Systematic Theology Study
Session 4
What does God do?

In the last three sessions we examined who God was and what He was like. We looked at His attributes of greatness (such as His nature as a spirit and His infinite qualities, to name a few) and then we examined His attributes of goodness (such as His truthfulness and His persistence, to name a few). In this session we will move forward and look at what God does. What are God's activities? How does He conduct Himself as we see Him working throughout Scripture? This will a look at those activities from a high altitude rather than ground level, for the most part. In this session we will examine God's plan, His originating work, and His continuing work.

I. God's plan

Q: When you hear the phrase "God's plan" or "God's will" what comes to your mind?

When theologians speak of God's plan they are asking where is history going and why? God's plan is He eternal decision ensuring that His will comes to pass. The following two verse contain the Old Testament words that describe God's plan or intention.

[Psalm 139:16]

[Isaiah 14:24-27]

In the New Testament God's plan is seen through the right time for something to happen and the plan is seen as a good steward of God's will. *(Have everyone turn to this passage)*

[Ephesians 1:7-10]

Q: What has God lavished on us? *(v.7 - His grace)*

Q: With all wisdom and insight God made what known to us? *(v.9 - the mystery of His will)*

In the New Testament when the word "mystery" is used, it means something that was once hidden has been brought to light and revealed. In this case (and most in the New Testament) the mystery pertains to Jesus, the Son of God, being revealed as the Messiah/Savior of mankind. Notice that in v.9 we are told that this mystery of Christ was revealed to us according to God's kind intention. The word administration means stewardship. So Paul is saying that God, out of His kind intentions to us, revealed the mystery of the gospel of Jesus to mankind at exactly the right time so that it would fulfill God's plan of finishing God's plan for mankind through Christ.

God has a perfect will. Things that are part of God's perfect will always happen just as God desires them to happen. Prophecies are examples of God's perfect will.

[Matthew 26:24] - *"just as it is written"* (The Old Testament prophecy for this event is found in Psalm 41:9)

[Luke 4:43-44]

Q: What was Jesus' purpose stated for traveling from town to town in this passage*? (v.43 - to preach the gospel of the kingdom)*

Since Jesus always did the Heavenly Father's will perfectly, Jesus is always a great source for determining the will of God. In the book of Matthew, Matthew often quotes Old Testament prophecies and then shows their fulfilment in Jesus. Jesus understood God's plan and realized Himself as the chosen instrument in seeing it completed.

There are several things Scripture teaches us about God's perfect will.

1. God's perfect plan is eternal.

[I Peter 1:20-21]

The vast majority of Scriptures dealing with God's will or eternal plan involve Jesus Christ and His work on our behalf and the subsequent relationship God desires to have with us as a result of this plan. All of history before Christ was leading up to His coming into the world and all of history since Jesus' ascension looks back on His work for mankind. He is the central aspect of God's will.

2. God is free to make and carry out His plan. It was not dependent upon anyone else or anything else.

[Isaiah 40:11-14]

3. The ultimate goal of God's plan is God's glory.

[Revelation 4:11]

4. God can use all of creation for His glory.

[Psalms 119:90-91]

5. God's plan will happen.

[Isaiah 42:9]

6. God's plan is unchanging. Just as God is perfect in all of His ways and has infinite power to accomplish His will, there is never a reason for Him to change His plans or revise His will.

Q: Can you give an example of God's perfect will that has not happened yet? (*Christ's second coming and all the things surrounding it)*

God's perfect will also encompasses our character after coming to Christ.

[I Thessalonians 5:11-18]

Q: What does God's will encompass as described in this passage? *(Everything listed in vv.11-18)*

All these things are character traits of a Spirit-led believer. So while God's plan ensures God's will to be done in the grand scheme of things, it also deals with the personal qualities of a person's life. It is important to realize that both the "big" and "small" things are part of God's will. He is an amazing God.

Now there is a difference between what God wills and what God desires on some instances. There is a gap between the perfect will of God and His permissive will. God's perfect will is neat and tidy. We may not agree with it from our finite perspective or personal biases but it is the way things will happen. However, God's permissive will, is where things get messy. This is because God created man with free will, a free moral agent, and as such he can choose to obey or disobey God.

[I Timothy 2:1-4]

Q: According to that passage, what does God desire? *(v.4 - for all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth)*

Q: Will all men eventually be saved? *(no)*

[Revelation 20:15]

Q: Why will some people not be saved? *(The people who reject Jesus Christ will not be saved. As in the days of His ministry on earth, many will reject Him as God's Savior.)*

Q: What does this tell us about God? *(That though He desires all men to be saved, He does not force anyone to be saved. He has given man a freedom of will to choose whether to accept or reject His offer of grace.)*

[Ezekiel 18:23]

Q: What does this verse tell us God doesn't desire? *(the death of the wicked)*

Q: In this verse, what does God say He'd rather see happen? *(for the wicked to turn from their evil ways)*

The permissive will of God permits things to happen that are not part of His perfect will.

These are often called the "gray areas" of life as they deal with things which while not listed as sinful, in and of themselves, are not commended as virtuous in Scripture.

Q: Where does the permissive will of God originate? *(In the decisions of man which he exercises through the free will God gave him.)*

Q: Can you give some examples of things which would fall into the permissive will of God? *(polygamy, alcohol consumption, etc.)*

Yet, in God's infiniteness, He is able to use even man's free choices to accomplish His will. Not even sin thwarts God's eternal plan.

[Romans 1:22-28]

Q: What is the activity of God mentioned three times in this passage? *(vv. 24, 26, 28 - God gave them over... God allowed them the freedom to live in open opposition to His will despite the consequences to the sinner. It is not what God desired yet due to the freedom of the individual, they were free to sin and in sinning took upon themselves the consequences of their choices.)*

Q: Are there any questions about God's plan before we move forward?

After looking at God's plan, the logical place to look next at God's activity and works is His creation.

II. Creation

God's creation of the universe was important enough that God put it first in His revelation to us.

[Genesis 1:1]

God created the universe out of nothing. He did it without using any pre-existing material. It's amazing just how much truth is contained about the creation in just three verses. With just the truth contained in these verses you can counter much of the so-called knowledge of those who deny God as the Creator.

[Hebrews 1:10]

Q: What does this verse teach us about the creation? *(God laid the foundation of the earth and the heavens are the work of His hands)*

[Romans 4:17]

Q: What does God do according to this verse? *(He calls things into existence)*

[Genesis 1:31]

Q: What was the condition of the world after God created it? *(God said it was very good)*

This dispels a philosophy called dualism that has been running rampant for several thousand years and is big in Eastern religions. Simply put, it says that all matter is evil while only spirit is good or pure. Thus, anything of this world is evil - including Jesus when He arrived. Only His spirit was pure and good. Of course, this is put to death by God pronouncing everything as 'very good' just after completing the creation of everything.

Q: How long did it take God to create the world? *(six days)*

Q: Based upon what we know from the Bible, why did God create the universe? *(He wanted to create man and man would need a place to live and come to know and love Him. The earth was the perfect environment for mankind.)*

Many people and even some well-intentioned Christians believe in what is called the "old earth" theory. They do not believe that God created the world in six literal 24 hour days but rather that this is a poetic statement and that the earth is actually billions of years old. In fact the vast majority of people who believe that the earth is billions of years old don't believe in God at all. Those who hold to this belief typically believe the universe was created through a Big Bang and life evolved over billions of years. However, there is no reason in the grammar or structure of this passage to assume that a day means anything other than a literal day. We know that God can do anything so the fact that He took six days to create the universe instead of doing it in one, should not shock anyone. The belief that Genesis reveals to us that God created the world in six days is called the "young earth" model. It holds that the earth is only a few thousand years old.

The problem is with science on this issue. There are two types of science: science that is driven by a desire to learn the truth about the world and then there is science that is driven by a certain agenda and does not care about the truth, only that the outcomes match it's agenda. As more and more real science is being conducted, the more and more the Bible's account of the creation stands true. I could spend months discussing this topic. If you are interested, go to a group called "Answers in Genesis". They are well-educated Christians with all the academic credentials to show how the Bible got it right and is waiting for modern science to catch up. They detail how they use the exact same evidence as other researchers but since they are not pigeon-holed into the "old earth" model of creation, they have the freedom to explore and give solutions that represent the truth. They also expose fraud in the scientific community that leads some to believe in the "old earth" theories.

There are several implications to keep in mind when considering the creation and how it can impact our faith.

<u>1. Everything derived its existence from God.</u>

[Acts 17:24-28]

2. The original act of God's creation is unique. It is completely different from human creations which create out of pre-existing materials. Think of the miracle of Jesus feeding the 5,000 men (and 10,000-15,000 women and children. As Jesus broke each of the five original loaves, more bread came into being. He created matter in front of the disciples and multitudes and in the end the was more left over than there was originally. The Son of God created food ex nihlo.

3. Nothing was made intrinsically evil. Everything came from God who is good and was created good.

4. The doctrine of creation forces responsibility upon man. He cannot justify or blame his evil behavior on an evil or flawed creation.

5. It's also important to know that because God made everything and it was all made good as God judged it, everything has value. Everything pleased Him or He would not have made it.

6. Ultimately science comes around to revealing God as the Creator and proves the Bible true. Copernicus (somewhere around 1500 A.D.) probably led the charge here when he stated that the earth orbited the sun rather than the sun orbiting the earth.

7. Nothing other than God is self-sufficient. Nothing other than God is eternal. God's creation will come to an end. God will bring it to an end.

Q: Do you have any questions concerning creation?

III. Providence: God's continuing activity

Providence is a word we often hear but rarely know exactly what it means. Technically, providence is God's continuing relationship to His creation. There are two aspects of providence: preservation of creation and governing creation.

1. Preservation is God's maintaining creation's existence.

[Nehemiah 9:6]

[Colossians 1:16-17]

[Hebrews 1:2-3]

Q: What are some of the elements of creation that God has preserved? *(people, the nation of Israel, all things living, etc)*

Q: Why do you think God has ensured that the nation of Israel has been preserved? *(His purpose in Israel was to bring the Messiah into the world through Israel. He also wants to keep His promise to Israel, the children of God, to bring them to Himself at the end of history.)*

God preserved the nation of Israel through Joseph. When the ancient world was stricken with a seven year long famine, God orchestrated Joseph to be sold into slavery to an Egyptian and within 13 years, rise to be second only to Pharaoh. He interpreted the dream of Pharaoh about the famine and its duration and he told Pharaoh what to do in preparation for it. In the end, Joseph's family came to Egypt to buy grain to survive and in the end Joseph, under Pharaoh's direction, moved his entire family to some of the best land in Egypt to settle and have security during the famine.

God also preserved the Israelites after their slavery in Egypt through the Exodus and the conquest of the Promised Land.

God is still active and He is still preserving man today.

[Matthew 6:25-34]

Q: What does God supply for us? *(the basics of life - food, shelter, clothing)*

[I Peter 4: 12-14]

Q: Does God always spare believers from trouble? *(no, He does not)*

[Isaiah 43:1-5]

Q: When we are in the midst of trouble, what does God do for us? *(He promises to be with us through the trouble and give us what we need)*

God does not spare us from trouble but He does supply us with what we need to be preserved through the trouble.

[I Peter 1:3-7]

Q: Where is the believer's inheritance? *(v.4 - in heaven)*

Q: What are believers protected from in this passage? *(v.5 - not specified but since Peter is speaking of salvation, this salvation is a salvation from God's wrath and hell. We are protected from God's wrath upon sinners and saved to an eternity with Him. We will be preserved forever with Him in heaven.)*

[Philippians 4:19]

Q: What is one thing God has given you recently that was specifically for your preservation in some way? What is one thing from God's riches that He has blessed you with?

The ultimate provision for us as humans is Jesus Christ. He is the provision for us to be forgiven from our sins and to enjoy Him forever. He is also the One in which we have the

provisions we need for a life of godliness. Because of this we can have a certain confidence in the preserving work of the Lord on our behalf. Think about these following verses and what emotions they bring forth in you.

[Psalm 91]

[Matthew 10:28]

[Romans 8:35-39]

Q: After hearing the truth of these verses, what thoughts and emotions do these evoke from you?

2. Governance is God's activity that God's creation fulfills God's plan for it.

The governance activity of God is usually seen in the unfolding of human history. This governance is shown in God's sovereignty over His creation. As such, it points to His royal and kingly nature as the One who is over all. In modern America, we tend to forget just what a king truly is and the power they wield. A king, if put into American system of government, would be the President, both houses of Congress, and the Supreme Court - all in one person. When we speak of the government of heaven it is called a Kingdom or the Kingdom of God because God rules it fully and justly.

[Psalm 135:5-7]

Q: What do we see God ruling over in this passage? *(Nature)*

In Mark 4:37-41 Jesus was sleeping in a boat when a storm arose and threatened the life of the disciples. Jesus awoke and rebuked the wind and waves and the weather and sea turned calm at once. This is just another example of God's mastery over His creation. This includes animals and plants as well as the weather.

In the story of Jonah, at the end, Jonah went outside the city and sat down waiting to see if God would destroy Nineveh. God directed a plant to grow over Jonah, a sign of mercy, so that he would have shade during his wait. God caused a plant to spring up over night in the desert large enough to provide enough shade for a grown man. Then the next day the Lord directed a worm to come and eat the plant. God was over both instances. God used them to teach Jonah a lesson that his values were misplaced in that he had compassion over a plant he did no work to cultivate yet he lacked compassion on the entire city of Nineveh.

God also directs human history.

[Daniel 2:16-23]

As we saw in the Acts 17 sermon of Paul's on Mars Hill, God is the One who sets up the boundaries of nations and He also sets the duration of all kingdoms and nations on earth. If God

has the hairs on your head numbered and a bird cannot fall without His notice, He certainly ordains the rise and fall of nations and their leaders.

[Romans 13:1-2]

God is also over the circumstances of individuals. Hannah was barren and prayed for a child to relieve her stigma and grief and the Lord heard her and gave her a son, Samuel. Here's part of her prayer of thanksgiving after Samuel was born.

[I Samuel 2:6-7]

What we need to remember is that the circumstances which God's directs are on our behalf, for our best and for bringing glory to God. The perspective to keep when undergoing the difficult circumstances is to remember God is working things out according to His eternal design and we are honored to be cooperating with Him in His plan. This means that in the end we can have the assurance of having done God's will. There is no higher accomplishment for man than to do God's will.

God can even use the sin of man to accomplish His will. The most striking picture of this comes when sinful man put sinless Jesus on trial and condemned Him to be crucified.

[Acts 2:22-24]

So now, let's start putting some pieces together.

Q: Describe God's love, as we examined it in the last session? *(self-sacrificing, looking out for the other's best, selfless, giving, determined, persevering, etc.)*

Q: How often does God act out of love? *(Always)*

Q: So when we hit a bad circumstance in life, as a result of our poor or sinful decision or for no discernable reason at all, what can we know about God? *(That He still loves us despite what we experience. In the end this will be seen as loving, if God chooses to reveal it to us in this lifetime. Think of Job, all he underwent was due to God's love for him yet he didn't see any answers until after he left this life. The truth is that if we could see everything that happens to us from God's perspective and could then make the choice as to what circumstances we needed to face, we would choose what God chose for us.)*

So now we need to examine the subject of sin and God's providence or His continuing work in history. How does God handle sin when it comes to His plan? In Scripture we see God handle sin in four different ways. Note that none of these absolves the sinner of guilt or God's justice. This is just how we see Him act and we can know that in each instance that God acts the way He does due to His nature and His plan.

1) In this following verse, Abraham lied to a local king. He told him that Sarah was his sister,

not his wife, and the king saw her beauty and took her to be his wife. Abraham's fear led to this sin. **[Genesis 20:6]**

Q: What did God do about sin in this passage? *(He prevented it from happening. The king did not touch Sarah)*

2) **[Matthew 19:3-9]**

Q: What did God do about sin in this passage? *(He permitted it to happen. He didn't wish it to happen but allows it. We would not be free moral agents if we didn't have the capacity to sin and it be carried out.)*

3) As mentioned earlier, Joseph's brothers were jealous of him and sold him into slavery where he spent 13 year in Egypt, many of them as a prisoner. However, in time, he was elevated to the number 2 person in Egypt, only below Pharaoh. This is a portion of Joseph's speech to his brothers after their father died. **[Genesis 50:20]**

Q: What did God do concerning the sin of Joseph's brothers? *(He directed it. This is called the Law of Reversal. God is able to take something bad and use it for the benefit of all parties involved. God can direct the effects of the sin of one person to backfire on them so that the effects can actually further God's will. Proverbs 28:10 - "He who leads the upright astray in an evil way will himself fall into his own pit, but the blameless will inherit good.")*

4) [**Job 1:12]**

Q: What did God do concerning sin in this verse? *(He limited it. He imposed limits beyond which He would not allow sin to go.)*

Q: Why do you think God does not just prohibit sin every time? *(It would violate the free will He gave to man. Man would not be free to love God or enjoy Him. Man would just do as God programmed him. There would be no real relationship with God possible as we would only respond affirmatively to God without any chance of disobedience or showing self-will. By the exercise of free will man shows himself (and others) what is truly in his heart.)*

It is key to remember that God governs His kingdom and His creation according to His nature, those attributes we studied in the previous three sessions. Who God is determines what God is choosing to do and how His will is to be accomplished. We don't have to understand it but we do need to maintain faith in Him as His works in our time in history unfold.

Q: Do you have any questions, comments, rebukes or rebuttals?