

PART FOUR

THE WORK OF GOD

THIRTEEN

God's Plan

Chapter Objectives

Upon completion of this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

1. To recognize the key terminology in God's plan and how to define these terms.
2. To explain the biblical teaching about God's plan from both the Old and New Testaments.
3. To identify and describe some general characteristics of God's plan.
4. To develop a logical priority for God's plan or human action by examining the historical views of Calvinism and Arminianism.
5. To describe a moderately Calvinistic model of God's plan and tell why it is more biblically based than an Arminian view.
6. To inspire confidence in God's work in history and its effect on all those who believe in Christ.

Chapter Summary

God has a definite plan for history. There are at least nine conclusions that may be drawn from the biblical references to God's plan. Calvinism and Arminianism pose different solutions to the problem of whether God's plan or human action is logically prior. From our analysis, we conclude that a moderately Calvinist position is the most biblically

based. Finally, there are a variety of views of history, but the biblical view posits that God is guiding history to his goal and that we can have assurance that if we align ourselves with his purpose, we will be moving to an assured outcome of history.

Study Questions

- Explain the terms *foreordain* and *predestinate*.
- What can be learned from both the Old and New Testament teachings about the plan of God?
- What are the general characteristics of God's plan?
- What does human freedom mean in the moderately Calvinistic model?

Chapter Outline

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Various Understandings of History

Where is history going, and why? What if anything is causing the pattern of history to develop as it is? These are questions which confront all thinking persons and which crucially affect their way of life. Christianity's answer is that God has a plan which includes everything that occurs, and that he is now at work carrying out that plan.

Key Definitions

We may define the plan of God (which is often referred to as his decrees) as his eternal decision rendering certain all things which shall come to pass. There are analogies which, though necessarily insufficient, may help us to understand this concept. The plan of God is like the architect's plans, drawn first in his or her mind and then on paper according to his or her intention and design, and only afterward executed in an actual structure. Or God may be thought of as being like a general who has carefully conceived a battle plan for his army to carry out.

It is necessary at this point to clarify certain terminology. Many theologians use the terms *predestinate* and *foreordain* virtually synonymously. For our purposes, however, we shall use them somewhat differently. "Predestinate" carries a somewhat narrower connotation than

does "foreordain." Since it literally suggests the destiny of someone or something, it is best used of God's plan as it relates in particular to the eternal condition of moral agents. We will use the term *foreordain* in a broader sense, that is, to refer to the decisions of God with respect to any matters within the realm of cosmic history. "Predestination" will be reserved for the matter of eternal salvation or condemnation. Within predestination, "election" will be used of God's positive choice of individuals, nations, or groups to eternal life and fellowship with him, while "reprobation" will refer to negative predestination or God's choice of some to suffer eternal damnation or lostness. The use of "predestination" is limited in this volume to either election or reprobation or both; "foreordination," on the other hand, while it also may refer to election, reprobation, or both, has a far broader range of meaning.

The Biblical Teaching

The Old Testament Teaching

In the Old Testament presentation, the planning and ordaining work of God is very much tied up with the covenant which the Lord made with his people. As we read of all that God did in choosing and taking personal care of his peo-

ple, two truths about him stand out. On one hand, God is supremely powerful, the creator and sustainer of all that is. On the other hand is the loving, caring, personal nature of the Lord. He is not mere abstract power, but is thought of as a loving person.¹

For the Old Testament writers, it was virtually inconceivable that anything could happen independently of the will and working of God. As evidence of this, consider that common impersonal expressions like "It rained" are not found in the Old Testament. For the Hebrews, rain did not simply happen; God sent the rain. They saw him as the all-powerful determiner of everything that occurs. God himself comments, for example, concerning the destruction inflicted by the king of Assyria: "Have you not heard that I determined it long ago? I planned from days of old what now I bring to pass, that you should make fortified cities crash into heaps of ruins" (Isa. 37:26). Even something as seemingly trivial as the building of reservoirs is described as having been planned long before (Isa. 22:11). Furthermore, there is in God's plan a special concern for the welfare of the nation of Israel, and of every one of God's children (Pss. 27:10-11; 37; 65:3; 91; 121; 139:16; Dan. 12:1; Jon. 3:5).

The Old Testament also enunciates belief in the efficaciousness of God's plan. What is now coming to pass is doing so because it is (and has always been) part of God's plan. What he has promised, he will do. In fact, in Isaiah 14:24-27 we read not only of God's faithfulness to his avowed purpose, but also of the futility of opposing it: "For the LORD of hosts has purposed, and who will annul it? His hand is stretched out, and who will turn it back?" (v. 27; cf. Job 42:2; Jer. 23:20; Zech. 1:6).

It is particularly in the wisdom literature and the prophets that the idea of an all-inclusive divine purpose is most prominent.² God has from the beginning, from all eternity, had an inclusive plan encompassing the whole of reality and

extending even to the minor details of life. "The LORD has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble" (Prov. 16:4; cf. 3:19-20; Job 38, especially v. 4; Isa. 40:12; Jer. 10:12-13). We humans may not always understand as God works out his purpose in our lives. This was the experience of Job throughout the book that bears his name; it is articulated particularly in 42:3, "Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge? Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know." Thus, in the view of the Old Testament believer, God had created the world, he was directing history, and all this was but the unfolding of a plan prepared in eternity and related to his intention of fellowship with his people.

The New Testament Teaching

The plan and purpose of God is also prominent in the New Testament. Jesus affirmed that God had planned not only the large, complex events, such as the fall and destruction of Jerusalem (Luke 21:20-22), but details as well, such as the apostasy of and betrayal by Judas, and the faithfulness of the remaining disciples (Matt. 26:24; Mark 14:21; Luke 22:22; John 17:12; 18:9). The fulfillment of God's plan and Old Testament prophecy is a prominent theme in the writing of Matthew (1:22; 2:15, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 26:56) and of John (12:38; 19:24, 28, 36). While critics may object that some of these prophecies were fulfilled by people who knew about them and may have had a vested interest in seeing them fulfilled (e.g., Jesus fulfilled Ps. 69:21 by saying, "I thirst" [John 19:28]), it is notable that other prophecies were fulfilled by persons who had no desire to fulfil them and probably had no knowledge of them, such as the Roman soldiers in their casting lots for Jesus' garment and not breaking any of his bones.³ Even where there was no specific prophecy to be fulfilled, Jesus conveyed a sense of necessity concerning future events. For example, he said to his disciples, "And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is not

1. Benjamin B. Warfield, "Predestination," in *Biblical Doctrines* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1929), pp. 7-8.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

3. Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Christian Evidences* (Chicago: Moody, 1953), p. 88.

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yet. . . . And the gospel must first be preached to all nations" (Mark 13:7, 10).

The apostles also laid emphasis upon the divine purpose. Peter said in his speech at Pentecost, "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men" (Acts 2:23). In writing the Book of Revelation the apostle John gave us a particularly striking example of belief in the divine plan. The note of certainty pervading the whole book, the entire series of events predicted there, derives from belief in God's plan and foreordination.

It is in Paul's writings that the divine plan according to which everything comes to pass is made most explicit. Everything that occurs is by God's choice and in accordance with his will (1 Cor. 12:18; 15:38; Col. 1:19). The very fortunes of nations are determined by him (Acts 17:26). God's redemptive work unfolds in accordance with his intended purpose (Gal. 3:8; 4:4-5). The choice of individual and nation to be his own and the consequent events are God's sovereign doing (Rom. 9-11). One might well take the image of the potter and the clay, which Paul uses in a specific and somewhat narrow reference (Rom. 9:20-23), and see it as expressive of his whole philosophy of history. Paul regards "all things" that happen as part of God's intention for his children (Eph. 1:11-12). Thus Paul says that "in everything God works for good for those who are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28), his purpose being that we might be "conformed to the image of his Son" (v. 29).

The Nature of the Divine Plan

We now need to draw together, from these numerous and varied biblical references, some general characteristics of God's plan. This will enable us to understand more completely what the plan is like and what we can expect from God.

1. God's plan is from all eternity. The psalmist spoke of God's having planned all of our days before there were any of them (Ps. 139:16). Paul in Ephesians indicates that God "chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of

the world" (1:4). Such decisions are not made as history unfolds and events occur. God manifests his purpose within history (2 Tim. 1:10), but his decisions have been made from all eternity, from before the beginning of time (see also Isa. 22:11).

Being eternal, the plan of God does not have any chronological sequence within it. There is no before and after within eternity. There is, of course, a logical sequence (e.g., the decision to let Jesus die on the cross logically follows the decision to send him to the earth), and there is a temporal sequence in the enacting of the events which have been decreed; but there is no temporal sequence to God's willing. It is one coherent simultaneous decision.

2. The plan of God and the decisions contained therein are free on God's part. This is implied in expressions like "the good pleasure of his will." It is also implicit in the fact that no one has advised him (for that matter, there is no one who could advise him). Isaiah 40:13-14 says, "Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord, or as his counselor has instructed him? Whom did he consult for his enlightenment, and who taught him the path of justice, and taught him knowledge, and showed him the way of understanding?" Paul quotes this very passage as he concludes his great statement on the sovereignty and inscrutability of God's workings (Rom. 11:34).

Not only do God's decisions not stem from any sort of external determination, they are not a matter of internal compulsion either. That is to say, although God's decisions and actions are quite consistent with his nature, they are not constrained by his nature. God did not have to create. He had to act in a loving and holy fashion in whatever he did, but he was not required to create. He freely chose to create for reasons not known to us.

3. In the ultimate sense, the purpose of God's plan is God's glory. Paul indicates that God chose us in Christ and destined us "according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace" (Eph. 1:5-6). What God does, he does for his own name's sake (Isa. 48:11; Ezek. 20:9). Jesus said that his followers were to let their lights so shine that others would see their

good works and glorify their Father in heaven (Matt. 5:16; cf. John 15:8).

This is not to say that there are no secondary motivations behind God's plan and resultant actions. He has provided the means of salvation in order to fulfil his love for humankind and his concern for their welfare. This, however, is not an ultimate end, but only a means to the greater end, God's own glory.

4. The plan of God is all-inclusive. This is implicit in the great variety of items which are mentioned in the Bible as parts of God's plan.

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which is from all eternity and includes
everything that occurs.

Beyond that, however, are explicit statements of the extent of God's plan. Paul speaks of God as the one who "accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will" (Eph. 1:11). The psalmist says that "all things are thy servants" (Ps. 119:91). While all ends are part of God's plan, all means are as well. And although we tend at times to think of sacred and secular areas of life, no such division exists from God's standpoint. There are no areas that fall outside the purview of his concern and decision.

5. God's plan is efficacious. What he has purposed from eternity will surely come to pass. The Lord says, "As I have planned, so shall it be, and as I have purposed, so shall it stand. . . . For the LORD of hosts has purposed, and who will annul it? His hand is stretched out, and who will turn it back?" (Isa. 14:24, 27). He will not change his mind, nor will he discover hitherto unknown considerations which will cause him to alter his intentions.

6. God's plan relates to his actions rather than his nature. It pertains to his decisions regarding what he shall do, not to his personal attributes. God does not have to choose to be loving and powerful; indeed, he could not choose to be otherwise. Thus, the decisions of God relate to objects, events, and processes ex-

ternal to the divine nature, not to what he is or what transpires within his person.⁴

7. The plan of God relates primarily to what God himself does in terms of creating, preserving, directing, and redeeming. It also involves human willing and acting, but only secondarily, that is, as means to the ends he purposes, or as results of actions which he takes. Note that God's role here is to decide that certain things will take place in our lives, not to lay down commands to act in a certain way. The plan of God does not force us to act in particular ways, but renders it certain that we will *freely* act in those ways.

8. Thus, while the plan of God relates primarily to what God does, human actions are also included. Jesus noted, for example, that the responses of individuals to his message were a result of the Father's decision (John 6:37, 44; cf. 17:2, 6, 9). Luke said in Acts 13:48 that "as many as were ordained to eternal life believed."

God's plan includes what we ordinarily call good acts. On the other hand, the evil actions of individuals, which are contrary to God's law and moral intentions, are also seen in Scripture as part of God's plan, as foreordained by him. The betrayal, conviction, and crucifixion of Jesus are a prominent instance of this (Luke 22:22; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28).

9. The plan of God in terms of its specifics is unchangeable. God does not change his mind or alter his decisions regarding specific determinations. This may seem strange in light of the seeming alteration of his intentions with regard to Nineveh (Jonah), and his apparent repentance for having made human beings (Gen. 6:6). The statement in Genesis 6, however, should be regarded as an anthropomorphism, and Jonah's announcement of impending destruction should be viewed as a warning used to effect God's actual plan for Nineveh. We must keep in mind here that constancy is one of the attributes of God's greatness.

Logical Priority: God's Plan or Human Action?

We must now consider whether God's plan or human action is logically prior. While Cal-

4. Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1907), pp. 353-54.

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vinists and Arminians are agreed that human actions are included in God's plan, they disagree as to what is the cause and what is the result. Do people do what they do because God has decided that this is exactly how they are going to act, or does God first foresee what they will do and then on that basis make his decision as to what is going to happen?

1. Calvinists believe that God's plan is logically prior and that human decisions and actions are a consequence. With respect to the particular matter of the acceptance or rejection of salvation, God in his plan has chosen that some shall believe and thus receive the offer of eternal life. He foreknows what will happen because he has decided what is to happen. This is true with respect to all the other decisions and actions of human beings as well. God is not dependent upon what humans decide. It is not the case, then, that God determines that what we are going to do will come to pass, nor does he choose to eternal life those who he foresees will believe. Rather, God's decision has rendered it certain that every individual will act in a particular way.⁵

2. Arminians, on the other hand, place a higher value upon human freedom. God allows and expects human beings to exercise the will they have been given. If this were not so, we would not find the biblical invitations to choose God, the "whosoever will" passages, such as "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). The very offering of such invitations implies that one can either accept or reject them. This, however, seems inconsistent with the position that God's decisions have rendered the future certain. If they had, there would be no point in issuing invitations, for God's decisions as to what would happen would come to pass regardless of what we do. The Arminians therefore look for some other way of regarding the decisions of God.

The key lies in understanding the role of God's foreknowledge in the formation and execution of the divine plan. In Romans 8:29 Paul

5. J. Gresham Machen, *The Christian View of Man* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947), p. 78.

says, "Whom he foreknew he also predestined." From this verse the Arminian draws the conclusion that God's choice or determination of each individual's destiny is a result of foreknowledge. Thus, those who God foreknew would believe are those he decided would be saved. A similar statement can be made of all human actions, of all other aspects of life for that matter. God knows what all of us are going to do. He therefore wills what he foresees will happen.⁶ So one might say that in the Arminian view this aspect of God's plan is conditional upon human decision; in the Calvinistic view, on the other hand, God's plan is unconditional.

A Moderately Calvinistic Model

The Unconditional Nature of God's Plan

Despite difficulties in relating divine sovereignty to human freedom, we nonetheless come to the conclusion on biblical grounds that the plan of God is unconditional rather than conditional upon human choice. There simply is nothing in the Bible to suggest that God chooses humans because of what they are going to do on their own. The Arminian concept of foreknowledge (*prōgnōsis*), appealing though it is, is not borne out by Scripture. The word means more than simply having advance knowledge or pre-cognition of what is to come. It appears to have in its background the Hebrew concept of *yādā'*, which often meant more than simple awareness. It suggested a kind of intimate knowledge—it was even used of sexual intercourse.⁷ When Paul says that God foreknew the people of Israel, he is not referring merely to an advance knowledge which God had. Indeed, it is clear that God's choice of Israel was not upon the basis of advance knowledge of a favorable response on their part. Had God anticipated such a response, he would certainly have been wrong. Note that in Romans 11:2 Paul says,

6. Henry C. Thiessen, *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), p. 157.

7. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), pp. 393–95.

"God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew," and that a discussion of the faithlessness of Israel follows. Certainly in this passage foreknowledge must mean something more than advance knowledge. In Acts 2:23, foreknowledge is linked with the will of God. Moreover, in 1 Peter 1 we read that the elect are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God (v. 2) and that Christ was foreknown from before the foundation of the world (v. 20). To suggest that foreknowledge here means nothing more than previous knowledge or acquaintance is to virtually deprive these verses of any real meaning. We must conclude that foreknowledge as used in Romans 8:29 carries with it the idea of favorable disposition or selection as well as advance knowledge.

Furthermore, there are passages where the unconditional nature of God's selecting plan is made quite explicit. This is seen in Paul's statement regarding the choice of Jacob over Esau: "Though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad, in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call, she [Rebekah] was told, 'The elder will serve the younger.' As it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated'" (Rom. 9:11-13). Paul seems to be taking great pains to emphasize the unmerited or unconditional nature of God's choice of Jacob. Later in the same chapter Paul comments, "So then he has mercy upon whomever he wills, and he hardens the heart of whomever he wills" (v. 18). The import of the subsequent image of the potter and the clay is very difficult to escape (vv. 20-24). Similarly, Jesus told his disciples, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide" (John 15:16). Because of these and similar considerations, we must conclude that the plan of God is unconditional rather than conditional upon human actions which he has foreseen.

The Meaning of Human Freedom

At this point we must raise the question of whether God can create genuinely free beings and yet render certain all things that are to come to pass, including the free decisions and

actions of those beings. The key to unlocking the problem is the distinction between rendering something certain and rendering it necessary. The former is a matter of God's decision that something *will* happen; the latter would be a matter of his decreeing that it *must* occur. In the former case, the human being will not act in a way contrary to the course of action which God has chosen; in the latter case, the human being cannot act in a way contrary to what God has chosen. What we are saying is that God renders it certain that a person who could act (or could have acted) differently does in fact act in a particular way (the way that God wills).⁸

What does it mean to say that I am free? It means that I am not under constraint. Thus, I am free to do whatever pleases me. But am I free with respect to what pleases me and what does not? To put it differently, I may choose one action over another because it holds more appeal for me. But I am not fully in control of the appeal which each of those actions holds for me. That is quite a different matter. I make all my decisions, but those decisions are in large measure influenced by certain characteristics of mine which I am not capable of altering by my own choice. If, for example, I am offered for dinner a choice between liver and steak, I am quite free to take the liver, but I do not desire to do so. I have no conscious control over my dislike of liver. That is a given that goes with my being the person I am. In that respect my freedom is limited. I do not know whether it is my genes or environmental conditioning which has caused my dislike of liver, but it is apparent that I cannot by mere force of will alter this characteristic of mine.

There are, then, limitations upon who I am and what I desire and will. I certainly did not choose the genes that I have; I did not select my parents nor the exact geographical location and cultural setting of my birth. My freedom, therefore, is within these limitations. And here arises

8. I hold what Antony Flew has called "compatibilistic freedom": human freedom is compatible with (in this case) God's having rendered certain everything which occurs ("Compatibilism, Free Will, and God," *Philosophy* 48 [1973]: 231-32).

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the question: Who set up these factors? The theistic answer is, "God did."

I am free to choose among various options. But my choice will be influenced by who I am. Therefore, my freedom must be understood as my ability to choose among options in light of who I am. And who I am is a result of God's decision and activity. God is in control of all the circumstances that bear upon my situation in life. He may bring to bear (or permit to be brought to bear) factors which will make a particular option appealing, even powerfully appealing, to me. Through all the factors that have come into my experience in time past he has influenced the type of person I now am. Indeed, he has affected what has come to pass by willing that it was I who was brought into being.

Whenever a child is conceived, there are an infinite number of possibilities. A countless variety of genetic combinations may emerge out of the union of sperm and ovum. We do not know why a particular combination actually results. But now, for the sake of argument, let us consider the possibility of a hypothetical individual whose genetic combination differs infinitesimally from my own. He is identical to me in every respect; in every situation of life he responds as I do. But at one particular point he will choose to move his finger to the left whereas I will move mine to the right. I am not compelled to move my finger to the right, but I freely choose to do so. Now by making sure that it was I, and not my hypothetical double, who came into existence, and setting the circumstances of my life, God rendered it certain that at that one particular point I would freely move my finger to the right.

God's Will and Human Freedom

Is God's having rendered human decisions and actions certain compatible with human freedom? How we respond depends on our understanding of freedom. According to the position we are espousing, the answer to the question, "Could the individual have chosen differently?" is yes, while the answer to the question, "But would he or she have?" is no. In our understanding, for human freedom to exist, only the first question need be answered in the

affirmative. But others would argue that human freedom exists only if both questions can be answered in the affirmative; that is, if the individual not only could have chosen differently, but could also have desired to choose differently. In their view freedom means total spontaneity, random choice. We would point out to them that when it comes to human decisions and actions, nothing is completely spontaneous or random. There is a measure of predictability with respect to human behavior; and the better we know an individual, the better we can anticipate his or her responses. For example, a good friend or relative might say, "I knew you were going to say that." We conclude that if by freedom is meant random choice, human freedom is a practical impossibility. But if by freedom is meant ability to choose between options, human freedom exists and is compatible with God's having rendered our decisions and actions certain.

It should be noted that if certainty of outcome is inconsistent with freedom, divine foreknowledge, as the Arminian understands that term, presents as much difficulty for human freedom as does divine foreordination. For if God knows what I will do, it must be certain that I am going to do it. If it were not certain, God could not know it; he might be mistaken (I might act differently from what he expects). But if what I will do is certain, then surely I will do it, whether or not I know what I will do. It will happen! But am I then free? In the view of those whose definition of freedom entails the implication that it cannot be certain that a particular event will occur, presumably I am not free. In their view, divine foreknowledge is just as incompatible with human freedom as is divine foreordination.

It might seem that the divine choice we have argued for is the same as the Arminian idea of foreknowledge. There is a significant difference, however. In the Arminian understanding, there is a foreknowledge of actual existing entities. God simply chooses to confirm, as it were, what he foresees real individuals will decide and do. In our scheme, however, God has a foreknowledge of possibilities. God foresees what possible beings will do if placed in a particular situation

with all the influences that will be present at that point in time and space. On this basis he chooses which of the possible individuals will become actualities and which circumstances and influences will be present. He foreknows what these individuals will freely do, for he in effect made that decision by choosing them in particular to bring into existence.

God's Wish and God's Will

Our position that God has rendered certain everything that occurs raises another question: Is there not a contradiction at certain points between what God commands and says he desires and what he actually wills? For example, sin is universally prohibited, yet apparently God wills for it to occur. Certainly murder is prohibited in Scripture, and yet the death of Jesus by execution was apparently willed by God (Luke 22:22; Acts 2:23). Further, we are told that God is not willing that any should perish (2 Peter 3:9), yet apparently he does not actually will for all to be saved, since not everyone is saved. How are we to reconcile these seemingly contradictory considerations?

We must distinguish between two different senses of God's will, which we will refer to as God's "wish" ($will_1$) and God's "will" ($will_2$). The former is God's general intention, the val-

The plan of God does not force us to act in particular ways, but renders it certain that we will freely act in those ways.

ues with which he is pleased. The latter is God's specific intention in a given situation, what he decides shall actually occur. There are times, many of them, when God wills to permit, and thus to have occur, what he really does not wish. This is the case with sin. God does not desire sin to occur. There are occasions, however, when he simply says, in effect, "So be it," allowing a human to choose freely a sinful course of action.

We are reminded here of the way parents sometimes treat their children. A mother may wish for her son to avoid a particular type of be-

havior, and may tell him so. Yet there are situations in which she may, though seeing her son about to engage in the forbidden action, choose not to intervene to prevent it. Here is a case in which the parent's wish is clearly that the child not engage in certain behavior, yet her will is that he do what he has willed to do. By choosing not to intervene to prevent the act, the mother is actually willing that it take place. Perhaps this is the way we should understand Joseph's treatment at the hands of his brothers. It did not please God; it was not consistent with what he is like. God did, however, will to permit it; he did not intervene to prevent it. And interestingly enough, God used their action to produce the very thing it was intended to prevent—Joseph's ascendancy.

God's Will and the Need for Human Action

Another issue that must be examined concerns whether our view of the all-encompassing plan of God removes incentives for activity on our part. If God has already rendered certain what is to occur, is there any point in our seeking to accomplish his will? Does what we do really make any difference in what happens? This issue relates particularly to evangelism. If God has already chosen (elected) who will be saved and who will not, what difference does it make whether we (or anyone else for that matter) seek to propagate the gospel? Nothing can change the fact that the elect will be saved and the nonelect will not.

Two points should be made by way of response. One is that if God has rendered certain the end, his plan also includes the means to that end. His plan may well include that our witness is the means by which an elect person will come to saving faith. Thus it is foreordained by God that we should witness to that person. The other consideration is that we do not know in detail what God's plan is. So we must proceed on the basis of what God has revealed of his wish. Accordingly, we must witness. This may mean that some of our time is spent on someone who will not ultimately enter the kingdom of heaven. But that does not mean that our time has been wasted. It may well have been the

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means to fulfilling another part of God's plan. And ultimately it is faithfulness, not success, that is God's measure of our service.

Various Understandings of History

As we noted at the beginning of this chapter, Christianity's doctrine of the divine plan responds specifically to the questions of where history is going and what is moving it. Some understandings of the movement of history are quite negative. This is particularly true of cyclical views, which do not see history as progressing, but as simply repeating the same pattern, albeit in somewhat different fashion. The Eastern religions tend to be of this type, particularly Hinduism, with its emphasis upon reincarnation. One goes through cycles of death and rebirth, with the status of one's life in each new incarnation largely determined by one's conduct in the previous life. Salvation, if we may term it that, consists in Nirvana, escape from the repeated process.

Doomsday philosophies abound in our time. It is believed that history will soon come to a disastrous end as a result of either an economic collapse, an ecological crisis involving massive pollution of the environment, or an outbreak of nuclear warfare.⁹ Humankind is doomed because we have failed to manage the world about us wisely.

Another prominent twentieth-century pessimistic philosophy is existentialism. The idea of the absurdity of the world, of the paradoxical and the ironic in reality, of the blind randomness of much that occurs, leads to despair. Since there is no discernible pattern in the events of history, one must create one's own meaning by a conscious act of free will.

On the other hand, there have been a number of quite optimistic views, especially in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Darwinism was extended from the biological realm to other areas, particularly to society. In the thought of Herbert Spencer it became an all-inclusive phi-

losophy entailing the growth, progress, and development of the whole of reality. Although this view proved rather unrealistic, it had considerable influence in its time. In more recent years, utopianisms employing the methods of the behavioral sciences have sought to restructure society or at least individual lives.¹⁰

Perhaps the most militant philosophy of history on a global scale has been dialectical materialism, the philosophy upon which communism is based. Adapting Georg Hegel's philosophy, Karl Marx replaced its idealistic metaphysic with a materialistic view. The forces of material reality are impelling history to its end. Through a series of steps, the economic order is being changed. Each stage of the process is characterized by a conflict between two antithetical groups or movements. The prevailing means of production is changing from feudalism to capitalism to a final socialistic stage where there will be no private ownership. In the classless society, the dialectic which has moved history through the rhythmical process of thesis-antithesis-synthesis will cease, and all evil will wither away. Note that this trust is in an impersonal force. Consequently, many of the people who have lived under communism found it neither personally satisfying nor socially effective.

Finally, there is the Christian doctrine of the divine plan, which affirms that an all-wise, all-powerful, good God has from all eternity planned what is to occur and that history is carrying out his intention. There is a definite goal toward which history is progressing. History is not, then, merely chance happenings. And the force causing its movements is not impersonal atoms or blind fate. It is, rather, a loving God with whom we can have a personal relationship. We may look forward with assurance, then, toward the attainment of the telos of the universe. And we may align our lives with what we know will be the outcome of history.

9. E.g., Barry Commoner, *The Closing Circle* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971); Paul R. Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (New York: Ballantine, 1976).

10. E.g., B. F. Skinner, *Walden Two* (New York: Macmillan, 1948).

FOURTEEN

God's Originating Work: Creation

Chapter Objectives

After you have completed your study of this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

1. To understand reasons for studying the doctrine of creation.
2. To identify and define the elements of the biblical teaching on creation.
3. To discuss the theological meaning of the doctrine of creation.
4. To understand and explain the relationship between the doctrine of creation and science.
5. To identify and describe the implications of the doctrine of creation.

Chapter Summary

God created all things without the use of preexisting materials. There are at least four elements of the biblical teaching from which we may deduce at least nine theological conclusions. Several theories have been proposed to harmonize the age of creation and development within creation. The most plausible position holds that God's acts of creation involved long periods of time through what is often called progressive creation. The Christian can have

confidence in the greatness of God in his creation of the universe and all that is within it.

Study Questions

- In light of society's rejection of creation, why should the doctrine of creation be studied?
- What are the elements of a biblical understanding of creation?
- What is the theological meaning of the doctrine of creation?
- How does the doctrine of creation relate to modern science?
- What attempts have been made to reconcile the apparent age of the earth with the biblical material, and what do they suggest?

Chapter Outline

Reasons for Studying the Doctrine of Creation
Elements of the Biblical Teaching on Creation
 Creation out of Nothing
 Its All-inclusive Nature
 The Work of the Triune God
 Its Purpose: God's Glory
The Theological Meaning of the Doctrine
The Creation Doctrine and Its Relation to Science
Science and the Bible
 The Age and Development of the Earth
Implications of the Doctrine of Creation

The plan of God may be thought of as being like the architect's plans and drawings for a building that is to be constructed. But the plan was not merely a scheme in the mind of God. It has been translated into reality by God's actions. At this point in our study we turn to these various works of God. In this part we will concentrate on those works which are attributed especially, although not exclusively, to God the Father. The first of these is creation. By creation we mean the work of God in bringing into being, without the use of any preexisting materials, everything that is.

Reasons for Studying the Doctrine of Creation

1. There are several reasons for giving careful study to the doctrine of creation. First is the fact that the Bible places great significance upon it. The very first statement of the Bible is, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). Creation is likewise one of the first assertions in the Gospel according to John, the most theologically oriented of the New Testament Gospels (John 1:1-3). Clearly, the creative work of God plays a prominent role in the Bible's presentation of him.

2. The doctrine of creation has been a significant part of the church's faith; it has been a

highly important aspect of its teaching and preaching. The first article of the Apostles' Creed says, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." Although this particular element (i.e., the phrase dealing with creation) was not in the earliest form of the creed, but added somewhat later, nonetheless, it is significant that in a formulation as brief as the Apostles' Creed, creation was rather early thought important enough to be included.

3. Our understanding of the doctrine of creation is important because of its effect upon our understanding of other doctrines. Humans were created by God as separate beings; they did not emanate from him. Because they came from the hand of a good God who pronounced the whole of his creation good, there is no inherent evil in being material rather than spiritual. These various facets of the doctrine of creation tell us a great deal about the status of humans. Moreover, since the universe is God's doing rather than a mere chance happening, we are able to discern something about the nature and the will of God from an examination of creation. Alter the doctrine of creation at any point, and you have also altered these other aspects of Christian doctrine.

4. The doctrine of creation helps differentiate Christianity from other religions and world-

views. While some might think that at root there are similarities between Christianity and Hinduism, for example, a close examination reveals that the Christian doctrine of God and creation is quite different from Hinduism's Brahma-Atman teaching.

5. The study of the doctrine of creation is one point of potential dialogue between Christianity and natural science. At times the dialogue has been quite furious. The great evolution debate of the early twentieth century makes it clear that while theology and science run in parallel courses most of the time, not intersecting in a common topic, the issue of the origin of the world is one point where they do encounter one another.

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independently of him.

It is important to understand just what the Christian and biblical position is upon this subject, and what is at stake.

6. There needs to be a careful understanding of the doctrine of creation because there sometimes have been sharp disagreements within Christian circles. In the modernist-fundamentalist controversy of the early twentieth century, the struggle was on a large scale—evolution versus creation. Today, by contrast, there seem to be internal disputes within evangelicalism between the theory of progressive creationism and the view that the earth is only a few thousand years old. A careful look must be taken at precisely what the Bible does teach on this subject.

Elements of the Biblical Teaching on Creation

Creation out of Nothing

We begin our examination of the doctrine of creation by noting that it is creation out of nothing (*ex nihilo*), or without the use of preexisting materials. This does not mean that all of God's

creative work was direct and immediate, occurring at the very beginning of time. (Certainly there was immediate or direct creation, the bringing into being of all reality; but there has also been mediate or derivative creation, God's subsequent work of developing and fashioning what he had originally brought into existence.) Rather, what we are here affirming is that the whole of what now exists was begun by God's act of bringing it into existence—he did not fashion and adapt something which already existed independently of him.

Although the language in the Old Testament is not conclusive, the idea of *ex nihilo* creation can be found in a number of New Testament passages where the aim is not primarily to make a statement about the nature of creation. In particular, there are numerous references to the beginning of the world or the beginning of creation:

"from [since, before] the foundation of the world" (Matt. 13:35; 25:34; Luke 11:50; John 17:24; Eph. 1:4; Heb. 4:3; 9:26; 1 Peter 1:20; Rev. 13:8; 17:8)

"from the beginning" (Matt. 19:4, 8; John 8:44; 2 Thess. 2:13; 1 John 1:1; 2:13–14; 3:8)

"from the beginning of the world" (Matt. 24:21)

"from the beginning of the creation" (Mark 10:6; 2 Peter 3:4)

"from the beginning of creation which God created" (Mark 13:19)

"since the creation of the world" (Rom. 1:20)

"Thou, Lord, didst found the earth in the beginning" (Heb. 1:10)

"the beginning of God's creation" (Rev. 3:14)

Regarding these several expressions Werner Foerster says, "These phrases show that creation involves the beginning of the existence of the world, so that there is no pre-existent matter."¹

1. Werner Foerster, κτίσις, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76), vol. 3, p. 1029.

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In the New Testament we can find several more-explicit expressions of the idea of creating out of nothing. We read that God calls things into being by his word. Paul says that God "calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom. 4:17). God said, "Let light shine out of darkness" (2 Cor. 4:6). This surely suggests the effect occurred without the use of any antecedent material cause. God created the world by his word "so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear" (Heb. 11:3).

From these biblical references we can draw several conclusions. For one, God has the power simply to will situations to be, and they immediately come to pass exactly as he has willed. Second, creation is an act of his will, not an act to which he is driven by any force or consideration outside himself. Further, God does not involve himself, his own being, in the process. Creation is not something made out of him. It is not a part of him or an emanation from his reality.

Its All-inclusive Nature

God did not create merely a certain part of reality, with the remainder attributable to some other origin. The entirety of reality has come into being through his act. In the opening statement of Genesis ("In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth"), the expression "the heavens and the earth" is not intended to designate those items alone. It is an idiom referring to everything that is. It is an affirmation that the whole universe came into being through this act of God. John 1:3 makes the same point most emphatically and explicitly in both positive and negative terms: "all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made." Here are an affirmation of the creaturehood of all that is, and a rejection of the notion that something might have been made by someone or something other than God.

The Work of the Triune God

Creation is the work of the Triune God. A large number of the Old Testament references to the creative act attribute it simply to God, rather than to the Father, Son, or Spirit, for the distinctions of the Trinity had not yet been fully

revealed (e.g., Gen. 1:1; Ps. 96:5; Isa. 37:16; 44:24; 45:12; Jer. 10:11–12). In the New Testament, however, we find differentiation. First Corinthians 8:6, which appears in a passage where Paul discusses the propriety of eating food which had been offered to idols, is particularly instructive. In contrasting God with idols, Paul says, "Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist." Paul is including both the Father and the Son in the act of creation and yet also distinguishing them from one another. The Father apparently has the more prominent part; he is the source from whom all things come. The Son is the means or the agent of the existence of all things. There is a similar affirmation in John 1:3 and Hebrews 1:10. In addition, there are references which seem to indicate the Spirit of God was active in creating as well—Genesis 1:2; Job 26:13; 33:4; Psalm 104:30; and Isaiah 40:12–13. In some of these cases, however, it is difficult to determine whether the reference is to the Holy Spirit or to God's working by means of his breath, since the Hebrew word *rūach* can be used for either one.

There may seem to be a conflict between attributing creation to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and maintaining that each member of the Trinity has his own distinctive work. Yet this is not a problem, unless we think that there is but one form of causation. When a house is built, who actually builds it? In one sense, it is the architect who designs it and creates the plans from which it is constructed. In another sense, however, it is the contractor who actually carries out the plan, and yet it is the construction workers who in fact build the house. But certainly the owners, although they may not drive a single nail, are also in a sense the ones who build the house, since they sign the legal papers authorizing its construction, and will make the mortgage payments each month. Each one, in a different way, is the cause of the house. A similar statement can be made about creation. It appears from Scripture that it was the Father who brought the created universe into existence. But it was the Spirit and

the Son who fashioned it, who carried out the details of the design. While the creation is *from* the Father, it is *through* the Son and *by* the Holy Spirit.

Its Purpose: God's Glory

While God did not have to create, he did so for good and sufficient reasons. He had a purpose in bringing reality into being. And the creation fulfils that purpose of God. In particular, the creation glorifies God by carrying out his will. The inanimate creation glorifies him (Ps. 19:1); the animate creatures obey his plan for them. In the story of Jonah, we see this in rather vivid fashion. Everyone and everything (except Jonah initially) obeyed God's will and plan: the storm, the dice, the sailors, the great fish, the Ninevites, the east wind, the gourd, and the worm. Each part of creation is capable of fulfilling God's purposes for it, but each obeys in a different way. The inanimate creation does so mechanically, obeying natural laws which govern the physical world. The animate creation does so instinctively, responding to impulses within. Humans alone are capable of obeying God consciously and willingly, and thus glorify God most fully.

The Theological Meaning of the Doctrine

We turn now to examine the theological meaning of the doctrine of creation. What really is being affirmed by this teaching? And, perhaps just as important for our purposes, what is being rejected or contradicted?

1. The doctrine of creation is first and rather obviously a statement that everything that is not God has derived its existence from him. To put it another way, the idea that there is any ultimate reality other than God is rejected. There is no room for dualism. In a dualism, as the word would indicate, there are two ultimate principles. In one form of dualism there is the Lord, the Creator, the Maker. And there is what the Creator utilizes, or what he works upon, the material that he employs in creating. But this is not what the Christian doctrine affirms. God did not work with something which was in existence. He brought into existence

the very raw material which he employed. If this were not the case, God would not really be infinite.

2. The original act of divine creation is unique. It is unlike human "creative" acts, which involve fashioning, using the materials at hand. In producing works of art, artists must work within the limitations of the medium employed, for example, the reflective characteristics of oil paint. Moreover, even the concepts artists express are dependent upon their previous experience. Their work will be either an expression of an idea they have directly experienced or a combination of elements previously experienced into some new whole; a genuinely novel idea, totally new and fresh, is very rare indeed. God, however, is not bound by anything external to himself. His only limitations are those of his own nature and the choices he has made.

3. The doctrine of creation also means that nothing made is intrinsically evil. Everything has come from God, and the creation narrative says five times that he saw that it was good (Gen. 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25). Then, when he completed his creation of man, we are told that God saw everything he had made, and it was very good (v. 31). There was nothing evil within God's original creation.

In any type of dualism, by contrast, there tends to be a moral distinction between the higher and the lower principles or elements.² Since the higher realm is divine and the lower is not, the former is thought of as more real than the other. Eventually this metaphysical difference tends to be regarded as a moral difference as well—the higher is good and the lower is evil. If, however, the whole of reality owes its existence to God, and if what God made was "good" throughout, we cannot think of matter as inherently or intrinsically evil.³

4. The doctrine of creation also thrusts a responsibility upon humankind. We cannot justify our evil behavior by blaming the evil realm of the material. The material world is not inherently evil. Our sin must be an exercise of our own freedom. Nor can we blame society. Human society was

2. Langdon Gilkey, *Maker of Heaven and Earth* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1965), p. 46.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 58–59.

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also part of what God made, and it was very good. To regard society as the cause of sin is therefore an inaccurate and misleading ploy.

5. The doctrine of creation also guards against depreciating the incarnation of Christ. If the material world were somehow inherently evil, it would be very difficult to accept the fact that the Second Person of the Trinity took on human form, including a physical body. On the other hand, a correct understanding of the doctrine of creation—what God made was good—enables us to affirm the full meaning of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, his taking of human flesh upon himself.

6. The doctrine of creation also restrains us from asceticism. Believing that the physical nature is evil has led some, including Christians, to shun

The great metaphysical gap
falls between God on one side
and all else on the other.

the human body and any type of physical satisfaction. Spirit, being more divine, is the proper realm of the good and the godly. Thus, meditation is pursued, and an austere diet and abstinence from sex are regarded as conditions of spirituality. But the doctrine of creation affirms that God has made all that is and has made it good. It is therefore redeemable. Salvation and spirituality are to be found, not by fleeing from or avoiding the material realm, but by sanctifying it.

7. If all of creation has been made by God, there are a connection and an affinity among the various parts of it. I am a brother to all other people, for the same God created us and watches over us. Since inanimate material also comes from God, I am, at base, one with nature, for we are members of the same family.

8. While the doctrine of creation excludes any dualism, it also excludes the type of monism that regards the world as an emanation from God. In monism, what we have is an outflow or emanation from God's nature, a part of him separated from his essence as it were. There is a tendency to regard this emanation as still divine; hence the end result of this view is usually pantheism. It is a

change of status, rather than a beginning of being, that is conceived of here.

Christianity's doctrine of creation out of nothing rejects all of this. The individual elements of the world are genuine creatures dependent upon God their Creator. Clearly separate from him (i.e., they are not emanations from his nature), they are finite dependent creatures.

9. Further, the doctrine of creation points out the inherent limitations of creaturehood. No creature or combination of creatures can ever be equated with God. Thus there is no basis whatsoever for idolatry—for worshiping nature or for revering human beings. God has a unique status, so that he alone is to be worshiped (Exod. 20:2–3).

We sometimes think of the great metaphysical gap in the universe as a quantitative gap falling between humans and the rest of the creation. In reality, however, the great metaphysical gap is quantitative *and* qualitative, and falls between God on one side and all else on the other.⁴ He is to be the object of worship, praise, and obedience. All other existents are to be subjects who offer these acts of submission to him.

The Creation Doctrine and Its Relation to Science

Science and the Bible

For many years, theology was the "queen of the sciences." It was the foremost source of authority in the West, and the teachings of the Bible and the church were the standard against which claims to truth were measured. In the modern period, however, the rise of science produced friction between theology and science. Christians who believed fully that the Bible is inspired and authoritative, and that God created the world and gave it order and meaning, had a natural desire to see theology and science interrelate, since both derive from God and point to him. Instead, open and violent conflict at times erupted. In the early stages, theology's quarrel was primarily with natural science; later on the behavioral sciences presented the major problem.

4. Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1968), pp. 94–95.

In recent years the controversy has taken on added intensity, with court cases to decide the teaching of evolution and creationism. The conflict has led many people to one extreme or the other. Some, thinking that there is an irreconcilable conflict between the scientific evidence for evolution and the biblical teaching regarding creation, have abandoned faith in Christianity. Others have virtually abandoned trust in the scientific method, believing that it rests upon false assumptions. In many cases, however, they continue to use the modern technology which science has helped to develop.

A related area of disagreement is the nature of the Bible. Some believe that the Bible has a great deal to say about such scientific matters as the origin of the universe, life, and the human race, and says it in fairly technical fashion. Others, asserting that the Bible is not a science textbook, treat it as quite irrelevant to any scientific matters, maintaining that its message is purely religious. Both conceptions are wrong. The Bible must be understood in light of its purpose: to make it possible for humans to be savingly related to God. It was not given to satisfy our curiosity, or to supply us with information which might be obtained by study of God's creation, his general revelation to us. Scripture describes matters of nature, not in the technical language which scientists use, but in the language of ordinary conversation, which reflects how the world appears to the eye. On the other hand, the fact that a book is not a formal text on a particular subject (few books are) does not mean that it says nothing bearing upon that subject. In reality, the Bible makes assertions or affirmations about nature and God's relationship to it which have implications for science. Its religious affirmations are in some cases so tied up with statements about nature that they cannot be separated. We must take seriously both of God's books: the book of his Word and the book of his works.

The Age and Development of the Earth

Apart from the issues relating specifically to the origin and nature of human beings, there are two problems which have caused concern over the years: the age of the earth, and devel-

opment within the creation. The conflict regarding the age of the earth pits the understanding that the Bible teaches that God created everything about six thousand years ago (4004 B.C. was the exact calculation produced by Archbishop James Ussher) against the indications of geology that the earth is several billion years old. Attempted resolutions have usually taken the form of adjusting either the scientific or the biblical indications of age, or, in some cases, both.

Those who maintain that the earth is relatively young frequently challenge the validity of the scientific methods of dating, especially those involving radioactive materials. Some of them argue that at the time of the flood the earth was subjected to unusual geological forces which so altered it that it appears much older than it actually is. One ingenious theory holds that God created the world six thousand years ago, but made it as if it were already billions of years old. On the other hand, those who believe the earth is billions of years old point out that the genealogies in the Bible were never intended to be used to calculate the beginning of time. Furthermore, the Hebrew word translated "day" in Genesis 1 can have several different meanings, including a long period of time. Some hold that the "days" are not time periods at all, but simply figures of speech. The most satisfactory approach appears to me to be that which holds that God created in a series of acts which involved long periods, and which took place an indefinite time ago. This does full justice to both the scientific and the biblical data.

The other major issue regarding creation and science is the question of development. Evolutionists hold that life originated through a set of chance factors, and that through a process known as natural selection all the species which now exist derived from one simple organism. Fiat creationists insist that God directly created at the beginning every species that would ever be, and that there has been no evolution. Theistic evolutionists hold that God created the first organism and placed within his universe the process by which life then developed in accordance with scientific laws, perhaps aided at some points by God's inter-

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vention (e.g., the changing of a higher primate into the first human).

We must note the significant evidence for the arising of new species through natural development: the resemblance between some different forms, and the existence of some transitional forms; the restriction of certain species to isolated areas (e.g., Australia); the existence of vestigial organs (e.g., the coccyx in humans). The biblical record, however, as understood from the perspective on inspiration and authority that we have espoused in this book, seems to teach that God created in a series of acts. The best combination of these considerations is found in what is sometimes called progressive creationism. This notes that the Hebrew word translated "kind(s)" in Genesis 1 cannot be made more specific than that. It is simply a word for subdivisions, and thus does not require the interpretation that God directly created every species. According to this view, God would create the first member of a group of creatures (say, the first horse); over a long period of time other forms closely related evolved therefrom. Then God created other kinds, quite different in nature, so that birds did not evolve from fish, for example. This fits well both the biblical data and the scientific data, for, significantly, there are systematic deficiencies in the fossil record. So one can take seriously both science and theology.

Sometimes Christians are intimidated by the theory of evolution, forgetting that it is simply a theory, although one built on many data. But when science goes beyond describing the facts and offering explanations of specific occurrences to give an overall explanation of the universe, it is going beyond its competence. It has then become philosophy, and specifically cosmology, which intellectual integrity requires should not be presented without pointing out that there are other explanatory theories. Among the alternatives, of course, is the view that there is a higher being who has brought into existence all that is.

Implications of the Doctrine of Creation

What are the implications of belief in creation? The doctrine has a significant impact upon how we view and treat life and the world.

1. Everything that is has value. It was a wise plan that brought into being just what there is within the creation. Each part has its place, which is just what God intended for it to have. God loves all of his creation, not just certain parts of it. Thus we should also have concern for all of it, to preserve and guard and develop what God has made.

2. God's creative activity includes not only the initial creative activity, but also his later indirect workings. Creation does not preclude development within the world; it includes it. Thus God's plan involves and utilizes the best of human skill and knowledge in the genetic refinement of the creation. Such endeavors are our partnership with God in the ongoing work of creation. Yet, of course, we must be mindful that the materials and truth we employ in those endeavors come from God.

3. There is justification for scientifically investigating the creation. Science assumes that there is within the creation some sort of order or pattern which it can discover. If the universe were random and, consequently, all the facts scientists gather about it were merely a haphazard collection, no real understanding of nature would be possible. But by affirming that everything has been made in accordance with a logical pattern, the doctrine of creation substantiates science's assumption. It is significant that historically science developed earliest and most rapidly in European culture, where there was a belief in a single God who had created according to a rational plan, rather than in some other culture where there was a belief in several gods who engage in conflicting activities.⁵ Knowing that there is an intelligent pattern to the universe, the Christian is motivated to seek for it.

4. Nothing other than God is self-sufficient or eternal. Everything else, every object and every being, derives its existence from him. It exists to do his will. Although we will highly respect the creation, since it has been made by him, we will always maintain a clear distinction between God and it.

5. Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Macmillan, 1925), p. 12.

God's Continuing Work: Providence

Chapter Objectives

After you have completed a study of this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

1. To recognize that one part of God's providence is maintaining his creation through preservation.
2. To understand that another part of providence is God's governing activity.
3. To recognize that prayer has a role in evoking an appropriate human response to providence.
4. To understand that miracles, or works that are specially supernatural, are an important aspect of providence.

Chapter Summary

The providence of God as preservation means that God maintains the creation he brought into existence. Providence as government means that God is actively engaged in achieving his purposes in his creation and that sin cannot thwart those purposes. While prayer does not change God, it brings the Christian in line with God's purposes, thus enabling God to accomplish those purposes. God does choose on occasion to counteract the natural law to ful-

fill his purposes; this occurs in a miracle. For the believer, God is ever present and active in caring for him or her.

Study Questions

- Why is providence important to a doctrine of God?
- What two aspects of providence are important to Christian understanding, and how are they presented in Scripture?
- What is the extent of God's governing activity?
- What are the ways in which God relates to sin?
- Why is there concern over the role of prayer?
- How are miracles related to the providence of God?

Chapter Outline

Providence as Preservation

Biblical Teaching on Preservation

The Theological Dimensions of Preservation

Providence as Government

The Extent of God's Governing Activity

The Relationship Between God's Governing Activity and Sin

The Major Features and Implications of God's Governing Activity

Providence and Prayer

Providence and Miracles

While creation is God's originating work with respect to the universe, providence is his continuing relationship to it. By providence we mean the continuing action of God by which he preserves in existence the creation which he has brought into being, and guides it to his intended purposes for it. In terms of the daily dynamics of our lives, therefore, providence has in many ways more actual pertinence than does the doctrine of creation. The word derives from the Latin *providere*, which literally means to foresee. But more than merely knowing about the future is involved. The word also carries the connotation of acting prudently or making preparation for the future.

Providence in certain ways is central to the conduct of the Christian life. It means that we are able to live in the assurance that God is present and active in our lives. We are in his care and can therefore face the future confidently, knowing that things are not happening merely by chance. We can pray, knowing that God hears and acts upon our prayers. We can face danger, knowing that he is not unaware and uninvolved.

Providence may be thought of as having two aspects. One aspect is God's work of preserving his creation in existence, maintaining and sustaining it; this is generally called preservation or

sustenance. The other is God's activity in guiding and directing the course of events to fulfil the purposes which he has in mind. This is termed government or providence proper. Preservation and government should not be thought of as sharply separate acts of God, but as distinguishable aspects of his unitary work.

Providence as Preservation

Preservation is God's maintaining his creation in existence. It involves God's protection of his creation against harm and destruction, and his provision for the needs of the elements or members of the creation.

Biblical Teaching on Preservation

Numerous biblical passages speak of God's preserving the creation as a whole. In Nehemiah 9:6 Ezra says, "Thou art the LORD, thou alone; thou hast made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and thou preservest all of them; and the host of heaven worships thee." After a statement about the role of Christ in creation, Paul links him to the continuation of the creation as well: "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col. 1:17). The writer to the He-

brews speaks of the Son as "upholding the universe by his word of power" (1:3).

The Scripture writers see the preserving hand of God everywhere. In particular, the psalmists' hymns of praise emphasize God's preserving work throughout nature. An outstanding example is Psalm 104. God has set the earth on its foundations, so that it should never

God's children cannot be separated from his love and keeping; though not spared from trial or danger, they are preserved within it.

be shaken (v. 5). He sends the streams into the valleys (v. 10) and waters the mountains (v. 13). He makes the darkness so that the beasts of prey can seek their sustenance (vv. 20–21). All of the creatures of God receive their food from him (vv. 24–30). The import of the passages we have just cited is to deny that any part of the creation is self-sufficient. Both the origination and the continuation of all things are a matter of divine will and activity.

God's presence is particularly evident in the preservation of Israel as a nation. For example, the hand of God was present in providing for the needs of his people at the time of the great famine. God had brought Joseph to Egypt to make provision for feeding the people in the time of shortage. The sparing of the people in the time of Moses is also particularly noteworthy. The children of Israel were enabled to pass through the Red Sea on dry land, while the pursuing Egyptians were engulfed in the waters and drowned. God's chosen people then received miraculous provision in their wanderings through the wilderness, and they were given victories in battle, sometimes against great odds, as they sought to take the land promised to them.

In the Book of Daniel, God's work of preservation is again very striking. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were condemned to be burned in the fiery furnace for failure to worship the golden image that had been set up. Yet they emerged unharmed from the furnace,

while those who cast them in were destroyed by the heat. Daniel, because he prayed to his God, was thrown into a den of lions, yet he also emerged unharmed. Certainly God's preserving of his people was never clearer.

Jesus has also given clear teaching regarding the Father's work of preservation. The disciples were concerned about the necessities of life—what they would eat and what they would wear. Jesus reassured them that the Father feeds the birds of the air and clothes the flowers of the fields. He would surely do the same for them. While God provides for the lesser members of his creation, humans are of more value than birds (Matt. 6:26) and flowers (v. 30). It therefore is not necessary for humans to be anxious about food and clothing, for if they seek God's kingdom and righteousness, all these things will be added to them (vv. 31–33). This is a reference to God's provision. A similar teaching occurs in Matthew 10:28–32.

The Theological Dimensions of Preservation

An important emphasis of both Jesus' and Paul's teaching on preservation is the inseparability of God's children from his love and keeping. In John 10, Jesus draws a contrast between his sheep and the unbelievers who had just asked for a plain statement about his messiahship. His sheep recognize and respond to his voice. They shall never perish. No one shall snatch them out of his hand; no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand (vv. 27–30). Paul strikes a similar note when he asks, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" (Rom. 8:35). After rehearsing the various possibilities, all of which he rejects, he summarizes by saying, "For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (vv. 38–39).

One salient dimension of God's preserving us and supplying us with what we need is that the believer is not spared from danger or trial, but preserved within it. There is no promise that persecution and suffering will not come.

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The promise is that they will not prevail over us. Paul rejoiced that God will supply all of our needs according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:19). Writing those words from prison, Paul indicated that he had learned to be content in any state in which he found himself (v. 11). He had learned the secret of facing either plenty and abundance or hunger and want (v. 12); he could do all things through Christ who strengthened him (v. 13).

Another concept excluded by the biblical teaching on the divine work of preservation is the deistic idea that God has simply made the world, established its patterns of action so that whatever is needed by each member of the creation will be automatically provided, and then allowed the world to go on its way.¹ Given this model, the creation will remain unless God acts to terminate it. Given the biblical model, however, creation would cease to be if God did not continuously will it to persist. God is directly and personally concerned about and involved with the continuation of his creation.

An image to help us correctly understand God's work of preservation can be drawn from the world of mechanics. We can start a manual electric drill by engaging the switch and then activate a locking device which will keep the drill running until definite action is taken to release the lock. The drill will remain on indefinitely if simply left by itself. This is like the deistic view of God's work of preservation. There are other tools, such as power saws, which do not have built-in locking devices. Such tools require continuous application of pressure to the switch. This is like the "dead man's switch" in a railroad locomotive. If the person operating the machine fails for whatever reason to continue to apply pressure, it comes to a halt. Such machines can serve as metaphors of the biblical view of preservation.

One other idea of preservation or sustenance needs to be avoided. This is the idea that God is like a celestial repairman: The creation has been established and ordinarily functions as God in-

tends. At times, however, it is necessary for God to intervene to make an adjustment before something goes amiss, or perhaps to make a repair after something has gone wrong. In this view, God is not needed when things are going as they were designed to; he merely observes, approvingly. However, the Bible pictures a much more active involvement by God on a continuing basis.² God is immanently at work in his creation, constantly willing it to remain.

The biblical writers who understood the divine work of preservation had a definite sense of confidence. For example, Psalm 91 describes the Lord as our refuge and fortress. The psalmist had learned the lesson that Jesus was to teach his disciples—not to fear the one who can destroy the body but cannot touch the soul (Matt. 10:28). This is not to say that death cannot touch the believer, for death comes to all (Heb. 9:27). Rather, it is the confidence that physical death is not the most significant factor, that even death cannot separate one from God's love. So while the doctrine of God's work of preservation is no justification for foolhardiness or imprudence, it is a guard against terror or even anxiety.

God's work of preservation also means that we can have confidence in the regularity of the created world. It is possible to plan and to carry out our lives accordingly because there is a constancy to our environment. We take this fact for granted, yet it is essential to any sort of rational functioning in the world. The basis of the Christian's belief at this point is not a material or impersonal ground of reality, but an intelligent, good, and purposeful being who continues to will the existence of his creation, so that ordinarily no unexpected events occur.

Providence as Government

The Extent of God's Governing Activity

By the government of God we mean his activity in the universe so that all its events fulfil his plan for it. As such, the governing activity of God of course broadly includes the matter

1. G. C. Joyce, "Deism," in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings (New York: Scribner, 1955), vol. 4, pp. 5-11.

2. G. C. Berkouwer, *The Providence of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), p. 74.

which we have referred to as preservation. Here, however, the emphasis is more fully upon the purposive directing of the whole of reality and the course of history to the ends that God has in mind. It is the actual execution, within time, of his plans devised in eternity.

This governing activity of God extends over a large variety of areas. God is described as controlling nature. Particularly dramatic evidence of God's power over nature can be seen in the case of Elijah, who told Ahab that it would not rain except by the word of God, and it did not rain for three-and-a-half years, and who prayed at Mount Carmel for God to send down lightning from heaven, and it was done. Jesus' power over nature was part of what caused the disciples to recognize that he was God (Mark 4:39-41). (For similar expressions of the Lord's governance of the forces of nature, see Job 9:5-9; 37; Pss. 104:14; 147:8-15; Matt. 6:25-30.)

Scripture tells us that God guides and directs the animal creation. In Psalm 104:21-29, the beasts, from the young lions to the teeming sea creatures, are depicted as carrying out his will and as depending upon him for their provisions. Incapable of conscious choice, animals instinctively obey God's command.

Further, God's government involves human history and the destiny of the nations. A particularly vivid expression of this is found in Daniel 2:21: "He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings." And there is a dramatic illustration in Daniel 4:24-25. The Lord uses Assyria to accomplish his purposes with Israel, and then in turn brings destruction upon Assyria as well (Isa. 10:5-12). (For similar expressions of God's direction of human history, see Job 12:23; Pss. 47:7-8; 66:7.)

The Lord is also sovereign in the circumstances of the lives of individual persons. Hannah, inspired by the miraculous answer to her prayer (the Lord had given her a son, Samuel), expressed her praise: "The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. The LORD makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts" (1 Sam. 2:6-7). Paul asserts that even before he was born God had set him apart for his task (Gal. 1:15-16). David found comfort in the fact that God was sovereign in

his life: "But I trust in thee, O LORD, I say, 'Thou art my God.' My times are in thy hand; deliver me from the hand of my enemies and persecutors!" (Ps. 31:14-15).

God is sovereign even in what are thought of as the accidental occurrences of life. Proverbs 16:33 says, "The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is wholly from the LORD." When the early believers sought someone to replace Judas within the circle of the apostles, they in effect nominated two, and prayed that God would show them which of the two, Barsabbas or Matthias, was his choice. They then cast lots; and when the lot fell on Matthias, they enrolled him with the eleven apostles (Acts 1:23-26).

God's governing activity is to be thought of in the widest possible setting. The psalmist says, "The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all." The psalmist then proceeds to call upon all the angels, all the hosts of the Lord, the ministers that do his will, all his works, in all the places of his dominion, to bless him (Ps. 103:19-22). The free actions of humans are included in God's governmental working. When Ezra was refurbishing the temple, King Artaxerxes of Persia provided resources out of his nation's funds. Ezra comments: "Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king, to beautify the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem" (Ezra 7:27). Even the sinful actions of humans are part of God's providential working. Probably the most notable instance of this is the crucifixion of Jesus, which Peter attributed to both God and sinful men: "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men" (Acts 2:23).

The Relationship Between God's Governing Activity and Sin

At this point we must address the difficult problem of the relationship between God's working and the committing of sinful acts by humans. It is necessary to distinguish between God's normal working in relation to human actions and his working in relation to sinful acts. The Bible makes quite clear that God is not the

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cause of sin (James 1:14). But if sinful actions are not caused by God, what do we mean when we say that they are within his governing activity? There are several ways in which God can and does relate to sin: he can (1) prevent it; (2) permit it; (3) direct it; or (4) limit it.³ Note that in each case God is not the cause of human sin, but acts in relationship to it.

1. God can prevent sin. At times he deters or precludes people from performing certain sinful acts. David prayed that God would keep him from sin: "Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me!" (Ps. 19:13).

2. God does not always prevent sin. At times he simply wills to permit it. Although it is not what he would wish to happen, he acquiesces in it. By not preventing the sin we determine to do, God renders it *certain* that we will indeed commit it; but he does not cause us to sin, or render it *necessary* that we act in this fashion. This is probably put most clearly by the Lord in Psalm 81:12-13: "So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels. O that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways!"

3. God can also direct sin. That is, while permitting some sins to occur, God nonetheless directs them in such a way that good comes out of them. Peter saw that God had used the crucifixion of Jesus for good: "Let all the house of Israel there-

God is not only in control; he is directing matters according to the goodness and the graciousness of his character.

fore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36; see also Rom. 11:13-15, 25). God is like a judo expert who redirects the evil efforts of sinful people and Satan in such a way that they become the very means of doing good.

4. Finally, God can limit sin. There are times when he does not prevent evil deeds, but none-

theless restrains the extent or effect of what evil people and the devil and his demons can do. A prime example is the case of Job. God permitted Satan to act, but limited what he could do: "Behold, all that he has is in your power; only upon himself do not put forth your hand" (Job 1:12). Later the Lord said, "Behold, he is in your power; only spare his life" (2:6).

The Major Features and Implications of God's Governing Activity

We need now to summarize the major features and the implications of the doctrine of divine government.

1. God's governing activity is universal. It extends to all matters, that which is obviously good and even that which seemingly is not good. Paul wrote, "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

2. God's providence does not extend merely to his own people. While there is a special concern for the believer, God does not withhold his goodness entirely from the rest of humankind. Jesus said this quite openly in Matthew 5:45: "he makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." This goes contrary to an opinion held by some Christians, an opinion which was expressed humorously a few years ago in a comic strip entitled "The Reverend." One day the Reverend, attired in his clerical garb, was leaving on vacation. His neighbor offered to water his lawn while he was gone. "Thank you for your thoughtfulness," replied the Reverend, "but I've made other arrangements." In the last panel, rain was pouring down on the Reverend's lawn, but not on the adjacent yards. That, says Jesus, is *not* how God ordinarily works. The unbeliever as well as the believer benefits from the Father's goodness. My father was a Christian; the man whose farm was next to ours was a non-Christian who worked seven days a week. But when it rained, it usually rained on both farms alike.

3. God is good in his government. He works for the good, sometimes directly bringing it about, sometimes countering or deflecting to-

3. Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Westwood, N.J.: Revell, 1907), pp. 423-25.

ward good the efforts of evil individuals. That God is good in his government should produce in the believer a confidence in the ultimate outcome of the events of life. God is not only in control; he is directing matters according to the goodness and graciousness of his character.

4. God is personally concerned about those who are his. He cares about the one lost sheep (Luke 15:3-7). This personal dimension of God's government speaks significantly to the contemporary situation. With growing automation and computerization has also come increased depersonalization. We are only cogs in the machinery, faceless robots, numbers on file, punches in computer cards, or entries on tape. A brilliant English major, applying to graduate school, was assigned a number by one institution and told that it would not be necessary to use his name in future correspondence; the number would be sufficient. He chose a different university, one which still uses names. The doctrine of the providence of God assures us that his personal relationship to us is important. He knows each of us, and each one matters to him.

5. Our activity and the divine activity are not mutually exclusive. We have no basis for laxity, indifference, or resignation in the face of the fact that God is at work accomplishing his goals. As we have seen, his providence includes human actions. Sometimes humans are conscious that their actions are fulfilling divine intention, as when Jesus said that he must do the Father's will (e.g., Matt. 26:42). At other times there is an unwitting carrying out of God's plan. Little did Caesar Augustus know when he made his decree (Luke 2:1) that the census he was ordering would make possible the fulfilment of the prophecy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, but he helped fulfil it nonetheless.

The increasing sophistication of human activity and the corresponding decrease in the need for spectacular divine intervention should not lead to any loss of belief in the providence of God. Many members of today's secular society see little place for God in this world. They know, for example, what makes a person ill (at least in many cases), and medical science can prevent or cure the illness. Prayers for healing

seem inappropriate (except in critical or hopeless cases). God's providence appears to be a foreign concept.⁴ Yet we have seen that providence includes the immanent working of God; thus, God is providentially at work as much in the cure wrought by the physician as in a miraculous healing.

6. God is sovereign in his government. This means that he alone determines his plan and knows the significance of each of his actions. It is not necessary for us to know where he is leading. We need to be careful, then, to avoid dictating to God what he should do to give us direction. Sometimes the Christian is tempted to tell God, "If you want me to do A, then show me by doing X." It would be far better, Gideon's fleece (Judg. 6:36-40) notwithstanding, if we simply allow God to illumine us—if he so wishes and to the extent he wishes—as to the significance of his working. To suppose that we should be able to understand the significance of all of God's leading and that he will spell it out for us through some means akin to Gideon's fleece is superstition, not piety.

7. We need to be careful as to what we identify as God's providence. The most notable instance of a too ready identification of historical events with God's will is probably the "German Christians'" 1934 endorsement of the actions of Adolf Hitler as God's working in history. The words of their statement are sobering to us who now read them: "We are full of thanks to God that He, as Lord of history, has given us Adolf Hitler, our leader and savior from our difficult lot. We acknowledge that we, with body and soul, are bound and dedicated to the German state and to its *Führer*. This bondage and duty contains for us, as evangelical Christians, its deepest and most holy significance in its obedience to the command of God."⁵ From our perspective, the folly of such a statement seems obvious. But are there perhaps some pronouncements we are making today which will be seen as similarly mistaken by those who come a few decades after us? While we need not

4. Karl Heim, *Christian Faith and Natural Science* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957), p. 15.

5. Quoted in Berkouwer, *Providence of God*, pp. 176-77.

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necessarily go so far as did Karl Barth in rejecting a natural theology based upon the developments of history, in his condemnation of the German Christians' action there is a word of caution that is instructive to us.

Providence and Prayer

One problem that has concerned thoughtful Christians when considering the nature of providence is the role of prayer. The dilemma stems from the question of what prayer really accomplishes. On the one hand, if prayer has any effect upon what happens, then it seems that God's plan was not fixed in the first place. Providence is in some sense dependent upon or altered by whether and how much someone prays. On the other hand, if God's plan is established and he is going to do what he is going to do, then does it matter whether we pray?

We should note that this is simply one particular form of the larger issue of the relationship between human effort and divine providence. Two facts are noteworthy here: (1) Scripture teaches that God's plan is definite and fixed—it is not subject to revision; and (2) we are commanded to pray and taught that prayer has value (James 5:16). But how do these two facts relate to each other?

It appears from Scripture that in many cases God works in a sort of partnership with humans. God does not act if they do not play their part. Thus, when Jesus ministered in his hometown of Nazareth, he did not perform any major miracles. All he did was to heal a few sick people. That Jesus "marveled because of their unbelief" (Mark 6:6) suggests that the people of Nazareth simply did not bring their needy ones to him for healing. It is clear that in many cases the act of faith was necessary for God to act—and such faith was lacking in Nazareth. On the other hand, when Jesus walked on the water (Matt. 14:22–33), Peter asked to be bidden to go to Jesus on the water and was enabled to do so. Presumably Jesus could have enabled all of the disciples to walk on the water that day, but only Peter did because only he asked. The centurion bringing his request for the healing of a servant (Matt. 8:5–13) and the woman with the

hemorrhage (Matt. 9:18–22), clinging to Jesus' garment, are examples of faith which, demonstrated in petition, resulted in God's working. When God wills the end (in these cases, healing), he also wills the means (which includes a request to be healed, which in turn presupposes faith). That is, God wills the healing in part by willing that those in need should bring their entreaties. Thus, prayer does not change what he has purposed to do. It is the means by which he accomplishes his end. It is vital, then, that a prayer be uttered, for without it the desired result will not come to pass.

This means that prayer is more than self-stimulation. It is not a method of creating a positive mental attitude in ourselves so that we are able to do what we have asked to have done. Rather, prayer is in large part a matter of creating in ourselves a right attitude with respect to God's will. Jesus taught his disciples and us to pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done," before "Give us this day our daily bread." Prayer is not so much getting God to do our will as it is demonstrating that we are as concerned as is God that his will be done. Moreover, Jesus taught us persistence in prayer (Luke 11:8–10—note that the grammatical forms used in the original Greek suggest continuous action: keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking). It takes little faith, commitment, and effort to pray once about something and then cease. Persistent prayer makes it apparent that our petition is important to us, as it is to God.

We do not always receive what we ask for. Jesus asked three times for the removal of the cup (death by crucifixion); Paul prayed thrice for the removal of his thorn in the flesh. In each case, the Father granted instead something that was more needful (e.g., 2 Cor. 12:9–10). The believer can pray confidently, knowing that our wise and good God will give us, not necessarily what we ask for, but what is best. For as the psalmist put it, "No good thing does the LORD withhold from those who walk uprightly" (Ps. 84:11).

Providence and Miracles

What we have been examining thus far are matters of ordinary or normal providence.

While they are supernatural in origin, they are relatively common and hence not too conspicuous or spectacular. We must, however, examine one additional species of providence—miracles. Here we are referring to those striking or unusual workings by God which are clearly supernatural. By miracle we mean those special supernatural works of God's providence which are not explicable on the basis of the usual patterns of nature.

One of the important issues regarding miracles involves their relationship to natural laws or the laws of nature. To some, miracles have been, not an aid to faith, but an obstacle, since they are so contrary to the usual patterns of occurrence as to appear very unlikely or even incredible. Thus, the question of how these events are to be thought of in relationship to natural law is of great importance. There are at least three views of the relationship between miracles and natural laws.

The first conception is that miracles are actually the manifestations of little-known or virtually unknown natural laws. If we fully knew and understood nature, we would be able to understand and even predict these events. Whenever the rare circumstances which produce a miracle reappear in that particular combination, the miracle will reoccur.⁶ Certain biblical instances seem to fit this pattern, for example, the miraculous catch of fish in Luke 5. According to this view, Christ did not create fish for the occasion, nor did he somehow drive them from their places in the lake to where the net was to be let down. Rather, unusual conditions were present so that the fish had gathered in a place where they would not ordinarily be expected. Thus, Jesus' miracle was not so much a matter of omnipotence as of omniscience. The miracle came in his knowing where the fish would be. Similarly, some of the healings of Jesus could well have been psychosomatic healings, that is, cases of powerful suggestion removing hysterical symptoms. He simply used his extraordinary

knowledge of psychosomatics to accomplish these healings.

There is much about this view that is appealing, particularly since some of the biblical miracles fit this scheme quite well; it may well be that some of them were of this nature. There are certain problems with adopting this view as an all-inclusive explanation, however. There are some miracles that are very difficult to explain in terms of this view. For example, was the man born blind (John 9) a case of psychosomatic congenital blindness? Now of course none of us knows what laws there may be that we do not know. But it is reasonable to assume that we should have at least some hint of what those unknown laws might be. The very vagueness of the theory is at once its strength and its weakness. To say, without further argument, that there are laws of nature which we do not know can never be either confirmed or refuted.

A second conception is that miracles break the laws of nature. In the case of the axhead that floated, for example (2 Kings 6:6), this theory suggests that for a brief period of time, in that cubic foot or so of water, the law of gravity was suspended. In effect, God turned off the law of gravity until the axhead was retrieved, or he changed the density of the axhead or of the water. This view of miracles has the virtue of seeming considerably more supernatural than the preceding one. But there are certain drawbacks attaching to it. For one thing, such suspending or breaking of the laws of nature usually introduces complications requiring a whole series of compensating miracles. In the story of Joshua's long day (Josh. 10:12-14), for example, numerous adjustments would have to be made, of which there is no hint in the narrative, if God actually stopped the revolution of the earth on its axis. While this is certainly possible for an almighty God, there is no indication of it in the astronomical data.⁷ There are two other problems, one psychological and one theological. Psychologically, the apparent disorderliness introduced into nature by the view

6. Patrick Nowell-Smith, "Miracles," in *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*, ed. Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (New York: Macmillan, 1955), pp. 245-48.

7. Bernard Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), pp. 156-61. A simpler explanation is that a miracle of refraction resulted in a prolongation of daylight.

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that miracles are violations of natural law unnecessarily predisposes scientists to be prejudiced against them. As a matter of fact, there are those who categorically reject miracles strictly on the basis of this definition.⁸ And, theologically, this view seems to make God work against himself, thus introducing a form of self-contradiction.

A third conception is the idea that when miracles occur, natural forces are countered by supernatural force. In this view, the laws of nature are not suspended. They continue to operate, but supernatural force is introduced, negating the effect of the natural law.⁹ In the case of the axhead, for instance, the law of gravity continued to function in the vicinity of the axhead, but the unseen hand of God was underneath it, bearing it up, just as if a human hand were lifting it. This view has the advantage of regarding miracles as being genuinely supernatural or extranatural, but without being antinatural, as the second view makes them to be. To be sure, in the case of the fish, it may have been the conditions in the water which caused the fish to be there, but those conditions would not have been present if God had not influenced such factors as the water flow and temperature. And at times there may have been acts of creation as well, as in the case of the feeding of the five thousand.

At this point we should mention the purposes of miracles. There are at least three. The most important is to glorify God. This means that when miracles occur today, we should credit God, who is the source of the miracle, not the human agent who is the channel. In biblical times, a second purpose of miracles was to es-

tablish the supernatural basis of the revelation which often accompanied them. That the Greek word *sēmeia* ("signs") frequently occurs in the New Testament as a term for miracles underscores this dimension. We note, too, that miracles often came at times of especially intensive revelation. This can be seen in the ministry of our Lord (e.g., Luke 5:24). Finally, miracles occur to meet human needs. Our Lord frequently is pictured as moved with compassion for the needy, hurting people who came to him. He healed them to relieve the suffering caused by such maladies as blindness, leprosy, and hemorrhaging. He never performed miracles for the selfish purpose of putting on a display.

We have seen that the doctrine of providence is not an abstract conception. It is the believer's conviction that he or she is in the hands of a good, wise, and powerful God who will accomplish his purposes in the world.

Be not dismayed whate'er betide,
God will take care of you;
Beneath His wings of love abide,
God will take care of you.

Through days of toil when heart doth fail, God
will take care of you;
When dangers fierce your path assail,
God will take care of you.

No matter what may be the test,
God will take care of you;
Lean, weary one, upon His breast,
God will take care of you.

God will take care of you, through every
day, o'er all the way;
He will take care of you,
God will take care of you.

(Civilla Durfee Martin, 1904)

8. E.g., David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, section 10, part 1.

9. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), pp. 59-61.

Evil and God's World: A Special Problem

Chapter Objectives

Upon completion of this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

1. To define and understand the nature of the problem of evil.
2. To explain the theological themes that bear upon this problem and that contribute to alleviating it.
3. To strengthen the faith of the believer and to enable him or her to offer response to critics of the Christian faith.

Chapter Summary

Probably the most difficult intellectual challenge to the Christian faith is the problem of evil in the world. If God is all-powerful and all-loving, how can evil be present in the world? Although the problem will never be fully resolved within this earthly life, there are biblical teachings that help alleviate it.

Study Questions

- What are three solutions to the problem of evil?
- How does human freedom affect the problem of evil?
- How would you define the terms *good* and *evil*?
- How do general and specific sins affect evil?

Chapter Outline

The Nature of the Problem

Types of Solutions

Themes for Dealing with the Problem of Evil

Evil as a Necessary Accompaniment of the Creation of Humankind

A Reevaluation of What Constitutes Good and Evil

Evil in General as the Result of Sin in General

Specific Evil as the Result of Specific Sins

God as the Victim of Evil

The Life Hereafter

The Nature of the Problem

We have spoken of the nature of God's providence and have noted that it is universal: God is in control of all that occurs. He has a plan for the entire universe and all of time, and is at work bringing about that good plan. But a shadow falls across this comforting doctrine: the problem of evil.

The problem may be stated in a simple or a more complex fashion. David Hume put it succinctly when he wrote of God: "Is he willing to prevent evil, but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing: whence then is evil?"¹ The existence of evil can also be seen as presenting a problem for the mealtime prayer that many children have been taught to pray: "God is great, God is good. Let us thank him for our food." For if God is great, then he is able to prevent evil from occurring. If God is good, he will not wish for evil to occur. But there is rather evident evil about us. The problem of evil then may be thought of as a conflict involving three concepts: God's power, God's goodness, and the presence of evil in the world. Common

sense seems to tell us that all three cannot be true.

The evil that precipitates this dilemma is of two general types. On one hand, there is what is usually called natural evil. This is evil that does not involve human willing and acting, but is merely an aspect of nature which seems to work against human welfare. The destructive forces of nature include hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes, and the suffering and loss of human lives caused by diseases such as cancer, cystic fibrosis, and multiple sclerosis. The other type of evil is termed moral evil. These are evils which can be traced to the choice and action of free moral agents. Here we find war, crime, cruelty, class struggles, discrimination, slavery, and injustices too numerous to mention. While moral evils can to some extent be removed from our consideration here by blaming them upon the exercise of human free will, natural evils cannot be dismissed from our consideration.

The problem of evil takes differing forms. In general, the religious form of the problem of evil occurs when some particular aspect of one's experience has had the effect of calling into question the greatness or goodness of God, and hence threatens the relationship between the believer and God. The theological form of the problem is concerned with evil in general. It is

1. David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, part 10.

not a question of how a specific concrete situation can exist in light of God's being what and who he is, but of how any such problem could possibly exist. It is important to note these distinctions. For as Alvin Plantinga has pointed out, the person for whom some specific evil is presenting a religious difficulty may need pastoral care rather than help in working out intellectual problems.² Similarly, to treat one's genuine intellectual struggle as merely a matter of feelings will not be very helpful. Failure to recognize the religious form of the problem of evil will appear insensitive; failure to deal with the theological form will appear intellectually insulting. Particularly where the two are found together it is important to recognize and distinguish the respective components.

Types of Solutions

There have been many different types of theodicies, that is, attempts to show that God is not responsible for evil. For the most part (our analysis here is somewhat oversimplified), these attempted solutions work at reducing the tension by modifying one or more of the three elements which in combination have caused the dilemma: the greatness of God, his goodness, and the presence of evil.

One way of solving the tension of the problem which we have been describing is to abandon the idea of God's omnipotence. This approach, which is called finitism, is often found in dualisms such as Zoroastrianism or Manichaeism. These dualisms propose that there are two ultimate principles in the universe: God and the power of evil. God is attempting to overcome evil, and would if he could, but he is simply unable to do so.

A second way of lessening the tensions of the problem is to modify the idea of God's goodness. While few if any who call themselves Christian would deny the goodness of God, there are those who, at least by implication, suggest that the goodness must be understood in a sense that is slightly different from what is

2. Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), pp. 63-64.

usually meant. One who falls into this category is Gordon H. Clark.

A staunch Calvinist, Clark does not hesitate to use the term *determinism* to depict God's causing of all things, including human acts. In regard to the relationship of God to certain evil actions of human beings, he even states, "I wish very frankly and pointedly to assert that if a man gets drunk and shoots his family, it was the will of God that he should do it."³ Because God is the sole ultimate cause of everything, and whatever God causes is good, Clark concludes that it is good and right that God (ultimately) causes such evil acts as a drunken man's shooting his family, although God does not sin and is not responsible for this sinful act. Clearly, in this solution to the problem of evil the term *goodness* has undergone such transformation as to be quite different from what is usually meant by the goodness of God.

A third proposed solution to the problem of evil rejects the reality of evil, rendering unnecessary any account of how it can coexist with an omnipotent and good God. We find this viewpoint in various forms of pantheism. The philosophy of Benedict Spinoza, for example, maintains that there is just one substance and all distinguishable things are modes or attributes of that substance. Everything is deterministically caused; God brings everything into being in the highest perfection.⁴ A more popularly held, but considerably less sophisticated version of this solution to the problem of evil is to be found in Christian Science, which affirms that evil in general, and particularly disease, is an illusion; it has no reality.⁵

Themes for Dealing with the Problem of Evil

A total solution to the problem of evil is beyond human ability. So what we will do here is

3. Gordon H. Clark, *Religion, Reason, and Revelation* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961), p. 221; for Clark's argument see pp. 221-41.

4. Benedict Spinoza, *Ethics*, part 1, proposition 33, note 2.

5. Mary Baker Eddy, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (Boston: Trustees under the will of Mary Baker Eddy, 1934), p. 348.

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to present several themes which in combination will help us to deal with the problem. These themes will be consistent with the basic tenets of the theology espoused in this writing. This theology can be characterized as a mild Calvinism which gives primary place to the sovereignty of God, while seeking to relate it in a positive way to human freedom and individuality. This theology is a dualism in which the second element is contingent upon or derivative from the

Though a total solution to the problem is beyond human ability, evil may be a necessary accompaniment of God's plan to make us fully human or the means to a greater good.

first. That is, there are realities distinct from God which have a genuine and good existence of their own, but which ultimately received their existence from him by creation (not emanation). This theology also affirms the sin and fall of the human race and the consequent sinfulness of each human; the reality of evil and of personal demonic beings headed by the devil; the incarnation of the Second Person of the Triune God, who became a sacrificial atonement for humanity's sins; and an eternal life beyond death. It is in the context of this theological structure that the following themes are presented as helps in dealing with the problem of evil:

Evil as a Necessary Accompaniment of the Creation of Humankind

There are some things God cannot do. God cannot be cruel, for cruelty is contrary to his nature. He cannot lie. He cannot break his promise. There are some other things that God cannot do without certain inevitable results. For example, God cannot make a circle, a true circle, without all points on the circumference being equidistant from the center. Similarly, God cannot make a human without certain accompanying features.

Humans would not be human if they did not have free will. Whether humans are free in the sense assumed by Arminians or free in a sense not

inconsistent with God's having rendered certain what is to happen, God's having made humans as he purposed means that we have certain capacities (e.g., the capacities to desire and to act) which we could not fully exercise if there were no such thing as evil. If God had prevented evil, he would have had to make us other than we are. To be truly human, we must have the ability to desire to have and do things some of which will not be what God wants us to have and to do. Evil, then, was a necessary accompaniment of God's good plan to make us fully human.

Another dimension of this theme is that for God to make the physical world as it is required certain concomitants. Apparently, for humans to have a genuine moral choice with the possibility of genuine punishment for disobedience meant that they would be capable of dying. Further, the sustenance of life required conditions which could lead to death instead. So, for example, we need water to live. But the same water which we drink can in other circumstances enter our lungs, cutting off our supply of oxygen, and thus cause us to drown. The water which is necessary to sustain life can also cut it off.

At this point someone might raise the question, "If God could not create the world without the accompanying possibility of evil, why did he create at all, or why did he not create the world without humans?" In a sense, we cannot answer that question since we are not God, but it is appropriate to note here that God chose the greater good. He decided to create rather than not create, and to create human beings rather than something lesser. He decided to create beings who would fellowship with and obey him, beings who would choose to do so even in the face of temptations to do otherwise. This was evidently a greater good than to introduce "humankind" into a totally antiseptic environment from which even the logical possibility of desiring anything contrary to God's will would have been excluded.

A Reevaluation of What Constitutes Good and Evil

Some of what we term good and evil may not actually be that. It is therefore necessary to take a hard look at what constitutes good and evil.

First, we must consider the divine dimension. Good is not to be defined in terms of what brings personal pleasure to humans in a direct fashion. Good is to be defined in relationship to the will and being of God. Good is that which glorifies him, fulfils his will, conforms to his nature. The promise of Romans 8:28 is sometimes quoted rather glibly by Christians: "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose." But what is this good? Paul gives us the answer in verse 29: "For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brethren." This then is the good: not personal wealth or health, but being conformed to the image of God's Son. It is not the short-range comfort, but the long-range welfare of humanity as determined by the superior knowledge and wisdom of God.

Second, we must consider the dimension of time or duration. Some of the evils which we experience are actually very disturbing on a short-term basis, but in the long-term work a much larger good. The pain of the dentist's drill and the suffering of postsurgical recovery may seem like quite severe evils, but they are in actuality rather small in light of the long-range effects that flow from them. Scripture encourages us to evaluate our temporary suffering in the light of eternity. Paul said, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18; see also 2 Cor. 4:17; Heb. 12:2; 1 Peter 1:6-7). A problem is often magnified by its proximity to us now, so that it becomes disproportionate to other pertinent matters. A good question to ask regarding any apparent evil is, "How important will this seem to me a year from now? five years? a million years?"

Third, there is the question of the extent of the evil. We tend to be very individualistic in our assessment of good and evil. But this is a large and complex world, and God has many persons to care for. The Saturday rainfall that spoils a family picnic or round of golf may seem like an evil to me, but be a much greater

good to the farmers whose parched fields surround the golf course or park, and ultimately to a much larger number of people who depend upon the farmers' crops, the price of which will be affected by the abundance or scarcity of supply.

Part of what we are saying here is that what appears to be evil may actually in some cases be the means to a greater good. Though we may not understand them, God's plans and actions are always good and lead invariably to good consequences. Note, however, that God's plans and actions are not made good by their consequences. Rather, what makes God's plans and actions good is the fact that he has willed them.

Evil in General as the Result of Sin in General

A cardinal doctrine of the theology being developed in this book is the fact of racial sin. By this we do not mean the sin of race against race, but rather the fact that the entire human race has sinned and is now sinful. In its head, Adam, the entire human race violated God's will and fell from the state of innocence in which God had created humanity. Consequently, all of us begin life with a natural tendency to sin. The Bible tells us that with the fall, humankind's first sin, a radical change took place in the universe. Death came upon humankind (Gen. 2:17; 3:2-3, 19). God pronounced a curse upon them which is represented by certain specifics: anguish in childbearing (3:16), male domination over the wife (v. 16), toilsome labor (v. 17), and thorns and thistles (v. 18). It seems likely that these are merely a sample of the actual effects upon the creation. Paul in Romans 8 says that the whole creation has been affected by the sin of humanity, and is now in bondage to decay. It waits for its redemption from this bondage. Thus, it appears likely that a whole host of natural evils may also have resulted from the sin of humankind.

More serious and more obvious, however, is the effect of the fall in the promotion of moral evil, that is, evil which is related to human willing and acting. There is no question that much of the pain and unhappiness of human beings is a result of structural evil within soci-

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ety. For example, power may reside in the hands of a few who use it to exploit others. Selfishness on a collective scale may keep a particular social class or racial group in painful or destitute conditions.

There is an important question that must be asked here; namely, how could sin have happened in the first place? Part of the answer is that humans must have an option if they are to be genuinely free. The choice is to obey or disobey God. In the case of Adam and Eve, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil symbolized that choice (Gen. 2:17). When they disobeyed God, their relationship to him was distorted, and sin became a reality. Humans have been greatly affected by sin: their attitudes, values, and relationships have changed. In the case of Adam and Eve, this change was reflected in their new awareness of their nakedness, in their fear of God, and in their unwillingness to accept responsibility for their sin.

It is clear, then, that God did not create sin. He merely provided the options necessary for human freedom, options which could result in sin. It is humans who sinned, not God.

Specific Evil as the Result of Specific Sins

Some specific evils are the result of specific sins or at least imprudences. Some of the evil occurrences in life are caused by the sinful actions of others. Murder, child abuse, theft, and rape are evils tied in with the exercise of sinful choices by sinful individuals. In some cases, the victim is innocent of the evil which occurs. In other cases, however, the "victim" contributes to or provokes the evil action.

In a fair number of cases, we bring evil upon ourselves by our own sinful or unwise actions. We must be very careful here. Job's friends tended to attribute his misfortunes solely to his sins (e.g., Job 22). But Jesus indicated that tragedy is not always the result of a specific sin. When his disciples asked concerning a man who had been born blind, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus replied, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be made manifest in him" (John 9:2-3). Jesus was not saying that the man and

his parents had not sinned; rather, he was refuting the idea that the blindness was the result of a specific sin. It is unwise to attribute misfortunes automatically to one's own sin.

But having given this warning, we need to note that there are instances of sin bringing unfortunate results upon the individual sinner. A case in point is David, whose sin with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah resulted in the death of the child of David and Bathsheba as well as conflict in David's own household. This perhaps should be thought of more in terms of the effects of certain acts than in terms of punishment from God. We do not know what was involved, but it may well be that certain conditions pertaining at the time of the act of adultery resulted in a genetic defect in the child. And David's sense of guilt may have led to indulgence with his own children, which in turn led to their sins. Much of the evil recounted in Scripture came upon people as a result of their own sin, or that of someone close to them.

Paul said, "Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption; but he who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life" (Gal. 6:7-8). While Paul was probably thinking primarily of the eternal dimension of sin's consequences, the context (the earlier part of ch. 6) seems to indicate that he had temporal effects in mind as well. Whoever violates the law against adultery (Exod. 20:14) may find that the result is the destruction of relationships of trust, not only with one's spouse, but with one's children as well. The habitual drunkard may well destroy his health with cirrhosis of the liver. God is not attacking him; rather, the drunkard's sin has brought about the disease. This is not to say, however, that God may not use the natural results of sin to chasten people.

God as the Victim of Evil

That God took sin and its evil effects upon himself is a unique contribution by Christian doctrine to the solution of the problem of evil.⁶

6. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), pp. 119-20.

Evil and God's World: A Special Problem

It is remarkable that, while knowing that he himself was to become a victim (indeed, the major victim) of the evil resulting from sin, God allowed sin to occur anyway. The Bible tells us that God was grieved by the sinfulness of humankind (Gen. 6:6). While there is certainly anthropomorphism here, there nonetheless is indication that the sin of humanity is painful or hurtful to God. But even more to the point is the fact of the incarnation. The Triune God knew that the Second Person would come to earth and be subject to numerous evils: hunger, fatigue, betrayal, ridicule, rejection, suffering, and death. He did this in order to negate sin and thus its evil effects. God is a fellow sufferer with us of the evil in this world, and consequently is able to deliver us from evil. What a measure of love this is! Anyone who would impugn the goodness of God for allowing sin and consequently evil must measure that charge

against the teaching of Scripture that God himself became the victim of evil so that he and we might be victors over evil.

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There is no question that in this life there are what seem to be rather clear instances of injustice and innocent suffering. If this life were all that there is, then surely the problem of evil would be unresolvable. But Christianity's doctrine of the life hereafter teaches that there will be a great time of judgment—every sin will be recognized and the godly will also be revealed. The judgment will be thoroughly just. Punishment for evil will be administered, and the final dimension of eternal life will be granted to all who have responded to God's loving offer. Thus the complaint of the psalmist regarding how the evil prosper and the righteous suffer will be satisfied in the light of the life hereafter.

SEVENTEEN

God's Special Agents: Angels

Chapter Objectives

After you have completed the study of this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

1. To identify and understand good angels and their unique characteristics.
2. To identify and understand evil angels through their characteristics and deeds.
3. To create a trust in, but not excessive fascination with, God's angels.
4. To create a healthy respect for, but neither a fear of nor a fascination with, evil angels.
5. To discover the role of the doctrine of angels in carrying out God's plan.
6. To understand the limitations and the ultimate destiny of Satan and his servants.

Chapter Summary

There are superhuman (but not divine) beings who work within human history. Some of these, who remained faithful to God, carry out his work. Others, who fell from their created state of holiness, live to oppose God and his children. God's care and concern for his creation is evident in the ministrations of good angels. By contrast, Satan and his minions seek to

thwart the purposes of God. But God has limited their powers.

Study Questions

- Why is it necessary to study angels and include them in the study of theology?
- What are the roles and responsibilities of angels in the plan of God?
- How would you compare and contrast good and evil angels?
- What confidence in God is inspired in the Christian believer by the role of good angels in life?
- What limits are placed on Satan and his emissaries?

Chapter Outline

Good Angels

- Terminology
- Their Origin, Nature, and Status
- Their Capacities and Powers
- Their Activities

Evil Angels

- The Origin of Demons
- The Chief of the Demons
- Activities of Demons
- Demon Possession

The Role of the Doctrine of Angels

When we come to the discussion of angels, we are entering upon a subject which in some ways is the most unusual and difficult of all of theology. Karl Barth, who has given the most extensive treatment of the subject to be found in recent theology textbooks, described the topic of angels as the "most remarkable and difficult of all."¹ It is, therefore, a topic which it is tempting to omit or neglect. Yet the teaching of Scripture is that God has created these spiritual beings and has chosen to carry out many of his acts through them. Therefore, if we are to be faithful students of the Bible, we have no choice but to speak of these beings.

By angels we mean those spiritual beings that God created higher than humankind, some of whom have remained obedient to God and carry out his will, and others of whom disobeyed, lost their holy condition, and now oppose and hinder his work.

One reason for the difficulty of the subject is that while there are abundant references to angels in the Bible, they are not treated in themselves. When they are mentioned, it is always

1. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1961), vol. 3, part 3, p. 369.

order to inform us further about God, what he does, and how he does it.

Good Angels

Terminology

The primary Hebrew term for angel is *mal'āk*; the corresponding Greek word is *angelos*; in each case, the basic meaning is messenger. The two terms are used both of human messengers and of angels. When used of angels, the terms emphasize their message-bearing role. Other Old Testament terms for angels are "holy ones" (Ps. 89:5, 7) and "watchers" (Dan. 4:13, 17, 23). Collectively, they are referred to as "the council" (Ps. 89:7), "the assembly" (Ps. 89:5), and "host" or "hosts," as in the very common expression "LORD [OR LORD God] of hosts," which is found more than sixty times in the Book of Isaiah alone. New Testament expressions believed to refer to angels are "heavenly host" (Luke 2:13), "spirits" (Heb. 1:14), and in varying combinations, "principalities," "powers," "thrones," "dominions," and "authorities" (see especially Col. 1:16; also Rom. 8:38; 1 Cor. 15:24; Eph. 6:12; Col. 2:15). The term *archangel* appears in two passages, 1 Thessalonians 4:16 and Jude 9. In the latter, Michael is named as an archangel.

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Their Origin, Nature, and Status

It is not explicitly stated in Scripture that angels were created, nor are they mentioned in the creation account (Gen. 1–2). That they were created is, however, clearly implied in Psalm 148:2, 5: "Praise him, all his angels, praise him, all his host! . . . Let them praise the name of the Lord! For he commanded and they were created."

Jews and Christians have long believed and taught that angels are immaterial or spiritual beings. Here, as with the matter of their creation, explicit evidence is not abundant. Indeed, one might conclude that angels and spirits are being distinguished from one another in Acts 23:8–9, although angels may be part of the genus of spirits. The clearest statement regarding the spiritual nature of angels is found in Hebrews 1:14, where the writer, obviously referring to angels (see vv. 5, 13), says, "Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to serve, for the sake of those who are to obtain

The good angels praise God continually,
communicate his message to us,
minister to us, execute judgment
on his enemies, and will participate
in the second coming.

salvation?" It seems safe to conclude that angels are spiritual beings; they do not have physical or material bodies. Physical manifestations recorded in Scripture must be regarded as appearances assumed for the occasion (angelophanies).

There have at times been tendencies to exalt angels unduly, giving them worship and reverence due only to the Deity. The most extended passage on angels, Hebrews 1:5–2:9, however, makes a particular point of establishing that Christ is superior to the angels. Although he was made for a brief time a little lower than the angels, he is in every way superior to them. And while they in turn are superior to humans in many of their abilities and qualities, angels are still part of the class of created and thus finite beings.

There are large numbers of angels. Scripture has various ways of indicating their numbers: "ten thousands" (Deut. 33:2); "twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands" (Ps. 68:17); "twelve legions" (36,000 to 72,000—the size of the Roman legion varied between 3,000 and 6,000) (Matt. 26:53); "innumerable angels in festal gathering" (Heb. 12:22); "thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand" (Rev. 5:11 *NIV*). While there is no reason to take any of these figures as exact numbers, particularly in view of the symbolic significance of the numbers used (12 and 1,000), it is clear that the angels are a very large group.

Their Capacities and Powers

The angels are represented as personal beings. They can be interacted with. They have intelligence and will (2 Sam. 14:20; Rev. 22:9). They are moral creatures, some being characterized as holy (Matt. 25:31; Mark 8:38; Luke 1:26; Acts 10:22; Rev. 14:10), while others, who have fallen away, are described as lying and sinning (John 8:44; 1 John 3:8–10).

In Matthew 24:36 Jesus implies that angels have superhuman knowledge, but at the same time expressly asserts that this knowledge is not unlimited: "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only." Just as the angels possess great knowledge but not omniscience, so they also have great and superhuman power, but not omnipotence. This great power is derived from God, and the angels remain dependent upon his favorable will to exercise it. They are restricted to acting within the limits of his permission. This is true even of Satan, whose ability to afflict Job was circumscribed by the will of the Lord (Job 1:12; 2:6). God's angels act only to carry out God's commands. There is no instance of their acting independently. Only God does the miraculous (Ps. 72:18). As creatures, angels are subject to all the limitations of creaturehood.

Their Activities

1. Angels continually praise and glorify God (Job 38:7; Pss. 103:20; 148:2; Rev. 5:11–12; 7:11; 8:1–4). While this activity usually takes

place in God's presence, on at least one occasion it took place on earth—at the birth of Jesus the angels sang, "Glory to God in the highest" (Luke 2:13-14).

2. Angels reveal and communicate God's message to humans. This activity is most in keeping with the meaning of the word *angel*. Angels were particularly involved as mediators of the law (Acts 7:53; Gal. 3:19; Heb. 2:2). Although they are not mentioned in Exodus 19, Deuteronomy 33:2 says, "The Lord came from Sinai, . . . from the ten thousands of holy ones." This obscure passage may be an allusion to the mediation of angels. While they are not said to have performed a similar function with respect to the new covenant, the New Testament frequently depicts them as conveyers of messages from God. Gabriel appeared to Zechariah (Luke 1:13-20) and to Mary (Luke 1:26-38). Angels also spoke to Philip (Acts 8:26), Cornelius (Acts 10:3-7), Peter (Acts 11:13; 12:7-11), and Paul (Acts 27:23).

3. Angels minister to believers. This includes protecting believers from harm. In the early church it was an angel who delivered the apostles (Acts 5:19) and later Peter (Acts 12:6-11) from prison. The psalmist experienced the angels' care (Pss. 34:7; 91:11). The major ministry is to spiritual needs, however. Angels take a great interest in the spiritual welfare of believers, rejoicing at their conversion (Luke 15:10) and serving them in their needs (Heb. 1:14). Angels are spectators of our lives (1 Cor. 4:9; 1 Tim. 5:21), and are present within the church (1 Cor. 11:10). At death, the believer is conveyed to the place of blessedness by angels (Luke 16:22).

4. Angels execute judgment upon the enemies of God. The angel of the Lord brought death to 185,000 Assyrians (2 Kings 19:35), and to the children of Israel until the Lord told him to stay his hand at Jerusalem (2 Sam. 24:16). It was an angel of the Lord that killed Herod (Acts 12:23). The Book of Revelation is full of prophecies regarding the judgment to be administered by angels (8:6-9:21; 16:1-17; 19:11-14).

5. The angels will be involved in the second coming. They will accompany the Lord at his

return (Matt. 25:31), just as they were present at other significant events of Jesus' life, including his birth, temptation, and resurrection. They will separate the wheat from the weeds (Matt. 13:39-42). Christ will send forth his angels with a loud trumpet call to gather the elect from the four winds (Matt. 24:31; see also 1 Thess. 4:16-17).

What of the concept of guardian angels, the idea that all persons or at least all believers have a specific angel assigned to care for them and to accompany them in this life? This idea was part of popular Jewish belief at the time of Christ and has carried over in some Christian thinking.² Two biblical texts are cited as evidence of guardian angels. Upon calling a child and placing him in the midst of the disciples, Jesus said: "See that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 18:10). When the maid Rhoda told the others in the house that Peter was at the gate, they said, "It is his angel!" (Acts 12:15). These verses seem to indicate that angels are specially assigned to individuals.

We should note, however, that elsewhere in the Bible we read that not just one, but many angels accompanied, protected, and provided for believers. Elisha was surrounded by many horses and chariots of fire (2 Kings 6:17); Jesus could have called twelve legions of angels; several angels carried Lazarus's soul to Abraham's bosom (Luke 16:22). Moreover, Jesus' reference to the angels of the little ones specifies that they are in the presence of the Father. This suggests that they are angels who worship in God's presence rather than angels who care for individual humans in this world. The reply to Rhoda reflects the Jewish tradition that guardian angels resemble the persons to whom they are assigned. But a report indicating that certain disciples believed in guardian angels does not invest the belief with authority. Some Christians still had mistaken or confused beliefs on various subjects. In the absence of definite di-

2. A. J. Maclean, "Angels," in *Dictionary of the Apostolic Church*, ed. James Hastings (New York: Scribner, 1916), vol. 1, p. 60.

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dactic material, we must conclude that there is insufficient evidence for the concept of guardian angels.

Evil Angels

The Origin of Demons

The Bible has little to say about how evil angels came to have their current moral character, and even less about their origin. We may derive something about their origin by noting what is said about their moral character. There are two closely related passages which inform us regarding the fall of the evil angels. Second Peter 2:4 says that "God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of nether gloom to be kept until the judgment." Jude 6 says that "the angels that did not keep their own position but left their proper dwelling have been kept by him in eternal chains in the nether gloom until the judgment of the great day." The beings described in these two verses are clearly identified as angels who sinned and came under judgment. They must, then, like all the other angels, be created beings.

A problem presented by these verses is the fact that the evil angels are said to have been cast into nether gloom to be kept until the judgment. This has led some to theorize that there are two classes of fallen angels, those who are imprisoned, and those who are free to carry on their evil in the world. Another possibility is that these two verses describe the condition of all demons. That the latter is correct is suggested by the remainder of 2 Peter 2. In verse 9 Peter says that "the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trial, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment." This language is almost identical to that used in verse 4. Note that the remainder of the chapter (vv. 10–22) is a description of the continued sinful activity of these people who are being kept under punishment. We conclude that, likewise, though cast into nether gloom, the fallen angels have sufficient freedom to carry on their evil activities.

Demons, then, are angels created by God and thus were originally good; but they sinned

and thus became evil. Just when this rebellion took place we do not know, but it must have occurred between the time when God completed the creation and pronounced it all "very good," and the temptation and fall of humankind (Gen. 3).

The Chief of the Demons

The devil is the name given in Scripture to the chief of these fallen angels. He is also known as Satan, which means to be or act as an adversary.³ The most common Greek word for him is *diabolos* (devil, adversary, accuser). Several other terms are used of him less frequently: tempter (Matt. 4:3; 1 Thess. 3:5), Beelzebub (Matt. 12:24, 27; Mark 3:22; Luke 11:15, 19), enemy (Matt. 13:39), evil one (Matt. 13:19, 38; 1 John 2:13; 3:12; 5:18), Belial (2 Cor. 6:15), adversary (1 Peter 5:8), deceiver (Rev. 12:9), great dragon (Rev. 12:3), father of lies (John 8:44), murderer (John 8:44), and sinner (1 John 3:8). All of these convey something of the character and activity of the devil.

The devil is, as his name indicates, engaged in opposing God and the work of Christ. He does this especially by tempting humans. This is shown in the temptation of Jesus, the parable of the weeds (Matt. 13:24–30), and the sin of Judas (Luke 22:3). (See also Acts 5:3; 1 Cor. 7:5; 2 Cor. 2:11; Eph. 6:11; 2 Tim. 2:26.)

One of the primary means used by Satan is deception. Paul tells us that Satan disguises himself as an angel of light, and that his servants disguise themselves as servants of righteousness (2 Cor. 11:14–15). His use of deception is also mentioned in Revelation 12:9 and 20:8, 10. He has "blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God" (2 Cor. 4:4). He opposes and hinders (1 Thess. 2:18) Christians in their service, even using physical ailments to that end (so, probably, 2 Cor. 12:7).

For all of his power, Satan is limited. As we have already mentioned, he could do nothing

3. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 966.

to Job that God did not expressly permit. He can be successfully resisted, and will flee (James 4:7; see also Eph. 4:27). He can be put to flight, however, not by our strength, but only by the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:26; 1 Cor. 3:16).

Activities of Demons

As Satan's subjects, demons carry out his work in the world. It may therefore be assumed that they engage in all the forms of temptation and deception which he employs. They inflict disease: dumbness (Mark 9:17), deafness and dumbness (Mark 9:25), blindness and deafness (Matt. 12:22), convulsions (Mark 1:26; 9:20; Luke 9:39), paralysis or lameness (Acts 8:7). And most particularly, they oppose the spiritual progress of God's people (Eph. 6:12).

Demon Possession

Incidents of demon possession are given prominent attention in the biblical accounts. The technical expression is to "have a demon" or to "be demonized." Sometimes we find expressions like "unclean spirits" (Acts 8:7) or "evil spirits" (Acts 19:12).

The manifestations of demon possession are varied. We have already noted some of the physical ailments demons inflict. The person possessed may have unusual strength (Mark 5:2-4), may act in bizarre ways such as wearing no clothes and living among the tombs rather than in a house (Luke 8:27), or may engage in self-destructive behavior (Matt. 17:15; Mark 5:5). There evidently are degrees of affliction, since Jesus spoke of the evil spirit who "goes and brings with him seven other spirits more evil than himself" (Matt. 12:45). In all of these cases is the common element that the person involved is being destroyed, whether that be physically, emotionally, or spiritually. It appears that the demons were able to speak, presumably using the vocal equipment of the person possessed (e.g., Matt. 8:29, 31). It appears that demons can also inhabit animals (see the parallel accounts of the incident involving the swine—Matt. 8; Mark 5; Luke 8).

It is noteworthy that the biblical writers did not attribute all illness to demon possession.

Luke reports that Jesus distinguished between two types of healing: "Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow" (Luke 13:32). Nor was epilepsy mistaken for demon possession. We read in Matthew 17:15-18 that Jesus cast out a demon from an epileptic, but in Matthew 4:24 epileptics (as well as paralytics) are distinguished from demoniacs. In the case of numerous healings no mention is made of demons. In Matthew, for example, no mention is made of demon exorcism in the case of the healing of the centurion's servant (8:5-13), or of the woman with the hemorrhage of twelve years' duration (9:19-20).

Jesus cast out demons without pronouncing an elaborate formula. He merely commanded them to come out (Mark 1:25; 9:25). He attributed the exorcism to the Spirit of God (Matt. 12:28) or the finger of God (Luke 11:20). Jesus invested his disciples with the authority to cast out demons (Matt. 10:1). But the disciples needed faith if they were to be successful (Matt. 17:19-20). Prayer is also mentioned as a requirement for exorcism (Mark 9:29). Sometimes faith on the part of a third party was a requirement (Mark 9:23-24; cf. 6:5-6). At times demons were expelled from someone who had expressed no wish to be healed.

There is no reason to believe that demon possessions are restricted to the past. There are cases, especially but not exclusively in less developed cultures, which seem to be explainable only on this basis. The Christian should be alert to the possibility of demon possession occurring today. At the same time, one should not too quickly attribute aberrant physical and psychological phenomena to demon possession. Even as Jesus and the biblical writers distinguished cases of possession from other ailments, so should we, testing the spirits.

In recent years there has been a flare-up of interest in the phenomenon of demon possession. As a consequence, some Christians may come to regard this as the primary manifestation of the forces of evil. In actuality, Satan, the great deceiver, may be encouraging interest in demon possession in hopes that Christians will become careless about other more subtle forms of influence by the powers of evil.

The Work of God

The Role of the Doctrine of Angels

Obscure and strange though this belief in good and evil angels may seem to some, it has a significant role to play in the life of the Christian. There are several benefits to be drawn from our study of this topic:

1. It is a comfort and an encouragement to us to realize that there are powerful and numerous unseen agents available to help us in our need. The eye of faith will do for the believer what the vision of the angels did for Elisha's servant (2 Kings 6:17).

2. The angels' praise and service of God give us an example of how we are to conduct ourselves now, and what our activity will be in the life beyond in God's presence.

3. It sobers us to realize that even angels who were close to God succumbed to temptation

and fell. This is a reminder to us to "take heed lest [we] fall" (1 Cor. 10:12).

4. Knowledge about evil angels serves to alert us to the danger and the subtlety of temptation which can be expected to come from satanic forces, and gives insight into some of the devil's ways of working. We need to be on guard against two extremes. We should not take him too lightly, lest we disregard the dangers. Nor, on the other hand, should we have too strong an interest in him.

5. We receive confidence from the realization that powerful though Satan and his accomplices are, there are definite limits upon what they can do. We can, therefore, by the grace of God, resist him successfully. And we can know that his ultimate defeat is certain, for Satan and his angels will be cast into the lake of fire and brimstone forever (Matt. 25:41; Rev. 20:10).