

THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE

(LESSON 27)

DOES GOD HAVE TWO WILLS?

(PART THREE)

In our two previous Lessons, we have sought to answer the question as to whether or not there is evidence in the Scriptures to support the view that God may have more than one will? We have advanced the view that the Scriptures do indicate that God may decree that a certain thing occur while also desiring that a completely different thing should come to pass. There is a sense, therefore, in which God does have more than one will. He has a will of **decree** as well as a will of **command**. We stated that it is important for us to distinguish between what God would like to see happen and what He has actually ordained to happen and we provided Scriptural evidence of God's willing something in one sense that He does not approve of in another sense.

In exploring this subject, we examined scriptures pertaining to:

- The Death of Jesus Christ,
- The War Against the Lamb,
- The Hardening of Person's Hearts,
- The Choice of God Either to Retrain Evil or Not to Do So, and
- The Sovereignty of God.

In this Lesson, we will reflect on how to understand this apparent contradiction between God's will of decree and His will of command in light of His purposes in salvation. In doing so, we will consider how these two wills of God may be harmonized to make sense. Admittedly, this is an extremely difficult undertaking for a sinful, finite human being. Nevertheless, we will make an attempt.

Let us begin by re-examining **Acts 4:26-28**, a passage that we looked at in **Lesson 25**: *"The kings of the earth stood up, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against his Christ. For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, For to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done."*

The **New Living Translation** renders the passage as follows: *"The kings of the earth prepared for battle; the rulers gathered together against the Lord and against his Messiah. 'In fact, this has happened here in this very city! For Herod Antipas, Pontius Pilate the governor, the Gentiles, and the people of Israel were all united against Jesus, your holy servant, whom you anointed. But everything they did was determined beforehand according to your will.'"*

It will be noted that four different human entities are mentioned as being responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. We have Herod Antipas the tetrarch of Galilee and Pontius Pilate the Roman governor of Judea, both of whom had legal oversight from the Roman government that essentially gave approval for the execution of Jesus. The Gentiles are also mentioned which probably refers to the Roman soldiers who scourged Jesus and nailed him to the cross. The people of Israel are also named. This group would include both the High Priest, the Sanhedrin and the crowd who urged Pilate to execute our Lord and who mocked and cursed Him on Golgotha's hill.

Luke informs us that all four entities were *"gathered together"* and *"all united"* against Jesus Christ. They all exhibited animosity and cruelty towards Him. They all desired His death. All of them worked together to ensure that Jesus Christ, the anointed, holy servant of God was put to death.

There can be no doubt whatsoever that Herod Antipas, Pontius Pilate, The Roman soldiers and the people of Israel were all guilty of committing sin. In fact, their sin is unequalled in the history of the world. What act of sin could possibly be greater than the sin of being guilty of the death of the absolutely sinless Son of God?

Now since the crucifixion of Jesus Christ was a horrendously sinful act, it would perhaps be understandable if an individual were to conclude that His crucifixion was **not** the will of God, for it is impossible for God to condone sin. And yet, verse **28** clearly states that these wicked people had gathered together *“to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done.”* The **New Living Translation** informs us that, *“everything they did was determined beforehand according to your will.”* Did you hear that beloved ones? **Everything** that Herod, Pilate, the Gentiles and the people of Israel did was determined beforehand according to the will of God!

Evidently, it was part of God’s plan to have His Son crucified. Indeed, it was not just His plan for it to be so, but He was instrumental in seeing to it that His plan was successfully carried out! Luke says that they did *“whatsoever **thy hand** and thy counsel determined before to be done.”* God had His hand in it! In other words, it was God’s will for it to happen. How can we make sense of this seeming paradox?

There is a sense in which God **did not** will for Jesus to die. It was not His will for sin to be committed, for He has stated emphatically that He hates sin and He has commanded human beings not to sin. But there is a sense in which **it was God’s will** for Jesus to die because the death of Jesus was part of God’s sovereign plan of salvation. In other words, it was God’s **will of decree** for Jesus to die but as far as His **will of command** is concerned, the men and groups who participated in the death of Jesus Christ were all guilty of sin.

Brothers and sisters, we must come to see that God’s will may involve things that are not always morally acceptable but which fit into a larger picture that includes a mixture of good and evil. To state it differently, God’s **will of command** is what He would ideally want to happen, whereas, His **will of decree** is what He has definitively determined will take place. His **will of command** is a reflection of His desires, which may or may not be realized, but His **will of decree** is a reflection of what He has ordained and therefore, His **will of decree** is always realized. There really can be no denying that there is a sense in which God may have two different, simultaneous, opposing, yet somehow co-mingling wills. **Acts 4:26-28** indicates that God may will something to occur in one sense that he does not will to occur in another sense. In fact, it appears as though God may sometimes decree His own displeasure by willing something to take place that goes against His own desires!

Brothers and sisters, I am certainly not arguing that God is unable to make up His own mind, or that He is confused. And I am certainly not saying that God is the author of sin or that He condones sin. I am contending that God has two wills, a **will of command** and a **will of decree** which He can maintain at the same time without compromising His absolute holiness, righteousness and justice on the one hand or His indescribable love, mercy and grace on the other hand. In ordaining all things, including sinful acts, God never commits or approves of sin. Even though He detests evil, God can somehow ordain that evil take place. And He can hold the evil doer accountable for his or her evil, while committing no evil Himself! If that is not the case, how can we explain **Acts 4:26-28**?

A certain act may be evil, and yet it may be a good thing that such an evil act be done. Again we say that without question, the crucifixion of Christ was an evil act but yet it was a blessed thing that His crucifixion occurred. In other words, the Scriptures lead us to the insight that God can will that a sinful act come to pass without willing it as an act of sin in Himself.

Let us examine God's **will of command** and **His will of decree** from a somewhat different perspective. There is a sense in which God desires all persons to be saved. The Scriptures indicate that this is so. In **Acts 17:22-31(New Living Translation)**, we read the following account of Paul's interaction with the people of Athens in Greece:

22 *So Paul, standing before the council, addressed them as follows: "Men of Athens, I notice that you are very religious in every way,*

23 *for as I was walking along I saw your many shrines. And one of your altars had this inscription on it: 'To an Unknown God.' This God, whom you worship without knowing, is the one I'm telling you about.*

24 *"He is the God who made the world and everything in it. Since he is Lord of heaven and earth, he doesn't live in man-made temples,*

25 *and human hands can't serve his needs — for he has no needs. He himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need.*

26 *From one man he created all the nations throughout the whole earth. He decided beforehand when they should rise and fall, and he determined their boundaries.*

27 *"His purpose was for the nations to seek after God and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him — though he is not far from any one of us.*

28 *For in him we live and move and exist. As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'*

29 *And since this is true, we shouldn't think of God as an idol designed by craftsmen from gold or silver or stone.*

30 *"God overlooked people's ignorance about these things in earlier times, but now **he commands** everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and turn to him.*

31 *For he has set a day for judging the world with justice by the man he has appointed, and he proved to everyone who this is by raising him from the dead."*

Paul tells the citizens of Athens that God "*commands everyone everywhere to repent of their sins and turn to him*" (verse **30**). Here, we are informed that it is God's **will of command** that all persons, wherever they are should repent and turn to Him. But what is **His will of decree**? We know from **Acts 5:31** and **Acts 11:18** that repentance is a gift. It is granted to us by God. **Romans 2:4** indicates that unless the goodness of God motivates us, we are not able to repent. In **2 Timothy 2:23-26**, we read the following:

23 *But foolish and unlearned questions avoid, knowing that they do gender strifes.*

24 *And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient,*

25 *In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; **if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth;***

26 *And that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will."*

The words "*Will give*" in verse **25** are in a construction in the Greek which is expressive of a condition that is uncertain and with only a remote prospect of determination. Paul's is expressing the hope that God will grant repentance to those who oppose the gospel, although he is not at all sure this will happen, as shown by the use of the word "*peradventure*" which is the translation of a Greek word that indicates lack of certainty in something.

The literal sense is “maybe God will give to them repentance.” If repentance is God’s gift, why does He not bestow the gift on all persons?

It appears as though God’s **will of command** is that all persons should repent. His **will of decree**, however, is that only those unto whom He grants repentance will in fact do so.

The question may well be asked, “What does God will more than the saving of all persons?” The answer may be that more than the saving of all persons, God wills the manifestation of the full range of His glory in wrath and in mercy. Perhaps the glory of His divine sovereignty is of greater value to God and it is this reality that restrains His will to save all people. This seems to be Paul’s opinion based on his argument in **Romans 9**. In verses **16-24** He writes,

16 *So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy.*

17 *For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth.*

18 *Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth.*

19 *Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will?*

20 *Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?*

21 *Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?*

22 *What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction:*

23 *And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory,*

24 *Even us, whom he hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?*

The **New Living Translation** renders verses **22-24**, in the following manner: “*In the same way, even though God has the right to show his anger and his power, he is very patient with those on whom his anger falls, who were made for destruction. **He does this to make the riches of his glory shine even brighter on those to whom he shows mercy, who were prepared in advance for glory.** And we are among those whom he selected, both from the Jews and from the Gentiles.*”

In these verses, Paul appears to be contending with a hypothetical objector in the Roman church. Paul’s argument is, “Doesn’t God have the right to glorify Himself as He sees fit?” If God chooses to glorify Himself through removing His hand of restraint from some persons and allow them to do exactly what their sinful, unregenerate natures motivate them to do, until they are ripe for destruction and wrath, who can oppose Him? And if He desires to be merciful and gracious to others, restraining their sinful predispositions and making them the objects of His salvation, who can oppose Him? And if God wants to show mercy to the Gentiles as well as the Jews, who can oppose Him? He is patient and longsuffering with the vessels of wrath “*fitted to destruction*” for the purpose of manifesting His glory to the vessels of mercy “*who were prepared in advance for glory.*”

Paul appears to be indicating that it would not be possible for God to make known the riches of His glory to the vessels of mercy, if He did not demonstrate patient endurance to the vessels of wrath. In other words, if every single human being were saved the riches of God’s glory could not be fully manifested and appreciated by anyone!

In **Lamentations 3:32-33** we read, *“But though he cause grief, yet will he have compassion according to the multitude of his mercies. For he doth not afflict **willingly** nor grieve the children of men.”*

The **New Living Translation** renders the verses as follows: *“Though he brings grief, he also shows compassion because of the greatness of his unfailing love. **For he does not enjoy hurting people or causing them sorrow.**”*

The word *“willingly”* is the translation of a composite Hebrew word which means literally “from his heart.” Jeremiah was trying, as we are in this Lesson, to come to terms with the way a sovereign God wills two different things, affliction and compassion. He seems to be saying here that God does will the affliction that He causes, but He does not will it in the same way that He wills compassion. The will to afflict does not come “from his heart.” God’s expression of pity and his pleading do come from His heart. There is a genuine desire in God’s heart to spare sinners but His motivation is complex, and not every true element in His motivation may be reflected in His ultimate choice. There may be desires in God’s great and mysterious heart that are fueled by a range of emotions that are real and reveal to us something true about His character. And yet not all of these emotions and desires may govern His actions at any one time.

I genuinely believe that God loves the world with a deep compassion and emotionally desires the salvation of all men. But at the same time I also believe that God has chosen from before the foundation of the world, those whom He will save from sin. Since it is obvious that not all people are saved, I am led to conclude that God’s will to save all people is restrained by His commitment to the glorification of His sovereign grace.

God is determined to manifest the full range of His glory through the sovereign demonstration of his wrath and mercy for the enjoyment of his elect. It is this determination that restrains His will or His emotional desire to save all people.

Brothers and sisters, the reality is that seeming contradictions relative to the will of God are abundant in the Bible. We have examined some of them in the last two Lessons. They appear to be contradictions to us because we are not able to wrap our minds around them and fully understand them. But we must understand that they are not contradictions to God and that is the important thing. We are finite humans who are sinful and therefore, severely handicapped in every conceivable way. We must admit that, as we are presently constituted, we are not able to comprehend all the wonder and complexity of the absoluteness of an infinite God! He can make sense of two seemingly contrary ideas, and cause them to fit together in ways that we cannot even begin to grasp. God can see relevance and harmony where all we can see is confusion and inconsistency.

As we have done before in our studies of the Doctrines of Grace, we again make reference to three very pertinent passages. We have used both the **King James Version** and the **New Living Translation** in each case.

DEUTERONOMY 29:29

“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.”

NEW LIVING TRANSLATION

“The Lord our God has secrets known to no one. We are not accountable for them, but we and our children are accountable forever for all that he has revealed to us, so that we may obey all the terms of these instructions.”

ISAIAH 55:8-9

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

NEW LIVING TRANSLATION

“My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts,’ says the Lord. ‘And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.’”

ROMANS 11:33

“O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!”

NEW LIVING TRANSLATION

“Oh, how great are God’s riches and wisdom and knowledge! How impossible it is for us to understand his decisions and his ways!”

There are some things that God has revealed to us, and He has done so in order for us to walk in the light of the revelation that we have received. But there are some things that God has not revealed to us. They are His secrets and we are not accountable for them.