

# God's Sovereign Will

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## 1

This subject of the will of God is a perplexing one to many Christians. Who of us has not wondered at some time or another, "Why has God allowed this awful calamity to befall me?"; or, "Why does God permit so much evil and suffering in the world?" Unbelievers, of course, use these problems as an excuse for their unbelief. If there is a God, they say, especially a God of love, why is there so much violence and pain, why are there so many wars? These questions are familiar to us all.

The Word of God does not give us specific answers to these many questions. God has not revealed to us beforehand the details of our lives. He does not tell us whom or even whether we shall marry, the difficulties of life we will encounter, the sorrows and illnesses we will suffer, nor yet the joys and triumphs of the years, nor even whether we shall live to draw breath for another day. All these things remain in the secret counsels of the Most High. "The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29).

The Scriptures do, however, lay down certain principles for our guidance and consolation. They tell us, for example, that "all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:29). Maybe we do not understand how our present circumstances could possibly work for our good, God does not explain that to us. But walking by faith we trust Him to do for us and with us what is best. He knows what is best for us more than we could ever know ourselves and if that means tears of sorrow and pain then by faith we submit to His sovereign will. Our prayer is "Thy will be done". This calling of ours is expressed beautifully by the Psalmist: "Wait on the LORD: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the LORD" (Ps.27:14). There must come a point at which we have to confess with the apostle that God's ways are "past finding out" (Romans 11:33).

God has also told us in the Scriptures many things about His will. He has revealed to us truths about Himself which, while deep and profound, are able to comfort us and assure us that He is sovereign, when otherwise only doubts and questions would abound in our thoughts.

It is to these texts of Scripture that we will now turn.

**All-inclusive**

The first point we need to understand is that the will of God is determinative for everything that takes place in the history of the universe. That is a sweeping statement but it is one that is drawn from Scripture. "For of him, and through him, and to him, are *all things*: to whom be glory for ever. Amen" (Rom.11:36). Again in Ephesians 1:11 the same writer declares God to be the One who "worketh *all things* after the counsel of *his own will*: That we should be to the praise of his glory". His will is all-encompassing so that nothing in heaven or on earth happens by chance. Exactly what this means will become clearer, hopefully, as we go on.

## **Eternal**

In that last text we see that related to the truth of God's will is the doctrine of His eternal counsel or decrees. God works to a purpose - an *eternal* purpose. His will is not like ours, formed by events or with the passage of time. His will is eternal. It was formed in past ages before the world was created. This is seen most clearly in the doctrine of election whereby before any human being had performed any work of good or evil, (Cf. Rom. 9:11), even before time itself, God chose a people to salvation: "According as he hath chosen us in him *before the foundation of the world*, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, *according to the good pleasure of his will*" (Eph. 1:4,5). Or again, "We have obtained an inheritance, being *predestinated* according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after *the counsel of his own will*" (Eph. 1:11). This is "the eternal purpose" (Eph. 3:11).

Having decreed in eternity, God now sovereignly brings all of those things to pass, *working* them in time and space. Our own personal histories from the womb to the grave, the histories of nations and empires, of the great and mighty as well as of the weak and insignificant, even of the sparrow on the roadside, are all predetermined and are being outworked by God in the process of time. "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered" (Matt. 10:29-30). This is a staggering thought which our puny minds find well nigh impossible to grasp.

Even the afflictions that we endure, the pain and sickness, the "thorn in the flesh" and the many other sorrows of life all take their place in those "all things" of Ephesians 1:11. Our all-wise God sends them to us to work out His purposes, "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, *worketh* for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal" (II Cor. 4:17-18). And notice that afflictions do not work *against* us, as we tend to think, but *for* us, for our eternal good. Let us then learn to confess by faith with the psalmist, "I know, O LORD, that thy judgments are right, and that thou in faithfulness hast afflicted me" (Ps. 119:75). Our heavenly Father knows best!

## **Free**

It is important to remember too that in the determination of His will there has been no outside power exerting influence upon God. He is never under constraint but is sovereign and

absolutely independent of any other being. "Our God is in the heavens; he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased" (Ps. 115:3). Is it not significant that the Bible opens with the words "In the beginning, God"?

Two other passages emphasize well this independence, this solitariness of God. First there is Romans 11:34-36, part of which we have quoted already, "For who hath known the mind of the Lord? Or who hath been his counsellor? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen"

Secondly there are those profound words of Isaiah in chapter 40 of his prophecy: "Who hath directed the spirit of the LORD, or being his counsellor hath taught him? With whom took he counsel, and who instructed him, and taught him in the path of judgment, and taught him knowledge, and shewed to him the way of understanding? Behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance: behold, he taketh up the isles as a very little thing... All nations before him are as nothing; and they are counted to him less than nothing, and vanity. To whom, then, will ye liken God? Or what likeness will ye compare unto him?" (40:15-18).

These two passages leave us in no doubt that God was under no external pressure or obligation to decree anything at all. His will is supremely *free* and His decrees are simply according to His own good pleasure.

Take creation for example: "Thou hast created all things, and *for thy pleasure* they are and were created" (Rev. 4:11). Had He so pleased God could have continued alone for all eternity, but He willed otherwise. He willed to manifest His great glory to humble creatures and by the deep mysterious way of the cross to bring sinful men into an everlasting covenant of fellowship with Himself. Why He willed that is not for us to ask.

Election too is simply according to His good pleasure (Eph. 1:5). God was under no obligation to save anyone. Why He decreed that only some people should be saved and the rest left in their sin to suffer eternal punishment, again is not for us to ask. These are some of those "secret things" that belong to Him alone. His ways are past finding out.

## **Immutable**

God's will is also unchangeable. It remains ever the same, unchallenged and unchallengeable, unaltered and unalterable. Even the pagan king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon recognized this: "He doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?" (Daniel 4:35).

Never does God have a "change of mind" or a "new idea". All that He brings to pass is exactly what He has willed from eternity. "He is of one mind, and who can turn him? and what his soul desireth, even that he doeth" (Job 23:13).

Unlike the fallen creatures that we are, God is not fickle or unstable. His mind is fixed, His will is firm, a rock that cannot be moved. In all of us there is something of the character of Reuben, "unstable as water" (Gen. 49:4), but God is always dependable. Sometimes we have to change our plans because of unforeseen events. We are caught unawares by unexpected changes in our circumstances. God is never caught off guard because He is omniscient, knowing the end from the beginning.

Sometimes too we have to change our minds about a matter because we see that we have been wrong. If God was to change His mind and will it would have to be either for the better or for the worse, but either way would indicate imperfection on His part, which is unthinkable.

Moreover, who could possibly exert influence on the mind and will of the Almighty to persuade Him to change His mind? "I am God", He says, "and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure..." (Isaiah 46:9-11).

## **Effectual**

Notice what God says there: "*I will do all my pleasure*". Unlike our will God's will is always effectual. He does not have any unfulfilled hopes or wishes but "what his soul desireth, even that he doeth". When He wills the salvation of a sinner, that sinner's salvation is certain. Although God has not revealed to us the individual names of the elect we may be sure that no sinner will be lost whom God has willed to save.

Neither will God go back on His will to save. Nor is there any power in creation, not even the Devil himself, who can frustrate God's will and purpose to save His people. Christ builds His church and the gates of hell can not prevail against it.

God's will is never thwarted but whatever He has ordained most surely comes to pass and nothing comes to pass but what He has ordained. This is true even though sometimes it *appears* that His will is defeated and that He is overcome by the will of wicked men. Scripture challenges us with this question "For who hath resisted his will?" (Rom. 9:19). Or again, "Who is he that saith, and it cometh to pass, when the Lord commandeth it not?" (Lam. 3:37). With all the passion we can muster we have to answer both these questions, *No one!*

Augustine was right when he wrote, "Those things which seemingly thwart the Divine will are, nevertheless, agreeable to it, for, if God did not permit them, they could not be done, and whatever God permits, He permits freely and willingly. He does nothing, neither suffers anything to be done, against His own will". Let us by faith walk in the assurance of that truth.

## **Sovereign**

There is much in this world that *seems* to thwart the Divine will. The fall of man and the death of Christ are the two supreme examples of this from history. From the Scriptures we have already quoted it should be evident that even these could not have been outside of the will and decree of God, but perhaps a few more texts will help to press the point home.

Peter, standing up in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost, declared, "Him [Jesus], being delivered *by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God*, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain" (Acts 2:23). All that was done against the Lord on that day by Herod, Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles and the Jews was no less than what God's hand and counsel "*determined before to be done*" (Acts 4:27). Indeed, the Lamb of God was "slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8).

Even those things which one would think were totally opposed to the will and purposes

of God do in fact work *for* them. It is with great care that we tread upon this holy ground for while we must maintain that God is sovereign *over* the sinful thoughts and ways of men, He is not the author of sin: "There is no iniquity with the LORD our God" (II Chron. 19:7).

The Lord works *all things*, including the thoughts and actions of wicked men, after the counsel of His own will. By His governing providence He works even sin and death toward the accomplishment of the highest, noblest end - His own glory, through the salvation of the church in Christ Jesus His Son. There is something here that we can only stagger at in wonder and amazement.

Another look now at Deuteronomy 29:29 will help us to understand the relationship between God's sovereign will and our responsibility. It will also open up another important truth about God's will - its unity. "The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law".

## One

The will of God is one and undivided. God cannot will two opposing events at the same time for that would be to bring contradiction and conflict into His very nature. The text does speak, however, of "secret things" and "things which are revealed". This demands our closer attention because some students of the Bible, wrongly we believe, have introduced a tension between these 'hidden' and 'revealed' aspects of God's will.

The secret things are known to God alone, while the revealed things He makes known to men. In this particular instance in Deuteronomy the Lord is saying to His people that while there are many things in His counsel He has purposed to do which are hidden from them, one thing is clear: if they forsake His holy law then He will deal with them in righteous judgment. The people's concern, therefore, is to be these "revealed things". Their responsibility is to obey His commandments. The hidden things on the other hand, namely how the judgments which He would bring upon Israel would work for the salvation of the elect, are God's concern alone.

Whatever God's 'secret will' may be, His all-encompassing sovereignty does not remove from man any responsibility for his actions. When he sins he is held responsible and accountable before God for his disobedience. Man's sin stems from his own fallen nature which he acquired willingly at the fall (Gen. 3). He sins because he wants to sin.

God has revealed that it is His will for all men to obey Him. This is His command, a command which has not changed from the very moment it was given to Adam in the Garden of Eden. Only man has changed. God has not altered or withdrawn His original requirement just because man is no longer able to fulfil it. He still says to man, "Obey me; love me with all your heart, mind, soul and strength".

In the gospel God comes with the command to all men everywhere to repent and turn from their wicked ways in faith to Christ. But do these commands of God indicate a will, a sincere desire on His part for the salvation of all men, without exception? Of course God is pleased when a sinner repents and believes the gospel, He is always pleased when His creatures obey Him, but does He will the salvation of everyone to whom the gospel message comes?

It is at this point that we find an unsustainable, unbiblical tension being introduced into

the will of God. According to His revealed will, so it is said, God desires to save everyone who hears the gospel, while according to His secret will (i.e. in predestination) He wills to save only the elect. This is a widely held belief but, I am convinced, mistaken. Plainly both wills cannot be satisfied.

### **Decretive and Preceptive will**

While it is perfectly right to distinguish between the secret and revealed will of God, we may not take that distinction beyond what Scripture itself makes of it. Deuteronomy 29:29 tells us clearly what the two terms mean. God's secret will is the will of His decree, established in eternity; His revealed will is the will of His command, expressing our duty of obedience to God. Hence, some have used the terms 'decretive will' and 'preceptive will' in the place of 'secret' and 'revealed' because they are more meaningful. But the point to emphasize is that they refer to two aspects of the one will, not to two different wills.

God does not, indeed can not, will one thing with a secret will and something entirely different with a revealed will. His will is one and united, "He is of one mind".

The mistake is made when we try to make God's commands expressions of His hidden intention and decrees. It only lands us in all sorts of trouble. For example, if we try to make God's command to Pharaoh "Let my people go" an expression of His intention, His hidden purpose, then clearly that purpose was thwarted because Pharaoh did *not* let the people go. Yet we have already said that God's will and purpose can never be frustrated. His command to Pharaoh, therefore, indicated only what was Pharaoh's duty, i.e. to set the people free, and the pleasure which such obedience would bring to God. God's hidden intention in giving the command is only revealed by subsequent events: the hardening of Pharaoh's heart unto damnation and the continuation for a while of His people's captivity.

So to return now to the question of God's will in salvation: if His command to all who hear the gospel indicates a sincere intention and will to save them, then clearly that will is far more often than not resisted and defeated. Yet "who hath resisted His will?". Moreover, "what His soul desireth even that he doeth". His will is effectual; it is powerful to the accomplishment of its end. His word "shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it" (Isaiah 55:11).

So where did we go wrong? We went wrong when we assumed the command to indicate God's secret purpose.

If we want to know the will of God in salvation, then there is no secret about it. God has revealed His desire, will or intention (which ever word one uses, it amounts to the same thing) clearly in His Word. His will is to save those whom He has loved with an eternal love and chosen from before the foundation of the world, His elect. This will is a powerful, effectual will. It is unchangeable and cannot be resisted. God irresistibly saves His elect. (See again Eph. 1:4,5,11; 3:11; Rom. 9:18-24).

We should note in passing that when the gospel is preached it *always* accomplishes God's purpose, whether that purpose is salvation or otherwise. Paul wrote, "We are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved *and* in them that perish: To the one we are the savour of death unto death; and to the other the savour of life unto life." (II Cor. 2:15-16).

In these days the doctrine of election is usually assigned by preachers and

theologians to the "hidden things" of God and hardly dared mentioned, even though it screams out from every page of the Bible as God's revelation to us of His will in salvation. We may not use His secret will as a cloak under which to hide doctrines we do not like.

The secret will of God, in both salvation and providence, is a deep mystery to us; His wisdom is inscrutable. But of one thing we can be sure: "As for God, his way is perfect " (Ps. 18:30). And as for The secret will of God, in both salvation and providence, is a deep mystery to us; His wisdom is inscrutable. But of one thing we can be sure: "As for God, his way is perfect" (Ps. 18:30). And as for us, let us seek to do His revealed will in every department of our lives for "*The secret will of God is none of our business; it is His revealed will which measures our accountability*" (A W Pink). The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed, *they* are the things that belong to us and our children for ever, that we may do all the words of God's holy law.

## 2

In the previous article we sought to show from the Scriptures something of what God has revealed to us concerning the character and content of His will. One aspect on which we laid special emphasis was the *unity* of God's will, specifically in the matter of salvation. We said that God cannot will the salvation of *some* as revealed in the doctrine of election, and at the same time will the salvation of *all*. That is to bring an impossible conflict into the nature and works of God when the Scripture expressly says that He is of one mind and "what his soul desireth, even that he doeth" (Job 23:13).

However, we are aware that a small number of Bible texts appear to contradict this doctrine and are often used to refute it. For example, there is I Timothy 2:3-4, "For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth".

Or there is II Peter 3:9, "The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance".

And thirdly there are a few well-known texts in Ezekiel's prophecy, for example: "Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? saith the Lord God: and not that he should return from his ways and live?" (18:23). "Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?" (33:11).

It is to this "unfinished business" that we turn in this article.

### **"Who will have all men to be saved"**

In the light of all we said last time, I Timothy 2:3-4 certainly appears to present us with a contradiction between Scripture's doctrine of predestination, teaching that God has willed the salvation of only *some*, and a desire apparently expressed here in this text that God will have *all* men to be saved.

There seems to be a contradiction here, two distinct and irreconcilable wills when we have shown from Scripture that God has only one will. Faced with this problem what are we to do?

There are two unbiblical "solutions". The **first** is to adopt a doctrine of predestination that is consistent with the idea that God *does* earnestly desire and will to save everyone. The fulfilment of the Divine decree now becomes conditional on believing the gospel. However, Scripture teaches us that election is unconditional. It is "according to the counsel of his own will" (Eph. 1:11). The writer says "*His* own will", not ours. (See John 1:13,14). If salvation depended on our will we would never be saved!

Clearly then this is not a solution to our problem..

A **second** option is to simply accept that there is no solution.

This calls us to believe that God has decreed the salvation of the elect *and* desires the salvation of all, and we are to leave it there. Even though we cannot understand it and cannot reconcile the two sides of the coin, we are to believe them both to be true. It is a paradox, but we must swallow it like some unpleasant medicine.

## Contradictions in the Bible?

This is the option taken by the famous nineteenth century preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon. In his sermon on this very text Spurgeon says, "The right way to take medicine of such a kind is to swallow it at once. In the same way there are some things in the Word of God which are undoubtedly true which must be swallowed at once by an effort of faith".

It is with hesitation that one takes issue with a preacher so greatly used of God and for generations held in honour by men the world over. One would not do so were it not for the fact that the view he held is now the accepted orthodoxy within Reformed circles.

What Spurgeon and others are saying is that this verse reveals an earnest desire on God's part to save *all* men, without any exception. He states, "*The Holy Ghost by the apostle has written 'all men', and unquestionably he means all men*". How that squares with the eternal decrees Spurgeon does not know but he accepts both as being true.

Spurgeon is perfectly right, of course, when he says there are "difficult doctrines" in the Word of God. The inspired apostle Peter admits that in the letters of Paul there are "some things hard to be understood", and "which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest... unto their own destruction" (II Peter 3:16). But that is not the issue here. The question is, does the Bible contain contradictions?

This strikes at the heart of what the Bible is and its own testimony concerning itself.

The Bible is a revelation. It is God's revelation to human beings of Himself, His Son and His salvation. Of course it is a revelation of high and holy things, but it is a revelation given to *human beings*. We may therefore expect it to be perfectly fitted and suited to be understood by the human mind.

## Revelation

When John was on the island of Patmos God wanted to give him "The Revelation of Jesus Christ". But John, even though he was a believer, even though he was "in the Spirit", and even though he was an apostle under Divine inspiration, was still only a human being. God wanted to show him many wonderful things, things which John, as a human being, with all the limitations which that entailed, was not able to see. So God gave His revelation in a form which was perfectly adapted to John's, and our, human capacity. God "sent and *signified* it by his angel unto his servant" (Rev. 1:1).

No human being could possibly have stood in the face of such a revelation as God was going to give John, so He "signified" it. In other words He gave it in the form of signs and symbols which John would then be able to record and "shew unto [Christ's] servants". He gave it in a form which was understandable.

Now certainly there are many things in the book of the Revelation which are "hard to be understood", but they are not *contrary* to human understanding. Above and beyond it they may be, but contrary to it they are not. This is true of the entire Word of God. There is not a book, not a verse, nor even a word in all the Bible which in any way conflicts with human understanding or intelligence. It has been given to us with the very purpose of understanding it. It is reasonable to assume therefore that it is understandable. "Revelation" that is not understandable does not reveal anything. It is not a revelation. "Revelation" which defies

logic is not revelation. It leaves one no wiser than before. There is no light in it, only darkness. It leads only to confusion, and God is not the author of confusion. The Scriptures own testimony is "The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple" (Ps.119:130).

Far from being contradictory and paradoxical, Scripture is a thoroughly reasonable, perfectly harmonious whole, at all times consistent with itself, a reflection of the One whom it reveals. To accept a contradiction in any field is to be irrational, but to accept a contradiction in the Word of God is to undermine its Divine authorship and truthfulness.

To be frank, I have to admit to being surprised by what Spurgeon says about I Timothy 2:4. With all humility we have to say that he was mistaken in accepting contradiction in the Word of God. God does not will the salvation of everyone, only the elect.

This leads us to our second, equally serious objection against a paradox view of I Timothy 2:4 - it makes no attempt to follow sound principles of Biblical interpretation.

## **Interpreting the Bible**

To know what the Bible is saying to us in any particular place we need to interpret it in the light of its context. This means examining a verse in its immediate setting of the preceding and following verses; it means keeping it in the context of the book in which it is found; and finally in the context of the whole of Scripture. In this way each passage is interpreted in harmony with all the rest, as it must be. Scripture cannot contradict itself. It cannot be broken (John 10:35).

The only Biblical solution to the apparent contradiction we have in I Timothy 2:4 must be to "rightly divide the word of truth". That calls for "study" and "workmanship" (II Tim. 2:15). Only then can we arrive at a consistent, God-honouring interpretation of this or any other verse.

## **“All” in Scripture**

It is usually assumed that the word "all" always means "all without exception", but this is not the case. There are occasions in Scripture where the word "all" has been used in translation when what is meant is "all without distinction", or "all manner of", or "all kinds of".

In some places the KJV translators have actually used these qualifying terms, for example in Luke 11:42: "But woe unto you, Pharisees! for ye tithe mint and rue and *all manner of* herbs". In Matthew 4:23 we read that Jesus healed "*all manner of* sickness and *all manner of* disease among the people". Or again in Acts 10:12 where Peter sees "a great sheet" which contained "*all manner of* fourfooted beasts".

But in other places where "all" is meant in a qualified sense, the translators have used simply "all". For example in Matthew 3:5 we read that "*all* Judea, and *all* the region round about Jordan" went to John the Baptist. In Acts 2:17 God says "I will pour out of my Spirit upon *all* flesh". Luke 3:6 tells us, "And *all* flesh shall see the salvation of God". In none of these instances is "all without exception" meant.

Applying this meaning to I Timothy 2:4 we find it says that God's will is to save *all kinds* of people, that is without distinction of race, sex, age, class or rank. It is not a will to save *all* people, but a people "*out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation*".

But how can we be sure that this is what the Spirit is really saying in the text? We can be sure because this will be gloriously and perfectly fulfilled (Rev. 5:9). It is also the only interpretation that is consistent with the context. Having endowed Timothy with the authority he needed to teach in the church (chap. 1) Paul begins in chapter 2 to expound the doctrine and practical teaching which he was to give.

First of all, prayers are to be made for all men (v.1). Paul's point and purpose for saying this becomes clear in the next verse where he specifies prayer to be made "For kings and for all that are in authority". It would not have been obvious to those early believers that they should pray for their earthly rulers. The authorities were largely enemies of Christ who persecuted the church of God. But whatever reservations believers would have had, Paul seeks to remove them by pointing out that it is good and acceptable to God to pray for such dignitaries because God "will have all [*kinds of*] men to be saved and come unto the knowledge of the truth".

God's salvation is not only for rank and file citizens, the slaves and peasant classes, but for rulers and kings too. Similarly it is not just for the poor, but also for the rich; it is not just for Jews but also for Gentiles. It is for all kinds and conditions of men, even those who abuse their authority to persecute Christians and put them to death, one of whom was the apostle Paul himself (see ch. 1:13-15). Salvation is for all manner of people, and it is theirs on the basis of a ransom that has been paid for *all manner of* people. "For there is one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; who gave himself a ransom for *all*" (vs. 5-6). The Son of Man came "to give his life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28), for many of all kinds of people, for all without any distinction.

This being true, Paul desires that men pray "every where" (v.8). Not just in Jerusalem, but throughout the whole earth men are to lift up holy hands in prayer for "all men" because there is no nation, people or tribe excluded from God's so great salvation. We are to pray for them, even for our rulers, that those who are of God's election may be brought to salvation.

Only when I Timothy 2:4 is kept in its context does one find perfect harmony with the rest of Scripture - no contradictions with the Divine decree of predestination, and no paradox, just plain revelation. There is no problem!

In fact this is how the text has been traditionally understood. It is the simple exegesis of Scripture which giants of the faith in former days, such as Augustine, John Calvin, Theodore Beza, Francis Turretin and John Gill, preached to their congregations. One laments that today even those who profess to be the spiritual successors of these men reject the plain meaning of Scripture which they taught. It does not bode well for the future testimony of many churches.

But I Timothy 2:4 is not the only disputed text. All that we have said regarding paradox and contradiction in relation to that text is equally applicable to the other verses we mentioned earlier. Similarly, the same rules of interpretation must apply. Scripture must interpret Scripture. We will now turn briefly to those texts.

### **“Not willing that any should perish”**

In II Peter 3 the apostle is writing about Christ's second coming. Certain scoffers had been claiming that the promises of the Lord's return would never be fulfilled (vs. 3-4), so Peter writes to assure the Lord's people that although He had not *yet* returned, the promises most

certainly would be fulfilled.

He assures them that "The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to usward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance". While a superficial reading of this text might suggest that God does not want *any* human being to perish but every one of the human race to repent, it in fact says no such thing.

The first point to notice is that Peter is not addressing everyone. He is addressing the Lord's people. He is writing "to them that have obtained like precious faith with us through the righteousness of God and our Saviour Jesus Christ" (1:1). He is addressing the "beloved" (vs. 1, 8).

Secondly, some believers were evidently looking for the Lord to return at any moment and in their eyes the fact that He was so long in coming gave some credence to the unbelief of the scoffers. But Peter seeks to allay their doubts. He writes, "be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning his promise" (8-9). In other words, the Lord is coming as quickly as possible. He cannot come yet because there are untold multitudes of unborn elect saints who must be saved. When they are all born and saved He will return, but He does not delay.

Thirdly, we note that while we wait, the Lord is "longsuffering to us-ward". Notice that nowhere does it say God is longsuffering to *all* men, but only and always to *us*-ward, to His beloved. His longsuffering is revealed to us in His willingness to preserve us. It is not His will that *any* of His beloved should perish but that *all* of them should come to repentance. Such longsuffering of God is our very salvation (v. 15).

All this means that if Peter was addressing all men without exception, telling everyone that God is longsuffering to them all, not willing that any should perish, then either all men will be saved in the end, or Christ, ever waiting for all to come to repentance, will never come and the scoffers will have the last word.

## **God's pleasure**

Again, the two passages we quoted earlier from Ezekiel are often used in support of the idea that God wills the salvation of all men.

There is a general ethical sense in which God does not take pleasure in the death of any man. God hates sin, and death is the wages of sin which man has brought upon himself. God takes no delight in sin and death. But it is precisely *because* God is not pleased by sin and death that He requires man to love Him, obeying His law, walking in His ways. His command to all men everywhere is that they repent of their sin and believe the gospel (Acts 17:30). Their continued rebellion and refusal to do so angers Him intensely. He finds no pleasure in the sinner's intransigence, only in his obedience as manifested in repentance and turning to the Saviour for forgiveness. God is pleased by the repentance of a sinner, and all heaven rejoices (Luke 15:10).

But as we pointed out last time, we must not assume from God's command (His 'preceptive will') that He wills the salvation of all those to whom it comes (His 'decretive will'). God's will is one and revealed to us in election.

However, this is not to deny that a relationship exists between God's commands and His

sovereign election. It is through the universal, indiscriminate promulgation of the command in the preaching of the gospel that God's sovereign and hidden purposes of election are outworked. When the preacher goes forth to preach, the Spirit goes with him to work His mighty regenerating work in the hearts of the elect so that they hear and obey the gospel commands, turning from their sin and fleeing by faith to Christ their Saviour.

This does not mean that because he does not have the Spirit to enable him, the non-elect individual who rejects the gospel call is not responsible for his unbelief. He is always responsible because man brought his inability to believe upon himself at the Fall. There is no room in Scripture for the idea that because the unregenerated sinner is not able to do what the gospel calls him to do, the call should not be extended to him. That is true hyper-Calvinism.

### **“Why will ye die?”**

Having looked at the general principle that God takes no pleasure in death, we are now able to see it applied in Ezekiel 18:23 and 33:11.

It is important here, as it was in II Peter 3:9, to recognise who is being spoken of. The Lord is talking about "the house of Israel" (18:31; 33:10). Because of their idolatry, their unfaithfulness to the covenant God of their fathers, the people of Israel at this time were captives far away in Babylon. God had given the nation up to her enemies in order to bring His elect remnant to repentance and confession.

Through His prophet Ezekiel, God addresses the people as a whole, as is so often the case in Scripture, regarding them all as being in a state of apostasy and alienation from Himself. He calls them to repentance, revealing in the clearest terms that no return to life is possible except by a return to righteousness. They must turn from their wicked ways for only then can He turn from His fierce displeasure. The Lord's gracious promise to any who repents is, "None of his sins that he hath committed shall be mentioned unto him: he hath done that which is lawful and right; he shall surely live" (33:16).

It is concerning those of the house of Israel who were now showing signs of contrition that God is speaking in verse 11 of chapter 33. They have said to Him, "If our transgressions and our sins be upon us, and we pine away in them, how should we then live?" (v. 10). They have realised that for as long as their sins are "upon them", they shall surely die. "The soul that sinneth, it shall die" (18:4). Their captivity was so long that they feared their sin to be so great that God would never forgive them and never again would they live. In reply to them God speaks words of hope, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?" (v. 11).

God is here applying to the specific case of His captive people the general principle we have outlined above. If God takes no pleasure in the death of any man, but delights in his repentance, how much more true is that of the house of Israel. He commands them to do what pleases Him, to turn from their evil ways and seek righteousness. That is what they ought to do. That is what they *must* do to bring pleasure to God. The cry of an apostate people, alienated from their Lord yet now conscious of their sins upon them, must be, "Turn thou us unto thee, O LORD, and we shall be turned; renew our days as of old" (Lam. 5:21). "Turn us again, O God, and cause thy face to shine; and we shall be saved" (Ps. 80:3,7,18-19). The

Lord is ever gracious and full of mercy toward those who seek Him.

Only in the One who gives the command can be found the power to obey. In the words of Calvin, "And so far as regards God's elect people, when He shows what they ought to do, and what they are conscious they can never of themselves perform, they then have recourse to the promised aid of the Spirit; so that *the outward command becomes the occasion or instrument which God employs for conferring the grace of His Spirit*" (emphasis mine - RJH). The command of the gospel is the instrument in God's hands by which He accomplishes His sovereign purposes of election and reprobation. And how sharp is that instrument when delivered as the question, "Why will ye die?"

Piercing words are these, even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit. "Why will ye die, O house of Israel". You, "to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises..." (Rom. 9:4), why will *you* die?

Today these words speak with force to an apostatising church. To the church belongs the means of grace, the keys of the kingdom, the Word and its ministry, the gospel and the sacraments. These are mighty privileges which make her backsliding all the worse and God's displeasure at her impenitence all the more intense.

When she makes alliances with the world, compromises the truth of Christian doctrine and the purity of Christian worship, then she is a church who has forsaken the Lord her God. She is a church in need of repentance. To such a church the Lord says, "Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, *and repent...*" (Rev. 2:5). The expression of God's heart is, "Turn ye, turn ye, for why will ye die?" Ezekiel 33:11 brings before us not a desire in God's heart for all men to be saved, but His sore displeasure towards His own people when they forsake Him, displeasure which is turned away only by their repentance. If He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, how much more true is it of the Church?

One has to say that nowhere in Scripture do we find any hope, or any will or desire in God, for the salvation of those who do not repent.