

Westminster Larger Catechism

Question 14

Halifax, 21 October 2007

Q. 14 How doth God execute His decrees?

A. God executeth His decrees in the works of creation and providence; according to His infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will.

Introduction:

When we considered Q. 12 a couple of weeks ago,

- I pointed out that God's decree is His plan. Before He created the world, He planned out everything that He would do.
 - If you are going to build a house, the first action is to draw up the plans—
 - that is the decree—
 - you decide what the house will look like and how it will be built.
 - Then, after the plan is done, you begin to put the plan into action—
 - that is the execution of the decree.

God executes His decrees in the works of creation and providence.

- **Creation** is that act of God in which He made all things...
 - This was all done in six days...then God rested or ceased from the work of creation.
 - When Genesis 2:2-3 says:
 - **“And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done.”**
 - It means that He stopped creating new things.
 - He was finished with that aspect of His plan.
 - We should not look at the birth of a child or the germination of a seed as an act of creation.
 - It is not...
 - It is rather an act of providence.
 - God is finished creating.
- **Providence** is what God does with those things that He has created.

- Providence goes on without cessation as God does what He has planned with all that He has made.
 - As we have seen in previous sermons, this involves everything that happens—from the greatest to the least of things,
 - from the motion of the planets to the seemingly random gyrations of an atom—
 - from the epoch-making acts of kings to the number of hairs on your head...
 - As it says in Ephesians 1:11,
 - **“He works all things after the counsel of His own will.”**

The Scripture teaches, as the Catechism here states, that God’s works of creation and providence are executed according to infallible foreknowledge...

- Infallible foreknowledge!
 - That means that God knows exactly what the future holds when He makes His plans...
 - The counsel of His will is never frustrated.
- That is quite different from the way we execute our own plans—
 - we have to make adjustments to our plans as we go along because there are many unforeseen things that come along that affect our plans.
 - Just ask the Alexanders as they work on their renovations.
 - If the plumber does not show up on schedule, you may have to change everything that follows...
 - or if the shingles you were going to use are no longer available, it can change the cost of the project...
 - But God’s plans—His decree—is different because what He plans is exactly the same as what happens!
 - Everything goes along precisely as He planned it.
 - God’s plumbers always come at the time appointed, and whatever materials He has purposed to use are always available.
 - **Acts 15:18: “Known to God from eternity are all His works.”**

The Catechism also tells us that God’s plan is “free and immutable.”

- “Free” means that He does whatever **He** wants—nobody and nothing can limit Him.
 - There is no one who comes along to alter or make even the slightest adjustment to what He has planned.

- Nor does the LORD receive counsel or new information from any creature that leads Him to make changes in what He does.
- “Immutable” means that He doesn’t make changes to His plan as He goes along.
 - Once again, Acts 15:18 speaks to this:
 - “Known to God from eternity are all His works.”

Well then, having looked at what the Catechism presents to us as the teaching of scripture about the execution of God’s decrees,

- let us now turn to a scripture passage that speaks of the execution of God’s decrees:
 - Listen as I read to you from Psalm 33.
 - READ> Psalm 33

You can see that this Psalm speaks about God’s decrees and the execution of His decrees.

- It begins with a call to praise God for the work that He does...
- Then it tells us about His works of creation and providence...
- And it concludes with a call to put our trust fully in Him as the One who has the final say about everything—the One whose will is done.

TRANS> That is an overview of the Psalm—

- And I want to begin our examination of this Psalm in the middle...
 - where the psalmist talks about God’s works of creation and providence...

I. Look at what this Psalm says about God’s work of creation and providence.

A. First, look at what it says about His work of creation in verse 6-9

1. In verse 6, it tells us that the heavens were made by His word.
 - a. This speaks of His word of decree by which He calls things that are not into existence.
 - The kings of the earth like to speak things into being—
 - They issue a decree of war, and their nation is at war—
 - the generals make plans,
 - the armies march out,
 - What was not is called into being...
 - But no king of earth is able to call the stars and the galaxies into being by the simple command of his mouth!

- Only our God, Jehovah, is able to do that! And that is just what He did.
- b. Verse 6 tells us that the heavens and everything in them came to be in this way...
 - It was a big bang when God's word called them into being.
 - They exist and have their being only because God called them be.
 - Men have tried to account for their own existence apart from God, but every attempt fails...
 - they cannot explain how it all originated.
2. In v. 7, it shows us not only that things exist because God called them to be, but that they are *as they are* because of His will.
 - a. He is the one who appointed the boundaries of the seas...
 - **Psalm 33:7: He gathers the waters of the sea together as a heap; He lays up the deep in storehouses.**
 - b. This is but one example to show us that things are as they are because of God's decree...
 - He is the reason that sugar tastes like sugar and salt tastes like salt.
 - He is the reason that there is male and female, oak trees and maple trees, rocks and oceans.
 - He is the reason that hippos have big mouths and that giraffes have long necks.
 3. The conclusion is that we ought to stand in awe before Him who has such awesome power!
 - a. Man is uneasy with a God like this and tries desperately to suppress the truth about Him.
 - Who can handle such awesome power?
 - Who can confront it?
 - Who would dare to challenge it?
 - If a man says, "to hell with you"
 - nothing happens,
 - but if God says, it is done.
 - b. We should indeed fear Him as Peter feared Jesus when he first saw his power...

- He fell before him and said, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man.”
 - Peter knew that here was a power he could not resist.
- But we should not fear Him so as to run away from Him!
 - It is folly to run from a God of such power and might who spoke the world into existence!
 - We should rather worship Him with reverence and godly fear.
 - But more about that later...

TRANS> So in the first place, this Psalm speaks about the execution of His work of creation...

B. Secondly, it speaks about the execution of His work of providence.

1. First, it contrasts God’s plans with the nations’ plans (v. 10-11)

- Psalm 33:10-11: The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; He makes the plans of the peoples of no effect. The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of His heart to all generations.
- a. The nations have all sorts of plans, but the only ones that get done are the ones that are in accord with the Lord’s plans.
 - 1) You think about it—what nation is there that does not want to prosper forever?
 - Some of them become so powerful that you wonder how they could ever be stopped.
 - But in every case, they are stopped...
 - Not one endures forever.
 - God brings their glowing plans that they lay with such hubris to nothing.

2) Yet, look at God’s plans...

- a) He has told us what many of His plans were—way in advance—
 - For example, in Gen. 12, He told Abraham that all the families of the earth would be blessed in his seed...
 - And you see it happening today...
 - Who would have ever thought that this one family should bring forth a Son that would be the source of blessing to all nations!

- God's plans stand!
 - And it was not that all the religions were claiming that their gods were saying this—
 - They all saw their gods as mere local deities at that time.
 - It was only Jehovah that gave such grand and sweeping promises.

- b) Compare God's plans to those of the nations—
 - Remember Daniel?
 - Nebuchadnezzar was building a world empire—it was to dominate forever as far as Nebuchadnezzar was concerned—
 - but God told him His plan—
 - He told him that Persia would rise, then Greece, then Rome.
 - This was His plan—
 - The plan of each of these nations was that they would continue forever,
 - but those plans all came to nothing because God had other plans.

- b. This is why a blessing is pronounced on the nation God chooses for his own inheritance (v. 12)
 - The nation whose God is the LORD is different from all the other nations...
 - If you are God's inheritance, you are blessed because no plans against you will prevail!
 - Do you see those who wanted to crucify Christ?
 - They have all perished, but He remains.
 - But note well—He remains even though He was crucified!
 - Brothers and sisters, our God has control of all the wealth, all the governors, all the weather activity, all the health, all the military powers—
 - Absolutely everything in His hands!
 - Every power is tuned and turned for the blessing of His people.
 - Look at Isa 43:3-5, 14
 - v. 3-5 For I *am* the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior; I gave Egypt for your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in your place. Since you were precious in My sight, you have been honored,

and I have loved you; therefore I will give men for you, and people for your life. Fear not, for I *am* with you; I will bring your descendants from the east, and gather you from the west;

- v. 14 Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: “For your sake I will send to Babylon, and bring them all down as fugitives—the Chaldeans, who rejoice in their ships.”

- What abundant consolation there is for us in this!

2. But the Psalm goes on to show us that His plan extends even to the very heart of individuals...

a. v. 13—He looks from heaven and sees them...

- God’s looking upon the inhabitants of the earth is His eternal looking across all the ages to see the sons of men in all their generations.
 - He is the planner from eternity.
 - He is not bound up in waiting with us to see what will happen next and then making His response...
 - For Him, it has all been foreseen!
- For Him there is a comprehensive understanding as opposed to a snapshot understanding.
 - He sees each person in his connection with eternity.
 - He understands what each one’s place is and how that place will play out in the eternal scheme.
 - He sees them in the light of the day of judgement.
 - So, for example,
 - when we see a dreadful persecutor, God sees him too,
 - but God sees him from the perspective of how his persecutions will bring salvation, grace, and eternal reward to all His people—
 - He understands...
 - He sees how the persecutor will be judged on the last day before all His creatures,
 - or how the persecutor will be saved in so many years and how in the day of judgement he will give glory to God’s great mercy!

b. He fashions each person’s heart individually—each one is just what He decreed.

- Each one is formed by Him to fit into His eternal glorious plan.
 - Solomon shows that this is true even of kings:
 - Pr 21:1: The king's heart *is* in the hand of the LORD, *like* the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes.
 - This teaches us a lot about how we should respond to the wrongs that others do to us.
 - If God has fashioned their hearts, then all their actions against us are God's judgements and discipline,
 - and their actions, for us, are His mercies for which we should give thanks.
 - In other words, we need to look at the actions of others from two perspectives:
 - as something that man does to us...
 - and as something that God does to us.
 - David shows this understanding in his response to Shimei.
 - 2 Sam 16:9-12: Then Abishai the son of Zeruiah said to the king, "Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Please, let me go over and take off his head!" But the king said, "What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah? So let him curse, because the LORD has said to him, 'Curse David.' Who then shall say, 'Why have you done so?' " And David said to Abishai and all his servants, "See how my son who came from my own body seeks my life. How much more now *may this* Benjamite? Let him alone, and let him curse; for so the LORD has ordered him. It may be that the LORD will look on my affliction, and that the LORD will repay me with good for his cursing this day."
 - There is to be a response toward God and a response to man.
 - Take the 9-11 attack—
 - From God, it is a judgement—He sent it and we need to be humbled and to repent...
 - But from man, it is an injustice and retribution is warranted.
3. And thirdly, we are told that God is the one that determines all the outcomes...
- a. The examples of war and famine are used...
 - We are reminded that our security is not in the instruments of war.
 - God is the one who determines whether those instruments succeed or fail.

- And whether in famine we live or die.
- Psalm 33:16-17 says:
 - No king is saved by the multitude of an army; a mighty man is not delivered by great strength. A horse is a vain hope for safety; neither shall it deliver any by its great strength.
- b. In other words, the outcome as well as the process is in His hands, and it is always what He decreed that happens.
 - Now of course it is true that the big, strong army is often the one that wins.
 - God ordinarily carries out His decree through means, and raises strong armies to protect the nation He wishes to protect.
 - But you are never to size up the army to determine what God wants you to do.
 - Even if you are the only Christian at work, or the only one that believes some particular aspect of God's word—
 - It doesn't mean that you might as well say nothing.
 - If God desires, He can use your one small voice to do great things in the hearts of many.
 - It also means that no one can harm you unless it is God's plan—
 - It doesn't matter how big their army is.
 - There is no need for you to be overwhelmed by the masses.
 - God's word will always prevail in the end.
 - Take something like corporeal punishment—you know, the spanking of your children—
 - It can be a really hard thing if you have parents and friends and government all opposing you—
 - a huge army all saying you are wrong and coming at you.
 - But if you are following God's word, you are with the side that will prevail.
 - This is what has made Christians so bold to stand and practice what they believe through the ages.

TRANS> It is a marvellous thing to have a God like this!

- The world does not run along at random, but it follows His purposes to a tee...
- How ought we to respond to His works?

II. This Psalm tells us that we ought to respond to His works with gratitude.

A. The Psalm opens with a summons to praise Him with joy...

- Psalm 33:1-3: Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous! For praise from the upright is beautiful. Praise the LORD with the harp; make melody to Him with an instrument of ten strings. Sing to Him a new song; play skillfully with a shout of joy.
- 1. It is a very appropriate thing to do—
 - it is beautiful and seemly to praise one who is so great as the God that this Psalm speaks about.
- 2. The instruments for us in the New Testament refers to giving our whole heart to the praising Him.

B. And we are to do this because of the way He does His work...(The way He executes His decree)

- Psalm 33:4: For the word of the LORD is right, and all His work is done in truth.
- 1. Because it is right and true—there is nothing about what He does that is ever inconsistent with who He is.
 - That means that God never does what is crooked or twisted or in any way false.
 - That means that God has never brought one thing into your life—
 - nor allowed one thing to happen to you—
 - that is not perfectly fitting, perfectly right, perfectly just!
 - That does **not** mean that no one has ever treated you unjustly, but it **does** mean that **God** has never treated you unjustly.
 - It was not unjust for God to crucify His Son, it was right and true—but it was wholly unjust for the Jewish and Roman leaders to do so.
 - If you were abused by a teacher or a parent or a husband,
 - the abuser was unjust—
 - but God was not unjust—all His ways are true and right.
 - This is that double perspective I spoke about before.
 - We respond to what man does, but we must see that everything that man does, God does also, but for very different reasons.
- 2. You see the reason that God always does what is right and true in verse 5—
 - it says that God *loves* righteousness and justice.

- In other words, He loves to be righteous and just in all His doings—this is what He delights in in all His operations and dealings with us...
- So what we have going on in this world,
 - as far as God’s action in it is concerned—
 - is righteousness and justice...
 - The earth is full of His goodness...
 - He has never done anything else but what is right and just.
 - The struggle for you is to learn accept what you receive from His hand as right and just.

TRANS> That is how the Psalm begins—

- Calling us to praise Him for all His works with gratitude...
 - and telling us how appropriate it is to do so.
- Now look at how it ends.

III. This Psalm ends telling us that we ought to respond to His works with trust.

A. It only makes sense that if he is in control of all that comes to pass,

- The best thing you can do is entrust yourself to Him!
1. Verse 20 is the profession of God’s people that they have done just that.
 - Psalm 33:20: Our soul waits for the LORD; He *is* our help and our shield.
 - If He doesn’t work things out at last who knows and controls both the end and the beginning...
 - Then we have no help and shield...we have no hope.
 2. Now someone might say,
 - “But what if you trust in Him and He has not decreed good concerning you?”
 - a. That cannot be...
 - He always makes good on His promises and His word...
 - And His word says that whoever believes will be saved.
 - If you trust in Him, it is because He has decreed good concerning you.
 - b. Verse 21 is the affirmation of confidence that all who trust will be found rejoicing in the end.

- v. 21: For our heart shall rejoice in Him, because we have trusted in His holy name.
 - This is our confidence as God's people.
- B. And so the Psalm concludes with the confident prayer that God's covenant mercy be upon us because we hope in Him...
1. The word mercy is the translation of *hesed*, which has reference to God's covenant mercy...
 - He will not fail anyone who hopes in Him according to His promise.
 - How real this was for the OT people—God worked out all things for their salvation in Christ just as promised...
 - They were not disappointed! Look at what God ended up doing to save them!
 - It is also true for us who look back on Christ and His finished work...
 - We will not come to judgement at last and be disappointed.
 - The God who works all things after the counsel of His will, will certainly bless us according to His covenant mercy—His *hesed*.
 - That covenant mercy is upon all of you who trust in Him.
2. In the end, there are only two ways to go when you consider God's decrees...
 - a. You either rejoice in them and give yourself up to Him to do what is good concerning you...
 - You put absolute confidence in Him as the One who works everything out according to His infallible foreknowledge...
 - And you rejoice that the one with all that power and authority is at work for you—to bless you and bring His salvation to you—which no one can stop...
 - And you take full confidence in His promises...
 - b. Or you chafe against His decree and wish that He did not have so much control...
 - You fight and struggle and try to pretend it is not so...
 - And at last you are crushed because it is so.