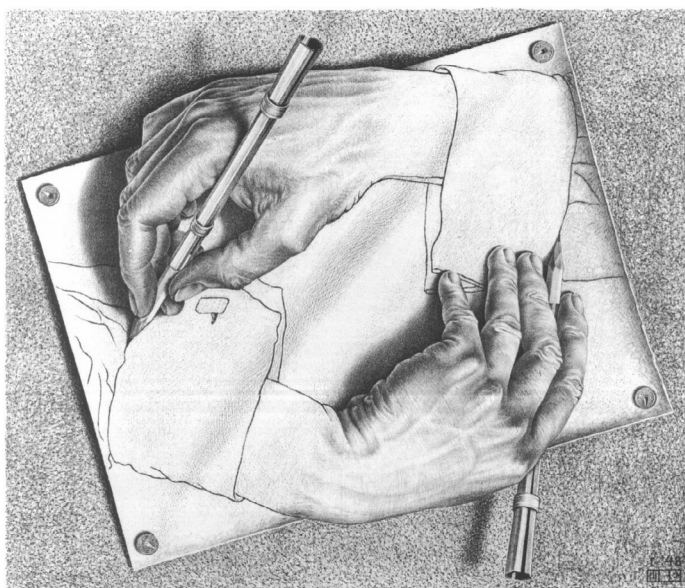


## SPECIAL EDITION

# The Sovereignty of God, Part 2

by Aaron Welch



Hello, everyone. Martin here. Once again, it is my privilege and delight to publish another installment of an article on the sovereignty of God by my good friend Aaron Welch. When this short sub-series within the Romans series is completed, I will be back with you zapping off my own thoughts and words on this important chapter of

Scripture, Romans, chapter 9. In the meantime, this temporary respite from ZWTF writing duties gives me much needed time to prepare other of my manuscripts for eventual publication in new books. As always, thank you for your patience and for your continued support of this work. The grace and peace of God be with you all. —MZ

### Is Everything God's Will?

For some, the difficulty in believing that Scripture teaches the absolute sovereignty of God seems to stem from a lack of understanding that there is more than one sense in which God's will is spoken of in Scripture. As an illustration of the two different ways in which I believe God's will is referred to in Scripture, let's consider Exodus 4:18-23. In this passage, we find that Moses, on God's behalf, was to give Pharaoh the following command: "Let my people go!" Now, let's consider the following question: Was Pharaoh disobeying the will of God when he refused to let God's people go, or was he actually doing the will of God by refusing to let God's people go?

I submit that there is a scriptural sense in which both can be said to be true. It just depends on what we mean by "the will of God." There are, I submit, two different senses in which God's will is spoken of in Scripture. I will refer to one sense as God's preceptive will and the other as God's providential will. For those who may object to my use of these terms on the basis that the expressions "preceptive will" and "providential will" do not appear in Scripture, I must emphasize that, in using these expressions, I am simply applying descriptive labels to distinguish and help clarify two concepts that I think are very much present in Scripture in the verses where God's will is referred to (in this regard, my use of these expressions is no different than when someone uses words such as "contrast principle," "preexistence," "finite," "universal," "person," "agent," "sentient," "unconscious," "sensation" or "millennial kingdom" when referring to ideas or concepts that are

believed to be present in Scripture, even if not explicitly referred to as such).

### God's Preceptive Will

By God's preceptive will I simply mean God's instructions, commandments, or precepts. Some have referred to this will of God as His "moral will" or His "will of command." However, to speak of God's moral will (in contrast with another sense in which God's will is spoken of) would seem to imply that God's other will is immoral (or at best, amoral) in nature. Yet I believe that whatever God wills is always consistent with the best interests and



ultimate happiness of His creatures. For this reason (and because I find the expression "will of command" somewhat awkward), I prefer to use the term "preceptive will" to convey the idea that I believe is being expressed in certain contexts when God's will is referred to.

A precept is defined as, "a rule that says how people should behave," or "a commandment or direction given as a rule of action or conduct." This will of God refers to the standard of righteousness by which people ought to live in relationship with God and others, whether this standard is revealed by God through an angel or prophet, engraved in stone (as with the Ten Commandments), or is a law that God has written on the human heart (Rom. 2:15). We've already seen one example of God's preceptive will—i.e., the command given to Pharaoh (through Moses) to let the people of Israel go free. Here are some other examples where I believe God's preceptive will is in view:

**Matthew 7:21**— "Not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord, will enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."

**Matthew 12:50**— "For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

**Mark 3:35**— "Whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother."

**John 7:17**— "If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority."

**John 9:31**— "We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him."

**1 Corinthians 1:1**— "Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God..." (cf. 1 Timothy 1:1)

**Romans 12:2**— "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

**Ephesians 5:15-17**— "Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is."

**1 Thessalonians 4:3-5**— "For this is the will of God, your sanctification..."

**1 Thessalonians 5:18**— "In everything be giving thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

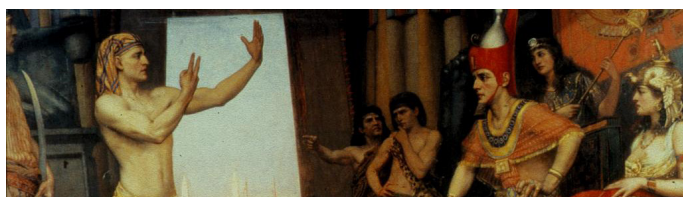
In these examples, the will of God that is in view refers to the precepts or standard of righteousness by which human beings ought to live within a given administration. To do the will of God in these verses is to obey God's command(s), or keep His precepts. Now, something important to keep in mind is that this particular will of God refers to something that can be spoken of as being obeyed or disobeyed. People act contrary to God's precepts and commandments all the time. That, of course, is what sin is (1 John 3:4).

But what if one's failure to keep God's precepts/commands is ultimately due to circumstances outside of one's control (and which were ultimately brought about by God himself)? Does a failure to keep the precepts God gives us cease to be sin just because God is the ultimate explana-

tion for why one is failing to do this? No. Regardless of the ultimate explanation for why one is disobeying God by failing to keep His precepts, the fact is that the failure of any moral being to keep God's law makes them a sinner. So it's simply not true that a person cannot be considered a sinner simply because God is ultimately responsible (and the ultimate explanation) for what they do and why they do it. For again, sin essentially consists in a violation of God's precepts (all of which are summed up in the precepts to love Him supremely and to love one's associate as oneself). A failure to love God supremely and to love one's

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associate as oneself doesn't cease to be sin/lawlessness just because God is the ultimate explanation for why one is failing to do so. Thus, contrary to the view of many who oppose the Biblical position that all is according to God's plan, sin is sin regardless of whether it is a part of God's plan for a being to sin, or not. Sin (the violation of God's precepts) doesn't cease to be sin merely because the sinner is acting in accord with the plan of God. (*See link below.*)



As noted earlier, Pharaoh disobeyed the divine command given him through Moses ten times before he finally relented and let Israel go. In Exodus 9 we read that, during the 7th plague, Pharaoh told Moses that he would let Israel go if only he would put an end to the plague. When the plague ended, we read that “he sinned yet again and hardened his heart, he and his servants...and he did not let the people of Israel go, just as Yahweh had spoken through Moses.” In other words, Moses disobeyed God's will in the sense of doing contrary to the command he was given. But what's fascinating here is that, in the very next

two verses, we read the following: “Then Yahweh said to Moses, ‘Go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may show these signs of mine among them, and that you may tell in the hearing of your son and of your grandson how I have dealt harshly with the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them, that you may know that I am Yahweh.’”

In these verses we read that Pharaoh sinned against God by hardening his heart and disobeying God's will for him—i.e., he disobeyed the command God gave him through Moses. But notice that Moses gives us *two different perspectives on the same event here*. That which in chapter 9 is spoken of as being something for which Pharaoh was responsible is, in chapter 10, spoken of as being something for which God was ultimately responsible. In other words, it was part of God's plan that Pharaoh disobey God. And this brings us to the second sense in which God's will is spoken of in Scripture.

### **God's Providential Will**

In addition to referring to the precepts or commands given to human beings, I believe that God's will can, in certain contexts, also refer to His intention, plan and purpose, as manifested in His providential control over the circumstances of life. As an example of this will of God, consider the following verses:

**1 Cor. 4:19**— “But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills...”

**Gal. 1:4**— Christ “gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us from this present wicked eon, according to the will of our God and Father.”

**Rom. 1:10**— Paul prayed “that somehow, by God's will, I may now at last succeed in coming to you.”

**Rom. 8:27**: “The Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”

**1 Tim. 2:4**— “...our Saviour, God, Who wills that all mankind be saved and come into a realization of the truth.”

**Eph. 1:9-10**— “...making known to us the secret of His will (in accord with His delight, which He purposed in Him) to have an administration of the complement of



the eras, to head up all in the Christ -- both that in the heavens and that on the earth..."

**James 1:18**— "Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth..."

**James 4:15**— Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.'"

**1 Pet. 3:17**— "For it is better to suffer for doing right, if that should be God's will, than for doing wrong."

**Rev. 4:11**— "Worthy art Thou, O Lord, our Lord and God, to get glory and honor and power; For Thou does create all, and because of Thy will they were, and are created."

In contrast with the first set of verses (where it's clear that God's will refers to something which people can choose to either do or not), the will of God referred to above is not something that can be disobeyed or thwarted; it's in a different category altogether. For example, the will of God that James has in view in chapter four verse fifteen involves whether or not man's plans will find



fulfillment. This will of God comes to pass regardless of whether those making plans are taking God's purpose and providential control into consideration when making plans, or not. It comes to pass regardless of whether we're living in obedience to God's revealed commands/instruction, or not. This will of God is not something that can be thwarted or resisted in any way. Either man's plans will find fulfillment, or they won't. Either way, it's due to God's plan, as manifested in his providential control over the circumstances of life.

Similarly, Peter speaks of people suffering for doing right "If that should be God's will." When (and how) a righteous person suffers for doing good—or whether they will suffer at all—is completely up to God's will,

in the sense of His plan or intention. Unlike God's commands/injunctions, this will of God is not something that can be thwarted or resisted. The circumstances that result in one person's suffering for doing right and another person's not suffering for doing right is entirely up to God, Who, in His wisdom, exercises providential control over the circumstances of life.

When we recognize the distinction between the two senses in which God's will is spoken of, we can understand how the Bible can talk about God's will being resisted or thwarted in some verses, and its being irresistible and unable to be thwarted in others.

### Three Characteristics of God's Providential Will

There are at least three characteristics of the providential will of God (His intention, plan or purpose) which distinguish it from the other sense in which God's will (his commands/precepts) is referred to in Scripture:

#### 1. God's intention and purpose is hidden, except when prophetically revealed by God.

Whenever God's will refers to His precepts and commands, it is, without exception, something that has been revealed to, or is known by, one or more people. In contrast, when God's will refers to that which finds expression in God's providential control over the circumstances of life (His purpose and intention), it involves what God has determined in advance, and which is unfolding each and every moment. With the exception of when God makes it known through prophecy, the only thing that reveals God's providential will is the unfolding of circumstances and events in time. If one wants to know what God's preceptive will is for the body of Christ, all one needs to do is read Paul's letters. But if one wants to know what God's providential will (His plan and intention) is for next Sunday, one will have to wait until next Monday.

#### 2. It is certain and will be fulfilled.

Unlike God's preceptive will, or will of command, no one can withstand, thwart or resist God's intention, plan and purpose:

**Psalms 33:10-11**— "Yahweh brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; He frustrates the plans of the peoples. The counsel of Yahweh stands for the eon, the plans of His heart to all generations."

Here we find an example of Hebrew parallelism (where, for emphasis, the same basic idea is conveyed in two different ways). In v. 10, the “counsel of the nations” and the “plans of the peoples” conveys the same idea. Similarly, in v. 11, the “counsel of Yahweh” and the “plans of his heart” also conveys the same idea.

**Job 23:13-14**— “But He is unique and who can turn Him? And what His soul desires, that He does. For He performs what is appointed for me, and many such decrees are with Him.”

**Job 42:2**— “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.”

**Isaiah 14:24-27**— “Yahweh of hosts has sworn: ‘As I have planned, so shall it be, and as I have purposed, so shall it stand, that I will break the Assyrian in My land, and on My mountains trample him underfoot; and his yoke shall depart from them, and his burden from their shoulder.’ This is the purpose that is purposed concerning the whole earth, and this is the hand that is stretched out over all the nations. For Yahweh of hosts has purposed, and who will annul it? His hand is stretched out, and who will turn it back?”

**Isaiah 46:9-10**— “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’.”

We know that this declaring or telling by God is not merely passive prediction on God’s part of what’s going to happen; it involves God’s counsel and purpose (we find here another example of parallelism, with two words being used to convey the same basic idea).

**Isaiah 55:10-11**— “For as the rain and snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall My word be that goes out from My mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.”

**Ezekiel 12:25**— “For I the Lord shall speak, and whatever word I speak will be performed.”

**Daniel 4:35**— “All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay His hand or say to Him, ‘What have You done?’”

Note the phrase, “All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth.”

There is a contrast being made here, and we need to understand it in order to properly interpret what it means for all the inhabitants of the earth to be accounted as nothing. Does this mean that God doesn’t value or care for His human creatures? Not at all. The contrast explains what is meant: all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing *with respect to their ability to thwart or frustrate God’s will*. And what’s even more remarkable is that what’s true on earth is true also in the heavenly realm. And who’s in heaven right now? According to Scripture, Satan and his messengers.

**Romans 9:19-20**— You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who can resist His intention?” But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?”

Here, God’s intention has to do with God’s deciding to show mercy to (and save) some for the eons, and his deciding to harden (and destroy) others. This will or intention of God finds expression in God’s providential control over the circumstances of people’s lives, which leads to some becoming vessels of honor and to others becoming vessels of dishonor. Unlike God’s will as expressed in his precepts/commands, this intention of God is not something that can be either obeyed or disobeyed by human beings. Notice that Paul does not say that the hypothetical protestor of v. 19 is mistaken in his belief that God’s intention cannot be withstood. This is taken for granted. What Paul objects to is the idea that people have any good and justified reason to complain

against the fact that God, in His infinite wisdom, has chosen different roles for different people (in accord with his “purpose of the eons”).

—Aaron Welch

(To be continued.)

