

Are There Two Wills in God?

Divine Election and God's Desire for All to Be Saved

By John Piper January 1, 1995

http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Articles/ByDate/1995/1580_Are_There_Two_Wills_in_God/

My aim here is to show from Scripture that the simultaneous existence of God's will for "all persons to be saved" (1 Tim. 2:4) and his will to elect unconditionally those who will actually be saved is not a sign of divine schizophrenia or exegetical confusion. A corresponding aim is to show that unconditional election therefore does not contradict biblical expressions of God's compassion for all people, and does not nullify sincere offers of salvation to everyone who is lost among all the peoples of the world.

1 Timothy 2:4, 2 Peter 3:9, and Ezekiel 18:23 might be called the Arminian pillar texts concerning the universal saving will of God. In 1 Timothy 2:1-4 Paul says that the reason we should pray for kings and all in high positions is that this may bring about a quiet and peaceable life which "is good, and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who wills (*thelei*) all persons to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." In 2 Peter 3:8-9 the apostle says that the delay of the second coming of Christ is owing to the fact that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years and a thousand years is as a day. "The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not willing (*boulomenos*) that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." And in Ezekiel 18:23 and 32 the Lord speaks about his heart for the perishing: "Do I indeed delight in the death of the wicked, says the Lord GOD, and not rather in his turning from his way that he might live? . . . I do not delight (*jehephoz*) in the death of the one who dies, says the Lord; so turn and live" (cf. 33:11).

It is possible that careful exegesis of 1 Timothy 2:4 would lead us to believe that "God's willing all persons to be saved" does not refer to every individual person in the world, but rather to all *sorts* of persons, since the "all persons" in verse 1 may well mean groups like "kings and all in high positions" (v. 2). It is also possible that the "you" in 2 Peter 3:9 ("the Lord is longsuffering toward you, not wishing any to perish") refers not to every person in the world but to "you" professing Christians among whom, as Adolf Schlatter says, "are people who only through repentance can attain to the grace of God and to the promised inheritance."

Nevertheless the case for this limitation on God's universal saving will has never been convincing to Arminians and likely will not become convincing, especially since Ezekiel 18:23, 32 and 33:11 are even less tolerant of restriction. **Therefore as a hearty believer in unconditional, individual election I rejoice to affirm that God does not delight in the perishing of the impenitent, and that he has compassion on all people. My aim is to show that this is not double talk.**

The assignment in this chapter is not to defend the doctrine that God chooses unconditionally whom he will save. I have tried to do that elsewhere and

others do it in this book. Nevertheless I will try to make a credible case that **while the Arminian pillar texts may indeed be pillars for universal love, nevertheless they are not weapons against unconditional election.** If I succeed then there will be an indirect confirmation for the thesis of this book. In fact I think Arminians have erred in trying to take pillars of universal love and make them into weapons against electing grace.

Affirming the will of God to save *all*, while also affirming the unconditional election of *some*, implies that there are at least "two wills" in God, or two ways of willing. It implies that God decrees one state of affairs while also willing and teaching that a different state of affairs should come to pass. This distinction in the way God wills has been expressed in various ways throughout the centuries. It is not a new contrivance. For example, theologians have spoken of sovereign will and moral will, efficient will and permissive will, secret will and revealed will, will of decree and will of command, decretive will and preceptive will, *voluntas signi* (will of sign) and *voluntas beneplaciti* (will of good pleasure), etc. Clark Pinnock refers disapprovingly to "the exceedingly paradoxical notion of two divine wills regarding salvation." In Pinnock's more recent volume (*A Case for Arminianism*) Randall Basinger argues that, "if God has decreed all events, then it must be that things *cannot* and *should* not be any different from what they are." In other words he rejects the notion that God could decree that a thing be one way and yet teach that we should act to make it another way. He says that it is too hard "to coherently conceive of a God in which this distinction really exists" In the same volume Fritz Guy argues that the revelation of God in Christ has brought about a "paradigm shift" in the way we should think about the love of God—namely as "more fundamental than, and prior to, justice and power." This shift, he says, makes it possible to think about the "will of God" as "delighting more than deciding." God's will is not his sovereign purpose which he infallibly establishes, but rather "the desire of the lover for the beloved." The will of God is his general intention and longing, not his effective purpose. Dr. Guy goes so far as to say, "Apart from a predestinarian presupposition, it becomes apparent that God's 'will' is always (sic) to be understood in terms of intention and desire [as opposed to efficacious, sovereign purpose]."

These criticisms are not new. Jonathan Edwards wrote 250 years ago, "The Arminians ridicule the distinction between the secret and revealed will of God, or, more properly expressed, the distinction between the decree and the law of God; because we say he may decree one thing, and command another. And so, they argue, we hold a contrariety in God, as if one will of his contradicted another."

But in spite of these criticisms the distinction stands, not because of a logical or theological deduction, but because it is inescapable in the Scriptures. The most careful exegete writing in Pinnock's *Case for Arminianism* concedes the existence of two wills in God. I. Howard Marshall applies his exegetical gift to the Pastoral Epistles. Concerning 1 Timothy 2:4 he says, "To avoid all misconceptions it should be made clear at the outset that the fact that God

wishes or wills that all people should be saved does not necessarily imply that all will respond to the gospel and be saved. *We must certainly distinguish between what God would like to see happen and what he actually does will to happen, and both of these things can be spoken of as God's will.* The question at issue is not whether all will be saved but whether God has made provision in Christ for the salvation of all, provided that they believe, and without limiting the potential scope of the death of Christ merely to those whom God knows will believe.

In this chapter I would now like to undergird Marshall's point that "we must certainly distinguish between what God would like to see happen and what he actually does will to happen, and [that] both of these things can be spoken of as God's will." Perhaps the most effective way to do this is to begin by drawing attention to the way Scripture portrays God willing something in one sense which he disapproves in another sense. Then, after seeing some of the biblical evidence, we can step back and ponder how to understand this in relation to God's saving purposes.

Illustrations of Two Wills in God:

The Death of Christ

The most compelling example of God's willing for sin to come to pass while at the same time disapproving the sin is his willing the death of his perfect, divine Son. The betrayal of Jesus by Judas was a morally evil act inspired immediately by Satan (Luke 22:3). Yet in Acts 2:23 Luke says, "This Jesus [was] *delivered up according to the definite plan (boule) and foreknowledge of God.*" The betrayal was sin, and it involved the instrumentality of Satan; but it was part of God's ordained plan. That is, there is a sense in which God willed the delivering up of his Son, even though the act was sin.

Moreover Herod's contempt for Jesus (Luke 23:11) and Pilate's spineless expediency (Luke 23:24) and the Jews' "Crucify! Crucify him!" (Luke 23:21) and the Gentile soldiers' mockery (Luke 23:36) were also sinful attitudes and deeds. Yet in Acts 4:27-28 Luke expresses his understanding of the sovereignty of God in these acts by recording the prayer of the Jerusalem saints:

Truly in this city there were gathered together against thy holy servant Jesus, whom thou didst anoint both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel to do *whatever thy hand and thy plan (boule) had predestined to take place.*

Herod, Pilate, the soldiers and Jewish crowds lifted their hand to rebel against the Most High only to find that their rebellion was unwitting (sinful) service in the inscrutable designs of God.

The appalling death of Christ was the will and work of God the Father. Isaiah wrote, "We esteemed him stricken, *smitten by God . . . It was the will of the LORD to bruise him; he has put him to grief*" (Isaiah 53:4,10). God's will was very much engaged in the events that brought his Son to death on the cross. God considered it "fitting to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings" (Hebrews 2:10). Yet, as Jonathan Edwards points out, Christ's suffering "could not come to pass but by sin. For contempt and disgrace was one thing he was to suffer."

It goes almost without saying that God wills obedience to his moral law, and that he wills this in a way that can be rejected by many. This is evident from numerous texts: "Not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord, will enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the *will (thelema) of my Father* who is in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). "Whoever does *the will of my Father* in heaven, he is my brother and sister and mother" (Matthew 12:50). "The one who does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:17). The "will of God" in these texts is the revealed, moral instruction of the Old and New Testaments, which proscribes sin. Therefore we know it was *not* the "will of God" that Judas and Pilate and Herod and the Gentile soldiers and the Jewish crowds disobey the moral law of God by sinning in delivering Jesus up to be crucified. But we also know that it *was* the will of God that this come to pass. Therefore we know that God in some sense wills what he does not will in another sense. I. Howard Marshall's statement is confirmed by the death of Jesus: "We must certainly distinguish between what God would like to see happen and what he actually does will to happen."

The War Against the Lamb

There are two reasons that we turn next to Revelation 17:16-17. One is that the war against the Son of God, which reached its sinful climax at the cross comes to final consummation in a way that confirms what we have seen about the will of God. The other reason is that this text reveals John's understanding of God's active involvement in fulfilling prophecies whose fulfillment involves sinning. John sees a vision of some final events of history:

And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the harlot; they will make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire, for God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by being of one mind and giving over their royal power to the beast, until the words of God shall be fulfilled (Revelation 17:16-17).

Without going into all the details of this passage, the relevant matter is clear. The beast "comes out of the abyss" (Revelation 17:8). He is the personification of evil and rebellion against God. The ten horns are ten kings (v. 12) and they "wage war against the Lamb" (v. 14).

Waging war against the Lamb is sin and sin is contrary to the will of God.

Nevertheless the angel says (literally), "God gave into their [the ten kings'] hearts *to do his will*, and to perform one will, and to give their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God shall be fulfilled" (v. 17). Therefore God willed (in one sense) to influence the hearts of the ten kings so that they would do what is against his will (in another sense).

Moreover God did this in fulfillment of prophetic words. The ten kings will collaborate with the beast "until the words of God shall be fulfilled" (v. 17). This implies something crucial about John's understanding of the fulfillment of "the prophecies leading up to the overthrow of Antichrist." It implies that (at least in John's view) God's prophecies are not mere predictions which God knows will happen, but rather are divine intentions which he makes sure will happen. We know this because verse 17 says that *God is acting* to see to it that the ten kings make league with the beast "until the words of God shall be fulfilled." John is exulting not in the marvelous foreknowledge of God to predict a bad event.

Rather he is exulting in the marvelous sovereignty of God to make sure that the bad event comes about. Fulfilled prophecy, in John's mind, is not only prediction, but also promised performance.

This is important because John tells us in his Gospel that there are Old Testament prophecies of events surrounding the death of Christ that involve sin. This means that God intends to bring about events that involve things he forbids. These events include Judas' betrayal of Jesus (John 13:18; Psalm 41:9), the hatred Jesus received from his enemies (John 15:25; Psalm 69:4; 35:19), the casting of lots for Jesus' clothing (John 19:24; Psalm 22:18), and the piercing of Jesus' side (John 19:36-37; Exodus 12:46; Psalm 34:20; Zechariah 12:10). John expresses his theology of God's sovereignty with the words, "These things happened *in order that* the scripture be fulfilled." In other words the events were not a coincidence that God merely foresaw, but a plan which God *purposed* to bring about. Thus again we find the words of I. Howard Marshall confirmed: "We must certainly distinguish between what God would like to see happen and what he actually does will to happen."

The Hardening Work of God

Another evidence to demonstrate God's willing a state of affairs in one sense that he disapproves in another sense is the testimony of Scripture that God wills to harden some men's hearts so that they become obstinate in sinful behavior which God disapproves.

The most well known example is the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. In Exodus 8:1 the Lord says to Moses, "Go in to Pharaoh and say to him, 'Thus says the LORD, "Let my people go, that they may serve me."'" In other words God's command, that is, his *will*, is that Pharaoh let the Israelites go. Nevertheless from the start he also willed that Pharaoh *not* let the Israelites go. In Exodus 4:21 God says to Moses, "When you go back to Egypt, see that you do all those wonders before Pharaoh, which I have put in your hand; but *I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.*" At one point Pharaoh himself acknowledges that his unwillingness to let the people go is sin: "Now therefore forgive, I pray, my sin" (Exodus 10:17). Thus what we see is that God commands that Pharaoh do a thing which God himself wills not to allow. The good thing that God commands he prevents. And the thing he brings about involves sin.

Some have tried to avoid this implication by pointing out that during the first five plagues the text does not say explicitly that God hardened Pharaoh's heart but that it "was hardened" (Exodus 7:22; 8:19; 9:7) or that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (Exodus 8:15,32), and that only in the sixth plague does it say explicitly "the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart" (9:12; 10:20,27; 11:10; 14:4). For example R.T. Forster and V.P. Marston say that only from the sixth plague on God gave Pharaoh "supernatural strength to continue with his evil path of rebellion"

But this observation does not succeed in avoiding the evidence of two wills in God. Even if Forster and Marston were right that God was not willing for Pharaoh's heart to be hardened during the first five plagues, they concede that for the last five plagues God does will this, at least in the sense of strengthening Pharaoh to continue in the path of rebellion. Thus there is a sense in which God

does will that Pharaoh go on refusing to let the people go, and there is a sense in which he does will that Pharaoh release the people. For he commands, "Let my people go." This illustrates why theologians talk about the "will of command" ("Let my people go!") and the "will of decree" ("God hardened Pharaoh's heart").

The Exodus is not a unique instance of God's acting in this way. When the people of Israel reached the land of Sihon king of Heshbon, Moses sent messengers "with words of peace saying, Let me pass through your land; I will travel only on the highway" (Deuteronomy 2:26-27). Even though this request should have lead Sihon to treat the people of God with respect, as God willed for his people to be blessed rather than attacked, nevertheless "Sihon the king of Heshbon would not let us pass by him; for *the LORD your God hardened his spirit and made his heart obstinate*, that he might give him into your hand, as at this day" (Deuteronomy 2:30). In other words it was God's will (in one sense) that Sihon act in a way that was contrary to God's will (in another sense) that Israel be blessed and not cursed.

Similarly the conquest of the cities of Canaan is owing to God's willing that the kings of the land resist Joshua rather than make peace with him. "Joshua waged war a long time with all these kings. There was not a city which made peace with the sons of Israel except the Hivites living in Gibeon; they took them all in battle. *For it was of the Lord to harden their hearts, to meet Israel in battle in order that he might utterly destroy them*, that they might receive no mercy, but that he might destroy them, just as the Lord had commanded Moses" (Joshua 11:19-20). In view of this it is difficult to imagine what Fritz Guy means when he says that the "will of God" is always to be thought of in terms of loving desire and intention rather than in terms of God's effective purpose of judgment. What seems more plain is that when the time has come for judgment God wills that the guilty do things that are against his revealed will, like cursing Israel rather than blessing her.

The hardening work of God was not limited to non-Israelites. In fact it plays a central role in the life of Israel in this period of history. In Romans 11:7-9 Paul speaks of Israel's failure to obtain the righteousness and salvation it desired: "Israel failed to obtain what it sought. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, as it is written, "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that should not see and ears that should not hear, down to this very day." Even though it is the command of God that his people see and hear and respond in faith (Isaiah 42:18), nevertheless God also has his reasons for sending a spirit of stupor at times so that some will not obey his command.

Jesus expressed this same truth when he explained that one of the purposes of speaking in parables to the Jews of his day was to bring about this judicial blinding or stupor. In Mark 4:11-12 he said to his disciples, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables; *so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand*; lest they should turn again, and be forgiven." Here again God wills that a condition prevail which he regards as blameworthy. His will is that they turn and be forgiven (Mark 1:15), but he acts in a way to restrict the fulfillment of that will.

Paul pictures this divine hardening as part of an overarching plan that will involve salvation for Jew and Gentile. In Romans 11:25-26 he says to his Gentile readers, "Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery, brethren: *a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in*, and so all Israel will be saved." The fact that the hardening has an appointed end—"until the full number of the Gentiles comes in"—shows that it is part of God's plan rather than a merely contingent event outside God's purpose. Nevertheless Paul expresses not only his but also God's heart when he says in Romans 10:1, "My heart's desire and prayer to God for them [Israel] is their salvation." God holds out his hands to a rebellious people (Romans 10:21), but ordains a hardening that consigns them for a time to disobedience.

This is the point of Romans 11:31-32. Paul speaks to his Gentile readers again about the disobedience of Israel in rejecting their Messiah: "So they [Israel] have now been disobedient *in order that* by the mercy shown to you [Gentiles] they also may receive mercy." When Paul says that Israel was disobedient "in order that" Gentiles might get the benefits of the gospel, whose purpose does he have in mind? It can only be God's. For Israel did not conceive of their own disobedience as a way of blessing the Gentiles or winning mercy for themselves in such a round about fashion. The point of Romans 11:31 therefore is that God's hardening of Israel is not an end in itself, but is part of a saving purpose that will embrace all the nations. But in the short run we have to say that he wills a condition (hardness of heart) which he commands people to strive against ("Do not harden your heart" (Hebrews 3:8, 15; 4:7).

God's Right to Restrain Evil and His Will Not To

Another line of Biblical evidence that God sometimes wills to bring about what he disapproves is his choosing to use or not to use his right to restrain evil in the human heart.

Proverbs 21:1 says, "The king's heart is like channels of water in the hands of the Lord; he turns it wherever he wishes." An illustration of this divine right over the king's heart is given in Genesis 20. Abraham is sojourning in Gerar and says to king Abimelech that Sarah is his sister. So Abimelech takes her as part of his harem. But God is displeased and warns him in a dream that she is married to Abraham. Abimelech protests to God that he had taken her in his integrity. And God says (in verse 6), "Yes, I know that in the integrity of your heart you have done this, and *I also kept you from sinning against me; therefore I did not let you touch her.*"

What is apparent here is that God has the right and the power to restrain the sins of secular rulers. When he does, it is his will to do it. And when he does not, it is his will not to. Which is to say that sometimes God wills that their sins be restrained and sometimes he wills that they increase more than if he restrained them.

It is not an unjust infringement on human agency that the Creator has the right and power to restrain the evil actions of his creatures. Psalm 33:10-11 says, "The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nought; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of the LORD stands for ever, the thoughts of his heart to all

generations." Sometimes God frustrates the will of rulers by making their plans fail. Sometimes he does so by influencing their hearts the way he did Abimelech, without them even knowing it.

But there are times when God does not use this right because he intends for human evil to run its course. For example, God meant to put the sons of Eli to death. Therefore he willed that they not listen to their father's counsel: "Now Eli was very old; and he heard all that his sons were doing to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who served at the doorway of the tent of meeting. And he said to them, `Why do you do such things, the evil things that I hear from all these people? No, my sons; for the report is not good which I hear the Lord's people circulating. If one man sins against another, God will mediate for him; but if a man sins against the Lord, who can intercede for him?' But they would not listen to the voice of their father, *for the Lord desired to put them to death*" (1 Samuel 2:22-25).

Why would the sons of Eli not give heed to their father's good counsel? The answer of the text is "*because* the Lord desired to put them to death." This only makes sense if the Lord had the right and the power to restrain their disobedience—a right and power which he willed not to use. Thus we must say that in one sense God willed that the sons of Eli go on doing what he commanded them not to do: dishonoring their father and committing sexual immorality.

Moreover the word for "desired" in the clause, "the Lord *desired* to put them to death," is the same Hebrew word (*haphetz*) used in Ezekiel 18:23,32 and 33:11 where God asserts that he does not *desire* the death of the wicked. God desired to put the sons of Eli to death, but he does not desire the death of the wicked. This is a strong warning to us not to take one assertion, like Ezekiel 18:23 and assume we know the precise meaning without letting other scripture like 1 Samuel 2:25 have a say. The upshot of putting the two together is that in one sense God may desire the death of the wicked and in another sense he may not. Another illustration of God's choosing not to use his right to restrain evil is found in Romans 1:24-28. Three times Paul says that God hands people over (*paredoken*) to sink further into corruption. Verse 24: "God handed them over to the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves." Verse 26: "God handed them over to dishonorable passions." Verse 28: "And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God handed them over to a base mind and to improper conduct." God has the right and the power to restrain this evil the way he did for Abimelech. But he did not will to do that. Rather his will in this case was to punish, and part of God's punishment on evil is sometimes willing that evil increase. But this means that God chooses for behavior to come about which he commands not to happen. The fact that God's willing is punitive does not change that. And the fact that it is *justifiably* punitive is one of the points of this chapter. There are other examples we could give, but we pass on to a different line of evidence.

Does God Delight in the Punishment of the Wicked?

We just saw that God "desired" to put the sons of Eli to death, and that the word for desire is the same one used in Ezekiel 18:23 when God says he does not

"delight" in the death of the wicked. Another illustration of this complex desiring is found in Deuteronomy 28:63. Moses is warning of coming judgment on unrepentant Israel. What he says is strikingly different (not contradictory, I will argue) from Ezekiel 18:23. "And as the Lord took delight in doing you good and multiplying you, so *the Lord will take delight in bringing ruin upon you and destroying you.*"

Here an even stronger word for joy is used (*yasis*) when it says that God will "take delight over you to cause you to perish and to destroy you." We are faced with the inescapable biblical fact that in some sense God does not delight in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 18), and in some sense he does (Deuteronomy 28:63; 2 Samuel 2:25).

How Extensive Is the Sovereign Will of God?

Behind this complex relationship of two wills in God is the foundational biblical premise that God is indeed sovereign in a way that makes him ruler of all actions. R.T. Forster and V.P. Marston try to overcome the tension between God's will of decree and God's will of command by asserting that there is no such thing as God's sovereign will of decree: "Nothing in Scripture suggests that there is some kind of will or plan of God which is inviolable." This is a remarkable claim. Without claiming to be exhaustive it will be fair to touch on some scriptures briefly that do indeed "suggest that there is some kind of will or plan of God which is inviolable." There are passages that ascribe to God the final control over all calamities and disasters wrought by nature or by man. Amos 3:6, "Does evil befall a city, unless the LORD has done it? Isaiah 45:7, "I am the LORD, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make peace and create woe, I am the LORD, who do all these things." Lamentations 3:37-38, "Who has commanded and it came to pass, unless the Lord has ordained it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that good and evil come?" Noteworthy in these texts is that the calamities in view involve human hostilities and cruelties that God would disapprove of even as he wills that they be.

The apostle Peter wrote concerning God's involvement in the sufferings of his people at the hands of their antagonists. In his first letter he spoke of the "will of God" in two senses. It was something to be pursued and lived up to on the one hand. "Such is *the will of God*, that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men" (1 Peter 2:15). "Live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men but for *the will of God*" (4:2). On the other hand the will of God was not his moral instruction, but the state of affairs that he sovereignly brought about. "For it is better to suffer for doing right, *if that should be God's will*, than for doing wrong" (3:17). "Let those who suffer *according to God's will* do right and entrust their souls to a faithful Creator" (4:19). And in this context, the suffering which Peter has in mind is the suffering which comes from hostile people and therefore cannot come without sin.

In fact the New Testament saints seemed to live in the calm light of an overarching sovereignty of God concerning all the details of their lives and ministry. Paul expressed himself like this with regard to his travel plans. On taking leave of the saints in Ephesus he said, "I will return to you *if God wills*," (Acts 18:21). To the Corinthians he wrote, "I will come to you soon, *if the Lord*

wills" (1 Corinthians 4:19). And again, "I do not want to see you now just in passing; I hope to spend some time with you, *if the Lord permits*" (1 Corinthians 16:7).

The writer to the Hebrews says that his intention is to leave the elementary things behind and press on to maturity. But then he pauses and adds, "And this we will do *if God permits*" (6:3). This is remarkable since it is hard to imagine one even thinking that God might not permit such a thing unless one had a remarkably high view of the sovereign prerogatives of God.

James warns against the pride of presumption in speaking of the simplest plans in life without a due submission to the overarching sovereignty of God in whether the day's agenda might be interrupted by God's decision to take the life he gave. Instead of saying, "Tomorrow we will do such and such . . . you ought to say, *'If the Lord wills, we shall live and we shall do this or that'*" (James 4:15). Thus the saints in Caesarea, when they could not dissuade Paul from taking the risk to go to Jerusalem "ceased and said, *'The will of the Lord be done'*" (Acts 21:14). God would decide whether Paul would be killed or not, just as James said.

This sense of living in the hands of God, right down to the details of life was not new for the early Christians. They knew it already from the whole history of Israel, but especially from their wisdom literature. "The plans of the mind belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord" (Proverbs 16:1). "A man's mind plans his way, but the LORD directs his steps" (Proverbs 16:9). "Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the LORD that will be established" (Proverbs 19:21). "The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is wholly from the LORD" (Proverbs 16:33). "I know, O LORD, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps" (Jeremiah 10:23). Jesus had no quarrel with this sense of living in the hand of God. If anything, he intensified the idea with words like Matthew 10:29, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father."

This confidence that the details of life were in the control of God every day was rooted in numerous prophetic expressions of God's unstoppable, unthwartable sovereign purpose. "Remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, *'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose'*" (Isaiah 46:9-10; cf. 43:13). "all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing; and *he does according to his will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, 'What doest thou?'*" (Daniel 4:35). "I know that thou canst do all things, and that *no purpose of yours can be thwarted*" (Job 42:2).

"Our God is in the heavens; he does whatever he pleases" (Psalm 115:3).

One of the most precious implications of this confidence in God's inviolable sovereign will is that it provides the foundation of the "new covenant" hope for the holiness without which we will not see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14). In the old covenant the law was written on stone and brought death when it met with the resistance of unrenewed hearts. But the new covenant promise is that God will not let his purposes for a holy people shipwreck on the weakness of human will.

Instead he promises to do what needs to be done to make us what we ought to be. "And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live" (Deuteronomy 30:6). "I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances" (Ezekiel 36:27). "I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them; and I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me" (Jeremiah 32:40). "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, *for it is God who is at work in you to will and to work for his good pleasure*" (Philippians 2:12-13).

In view of all these texts I am unable to grasp what Forster and Marston might mean by saying, "Nothing in Scripture suggests that there is some kind of will or plan of God which is inviolable" (see note 26). Nor can I understand how Fritz Guy can say that the "will of God" is always a desiring and intending but not a sovereign, effective willing (see note 12). Rather the Scriptures lead us again and again to affirm that God's will is sometimes spoken of as an expression of his moral standards for human behavior and sometimes as an expression of his sovereign control even over acts which are contrary to that standard.

This means that the distinction between terms like "will of decree" and "will of command" or "sovereign will" and "moral will" is not an artificial distinction demanded by Calvinistic theology. The terms are an effort to describe the whole of biblical revelation. They are an effort to say Yes to all of the Bible and not silence any of it. They are a way to say Yes to the universal, saving will of 1 Timothy 2:4 and Yes to the individual unconditional election of Romans 9:6-23.

Does It Make Sense?

I turn now to the task of reflecting on how these two wills of God fit together and make sense—as far this finite and fallible creature can rise to that challenge. The first thing to affirm in view of all these texts is that God does not sin. "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory." (Isaiah 6:3). "God cannot be tempted by evil and he himself does not tempt anyone" (James 1:13). In ordering all things, including sinful acts, God is not sinning. For as Jonathan Edwards says, "It implies no contradiction to suppose that an act may be an evil act, and yet that it is a good thing that such an act should come to pass. . . . As for instance, it might be an evil thing to crucify Christ, but yet it was a good thing that the crucifying of Christ came to pass." 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.

Edwards points out that Arminians, it seems, must come to a similar conclusion. All must own that God sometimes wills not to hinder the breach of his own commands, because he does not in fact hinder it But you will say, God wills to permit sin, as he wills the creature should be left to his freedom; and if he should hinder it, he would offer violence to the nature of his own creature. I answer, this comes nevertheless to the very same thing that I say. You say, God does not will sin absolutely; but rather than alter the law of nature and the nature of free agents, he wills it. He wills what is contrary to excellency in some

particulars, for the sake of a more general excellency and order. So that the scheme of the Arminians does not help the matter.

This seems right to me, and it can be illustrated again by reflecting directly on 1 Timothy 2:4 where Paul says that God wills all persons to be saved. What are we to say of the fact that God wills something that in fact does not happen. There are two possibilities as far as I can see. One is that there is a power in the universe greater than God's which is frustrating him by overruling what he wills. Neither Calvinist nor Arminian affirms this.

The other possibility is that God wills not to save all, even though he is willing to save all, because there is something else that he wills more, which would be lost if he exerted his sovereign power to save all. This is the solution that I as a Calvinist affirm along with Arminians. In other words both Calvinists and Arminians affirm two wills in God when they ponder deeply over 1 Timothy 2:4. Both can say that God wills for all to be saved. But then when queried why all are not saved both Calvinist and Arminian answer that God is committed to something even more valuable than saving all.

The difference between Calvinists and Arminians lies not in whether there are two wills in God, but in what they say this higher commitment is. What does God will more than saving all? The answer given by Arminians is that human self-determination and the possible resulting love relationship with God are more valuable than saving all people by sovereign, efficacious grace. The answer given by Calvinists is that the greater value is the manifestation of the full range of God's glory in wrath and mercy (Romans 9:22-23) and the humbling of man so that he enjoys giving all credit to God for his salvation (1 Corinthians 1:29). This is utterly crucial to see, for what it implies is that 1 Timothy 2:4 does not settle the momentous issue of God's higher commitment which restrains him from saving all. There is no mention here of free will. Nor is there mention of sovereign, prevenient, efficacious grace. If all we had was this text we could only guess what restrains God from saving all. When free will is found in this verse it is a philosophical, metaphysical assumption not an exegetical conclusion. The assumption is that if God wills in one sense for all to be saved, then he cannot in another sense will that only some be saved. That assumption is not in the text, nor is it demanded by logic, nor is it taught in the rest of Scripture. Therefore 1 Timothy 2:4 does not settle the issue; it creates it. Both Arminians and Calvinists must look elsewhere to answer whether the gift of human self-determination or the glory of divine sovereignty is the reality that restrains God's will to save all people.

The Calvinists which I admire do not claim to have simple, easy solutions to complex Biblical tensions. When their writing is difficult this is because the Scriptures are difficult (as the apostle Peter admitted that, in part, they are, 2 Peter 3:16). These Calvinists are struggling to be faithful to diverse (but not contradictory) scriptures. Both Calvinists and Arminians feel at times that the ridicule directed against their complex expositions are in fact a ridicule against the complexity of the scriptures.

I find the effort of Stephen Charnock (1628-1680), a chaplain to Henry Cromwell and non-conformist pastor in London, to be balanced and helpful in holding the diverse scriptures on God's will together.

God doth not will [sin] directly, and by an efficacious will. He doth not directly will it, because he hath prohibited it by his law, which is a discovery of his will; so that if he should directly will sin, and directly prohibit it, he would will good and evil in the same manner, and there would be contradictions in God's will: to will sin absolutely, is to work it (Psalm 115:3): "God hath done whatsoever he pleased." God cannot absolutely will it, because he cannot work it. God wills good by a positive decree, because he hath decreed to effect it. He wills evil by a private decree, because he hath decreed not to give that grace which would certainly prevent it. God doth not will sin simply, for that were to approve it, but he wills it, in order to that good his wisdom will bring forth from it. He wills not sin for itself, but for the event.

Similarly Jonathan Edwards, writing about 80 years later comes to similar conclusions with somewhat different terminology.

When a distinction is made between God's revealed will and his secret will, or his will of command and decree, "will" is certainly in that distinction taken in two senses. His will of decree, is not his will in the same sense as his will of command is. Therefore, it is no difficulty at all to suppose, that the one may be otherwise than the other: his will in both senses is his inclination. But when we say he wills virtue, or loves virtue, or the happiness of his creature; thereby is intended, that virtue, or the creature's happiness, absolutely and simply considered, is agreeable to the inclination of his nature.

His will of decree is, his inclination to a thing, not as to that thing absolutely and simply, but with respect to the universality of things, that have been, are or shall be. So God, though he hates a thing as it is simply, may incline to it with reference to the universality of things. Though he hates sin in itself, yet he may will to permit it, for the greater promotion of holiness in this universality, including all things, and at all times. So, though he has no inclination to a creature's misery, considered absolutely, yet he may will it, for the greater promotion of happiness in this universality.

Putting it in my own words, Edwards said that the infinite complexity of the divine mind is such that God has the capacity to look at the world through two lenses. He can look through a narrow lens or through a wide-angle lens. When God looks at a painful or wicked event through his narrow lens, he sees the tragedy or the sin for what it is in itself and he is angered and grieved. "I do not delight in the death of anyone, says the Lord God" (Ezekiel 18:32). But when God looks at a painful or wicked event through his wide-angle lens, he sees the tragedy or the sin in relation to everything leading up to it and everything flowing out from it. He sees it in all the connections and effects that form a pattern or mosaic stretching into eternity. This mosaic, with all its (good and evil) parts he does delight in (Psalm 115:3).

God's emotional life is infinitely complex beyond our ability to fully comprehend. For example, who can comprehend that the Lord hears in one moment of time the prayers of ten million Christians around the world, and sympathizes with each

one personally and individually like a caring Father (as Hebrews 4:15 says he will), even though among those ten million prayers some are broken-hearted and some are bursting with joy? How can God weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice when they are both coming to him at the same time—in fact are always coming to him with no break at all?

Or who can comprehend that God is angry at the sin of the world every day (Psalm 7:11), and yet every day, every moment, he is rejoicing with tremendous joy because somewhere in the world a sinner is repenting (Luke 15:7,10,23)? Who can comprehend that God continually burns with hot anger at the rebellion of the wicked, grieves over the unholy speech of his people (Ephesians 4:29-30), yet takes pleasure in them daily (Psalm 149:4), and ceaselessly makes merry over penitent prodigals who come home?

Who of us could say what complex of emotions is not possible for God? All we have to go on here is what he has chosen to tell us in the Bible. And what he has told us is that there is a sense in which he does not experience pleasure in the judgment of the wicked, and there is a sense in which he does.

Therefore we should not stumble over the fact that God does and does not take pleasure in the death of the wicked. When Moses warns Israel that the Lord will take delight in bringing ruin upon them and destroying them if they do not repent (Deuteronomy 28:63), he means that those who have rebelled against the Lord and moved beyond repentance will not be able to gloat that they have made the Almighty miserable. God is not defeated in the triumphs of his righteous judgment. Quite the contrary. Moses says that when they are judged they will unwittingly provide an occasion for God to rejoice in the demonstration of his justice and his power and the infinite worth of his glory (Romans 9:22-23).

When God took counsel with himself as to whether he should save all people, he consulted not only the truth of what he sees when looking through the narrow lens but also the larger truth of what he sees when all things are viewed through the wide-angle lens of his all-knowing wisdom. If, as Calvinists say, God deems it wise and good to elect unconditionally some to salvation and not others, one may legitimately ask whether the offer of salvation to all is genuine. Is it made with heart? Does it come from real compassion? Is the willing that none perish a bona fide willing of love?

The way I would give an account of this is explained by Robert L. Dabney in an essay written over a hundred years ago. His treatment is very detailed and answers many objections that go beyond the limits of this chapter. I will simply give the essence of his solution which seems to me to be on the right track, though he, as well as I, would admit we do not "furnish an exhaustive explanation of this mystery of the divine will."

Dabney uses an analogy from the life of George Washington taken from Chief-Justice Marshall's *Life of Washington*. A certain Major André had jeopardized the safety of the young nation through "rash and unfortunate" treasonous acts. Marshall says of the death warrant, signed by Washington, "Perhaps on no occasion of his life did the commander-in-chief obey with more reluctance the stern mandates of duty and of policy." Dabney observes that Washington's compassion for André was "real and profound". He also had "plenary power to kill

or to save alive." Why then did he sign the death warrant? Dabney explains, "Washington's volition to sign the death-warrant of André did not arise from the fact that his compassion was slight or feigned, but from the fact that it was rationally counterpoised by a complex of superior judgments . . . of wisdom, duty, patriotism, and moral indignation [the wide-angle lens]."

Dabney imagines a defender of André, hearing Washington say, "I do this with the deepest reluctance and pity." Then the defender says, "Since you are supreme in this matter, and have full bodily ability to throw down that pen, we shall know by your signing this warrant that your pity is hypocritical." Dabney responds to this by saying, "The petulance of this charge would have been equal to its folly. The pity was real, but was restrained by superior elements of motive. Washington had official and bodily power to discharge the criminal, but he had not the sanctions of his own wisdom and justice." The corresponding point in the case of divine election is that "the absence of volition in God to save does not necessarily imply the absence of compassion." God has "a true compassion, which is yet restrained, in the case of the . . . non-elect, by consistent and holy reasons, from taking the form of a volition to regenerate." God's infinite wisdom regulates his whole will and guides and harmonizes (not suppresses) all its active principles."

In other words, God has a real and deep compassion for perishing sinners. Jeremiah points to this reality in God's heart. In Lamentations 3:32-33 he speaks of the judgment that God has brought upon Jerusalem: "Though he causes grief, he will have compassion according to the abundance of his steadfast love; for he does not *willingly* afflict or grieve the sons of men." The word "willingly" translates a composite Hebrew word (*milibo*) which means literally "from his heart" (cf. 1 Kings 12:33). It appears that this is Jeremiah's way of saying that God does will the affliction that he caused, but he does not will it in the same way he wills compassion. The affliction did not come "from his heart." Jeremiah was trying, as we are, to come to terms with the way a sovereign God wills two different things, affliction and compassion.

God's expression of pity and his entreaties have heart in them. There is a genuine inclination in God's heart to spare those who have committed treason against his kingdom. But his motivation is complex, and not every true element in it rises to the level of effective choice. In his great and mysterious heart there are kinds of longings and desires that are real—they tell us something true about his character. Yet not all of these longings govern God's actions. He is governed by the depth of his wisdom expressed through a plan that no ordinary human deliberation would ever conceive (Romans 11:33-36; 1 Corinthians 2:9). There are holy and just reasons for why the affections of God's heart have the nature and intensity and proportion that they do.

Dabney is aware that several kinds of objections can be raised against the analogy of George Washington as it is applied to God. He admits that "no analogy can be perfect between the actions of a finite and the infinite intelligence and will." Yet I think he is right to say that the objections do not overthrow the essential truth that there can be, in a noble and great heart (even a divine heart), sincere compassion for a criminal that is nevertheless not set free.

Therefore I affirm with John 3:16 and 1 Timothy 2:4 that God loves the world with a deep compassion that desires the salvation of all men. Yet I also affirm that God has chosen from before the foundation of the world whom he will save from sin. Since not all people are saved we must choose whether we believe (with the Arminians) that God's will to save all people is restrained by his commitment to human self-determination or whether we believe (with the Calvinists) that God's will to save all people is restrained by his commitment to the glorification of his sovereign grace (Ephesians 1:6,12,14; Romans 9:22-23).

This decision should not be made on the basis of metaphysical assumptions about what we think human accountability requires. It should be made on the basis of what the scriptures teach. I do not find in the Bible that human beings have the ultimate power of self-determination. As far as I can tell it is a philosophical inference based on metaphysical presuppositions. On the other hand this book aims to show that the sovereignty of God's grace in salvation is taught in Scripture.

My contribution has simply been to show that God's will for all people to be saved is not at odds with the sovereignty of God's grace in election. That is, my answer to the above question about what restrains God's will to save all people is his supreme commitment to uphold and display the full range of his glory through the sovereign demonstration of his wrath and mercy for the enjoyment of his elect and believing people from every tribe and tongue and nation.

From *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*. Thomas Schreiner/Bruce Ware, editors (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000). Desiring God highly recommends this excellent work. This article is now an appendix in *The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God's Delight in Being God* by John Piper (Sisters: Multnomah, 2 ed., 2000).

Used by permission of Baker Book House Company © 1995. All rights to this material are reserved. Materials are not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in other media, or mirrored at other sites without written permission from Baker Book House Company. www.bakerbooks.com