfect, so beautiful, so holy, that God would appear regularly in his visible glory. But the goal of history was for the perfection, beauty and holiness of the garden to extend to the far reaches of the earth. In this way, it would be appropriate for God's visible glory to appear everywhere to his endless praise. And the primary instrument for this expansion of holiness and God's glory throughout the world was humanity — the image and likeness of God. By God's gracious empowerment, and the service of angels against every physical and spiritual foe, the redeemed of humanity were destined to fulfill history's purpose in service to God.

This is why Scripture and evangelical systematic theology place so much stress on the role of Christ as the perfect image and likeness of God. Not only did he pay for the sins of his redeemed people, but when Christ returns to make the new heavens and new earth, he will fill the earth with God's holy images and make all things new. God's visible glory will shine throughout the invisible *and* visible realms of creation so that every creature will worship God. As Paul wrote in Philippians 2:10-11:

At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:10-11).

Having seen how the arrangements and occupants of creation set the stage for the works of God in history, we should turn to the unfolding of history under the providence of God.



## PROVIDENCE

The Latin theological term *providentia* speaks of God “attending to,” “sustaining,” or “taking care of” creation as he works out his eternal plan. As you can imagine, providence includes many different activities because it’s God’s sustaining power upholding all things, all of the time. Topics within systematic theology, other than theology proper, focus on particular aspects of God’s providence, especially how God attends to sin and salvation in history. But theology proper has typically focused on patterns of God’s providence that underlie all of history, the patterns that characterize every dimension of God’s care for his creation.

**The word “providence” actually comes from the Latin and means basically to see in advance or to see before, but it ultimately represents that God is overseeing, he is looking over, watching over, caring for all of creation... This concept of providence is tied in with a number of other important doctrines that I think Christians have unfortunately missed in terms of their appreciation for how God really does care for us. He cares for his creation... And that gives comfort. It gives a sense of God's goodness and that he's not a distant God, that he's not an angry God, that he's a God who delights to provide, that he's a God who knows what he's doing and who's moving everything according to his purposes and plans.**

— Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler

Traditional systematic theologians have explored the patterns of God’s providence by relying on a distinction that we mentioned in an earlier lesson. On the one hand, they’ve referred to God as the First Cause, the ultimate cause behind everything that happens in history. And on the other hand, they’ve referred to various dimensions of creation as second causes — different facets of the invisible and visible realms that also cause events to occur in history.

Now, there are many things that could be said about this distinction in God’s work of providence. But for the sake of time, we’ll touch on just two aspects. First, we’ll note the importance of second causes. And second, we’ll look into the interaction between God and second causes. Let’s consider first the importance of second causes.

### Importance of Second Causes

It will help to begin with a portion of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* entitled “Of Providence.” In the fifth chapter, second paragraph, we read these words:

**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.**

As we can see here, this paragraph begins by affirming what we've called centrist evangelical outlooks on the plan of God. It draws attention to the fact that "all things come to pass immutably, and infallibly," "in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first Cause." As we discussed earlier, the Scriptures teach that every event in history accords with God's all-encompassing, eternal and unfailing plan. But all too often, followers of Christ fail to acknowledge what the *Confession* quickly adds here. It declares that God orders all things "to fall out, according to the nature of second causes." This expression reflects complex debates among medieval scholastic theologians that have continued even to our own day. The details of these debates are beyond the scope of our lesson. But we'll give a brief summary of the matter.

Throughout the centuries, a number of theologians and philosophers have argued that God is not simply the *first* Cause of all things, but the *one and only* Cause. It's as if every element in creation is a lifeless puppet and all historical events result from God acting directly on creation, as if he were the great Cosmic Puppeteer. In this view, if God does not directly and personally make things happen, then nothing happens. The earth revolves in its elliptical orbit around the sun solely because God causes it to move in this way. Trees grow tall because God personally causes them to grow. Animals walk about and fish swim in the sea only as God moves each one himself. And in this view, human beings and invisible spirits choose to do good and evil because God makes these choices for them.

Now, it's true that God sustains all of creation. As Paul put it in Acts 17:28, "In him we live and move and have our being." But as we're about to see, creation doesn't simply wait until God pulls strings to make things happen. Instead, the Scriptures teach that God has granted various capacities to different facets of creation so that they genuinely function as significant second causes of historical events.

**What do we mean when we say, for instance, in the *Westminster Confession*, that God is the primary cause of everything, but that he also makes use of, establishes, and affirms secondary causes. And so, the language is very carefully chosen to affirm that what people do matters; therefore, the word "cause" is put to it, but that God is ultimately sovereign, therefore "secondary" is put to it... God is the primary cause. The means of grace — preaching, Bible memory, sharing, evangelism, praying, the Lord's Supper, baptism — all of those things that God has put in place are secondary causes, which we embrace. So, we plant, we water, but God gives the increase. Every farmer understands this. A farmer puts the seed in, there's the soil, there's the seed, and now what's going to happen? He can't make it grow. Only God can make it grow. But God has given him the means that he is to use: secondary causes, plant and water.**

— Dr. Harry L. Reeder III

Listen to the way the *Confession* makes this clear by stressing three ways that aspects of creation function as historical causes. They do so "either necessarily, freely, or contingently." Let's unpack what this terminology means.

In the first place, we see the importance of second causes in history as they function “necessarily.” In brief, the term “necessarily” refers to the ways many aspects of God’s creation accomplish his purposes mechanically, or as we might say, by consistent laws of nature. The radiation of the sun necessarily warms the earth. The gravitational force of the earth causes objects to fall to the ground. Chemical reactions cause particular results. Involuntary biological processes have predictable, mechanical effects. The list goes on and on. Much like Genesis 8:22 speaks of the predictable cycles of day and night, cold and heat, summer and winter, God has arranged creation so that countless second causes move history toward his goals through necessary interconnections.

In the second place, as vital as necessary or mechanical functions of second causes are, they also cause things to occur “freely.”

The term “freely” refers to functions of second causes that are not mechanical. Second causes act “freely,” in the sense that the outcomes of their actions are not necessarily what the second causes intended. God is fully in control of the outcomes, but from the perspective of second causes, many effects of their actions are random, inadvertent, or perhaps even accidental. For instance, passages like Exodus 21:13 speak of unintentional sins. 1 Kings 22:29-34 speaks of a time when king Ahab was struck by an arrow shot “at random.” The Scriptures frequently acknowledge that the free or unintended consequences of second causes are often very significant in God’s providence.

In the third place, the *Confession* notes that second causes function within God’s providence not only necessarily and freely, but also “contingently.” The term “contingently” refers to the ways that the intentional choices of human beings and spirits cause things to happen in history. Now, God knows all things and, in this sense, there are no contingencies from his divine perspective. But the Scriptures stress over and over that the contingent choices of God’s volitional creatures shape the course of history. In Genesis 2:17, God warned Adam that he would suffer death if he ate the forbidden fruit. And the results of his contingent choice have influenced every facet of history. In fact, human choice is central even in obtaining eternal salvation from the curse of sin. As Paul put it in Romans 10:9, we will be saved, “*if*” we declare that Jesus is Lord and “*if*” we believe that God raised him from the dead.

In reality, in any given circumstance, the importance of second causes appears in some combination of all three functions. God orchestrates history so that second causes impact the course of history, necessarily, freely *and* contingently.

Keeping the importance of second causes in God’s providence in view, we’re now in a position to consider the interactions between God and second causes. How is it that God engages the second causes he has created as he works out his plan for history? What patterns emerge as we survey the Scriptures?

## God and Second Causes

The third paragraph of the fifth chapter of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* addresses this question in a very helpful way. There we read:

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

It would be difficult to overemphasize the last phrase of this paragraph. God interacts with second causes “at his pleasure.” He does with them what he wishes, when he wishes and how he wishes. God is not constrained to work one way or another with second causes. Even so, this portion of the *Confession* makes an important distinction between God’s “ordinary providence” and how he is “free” to act in extraordinary ways with second causes.

In looking at God and second causes, it will help to unpack this distinction a bit. So, let’s look first at God’s ordinary providence. And then we’ll turn to his extraordinary providence. Let’s start with ordinary providence.

***Ordinary Providence.*** One kind of interaction ordinarily characterizes God’s engagements with second causes. As the *Confession* puts it, God makes use of means. Or to put it another way, God ordinarily works through the second causes he has created.

We can see this easily in the realm of the visible world. How does God nourish plants? Ordinarily, he does this through nutrients that are in the soil, through water and sunlight. How does God keep human beings alive? Usually, he employs food, oxygen, water and the like. In fact, the Scriptures make it clear that God even spreads the saving work of Christ throughout the world by making use of second causes. Listen to the way Romans 10:14-15 describes the ordinary way in which people come to faith in Christ:

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? (Romans 10:14-15).

But God doesn’t merely employ visible second causes in his ordinary providence. Throughout the Scriptures we find that God also makes use of invisible second causes: angels, demons and even Satan himself. As we read in Psalm 103:20-21:

Praise the Lord, you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, who obey his word. Praise the Lord, all his heavenly hosts, you his servants who do his will (Psalm 103:20-21).

There are countless implications of the fact that God ordinarily makes use of visible and invisible second causes as he interacts with creation. But systematic theologians often turn to the subject of theodicy: the vindication of God’s goodness in view of the existence of evil. Understanding how God carries out his plan *through* second causes helps us grasp how God can be holy and good when evil exists in his creation. God’s ordinary providence sheds light on this subject in at least two ways.

In the first place, the Scriptures are clear that God is sovereign over evil. It is fully under his control. Passages like Job 1:6-12 indicate that God employs Satan in his service from his heavenly throne. And as Jesus explained to Peter in Luke 22:31-32:

Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail (Luke 22:31-32).

This is why, in Matthew 6:13, Jesus taught his disciples to pray in this way:

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one (Matthew 6:13).

As Jesus' words here indicate, we are to pray that God will deliver us from the evil one because God is in control of him.

**When we study different aspects of the divine powers in the Bible, we discover that probably Satan is the second most powerful person. But, it's a great counsel to me that he's not omnipresent, he's not omniscient, he's not omni anything... He's not like God. He's unlike God. It's not that God and Satan exist in equal power and they throw one punch here, one punch over here, at the same time just kind of fighting over. No, Satan is nowhere in comes close to who God is... we discover that often time he's defeated just ... by prayers of the believers and their power, or the unity among the believers — all different ways the Bible describes that, how Satan can be put aside. And the Holy Spirit resists him that he's not able to function. So, yes, he's powerful, but he's limited in a great sense, and nothing comes close to even the power of God.**

— Dr. Sukhwant S. Bhatia

But while God, in the first place, is completely sovereign over evil, in the second place, God's ordinary providence indicates that God himself never *causes* evil. Rather, temptations come indirectly through evil second causes. Listen to the way James 1:13 makes this perspective clear:

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God," for God cannot be tempted with evil, and he himself tempts no one (James 1:13, ESV).

Notice here that James says we should not blame temptation on God for two reasons. On the one side, "God cannot be tempted with evil" because God is good, and evil does not entice him in any way. And on the other side, "[God] himself tempts no one." This literal translation rightly highlights what is explicit in the Greek text. "God himself" *does not tempt*. In other words, God does not directly tempt us toward evil. Rather he does this through preternatural creatures like Satan and his demons. And, as James also notes in 1:14, temptation is successful because of the evil propensities of human second causes. James wrote:

Each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire (James 1:14, ESV).

Temptations are successful because of our own evil longings. In the end, God's ordinary use of second causes explains how God is sovereign over evil, but not the author of evil. While all things fall out according to his eternal plan, the responsibility of evil rests on preternatural and natural second causes that rebel against the commands of the One who made them.

In addition to stressing how God makes use of second causes in his ordinary providence, we must be sure to acknowledge God's extraordinary providence as well.

***Extraordinary Providence.*** As chapter five, paragraph three of the *Confession* puts it, God is also "free to work without, above, and against [means], at his pleasure." In effect, the *Confession* indicates that God engages his creation in extraordinary ways, in ways that we often call divine interventions, or even miracles. Sometimes he causes events to occur "without" the use of second causes. In other words, he does things directly in history. At other times, God causes things to occur in history that are "above" second causes. Meaning, he goes beyond the normal effects of second causes. And at other times, God also works "against" second causes. In other words, God reverses the ordinary results of second causes, especially as he brings good out of evil.

The Bible highlights many examples of extraordinary providence, times when God causes things to happen in history without, above and against second causes. In the Old Testament, these extraordinary acts of providence were often designed as signs to vindicate the authority of God's representatives like kings, prophets and priests. In the New Testament extraordinary providence often testifies to the authority of Jesus and his first century apostles and prophets. But unusual or extraordinary providence also includes other dramatic displays of God's blessings and judgments, even when they are not closely associated with the authority of God's special servants.

Even in our own day, God is always free to do things in ways that we do not expect. To be sure, when we examine our world, we see God's ordinary providence at every turn. And we should be grateful for the ways he makes use of second causes every day of our lives. But at the same time, faithful followers of Christ should expect to experience God's extraordinary providence as well. When the second causes that God ordinarily uses in our lives fail, we should turn to God himself, just as his faithful people have done throughout the centuries. We should call out for his extraordinary intervention into history, because he always remains free to work without, above and against every facet of creation. Nothing can withstand him.

---

## CONCLUSION

---

In this lesson on the "Plan and Works of God," we've explored how systematic theology has dealt with the plan of God from both biblical perspectives and a variety of theological positions. God has an all-encompassing, eternal and unfailing plan by which he orders all of history. But he also makes many limited, temporal and changing plans as he interacts moment by moment with his creation. And, we've also explored how systematic theologians refer to the works of God in creation and providence. God formed

both the visible and invisible dimensions of his creation and he sustains them all by his ordinary and extraordinary providence so that they fulfill all of his good pleasure and bring him endless glory.

Traditional systematic theologians have provided helpful ways of organizing many different biblical teachings about God as they deal with the plan and works of God. But more than this, what we've seen about these topics in this lesson also provides you and me with immeasurably valuable practical guidance for our daily lives. Whether we enjoy the wonders of God's blessings or the trials of suffering in our fallen world, what the Scriptures teach about God's plan and his works strengthens us and leads us into faithful service to Christ and his kingdom.



## CONTRIBUTORS

---

**Rev. Dr. Thurman Williams (Host)** is Associate Pastor at Grace and Peace Fellowship in St. Louis, Missouri. Dr. Williams earned his M.Div. at Chesapeake Theological Seminary and his D.Min. at Covenant Theological Seminary. Before joining Grace and Peace Fellowship, Dr. Williams was Senior Pastor of New Song Community Church in Baltimore, MD. He also served as Minister of Outreach and Youth at Faith Christian Fellowship Church and was Co-Area Director with Young Life.

---

**Andrew Abernethy, Ph.D.** is Assistant Professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College & Graduate School.

**Dr. Frank Barker** is Pastor Emeritus at Briarwood Presbyterian Church and is a founder of Birmingham Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Sukhwant S. Bhatia** is Founder and President of North India Institute of Theological Studies in Chandigarh, India.

**Dr. D.A. Carson** is Research Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Co-founder of The Gospel Coalition.

**Rev. Larry Cockrell** is Senior Pastor of Household of Faith Church and faculty member of Birmingham Theological Seminary.

**Rev. Michael J. Glodo** is Associate Professor of Biblical Studies at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida.

**Dr. Scott Manor** is Assistant Professor of Historical Theology, Vice President of Academic Affairs, and Dean of Faculty at Knox Theological Seminary.

**Dr. Grant R. Osborne** is Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

**Dr. Harry L. Reeder III** is Senior Pastor at Briarwood Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, AL.

**Dr. Steven C. Roy** is Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

**Dr. Philip Ryken** is President of Wheaton College.

**Rev. Dr. Lewis Winkler** is resident faculty member of Theological and Historical Studies at East Asia School of Theology.

## GLOSSARY

---

**boulé** – Greek term (transliteration) for "purpose," "counsel," "decree," "will"

**Calvin, John** – (1509-1564) French theologian and key Protestant Reformer who wrote *Institutes of the Christian Religion*

**chaphets** – Hebrew term (transliteration) meaning "pleasing"

**chashav** – Hebrew term (transliteration) meaning "to think," "to plan," "to determine"

**creation, act of** – God's work of bringing into existence the natural and preternatural realms

**decretive will** – God's sovereign will ordained as a firm decree that will happen without fail

**divine attributes** – The perfections of God's essence revealed through a variety of historical manifestations; attributes that only God can possess

**divine immanence** – Attribute of God referring to his closeness to man and creation; God's active involvement in space and time

**divine transcendence** – Attribute of God indicating that he is superior to man and above all the limitations of the created universe, including space and time

**dualism** – Theory that reduces a subject to the mutual existence of two opposing principles or entities

**eudokia** – Greek term (transliteration) for "good-pleasure," "favor"

**ex nihilo** – Latin term meaning "out of nothing"

**fatalism** – A view of the future that simply accepts what is to come because the events are inevitable; in this view, God is impersonal and does not interact with man

**First Cause** – Theological term for God as the Creator and ultimate cause behind everything that happens in history

**foreknowledge** – God's knowledge prior to creation of events that would occur in the course of history

**Hellenistic** – Of or relating to Greek civilization, culture, or language, after the time of Alexander the Great

**infra** – Latin term meaning "beneath"

**infralapsarianism** – The belief that God's decree to save his people should be placed after his decree to permit the fall of humanity into sin

**lapsus** – Latin term meaning "the fall"

**open theism** – Theological outlook that says the success of God's plans, purposes, and will are entirely dependent on history, especially on the choices that spirits and human beings make

**pantheism** – Belief that identifies God with his creation

**polytheism** – Belief in multiple gods

**prescriptive will** – God's prescribed commands; his preferred will for humanity as revealed in his law

**preternatural** – The realm of existence that is beyond or beside nature; includes invisible spirits such as angels and demons

**prothesis** – Greek term (transliteration) for "purpose," "plan"

**providence** – God's active involvement in history as he works out his eternal plan for his creation and the welfare of his people.

**providentia** – Latin term meaning "attending to," "sustaining," "taking care of"

**rahtsown** – Hebrew term (transliteration) meaning "pleasing," "favorable"

**second causes** – Created beings or objects that perform real but secondary roles in causing events to occur

**shamayim** – Hebrew term (transliteration) for "heaven," "the heavens," "sky"

**sub** – Latin term meaning "under"

**sublapsarianism** – Belief that God's decree to save his people came after his decree to permit the fall of humanity into sin, and that his decree to save came after his decree to offer redemption

**supra** – Latin term meaning "above"

**supralapsarianism** – Belief that God's decree to save his people came before his decree to permit the fall of humanity into sin

**theléma** – Greek term (transliteration) for "will," "desire"

**theology proper** – The doctrine or study of God; any theological matter that refers directly to God

**Westminster Confession of Faith** – An ecumenical doctrinal summary composed by the Westminster Assembly of Divines and published in 1647

**yaats** – Hebrew term (transliteration) meaning "to give counsel," "to decree"

**zamam** – Hebrew term (transliteration) meaning "to purpose," "to plan"