

OF THE DECREES OF GOD.

EPHES. i. 11.—*According to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will.*

THE apostle here gives an instance of the sovereign freedom of divine grace through Jesus Christ in the believing Jews.

1. There is here the high privilege they were advanced to, a right to the heavenly inheritance, which had been forfeited by the sin of man.

2. Through whom they had obtained it, *in him*; by virtue of the merits, the obedience and satisfaction of Christ.

3. Why they obtained it, while others had not. Not that they were more worthy than others, but because they were predestinated, elected, or fore-ordained to salvation, and all the means of it.

4. There is the certainty of the efficacy of predestination. It is *according to his purpose*; that is, his firm purpose and peremptory decree to bring such things to pass. And this certainly in particular is evinced by a general truth, *Who worketh all things according to the counsel of his own will.* Wherein we may notice.

(1.) God's effectual operation, *he worketh*. The word signifies to work powerfully and efficaciously, so as to overcome all contrary resistance, and all difficulties in the way; which is exactly God's way of working. And this working takes place in the works of creation and providence.

(2.) The manner how God works. The plan and scheme according to which his works are framed, is *the counsel of his will*. His will is his decree and intention; and it is called *the counsel of his will*, to denote the wisdom of his decrees, his most wise and free determination therein. As God's decree is an act of his will, and so most free, considered in relation to the creatures; so his decree and will are never without counsel; he willeth or decreeth things to be done with the greatest reason and judgment, most wisely as well as freely.

(3.) The object of his working after this manner, *all things*. This cannot be restricted to the blessings which the apostle had been speaking of immediately before, but must be understood of all things whatsoever, and of all their motions and actions as such; which therefore are the object of God's decrees.

The text plainly affords this doctrine, viz.

DOCT. 'God hath fore-ordained, according to the counsel of his own will, whatsoever comes to pass.'

Here I shall,

- I. Explain the nature of a decree.
- II. Consider the object of God's decrees.
- III. Speak of the end of his decrees.
- IV. Touch at their properties.
- V. Make improvement.

I. I am to explain the nature of a decree. The text calls it *a purpose, a will*. For God to decree is to purpose and fore-ordain, to will and appoint that a thing shall be or not be. And such decrees must needs be granted, seeing God is absolutely perfect, and therefore nothing can come to pass without his will; seeing there is an absolute and necessary dependence of all things and persons on God as the first cause. But there is a vast difference betwixt the decrees of God and men; whereof this is the principal: Men's purposes or decrees are distinct from themselves, but the decrees of God are not distinct from himself. God's decrees are nothing else but God himself, who is one simple act; and they are many only in respect of their objects, not as they are in God; even as the one heat of the sun melts wax and hardens clay. To say otherwise is to derogate from the absolute simplicity of God, and to make him a compound being. It is also to derogate from his infinite perfection; for whatsoever is added to any thing argues a want, which is made up by the accession of that thing, and so introduces a change; but God is absolutely unchangeable. Neither could God's decrees be eternal, if it were not so; for there is nothing eternal but God.

II. I proceed to consider the object of God's decrees. This is whatsoever comes to pass. He *worketh all things*, says the text. God has decreed whatsoever comes to pass; and nothing comes to pass but what he has decreed to come to pass. We may consider the extent of the divine decree under the three following heads.

1. God has decreed the creation of all things that have a being.
2. He has decreed to rule and govern the creatures which he was to make.
3. He has decreed the eternal state of all his rational creatures.

First, God decreed to rear up this stately fabric of the world, the heavens and the earth, the sea and the land, with all the great variety of creatures which inhabit them. There are myriads of holy angels in heaven, cherubim and seraphim, thrones and dominions, principalities and powers, angels and archangels. There are many shining luminaries in the firmament, the sun, and the moon, and innumerable glittering stars. There is a great variety of creatures on the earth, animals, plants, trees, and minerals, with various forms, shapes, colours, smells, virtues, and qualities. The sea is

inhabited by many creatures, Psal. civ. 25. Now, God decreed to make all these things, Rev. iv. 11. ‘Thou hast created all things.’

Secondly, God hath decreed the government of all his creatures. He preserves and upholds them in their beings, and he guides and governs them in all their motions and actions. He is not only the general spring and origin of all the motions and actions of the creatures, but he appoints and orders them all immediately.

1. He has decreed all their motions and actions: ‘For (says the apostle) of him, and through him, and to him, are all things.’ Rom. xi. ult. This is clear from God’s knowing all these things before they come to pass; which knowledge of them must needs be in the decree, upon which the coming to pass of all things depends.

Not only good things, but evil things fall within the compass of his holy decree. Evils of punishment are truly good, being the execution of justice, as it is good in a magistrate to punish evildoers. God owns himself to be the author of these evils, Amos iii. 6. ‘Shall there be evil in a city, and the Lord hath not done it?’ And yet he has decreed the effecting of these. As for the evils of sin, these also fall within the compass of the decree of God, as is clear in the case of crucifying Christ, Acts ii. 23. ‘Him (says the apostle to the Jews) being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain.’ And says the apostle, Acts iv. 27. 28. ‘For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done.’ This appears also in the case of Pharaoh refusing to let Israel go, and pursuing them when they had gone, whose heart God hardened, Exod. xiv. 4; and in the sin of Joseph’s brethren in selling him into Egypt; of which Joseph says, Gen. xlv. 8. ‘So now it was not you that sent me hither, but God.’ It is true, God decreed not the effecting of sin, for then he should have been the author of it, but he decreed the permission of sin. And though sin in itself is evil, yet God’s permitting it is good, seeing he can bring good out of it; and it is just in him to permit it, where he is not bound to hinder it. Yet this is not a naked permission, whereby the thing may either come to pass or not, but such as infers a certainty of the event, so that in respect of the event the sin cannot but come to pass. Hence our Lord says, Matth. xviii. 7. ‘Wo unto the world because of offences; for it must needs be that offences come.’ And says the apostle, 1 Cor. xi. 19. ‘There must be heresies among you.’ See also Acts iv. 27, 28. forecited.

2. And not only necessary things, as the burning of the fire, but the most free acts of the creature, and the most casual things, fall under the divine decree. Free acts, as Prov. xx. 1. ‘The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will.’ To this purpose are the foresaid instances of the Jews, Pharaoh, and Joseph’s brethren.—The most casual, as in the ease of the casual slaughter mentioned, Exod. xxi. 12, 13, and Deut. xix. 3. where mention is made of the Lord’s delivering the person slain into the hands of the slayer, though he had no intention to slay him. Such also is the case of lots, Prov. xvi. 33. ‘The lot is cast into the lap; but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord.’ This holds also in the case of sparrows, and the hairs of the head falling, which cannot be done without God, Matth. x. 29, 30. And thus not only great things, but small things fall within the compass of the divine decree.

But more especially let us consider God’s decrees with respect to the government of rational creatures. This we may take up in the following particulars.

1. God has decreed what kingdoms and monarchies should be on the earth, what princes and potentates should rule and govern them, and whether their government should be mild or tyrannical; how long each kingdom should continue, when they should have peace and when war, when prosperity and adversity. We find wonderful discoveries made to Daniel with respect to these things.

2. God has decreed every thing relating to the lot and condition of particular persons.

(1.) He has decreed the time and place of their birth, whether it should be under the law or gospel, in a land of light or darkness; whether among the savage Indians in America, or among the more polite and civilized people of Europe; whether among Mahometans, Papists, or Protestants. All this was decreed by the Lord, who ‘hath made of one blood all nations of men, to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation,’ Acts xvii. 26.

(2.) He hath decreed every man’s lot and condition, whether it shall be high or low, rich or poor, noble or ignoble, learned or unlearned. He hath determined the trade and employment they should follow, the particular business they should betake themselves to. Many times God’s providence over-rules men’s purposes and designs, for fulfilling his own counsels. Matters are sometimes strangely wheeled about, so that not what we or our parents designed, but what God hath purposed shall take place. Amos was meanly employed at first, but God designed him for a more honour-

able calling: he was taken from the office of a herdman, and gatherer of sycamore fruit, and invested with a commission to prophesy to the people of Israel, Amos vii. 14, 15. David followed the ewes, and it is like never raised his thoughts to higher things in the days of his youth; but God made him the royal shepherd of a better flock, Psal. lxxviii. 70, 71. The most part of the apostles were fishermen; but Christ called them to a more high and eminent station, even to be extraordinary officers in his church, and fishers of men.

(3.) God hath decreed what relations men shall have in the world. Their wives and children are appointed for them. Hence said Abraham's servant, Gen. xxiv. 44. 'Let the same be the woman whom the Lord hath appointed for my master's son.' That such a woman rather than any other, should be wife to such a man, is by the appointment of Heaven. Men's children are also decreed by God. Hence said Eve, Gen. iv. 24. 'God hath appointed me another seed instead of Abel, whom Cain slew.' And says the Psalmist, Psal. cxvii. 3. 'Lo children are the heritage of the Lord.' God determines the numbers and names of every man's children.

(4.) All the comforts of men's lives are under the divine appointment, both those temporal and spiritual. Hence says the prophet, Isa. xxvi. 1. 'We have a strong city: salvation will God appoint for walls and bulwarks.'

5. All men's afflictions are determined by a decree of Heaven, Micah vi. 9. 'Hear ye the rod, and who hath appointed it.' Such are public calamities and distresses, as war, famine and pestilence, all bodily pains and sickness, povertyes and pinching straits, and whatever is grievous and afflictive to men. None of these spring out of the dust, or come by chance. The kind and nature of people's troubles, their measure and degree, time and season, continuance and duration, and all the circumstances of them, are determined, and weighed in the scale of his eternal counsel. Hence says the apostle, 1 Thess. iii. 3. 'No man should be moved by these afflictions: for you yourselves know that we are appointed thereunto.'

(6.) The time of every man's life in the world is appointed. Hence says Job, chap. vii. 1. 'Is there not an appointed time to man upon earth? are not his days also like the days of an hireling?' And says the same great man, chap. xiv. 5. 'His days are determined: and the number of his months are with thee, thou hast appointed his bounds that he cannot pass.' The term of our life is fixed and limited, our days are determined, and our months numbered. Hence David prays, Psal. xxxix. 4. 'Lord, make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is: that I may know how frail I am.' Our days are measured; they are as

the days of an hireling. As the hireling hath a set time to work in, so every man and woman hath an appointed time for acting and working in this world. We are all pilgrims and strangers on the earth, and in a little time we must go hence and be no more. We are here like men upon a stage to act our parts, and in a short time we must retire within the curtain of death, and others will come in our room. Our glass is continually running, and the day and hour in which it will run out is settled and fixed by the order of Heaven. We find in scripture that God hath often foretold the precise term of particular men's lives. He set a hundred and twenty years to those who lived in the old world before the flood came upon them, Gen. vi. 3. He foretold the time of Moses' life, of that of Jeroboam's son, of that of Ahaziah king of Israel, and of many others. All this was from his own decree and counsel.

Thirdly, God hath determined the eternal state of all his rational creatures, both men and angels. Our Confession of Faith tells us, agreeably to scripture, chap. iii. art. 3. that 'by the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others are fore-ordained to everlasting death.' More particularly,

1. We read of the elect angels, 1 Tim. v. 21. The perseverance and standing of the holy angels in the state of their primitive integrity, and their confirmation therein, was determined by the purpose of God. In the morning of the creation heaven shined with innumerable glittering stars, the angels of light, of whom a vast number are, by their rebellion against God, become wandering stars, to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever. Now, the good angels are in a supernatural state, without the least danger of change, or any separation from the blessed presence of God in glory, flowing from the continual irradiations of divine grace, which preserves their minds from errors, and their wills from irregular desires; and consequently they cannot sin, nor forfeit their felicity.

It was by an eternal decree of God, that he passed by the angels that fell, and doomed them to everlasting misery. The apostle tells us, 2 Pet. ii. 4. that 'God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved into judgment.' And saith Jude, ver. 6. 'The angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, he hath reserved in everlasting chains under darkness, unto the judgment of the great day.' Mercy did not interpose to avert or suspend their judgment; but immediately they were expelled from the Divine Presence. Their present misery is insupportable, and worse awaits them. Their judgment is irreversible; they are

under the blackness of darkness for ever. They have not the least glimpse of hope to allay their sorrows, and no star-light to sweeten the horrors of their eternal night. It were a kind of mercy to them to be capable of death; but God will never be so far reconciled to them as to annihilate them. Immortality, which is the privilege of their nature, infinitely increases their torment.

2. God hath likewise appointed the final and eternal state of men and women. It is said, Rom. ix. 21, 22, 23. ‘Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour? What if God, willing to show his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much long-suffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: and that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory?’

(1.) He hath elected some to everlasting life by an irreversible decree, Rom. viii. 29, 30. ‘For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the first-born among many brethren. Moreover, whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified.’ Eph. i. 4. ‘According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love.’ 2 Thess. ii. 13. ‘God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation.’ From eternity God elected some from among the lost posterity of Adam to everlasting life and glory, according to the good pleasure of his own will. Therefore all is referred by our Saviour to the good pleasure of God, Matth. xi. 25, 26. And all the means for accomplishing the ends of election are^{are} likewise of divine appointment; particularly the redemption of ruined sinners by the death and sufferings of Christ: ‘He hath chosen us in Christ,’ Eph. i. 4. The Father did first, in the order of nature, chuse Christ to the Mediatory office, and as the chief corner-stone to bear up the whole building; whence he is called God’s *elect*, Isa. xlvi. 1. And then he chose a company of lost sinners to be saved by and through Christ; and therefore he is said to predestinate them to be conformed to the image of his Son.

2. God hath passed by the rest of mankind, according to the unsearchable counsel of his own will, whereby he extendeth or withholdeth mercy as he pleaseth, for the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, and hath ordained them to dishonour and wrath for their sins, to the praise of his glorious justice. Hence Christ is said to be ‘a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence to them that stumble at the word being disobedient: whereunto also they were

appointed,' 1 Pet. ii. 8. 'The foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity. But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold, and of silver, but also of wood, and of earth; and some to honour, and some to dishonour,' 2 Tim. ii. 19, 20. In Jude, ver. 4. we read of 'ungodly men, who were before of old ordained to condemnation.' And in Rom. ix. 22, 23. we read of 'vessels of mercy, which God had afore prepared unto glory: and of vessels of wrath fitted for destruction.'

III. I come to consider the end of God's decrees. And this is no other than his own glory. Every rational agent acts for an end; and God being the most perfect agent, and his glory the highest end, there can be no doubt but all his decrees are directed to that end. 'For—to him are all things,' Rom. xi. 36. 'That we should be to the praise of his glory,' Eph. i. 12. In all, he aims at his glory: and seeing he aims at it, he gets it even from the most sinful actions he has decreed to permit. Either the glory of his mercy or of his justice he draws therefrom. Infinite wisdom directs all to the end intended. More particularly,

1. This was God's end in the creation of the world. The divine perfections are admirably glorified here, not only in regard of the greatness of the effect, which comprehends the heavens and the earth, and all things therein; but in regard of the marvellous way of its production. For he made the vast universe without the concurrence of any material cause; he brought it forth from the womb of nothing by an act of his efficacious will. And as he began the creation by proceeding from nothing to real existence, so in forming the other parts he drew them from infirm and indisposed matter, as from a second nothing, that all his creatures might bear the signatures of infinite power. Thus he commanded light to arise out of darkness, and sensible creatures from an insensible element. The lustre of the divine glory appears eminently here. Hence says David, Psal. xix. 1. 'The heavens declare the glory of God.' They declare and manifest to the world the attributes and perfections of their great Creator, even in his infinite wisdom, goodness, and power. All the creatures have some prints of God stamped upon them, whereby they loudly proclaim and shew to the world his wisdom and goodness in framing them. Hence says Paul, Rom. i. 20. 'The invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead.'

2. The glory of God was his chief end and design in making men and angels. The rest of the creatures glorified God in an objective

way, as they are evidences and manifestations of his infinite wisdom, goodness, and power. But this higher rank of beings are endued with rational faculties, and so are capable to glorify God actively. Hence it is said, Prov. xvi. 4. ‘The Lord hath made all things for himself.’ If all things were made for him, then man and angels especially, who are the master-pieces of the whole creation. We have our rise and being from the pure fountain of God’s infinite power and goodness; and therefore we ought to run towards that again, till we empty all our faculties and excellencies into that same ocean of divine goodness.

3. This is likewise the end of election and predestination. For ‘he hath predestinated us unto the adoption of children, to the praise of the glory of his grace.’ That some are ordained to eternal life, and others passed by, and suffered to perish eternally in their sin, is for the manifestation of the infinite perfections and excellencies of God. The glory and beauty of the divine attributes is displayed here with a shining lustre; as his sovereign authority and dominion over all his creatures to dispose of them to what ends and purposes he pleaseth; his knowledge and omniscience, in beholding all things past, present, and to come; his vindictive justice, in ordaining punishments to men, as a just retribution for sin; and his omnipotence, in making good his word, and putting all his threatenings in execution. The glory of his goodness shines likewise here, in making choice of any, when all most justly deserved to be rejected. And his mercy shines here with an amiable lustre, in receiving and admitting all who believe in Jesus into his favour.

4. This was the end that God proposed in that great and astonishing work of redemption. In our redemption by Christ we have the fullest, clearest, and most delightful manifestation of the glory of God that ever was or shall be in this life. All the declaratious and manifestations that we have of his glory in the works of creation and common providence, are but dim and obscure in comparison with what is here. Indeed the glory of his wisdom, power, and goodness, is clearly manifested in the works of creation. But the glory of his mercy and love had lain under an eternal eclipse without a Redeemer. God had in several ages of the world pitched upon particular seasons to manifest and discover one or other particular property of his nature. Thus his justice was declared in his drowning the old world with a deluge of water, and burning Sodom with fire from heaven. His truth and power were clearly manifested in freeing the Israelites from the Egyptian chains, and bringing them out from that miserable bondage. His truth was there illustriously displayed in performing a promise which had lain

dormant for the space of 430 years, and his power in quelling his implacable enemies by the meanest of his creatures. Again, the glory of one attribute is more seen in one work than in another: in some things there is more of his goodness, in other things more of his wisdom is seen, and in others more of his power. But in the work of redemption all his perfections and excellencies shine forth in their greatest glory. And this is the end that God proposed in their conversion and regeneration. Hence it is said, Isa. xlivi. 21. ‘This people have I formed for myself, they shall shew forth my praise.’ Sinners are adopted into God’s family, and made a royal priesthood on this very design,’ 1 Pet. ii. 9.

IV. I come now to consider the properties of God’s decrees.

1. They are eternal. God makes no decrees in time, but they were all from eternity. So the decree of election is said to have been ‘before the foundation of the world,’ Eph. i. 4. Yea whatever he doth in time, was decreed by him, seeing it was known to him before time, Acts xv. 18. ‘Known unto God are all his works from the beginning.’ And this foreknowledge is founded on the decree. If the divine decrees were not eternal, God would not be most perfect and unchangeable, but, like weak man, should take new counsels, and would be unable to tell every thing that were to come to pass.

2. They are most wise, ‘according to the counsel of his will.’ God cannot properly deliberate or take counsel, as men do; for he sees all things together and at once. And thus his decrees are made with perfect judgment, and laid in the depth of wisdom, Rom. xi. 33. ‘O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!’ So that nothing is determined that could have been better determined.

3. They are most free, *according to the counsel of his own will*; depending on no other, but all flowing from the mere pleasure of his own will, Rom. xi. 34. ‘For who hath known the mind of the Lord, or who hath been his counsellor?’ Whatsoever he decreeth to work without himself, is from his free choice. So his decrees are all absolute, and there are none of them conditional. He has made no decrees suspended on any condition without himself. Neither has he decreed any thing because he saw it would come to pass, or as that which would come to pass on such or such conditions; for then they should be no more according to the counsel of his will, but the creature’s will. For God’s decrees being eternal, cannot depend upon a condition which is temporal. They are the determinate counsels of God, but a conditional decree determines nothing. Such

conditional decrees are inconsistent with the infinite wisdom of God, and are in men only the effects of weakness; and they are inconsistent with the independency of God, making them depend on the creature.

4. They are unchangeable. They are the unalterable laws of heaven. God's decrees are constant; and he by no means alters his purpose, as men do, Psal. xxxiii. 11. 'The counsel of the Lord standeth for ever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations.' Hence they are compared to mountains of brass, Zech. vi. 1. As nothing can escape his first view, so nothing can be added to his knowledge. Hence Balaam said, 'God is not a man that he should lie, neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?' Numb. xxiii. 19. The decree of election is irreversible: 'The foundation of God, (says the apostle), standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his,' 2 Tim. ii. 19.

5. They are most holy and pure. For as the sun darts its beams upon a dunghill, and yet is no way defiled by it; so God decrees the permission of sin, as above explained, yet is not the author of sin: 1 John i. 5. 'God is light, and in him is no darkness at all,' Jam. i. 13, 17. 'God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man. With him is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.'

6. *Lastly*, They are effectual; that is, whatsoever God decrees comes to pass infallibly, Isa. xlvi. 10. 'My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure.' He cannot fall short of what he has determined. Yet the liberty of second causes is not hereby taken away; for the decree of God offers no violence to the creature's will; as appears from the free and unforced actings of Joseph's brethren, Pharaoh, the Jews that crucified Christ, &c. Nor does it take away the contingency of second causes, either in themselves or as to us, as appears by the lot cast into the lap. Nay they are thereby established, because he hath efficaciously foreordained that such effects shall follow on such causes.

Before proceeding to the application of this doctrine, it may not be improper to answer some objections which are brought against the doctrine of the divine decrees.

1. It is objected by some, that if all things that come to pass in time be appointed of God by an irreversible decree, then this seems to make God the author of sin, as if he had ordained that horrid and hateful evil to come into the world, which is so dishonourable to himself, and so destructive to the children of men. In answer to this, you must know,

1. That all sinful actions fall under the divine decree. Though sin itself flows from transgressing the law, yet the futurition of it is from the decree of God. No such thing could ever have been in the world, if it had not been determined by the eternal counsel of Heaven for a holy and just end. This is plainly asserted by the apostle Peter, with respect to the greatest villainy that was ever committed on the earth, namely, the death and sufferings of the Lord Jesus Christ, at the hands of sinful men, Acts ii. 23. forecited. And the church gives this account of it, Acts iv. 27, 28. ‘For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, for to do whatsoever thy hand, and thy counsel determined before to be done.’ There was never such an atrocious crime or higher act of wickedness committed, than the murdering of the Lord of glory. And yet it appears from these texts of scripture, that, in this bloody and horrid scene, wicked men did no more than God’s hand and counsel determined before to be done.

2. That the decree of God is properly distinguished into that which is effective, and that which is permissive.

(1.) His effective decree respects all the good that comes to pass, whether it be moral or natural goodness. All the actions and motions of the creatures have a natural goodness in them; and even sinful actions considered abstractly from any irregularity, obliquity, or deformity cleaving to them, have a natural goodness in them, so far as they are actions: they have a goodness of being considered purely and simply as actions. Now, God has decreed to effect all these, yea even sinful actions considered purely as natural. For he is the first and universal cause of all things, the fountain and original of all good. And it is said with respect to the oppressions of the church by wicked men, Psal. cxv. 3. ‘Our God is in the heavens; he hath done whatsoever he pleased.’

(2.) His permissive decree doth only respect the irregularity and gravity that is in sinful actions. God decreed to permit the same, or he determined it to be, himself permitting it. Hence it is said, Acts xiv. 16. ‘In times past he suffered all nations to walk in their own ways.’ And God doth nothing in time, but what he did from eternity decree to do. So that the futurition of sin is from the decree of God. God determined that it should be. He did not decree to have any efficiency in sin, considered as such; but he willed that it should be done, himself permitting it. The counsel of God did not determine to do it, but that it should be done.

3. God decreed the permission of sin for great and glorious ends.

It is true, sin in its own nature has no tendency to any good end. If it end in any good, it is from the overruling providence of God, and that infinite divine skill that can bring good out of evil, as well as light out of darkness. Now, the great and glorious end for which God decreed the after-being of sin, is his own glory : and the ends subordinate thereunto are not a few. Particularly, God decreed the futurition of sin, (1.) That he might have occasion of glorifying his infinite wisdom, love, and grace in the redemption and salvation of a company of lost sinners through the death and sufferings of his own dear Son. (2.) That his patience and long suffering in bearing with and forbearing sinners, might be magnified, admired, and adored. (3.) That he might be honoured and glorified by the faith and repentance of his people, and their walking humbly with him. (4.) That his justice might be illustriously displayed and glorified in the eternal damnation of reprobate sinners for their own sins and abominations, sin being the cause of their damnation, though not of their reprobation. Thus God decreed the futurition of sin for these holy and wise ends, that he might glorify his wisdom in bringing good out of so great an evil, and a greater good than the evil he decreeed to permit.

4. The decree of God about the permission of sin does not infringe the liberty of man's will. For sin doth not follow the decree by a necessity of co-action or compulsion, which indeed would destroy human liberty ; but by a necessity of infallibility, which is very consistent with it. It is sufficient unto human liberty, or the freedom of man's will, that a man act without all constraint, and out of choice. Now, this is not taken away by the decree. Men sin as freely as if there were no decree, and yet as infallibly as if there were no liberty. And men sin, not to fulfil God's decree, which is hid from them, but to serve and gratify their vile lusts and corrupt affections.

Objeet. 2. If God hath determined the precise number of every man's days by an unalterable decree, then the use of means for the preservation of our health and lives is altogether unnecessary ; for nothing can frustrate the divine decree. We will certainly live as long as God hath appointed us, whether we use any means or not. And therefore when we are hungry, we need not eat and drink ; and when we are sick, we need not take physic, or use any medicines.

In answer to this, you must know, that as God hath decreed the end, so he hath decreed the means that are proper for attaining that end ; so that these two must not be separated. Though God hath decreed how long we shall live, yet seeing it is his ordinary way to work by means, and he hath commanded and enjoined the use of

them to men, therefore it is still our duty to use lawful means for preserving our life and health, and to wait on God in the due use of them, referring the event to his wise determination. In Paul's dangerous voyage to Rome, an angel of the Lord assured him, that God had given him all that sailed with him in the ship ; and Paul assured them from the Lord, that there should be no loss of any of their lives: yet when some were about to flee out of the ship, he says to the centurion who had the command, ' Except these abide in the ship, you cannot be saved,' Acts xxvii. 31. And he exhorted them to take some meat after their long abstinence, telling them, that it was for their health. From which it plainly appears, that as God had decreed to save their lives, so he had decreed to save them in the due use of ordinary means; so that they were to use means for the preservation of their life and health. And when Hezekiah was recovered from a mortal disease, and received a promise from God that he should have fifteen years added to his days, and the promise was confirmed by a sign, the miraculous going back of the sun, he did not neglect or cast off the use of means: but, as was prescribed by the prophet, he applied a bunch of dried figs to his sore, and used still his ordinary diet. Therefore it is gross ignorance and madness in men to reason so against God's decrees. The Lord, by an unchangeable counsel and purpose, hath decreed and set down all things, and how they shall come to pass; and therefore it is a wrong way of arguing for people to say, If God hath determined how long I shall live, then I shall not die sooner, though I never eat or drinck.

Object. 3. If God hath determined the eternal state and condition of men, whether they shall be happy or miserable for ever, then it is in vain to repent and believe, or use any means for their own safety. For if God hath elected them to salvation, they shall certainly be saved, whether they use any means or not; and if they are not elected to everlasting life, all that they can possibly do will be to no purpose at all, for they shall never be saved by it.

For answer to this, you must know,

1. That God's decree of election is a great secret, which we ought not to pry into. It is simply impossible for men to know whether they are elected or not, before they believe. Indeed, if a man were certain that he is not elected to eternal life, it would be another case : but as it is not certain that thou art elected, so it is not certain that thou art not elected. You have no means to know either the one or the other certainly, till you get saving faith. Till then the Lord reserves it in his own breast, as a secret which we are not to pry into. For it is said, Deut. xxix. 29. ' Seeret things belong

unto the Lord our God; but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children, that we may do all the things of his law.' Here the Lord shews what belongs to him and what belongs to us, and that we should mind our duty, and not busy and perplex ourselves about impertinencies. Whether men be elected or not elected, is a secret that God never discloses to an unbeliever; but that we should believe on Christ is no secret. This is a duty clearly revealed and enjoined by the gospel.

2. It is our duty to look to God's commands, and not to his decrees; to our own duty, and not to his purposes. The decrees of God are a vast ocean, into which many possibly have curiously pried to their own horror and despair; but few or none have ever pried into them to their own profit and satisfaction. Our election is not written in particular in the word of God; but our duty is plainly set down there. If men conscientiously perform their duty, this is the way to come to the knowledge of their election. Men therefore should not question whether they be elected or not, but first believe on Christ, and endeavour diligently to work out their own salvation; and if their works be good, and their obedience true, thereby they will come to a certain knowledge that they were elected and set apart to everlasting life.

3. As God elects to the end, so he elects also to the means. Now, faith and obedience are the means and way to salvation; and therefore, if you be elected to salvation, you are also elected to faith and obedience. See what is said to this purpose, 2 Thess. ii. 13. 'God hath chosen you to salvation,' there is the end; 'through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth,' there is the means which lead to that end. Both are decreed by God. If therefore you heartily and sincerely believe and obey, then your election to salvation stands firm and sure. Nay, further, the scriptures make election to be terminated as well in obedience as salvation. So 1 Pet. i. 2. 'Elect (says the apostle) unto obedience, through sanctification of the Spirit.' In the former place it was, 'elect to salvation through sanctification;' but here it is, 'elect to obedience through sanctification;' to denote unto us, that none are elected unto salvation but those that are elected unto obedience. And therefore it is unreasonable, yea, it is contradictory to say, if I am elected, I shall be saved, whether I believe and obey or not; for none are elected to salvation but through faith and obedience.

4. Men do not pry into the decrees of God in other things, but do what they know to be incumbent upon them as their duty. And certainly it is as unreasonable here. When you are dangerously sick, and the physician tells you, that unless you take such and such

medicines, your case is desperate ; you do not use to reason thus, Then if God bath decreed my recovery, I will certainly be restored to my health, whether I take that course of physic or not ; but you presently fall in with the advice given you, and make use of the means prescribed for your health. And will you not do so here ? You are dangerously sick and mortally wounded with sin, and God commands you to flee to Christ the only physician that can cure you, and cast yourselves upon him, and you shall certainly be saved. But O, says the sinner, if I knew that God had decreed my salvation, I would venture on Christ ; but till once I know this, I must not believe : O how unreasonable is unbelief ! The devil's suggestions make poor creatures act as if they were entirely distracted and out of their wits. This is just as if an Israelite stung with the fiery serpents should have said, If I knew that the Lord had decreed my cure, I would look upon the brazen serpent, and if he hath decreed it, I will certainly recover whether I look to it or not. If all the stung Israelites had been thus resolved, it is likely they had all perished. Or this is as if one pursued by the avenger of blood, should have set himself down in the way to the city of refuge, where he should have been flying for his life, and said, If God hath decreed my escape, then I will be safe whether I run to the city of refuge or not ; but if he hath not decreed it, then it is in vain for me to go thither. Now, would not men count this a wilful casting away of his life, with a careless neglect of that provision which God hath made to save it ? Was it not sufficient that a way was made for his escape, and a way feasible enough, the city of refuge being always open ? Thus the arms of Christ are always open to receive and embrace poor humbled perishing sinners fleeing to him for help. And will men destroy themselves by suffering Satan to entangle them with a needless, impertinent, and unreasonable scruple ? In other cases, if there be no way but one, and any encouraging probability to draw men into it, they run into it without delay, not perplexing and discouraging themselves with the decrees of God. Now, this is thy case, O sinner ; Christ is the way, the truth, and the life ; there is no other by whom you can be saved ; flee to him then as for thy life ; and let not Satan hinder thee, by diverting thee to impossibilities and impertinencies. Comply with the call and offer of the gospel. This is present and pertinent duty, and trouble not thyself about the secrets of God.

I conclude all with a few inferences.

1. Has God decreed all things that come to pass ? Then there is nothing that falls out by chance, nor are we to ascribe what we meet with either to good or ill luck and fortune. There are many

events in the world which men look upon as mere accidents, yet all these come by the counsel and appointment of Heaven. Solomon tells us, Prov. xvi. 33. that ‘the lot is cast into the lap, but the whole disposing thereof is from the Lord.’ However casual and fortuitous things may be with respect to us, yet they are all determined and directed by the Lord. When that man drew a bow at a venture, 1 Kings xxii. 34. it was merely accidental with respect to him, yet it was God that guided the motion of the arrow so as to smite the king of Israel rather than any other man. Nothing then comes to pass, however casual and uncertain it may seem to be, but what was decreed by God.

2. Hence we see God’s certain knowledge of all things that happen in the world, seeing his knowledge is founded on his decree. As he sees all things possible in the glass of his own power, so he sees all things to come in the glass of his own will; of his effecting will, if he hath decreed to produce them; and of his permitting will, if he hath decreed to suffer them. Hence his declaration of things to come is founded on his appointing them, Isa. xliv. 7. ‘Who, as I, shall call, and shall declare it, and set it in order for me, since I appointed the ancient people? and the things that are coming and shall come? let them shew unto them.’ He foreknows the most necessary things according to the course of nature, because he decreed that such effects should proceed from and necessarily follow such and such causes: and he knows all future contingents, all things which shall fall out by chance, and the most free actions of rational creatures, because he decreed that such things should come to pass contingently or freely, according to the nature of second causes. So that what is casual or contingent with respect to us, is certain and necessary in regard of God.

3. Whoever be the instruments of any good to us, of whatever sort, we must look above them, and eye the hand and counsel of God in it, which is the first spring, and be duly thankful to God for it. And whatever evil of crosses or afflictions befalls us, we must look above the instruments of it to God. Affliction doth not rise out of the dust or come to men by chance; but it is the Lord that sends it, and we should own and reverence his hand in it. So did David in the day of his extreme distress. 2 Sam. xvi. 11. ‘Let him alone, and let him curse; for the Lord hath bidden him.’ We should be patient under whatever distress befalls us, considering that God is our party, Job ii. 10. ‘Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?’ This would be a happy means to still our quarrelings at adverse dispensations. Hence David says, ‘I was dumb, I opened not my mouth, because thou didst it,’ Psal. xxxix. 9.

4. See here the evil of murmuring and complaining at our lot in the world. How apt are ye to quarrel with God, as if he were in the wrong when his dealings with you are not according to your own desires and wishes? You demand a reason, and call God to an account, Why am I thus? why so much afflicted and distressed? why so long afflicted? and why such an affliction rather than another? why am I so poor and another so rich? Thus your hearts rise up against God. But you should remember, that this is to defame the counsels of infinite wisdom, as if God had not ordered your affairs wisely enough in his eternal counsel. We find the Lord reproving Job for this, chap. xl. 2. ‘shall he that contendeth with the Lord instruct him?’ When ye murmur and repine under cross and afflictive dispensations, this is a presuming to instruct God how to deal with you, and to reprove him as if he were in the wrong. Yea, there is a kind of implicit blasphemy in it, as if you had more wisdom and justice to dispose of your lot, and to carve out your own portion in the world. This is upon the matter the language of such a disposition, Had I been on God’s counsel, I had ordered this matter better; things had not been with me as now they are. O presume not to correct the infinite wisdom of God, seeing he has decreed all things most wisely and judiciously.

5. There is no reason for people to excuse their sins and falls, from the doctrine of the divine decrees. Wicked men, when they commit some villainy or atrocious crime, are apt to plead thus for their excuse, Who can help it? God would have it so; it was appointed for me before I was born, so that I could not avoid it. This is a horrid abuse of the divine decrees, as if they did constrain men to sin: Whereas the decree is an immanent act of God, and so can have no influence, physical or moral upon the wills of men, but leaves them to the liberty and free choice of their own hearts; and what sinners do, they do most freely and of choice. It is a horrid and detestable wickedness to cast the blame of your sin upon God’s decree. This is to charge your villainy upon him, as if he were the author of it. It is great folly to cast your sins upon Satan who tempted you, or upon your neighbour who provoked you; but it is a far greater sin, nay horrid blasphemy, to cast it upon God himself. A greater affront than this cannot be offered to the infinite holiness of God.

6. *Lastly*, Let the people of God comfort themselves in all cases by this doctrine of the divine decrees; and, amidst whatever befalls them, rest quietly and submissively in the bosom of God, considering that whatever comes or can come to pass, proceeds from the decree of their gracious friend and reconciled Father, who knows

what is best for them, and will make all things work together for their good. O what a sweet and pleasant life would ye have under the heaviest pressures of affliction, and what heavenly serenity and tranquillity of mind would you enjoy, would you cheerfully acquiesce in the good will and pleasure of God, and embrace every dispensation, how sharp soever it may be, because it is determined and appointed for you by the eternal counsel of his will !

OF THE WORK OF CREATION.

HEB. xi. 3.—*Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear.*

HAVING discoursed to you of the decrees of God, whereby he hath fore-ordained whatsoever comes to pass, I come now to treat of the execution of these decrees. That question, ‘ How doth God execute his deerees?’ being only an introduction to what follows, it is needless to insist on it. Only you must know, that for God to execute his decrees, is to bring to pass what he has decreeed. Now, what God from all eternity decreed is brought to pass in the works of creation and providence. Nothing falls out in either of these but what was decreeed ; nor does it fall out in any other way than as it was decreeed. The deerees of God are as it were the scheme, draught and pattern of the house ; and the works of creation and providence are the house, built in every point conformable to the draught.

In the text we have an answer to that question, ‘ What is the work of creation ?’ Wherein, we may consider,

1. What we understand about it. (1.) The making of the world ; it was *framed*, and had a beginning, not being from eternity. (2.) The author and efficient cause of it, God. (3.) What God made, *the worlds* ; all things, heaven, earth, sea, air, &c. and all the inhabitants thereof, angels, men, cattle, fowls, fishes, &c. (4.) How they were made, *by the word of God*, that word of power which spake all things, into being. Or it may denote Jesus Christ, who is called *the word of God*, and by whom God made *the worlds*. (5.) Whereof they were made. This is declared negatively, *Things which are seen were not made of things which do appear*, that is, not of pre-existent matter, but of nothing. By *things that are seen* may be understood visible corporeal things ; and if these were made of nothing, much more things that are not seen. But I rather under-