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John Gill's

A BODY OF DOCTRINAL DIVINITY

Book 2—Chapter 1

**OF THE INTERNAL ACTS AND
WORKS OF GOD;
AND OF HIS DECREES IN GENERAL.**

Having considered the nature, perfections, and persons in God, I shall now proceed to treat of his acts and operations; which are such as are worthy of a Being possessed of those perfections which have been described; and so must be worthy of our notice. God is "actus purus et simplicissimus"; he is all act; if one may so say; having nothing passive in him; and therefore must be active and operative; "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work", (John 5:17) in which words there is a term fixed, unto which God had worked, the then present time Christ spoke them; but none from whence he began to work: he had not only worked in providence till then, since the creation, and not only at the creation, but from all eternity; his active and eternal mind had always been at work; the thoughts of his heart were always employed in devising, forming, and settling things that should be done in time; and as the three divine Persons were taking infinite delight and pleasure in each other, so in the foreviews of what would be done by each of them in time, for the setting forth and manifestation of their glory.

The acts and works of God may be distinguished into internal and external. The "external" acts and works of God, are such as are done in time, visible to us, or known by us; as creation, providence, redemption, &c. His "internal" acts and works, which will be first considered, and are what were done in eternity, are commonly distinguished into personal and essential. Personal acts are such as are peculiar to each person, and distinguish the one from the other; and which have

been taken notice of already, in treating of the doctrine of the Trinity. "Essential" acts are such as are common to them all; for as they have the same nature and essence, they have the same understanding, will, and affections; and the same acts appropriate to these belong unto them, both with respect to themselves and the creatures they meant to make; that is to say, they mutually know one another, love each other, and will each other's happiness and glory; and have the same knowledge of, will concerning, and affection for creatures to be brought into being by them; and among these internal acts of the mind of God, are his purposes and decrees; and these are "purposed in himself", (Eph. 1:9) for what is true of one of his purposes, is true of all; and that there are such in God is certain; and which respect, not only the affairs of grace, but those of providence; even the whole earth, and all things in it, (Rom. 9:11; Eph. 1:11, 3:11; Isa. 14:24, 27) and which go by various names in scripture; sometimes they are called, "the thoughts of his heart"; these are the deep things of God, which lie in the inmost recesses of his mind; are only known by himself, and searched by his Spirit; as the thoughts of a man can only be known by the spirit of man within him (Ps. 33:11; Jer. 29:11; 1 Cor. 2:10, 11). Sometimes they are called the "counsels" of God, said to be "of old", ancient ones, even from eternity; and to be "faithfulness and truth"; faithfully and truly performed in time, (Isa. 25:1) and their being so called does not suppose any degree of ignorance, or want of knowledge in God, or as if he was at a loss what to resolve upon; and therefore consulted with himself, or others, what was fittest to be determined on; but because such resolutions, that are taken after mature deliberation and consultation, are generally formed in the wisest manner; and commonly most successful in the execution of them; therefore the purposes of God, being made with the highest wisdom, from thence they have the name of "counsels". They are sometimes called "decrees", and so we commonly call them; being the determinations of the mind of God; what he has fixed, settled, and resolved upon, (Dan. 4:17; Zeph. 2:2) and so the "determinate counsel" of God, (Acts 2:23) sometimes they are expressed by "preordination" and predestination; so Christ is said to be "foreordained" before the foundation of the world, (1 Peter 1:20) and men are said to be "predestinated" to the adoption of children, and to an inheritance, (Eph. 1:5, 11) that is, afore appointed thereunto in the decrees of God; and often they are signified by his "will" and "pleasure"; by the "counsel of his will"; and by his "counsel" and "pleasure", (Rom. 9:19; Eph. 1:11; Isa. 46:10) they containing and expressing his mind and will; what it is his pleasure should be. Now concerning these may be observed,

1. First, The proof to be given of them, that there are decrees and purposes in God; not merely ideas of things future, but settled determinations concerning them; which may be evinced from the nature and perfections of God. God is a Spirit, uncreated, infinite, operative, and active: he is a pure act, as before observed; and must have been for ever active in himself; his eternal mind must always have been employed, and continually at work; as the mind of man is never without its thoughts, and the understanding has its acts, and the will its volitions; so God never was without the thoughts of his heart, the acts of his understanding, and the volitions of his will. The "Sovereignty" of God over all, and his "independency",

clearly show, that whatever is done in time, is according to his decrees in eternity; for if anything comes to pass without the will of God, or contrary to it, or what he has not commanded, that is decreed, (Lam. 3:37) how is he a sovereign Being, that does according to his will in heaven and in earth, and works all things after the counsel of his will? (Dan. 4:35; Eph. 1:11) and if anything is by chance and fortune, or the mere effect of second causes, and of the free will of men, independent of the will of God, and if he works under these, in subserviency to them, and takes his measures of operation from them, then he must be dependent on them; and how then can it be said with truth, that "of him, and through him, and to him, are all things?" (Rom. 11:36). The "immutability" of God requires eternal decrees in him, concerning everything that is in time; for if anything is done in time, that did not fall under his notice and will in eternity, this must be new to him, and produce a change in him; or if an after will in time arises in him, respecting anything he would have done, which he willed not before, this argues a change in him; whereas, in him there is "no variableness, nor shadow of turning". The knowledge of God, supposes and clearly proves and establishes the decrees of God; he is a "God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed", (1 Sam. 2:13) he has knowledge of all actions done in time; and such an exact knowledge of them, as if they were weighed by him, and before him; and this knowledge of them is not successive, as they are performed; "Known unto God are all his works from the beginning", or from eternity, (Acts 15:18) both what he would do himself, and what he wills to be done by others: and this knowledge is founded on his decrees; he knows that such and such things will be, because he has determined they shall be. Once more, the "wisdom" of God makes it necessary that there should be eternal purposes and decrees in him, concerning things future; he is the all-wise and only wise God, and in wisdom makes all his works; which cannot be supposed to be made without previous thoughts and determinations concerning them: what wise man undertakes a building, without first determining what it shall be, of what materials it shall be made, in what form and manner, as well as for what end? And can we imagine that the all-wise God, who builds all things, should go about them without preconcerted measures, and settled determinations concerning them; "Who is wonderful in counsel, and excellent in working?" (Isa. 28:29).

2. Secondly, The extent of the decrees and purposes of God, deserve notice and consideration: and they reach to all things that come to pass in the world, from the beginning to the end of it. The world, and all things in it, were created by and according to the will and pleasure of God (Rev. 4:11). The heavens, their creation, stability, duration, and passing away, and succeeded by new heavens, are by a decree that cannot pass (Ps. 148:6). The earth, in its different forms, before and after the flood, its continuance, and final destruction, with the day or time of it, are by the word or decree of God (2 Peter 3:5-7, 10). The sea, and the place the receptacle of it, and its boundary, the sand, which its waters cannot pass, are by a perpetual decree (Job 38:10, 11; Prov. 8:29; Jer. 5:21). The rain which is exhausted out of it, has its decree; and there is not a shower falls but by the will of God; whether it be given as a mercy, to make fruitful seasons, or whether it be withheld, or poured down in too great plenty, in a way of judgment; it is all according to the

word, will, and decree of God (Job 28:26; Amos 4:7, 8, 5:8). The peopling of the world; the distinction of nations; the rise, progress, and ruin of states, kingdoms, and empires, are all according to the decrees of God; even every petty state and kingdom, as well as the four grand monarchies; the destruction of the first of which, the Babylonian monarchy, as it was by the decree of the Watchers, and by the demand of the Holy Ones; that is, by the decree of the most High; so the origin of it, and its rise to all its glory and grandeur; and the same is true of all the rest (see Deut. 32:8; Dan. 2:38-44, 4:17, 20). Particularly, the people of Israel, a select and distinguished people from all others; their original from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; their servitude in a land not theirs, for four hundred years; their settlement in the land of Canaan; their government under judges and kings; and their several captivities, were all determined; as well as their last destruction, when the desolations determined, were poured upon the desolate; and so is their future conversion and restoration (Gen. 15:14; Ex. 15:17; Dan. 9:26, 27; Rom. 11:25, 26). The church of God, in its different states, under the legal dispensation; the time appointed of the Father, when it was under tutors and governors, (Gal. 4:1, 2) and under the gospel dispensation, the world to come, the time of reformation, when all things became new; the former covenant waxed old, and vanished away, and the ordinances of it, and new ones took place; and which continues to be the accepted time and day of salvation; all are by divine appointment. The persecutions and sufferings of the church of Christ under the ten Roman emperors, signified by ten days, (Rev. 2:10) and under Rome papal, for a time, and times, and half a time; even forty two months, or one thousand, two hundred and sixty days or years; the time of the church's being in the wilderness, and of the witnesses prophesying in sackcloth, and of the reign of antichrist, are all fixed by the decree of God; and when the time is up, the Angel will swear by the living God, that time shall be no longer; that is, antichristian time, (Rev. 10:6, 11:2, 3, 12:14, 13:5) as well as the glory of the church in the latter day; for which there is a set time; and which God will hasten, in his own time; when there will be great light and prosperity, numerous conversions, a great spread of the gospel, and an enlargement of the interest of Christ, and much purity and righteousness (Ps. 102:13; Isa. 60:1-22). In short, everything respecting all the individuals of the world, that have been, are, or shall be, all correspond with the decrees of God, and are according to them; mens' coming into the world, the time of it, and all circumstances attending it; all events and occurrences they meet with, throughout the whole time of life; their places of habitation, their stations, calling, and employment; their circumstances of riches and poverty, of health and sickness, adversity and prosperity; their time of going out of the world, with everything attending that; all are according to the determinate counsel and will of God, (Eccl. 3:1, 2, 7:14; Acts 17:26; Job 14:5) and particularly, all that relate to the people of God, as well their spiritual and eternal, as temporal concerns; their election of God, their redemption by Christ, their effectual calling, which is according to the purpose of God; the time, manner, and means of it; all their changes in life; their afflictions and distresses, deliverances, and salvations from temptation and trouble; yea, even the final state and condition of good men and bad men, is settled and determined: but this will be more particularly considered under the special decrees of God, respecting rational creatures. All that Christ was to be, do, and suffer for his people,

are what the hand and counsel of God before determined; his incarnation, the time of his coming into the world; all that he met with, from the hand of God, from men and devils, while in it; his sufferings and death, and all circumstances attending the same (Gal. 4:4; Acts 4:28, 2:23; Luke 22:22, 37). In a word, everything that comes to pass in this world, from the beginning to the end of it, is pre-ordained; everything, good and bad; good by his effective decrees; that is, such by which he determines what he will do himself, or shall be done by others; and evil things, by his permissive decrees, by which he suffers things to be done; and which he overrules for his own glory; yea, things contingent, which, with respect to second causes, may seem to be, or not be, as the free actions of men; such as the prophecies, founded on decrees, concerning the names of Josiah and Cyrus, and of actions being performed by them of their own free will, many hundreds of years before they were born; nay, even things of the least importance, as well as the greatest; the hairs of mens' heads are numbered; two sparrows, not worth more than a farthing, and yet fall not to the ground, without the knowledge, will, and purpose of God (Matthew 10:29, 30).

3. Thirdly, The properties of the purposes and decrees of God, may next be considered.

3a. As they are internal acts, they are immanent ones; they are in God, and remain and abide in him; and while they are so, they put nothing into actual being, they are concerned about, until they bring forth, or are brought forth into execution: then they pass upon their respective objects, terminate on them, and issue in actual operation; and then they are called "transient" acts; and till then they are secrets in God's breast, and are unknown to men.

3b. They are eternal; as God himself is eternal, so are they; for, as some divines express it, God's decrees are himself decreeing, and therefore if he is from everlasting to everlasting, they are so likewise; if the knowledge of God, respecting all his works, is from the beginning, or from eternity, which arises from his decrees, then they themselves must be from eternity; and if the particular decree of election was before the foundation of the world, as it was, (Eph. 1:4) the same must be true of all the decrees of God, which are all of a date; for no new will, nor new act of the will of God, arise in him in time.

3c. The decrees of God are most free; they are the free acts of his will, without any force or compulsion, and are not influenced by any motive from without himself; as "he will have mercy on whom he will have mercy", and exercises it freely, and on whom he pleases; so he freely decreed to have mercy as he pleased; as he hides the things of the gospel from the wise and prudent, and reveals them unto babes, as seems good in his sight; he freely determined so to do: indeed, having made those decrees, there is a necessity of the performance of them; but the making of them was quite free.

3d. They are most wise decrees; as God is a wise Being, and does all his works in wisdom, so his decrees are laid in the deepest wisdom; which, though unsearchable

by us, and may be unaccountable to us; yet there is, as the apostle expresses it, speaking of them, "a depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God in them" (Rom. 11:33).

3c. They are immutable and unalterable; they are the mountains of brass, out of which come forth the horses and chariots, the executioners of divine providence; signified by mountains, for their immoveableness, and by mountains of brass, for their greater stability and firmness (Zech. 6:1-8). The decrees of the Medes and Persians, when signed and sealed, were not to be changed or altered: but these are more unchangeable and unalterable than they were: we read of the immutability of the counsel of God, (Heb. 6:17) his purposes and decrees, which, like himself, are the same today, yesterday, and for ever; without any variableness, or shadow of turning.

3f. The decrees of God are always effectual; they cannot be frustrated or disannulled, or become of no effect; "For the Lord of hosts hath purposed, and who shall disannul it? and his hand is stretched out, and who shall turn it back?" (Isa. 14:27). The purposes of men are often frustrated, through want of foresight, not being able to foresee what may turn up, which may hinder the execution of their designs; but no unforeseen accident can arise to put any stop in the way of executing the decrees of God; since all things are at once in his eternal view, who sees the end from the beginning: men sometimes fail of bringing their resolutions into execution, for want of power: but God is omnipotent, and is able to do, and therefore does whatever he pleases; he is in one mind, and none can turn him; and what he desires, he does; his counsel stands, and he does all his pleasure; and the thoughts of his heart are to all generations. To say no more; the end of the decrees of God is his own glory; he has "made", that is, appointed "all things for himself", for the glorifying his perfections, (Prov. 16:4) there may be, and are, inferior ends, as the good of his creatures, &c. but his glory is the supreme end, and all others are subordinate to it.