

Daniel 4:34-35

³⁴ At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; ³⁵ all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?" (ESV)

Earlier we read the Catechism questions about the decrees of God.¹ But I want to direct your attention to the box on your bulletin that contains the first two sections of Chapter III of the Westminster Confession because I think it is so well written.

Of God's Eternal Decree

Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter III:1-2

1: God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established. 2: Although God knows whatsoever may or can come to pass upon all supposed conditions, yet hath he not decreed anything because he foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass upon such conditions.

One of the things that I appreciate about the Confession is the way that the writers – these Puritans – captured so well, *and you might even say "prophetically foresaw,"* the arguments of our own day.

You see, this discussion still goes on. We will come upon it in our study of Esther, sure, but it comes up among Christians of different denominations, and it certainly comes up when something like the earthquakes in Haiti or Chile occur. What does God know and when does he know it?

And then, what about my personal freedom? You see, people will say, "God doesn't know what *actually* will take place, because if he did, then there can be no freedom." If God knows, on hoagie Sunday that I am going to choose the turkey hoagie rather than the roast beef, then I really have no freedom because everything's been set in advance. So what some people have done – rather than saying that God knows what will actually take place – is to say that "God knows all the *possible* worlds there could be. He knows all the possible combinations of choices that we could make and all of the contingent events. God can see all possibilities and respond perfectly to whatever we do. You know, it's something like Captain Kirk and Dr. Spock playing

¹ from Westminster Shorter Catechism, Questions 7-9

Leader: What are the decrees of God?

All: **The decrees of God are, his eternal purpose, according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass.**

Leader: How does God execute his decrees?

All: **God executes his decrees in the works of creation and providence.**

Leader: What is the work of creation?

All: **The work of creation is God's making all things of nothing, by the word of his power, in the space of six days, and all very good.**

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that multi-level chess board. Philosophers call this "middle-knowledge." God has to wait and see what we will do, like watching a huge, worldwide labyrinth of dominos set up, waiting to see what will get knocked over first.

And yet here is the confession saying, "Although God knows whatsoever may or can come to pass *upon all supposed conditions*, yet he hasn't decreed anything *because* he foresaw it as future, or as that which would come to pass *upon* such conditions." You see, the writers of the confession want to say as the bible makes clear, that his knowledge and providence is not conditioned upon events. God isn't boxed in. As Ephesians 1 says very clearly, "God predestines according to his purposes and *works all things* according to the counsel of his will."

There's the old story about the Arminian and the Calvinist who were walking along together one day, just chatting about this and that. While descending a flight of steps, both tripped and fell to the bottom of the stairwell. Both were unhurt. But the Arminian got up and, while brushing himself off, said, "I wonder what sin I committed to deserve that?" The Calvinist stood up and said, "Boy! Am I glad that's over!"

Now I know that story maligns both views – it's a caricature – but you have to admit, we all know Christians who respond to calamities in one of those two ways. Sometimes WE are that Christian!

Just this month, after the Earthquake in Haiti, Joel Osteen claimed that this was *not* God's will. God would never have ordained this or willed it to happen.

Now that saves God from being the cause of something so many of us see as evil or unjust. But you see, this god is not sovereign. He has to *wait* for things to happen, and then he responds. But Pat Robertson said that this *was* God's will – that God willed the earthquake to judge the people of Haiti for making a pact with the devil so that they could be free of France 200 years ago. Now forget for a moment how Pat Robertson knows what the devil the devil is up to. The problem here is that obviously, there were many Christians that died in that earthquake – some Christians died in their church on that day.

Both of these responses are unbiblical. Both of these views are trying to find human justification for the actions of God. One says God is too loving to allow calamity. The other said that God ordains calamity, and it is always in judgment for specific sins when he does.

The bible says both of those views are wrong! Now Joel Osteen can read, and so can Pat Robertson. So why do they come up with these aberrant readings? And I think the answer is, they find what the Catechism says abhorrent, ugly, and unacceptable.

And a lot of people do! King Nebuchadnezzar was one who did! King Nebuchadnezzar was the Babylonian king who captured Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, and carried the people of Judah into captivity in Babylon. This guy was evil – he had a policy of resettling conquered peoples and transporting them to other provinces of his empire to provide himself with slave labor to conduct his extensive building projects. And he killed many, many leaders of Israel so that everyone would know HE was king, that HE was the only sovereign, that HE was in control.

But then, at the very height of his powers and pride, here in Daniel, he is stricken by God's judgment. Nebuchadnezzar was eventually driven out of office, living with the beasts of the field and eating grass like an ox. And it's at the end of his days that he lifted his eyes to heaven, and said "my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and *he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth*; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?"

Now as hard as it was for the king, I want to say that we are just like King Nebuchadnezzar. We are prideful and desire power. We want to be sovereign over our kingdom of one. We want to decide what God is like and what he will do.

We have difficulty with God's decree or predestinating power because *we* bring difficulty to the bible, we bring an unteachable spirit, and we bring an unwillingness to understand, even though the bible is understandable on this point. This doesn't require a seminary education.

I want you to think about that famous story in 1st Kings 22. You don't have to turn there. In 1st Kings, King Jehoshaphat, the King of Judah goes to the Court of King Ahab, the King of Israel, and they have a meeting. And during the meeting, Ahab says, "You know, we really need to take back the town of Ramoth-gilead. That town belongs to us. What say you get your army and I get mine, and we will attack Syria and take it back?"

And Jehoshaphat says to him, "Interesting idea. But have you asked the Lord about that one?" So Ahab says, "No. But tell you what – I will bring in these 400 priest (these weren't priests of God – more like his presidential cabinet), and ask them. So they said, "Yeah, go for it! You'll conquer!"

Jehoshaphat is still skeptical – he can see that these sorts of "priests" are the paid kind that tell the king whatever he wants to hear. So he says to Ahab, aren't there any real priests – you know, the "priests of God" type – we can ask? And Ahab says, "Well yeah, "There is yet one, Micaiah, but I hate him because he never prophesies anything good about me, but just evil stiff."

Well, Jehoshaphat convinces Ahab to speak to him, and a posse is sent out to retrieve Micaiah and they tell the prophet on the way back, "Hey, everyone else has weighed in – you should agree with the other 400 and speak with one voice. Tell Ahab what he wants to hear."

But Micaiah tells the truth. And here it is. Ahab is going to go into battle and the Syrians are going to strike him down, and the sheep will be scattered and they will be without their shepherd.

Of course Ahab is furious, and says "I told you this guy never has anything good to say about me. Lock him up, and I'll take care of him after I get back from the battle." And Micaiah says, "Yeah, IF you come back!"

So what happens? Well, Ahab is a real BAD guy. He says to Jehoshaphat on the day of battle, "Look, YOU wear the kings robes today."

Now that's interesting. He hedges his bets. He's got 400 prophets who say "no problem," and one who says, "don't do it," and he hedges his bets by going anyway, but just in case, he puts the royal robes on Jehoshaphat under the pretense that – "Hey, I'll give YOU the glory for winning today, Jehoshaphat. You can wear the robes."

Well the day of the battle comes. And the Syrian king says "Take out the king. I want to cut this army off at the head." And when Jehoshaphat sees the Syrian warriors come right for him he knows what's up and says, "Hey, I'm the wrong guy! You want Ahab!" To no avail.

Now if you think about it, this sounds a little like Pat Robertson, right? I mean, this story, I hope you see rules out Joel Osteen's view (God himself says through the prophet Isaiah "I am the LORD, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things."²)

But what about Pat Robertson's view? (I mean, it *seems* like Ahab was being judged by God, so can't we say that God is judging Haiti for selling its soul to the Devil?) And for a moment you think, wow! Ahab *is* pretty smart! Because he outsmarted Syria, he outsmarted Jehoshaphat. Hey, ***he outsmarted the Lord!*** Micaiah said he'd never come back alive and there he goes!

But here's what we're told. Chapter 22:34 says, "But a certain man drew his bow at random and struck the king of Israel (Ahab) between the scale armor and the breastplate."

Now think about that. This guy wasn't aiming. He may have been down to his final arrow and about to be FLUSHED OUT OR CAPTURED HIMSELF, SO HE LETS ONE FLY. And by chance, this arrow goes up into the sky, and as luck would have it, of all people, it comes down and it hits Ahab. Hits Ahab where? Well, between the joints of the Armor.

Now what's the point? The point is, there is no such thing as luck. There is no such thing as chance or fates that pull the trigger. It is virtually impossible to hit someone between the plates of armor. If you were trying to wait until your enemy stretched an arm or extended a limb just so that there was a little flesh exposed, you couldn't do it, because it would be only for a millisecond. But that is what happens. The point is, God controls every detail. God controls things that happen at random.

Isaiah 46 says "for I am God... and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,'... I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it.

God declares it, and it will happen. He declares the end from the beginning – even the order of things he decides and he executes. Events can't be undone, they cannot be reordered, they can't go another direction or be reversed. God is responsible right down to the order of things.

One way to illustrate this is to think about an architect. Even before the foundation is laid, the architect has worked out all of the details. And when it's time to build, the builders must follow his plans.

² Isaiah 45:6-8

Just as the architect plans everything that goes into his house, God plans everything in the world. God and the architect "foreordain whatsoever comes to pass."

BUT. There are differences. First, God's plan is eternal. His plan has been forever. Our plans are not. At first, we *don't* have a plan. In other words, there IS a time before we've even *come up* with a plan. Then, there is a time when we *do* have a plan. Then we revise it, and so forth. But with God, as Psalm 33:11 says, "The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations.

God's blueprint, if you will, is unchangeable. There is no "Plan B". That's what the catechism is getting at when it says that God's "eternal purpose is according to the counsel of his will."

God the architect does not show his plan to the builder or the zoning commissioner. He doesn't need external wisdom.

A second difference between God and a human architect is the issue of control. While an architect has a measure of control, God's plan is absolute. Even things we would call "chance" or accidental events." Proverbs 16 says "The lot is cast into the lap" – casting lots is like throwing dice – "but its every decision is from the LORD." Even *chance* he controls.

And thirdly, God's knowledge and his will are independent of us. While our knowledge of the universe is *dependent* upon the universe, God's knowledge is NOT dependent upon that universe. No, the existence of the universe is dependent upon *God's* knowledge of it for its own being! You and I – we know things *because* they are. God knows things, *therefore they are*. Everything we know is contingent upon creation or revelation. That's why we are so uncertain about so many things. But God is contingent upon nothing. He is uncertain about nothing. That is a radically different way of being. That's why God – who clearly reveals himself to us – is always going to be incomprehensible to us. There are going to be things he does or allows that we won't always get.

Now what about the choices *you* make. Are you free? Does God's providence make you a robot?

This church believes, this denomination believes, the bible *says*, that men and women are free. Now after all we've said about God's sovereign control, how can this be?

And the answer is. "I don't know." I'm not God, and he's not saying! But the bible says that men and women freely do what they do and yet they do *exactly* what God plans.

When we consider an event like the earthquake in Haiti, we have to be very careful not to make God over in our image. Listen to the unbeliever, and almost every comment they will make about an event like an earthquake – if they decide to speak about God – is almost always like this: If there is a God, how could he let this happen (because they think that his thinking is just like theirs).

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Who is responsible for the earthquake in Haiti? We are. All of us. God does will earthquakes in Haiti and in Chile, and Tsunamis in Hawaii. Nothing happens that happens apart from his will, and yet he is not responsible for it. As my friend Jim Cassidy said recently, to say that the earthquake in Haiti "happened apart from or over and against God's will is to de-god God. To un-god God. It is to make God powerless. That is not an option for a biblical person."

When Romans tells us that "creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God," Paul is simply saying that *the earth, too*, is cursed because of our sin. There were no pre-fall earthquakes, floods or tsunamis.

So Pat Robertson is partially correct in this sense: Earthquakes happen because of sin, but it's *our* sin. And I can't tell you exactly how, but God can decree and use an earthquake for the good of those who love him, and he can use it as judgment on those who don't. An earthquake to a Christian is a precursor to the return of our Lord. Jesus himself says that "nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are but the beginning of the birth pains." An earthquake is a terrifying, and yet regular part of our present age. It remind us that nothing is perfect until God redeems it.

If you *don't* know God, then these *same* earthquakes are a warning. The bible says that these same earthquakes will come at the day of the Lord and the mountains will shake to make God's name known.

Here is what you do need to know. At the cross, there IS an earthquake. It was a horrible death – and that too, happened because of our sin. He bore the full judgment of God for sin, and the ground shook because of it. But God's providence was at work.

In Acts chapter 2, Peter preaches this sermon on God's gracious providence: "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know — ***this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God – (God planned it! – but listen)***, you crucified and killed (this Jesus) by the hands of lawless (wicked) men. (Men did it, but God planned it) God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death (the birthpangs that were coming closer together until this Day of the Lord), because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

So repent. In God's providence, earthquakes are coming. Jesus will come again in judgment. But when you suffer IN CHRIST, blame not God – even though he controls all. No, it is we who are to blame, but in Christ, we are more than conquerors. We are saved, we are raised, we are children of God. And where he will take us there will be no tragedy, no earthquakes, no cancer... because there is no sin.

Let's pray.