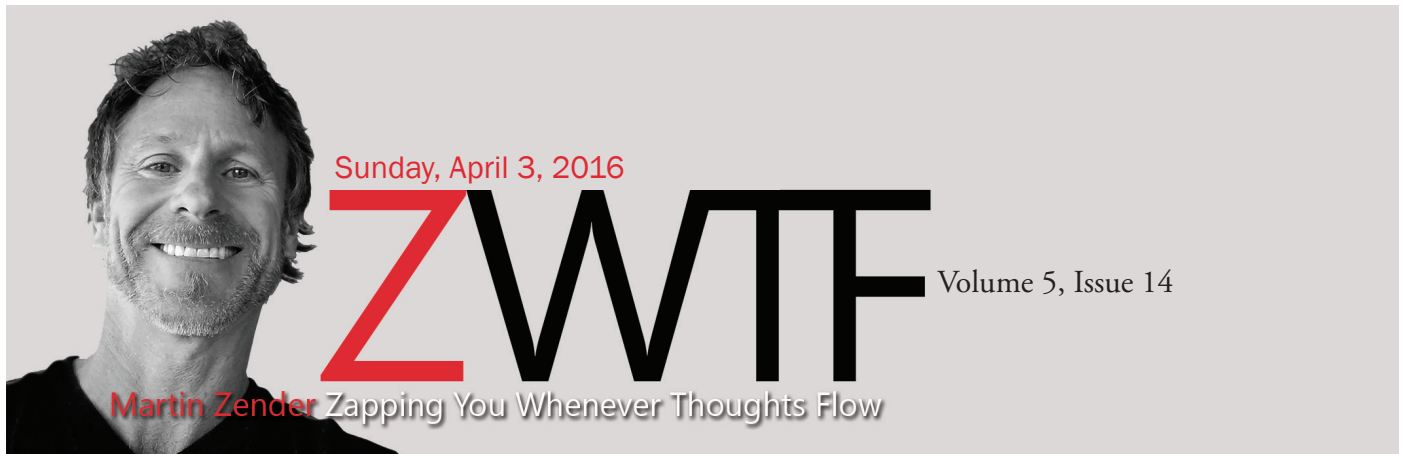




SPECIAL EDITION

The Sovereignty of God, Part 3

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

Prophecy

Whenever we find prophecies in Scripture, we're reading what God's intention or purpose is for the future. And that which is prophesied is certain to come to pass. Here are a few well-known examples:

- In Genesis 3:15 the promise of a Savior was made shortly after the "forbidden fruit" was eaten by Adam and Eve.
- In Psalm 22 we find that the Messiah would die by crucifixion.



- In Isaiah 53 it's foretold that the Messiah would die as a sin-offering.
- Daniel 9:26 reveals the time when the Messiah would come.

Occasionally we read words like, "These things happened in order that the Scripture may be fulfilled." In other words, prophesied events are not a coincidence that God merely foresaw. No; prophesied events are events which God has purposed to bring about. In Luke 24:44, we read, "Then He said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.'" As an example of what had to be fulfilled concerning Christ, we read in John 19:36: "For these things took place so that the Scripture may be fulfilled: 'Not one of His bones will be broken.'"

In Ezra 1:1 we read,

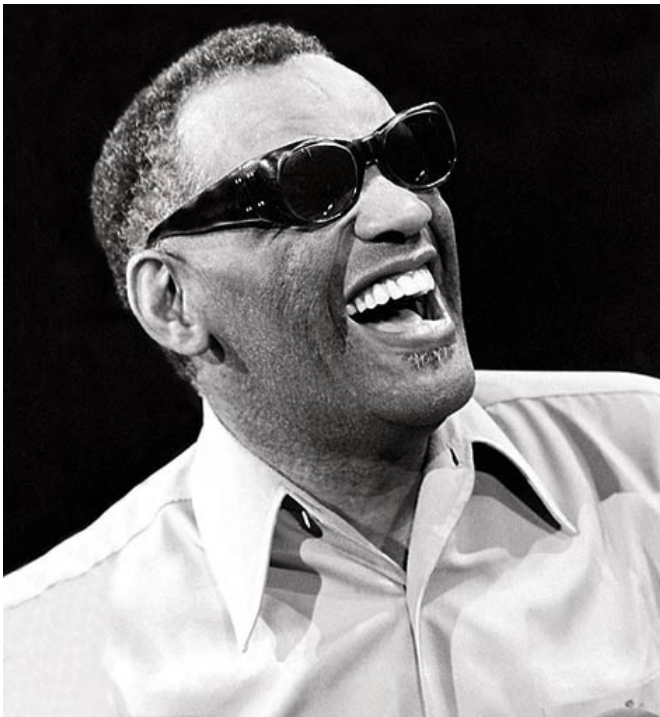
In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of Yahweh by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, Yahweh stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so

that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing (compare with v. 5).

As is evident from this and many other verses, prophecy in Scripture is not merely prediction by God. It is promised performance by God. History is not unfolding randomly as a result of chance events that God merely foresees in advance (as if God were simply an infallible psychic, or as if God stood outside of time, passively observing events as they take place within time). History is and always has been unfolding according to God's sovereign purpose and intention.

God's intention, plan and purpose is detailed and comprehensive.

We've already considered some key statements by Paul and others in which this is being taught; the following verses can be understood as further confirmation of this truth. According to Scripture, God is responsible for:



- ▶ Good and evil (Job 2:10; Isaiah 45:7; Lamentations 3:37-38).
- ▶ Whether a person is born mute, deaf, or blind (Exodus 4:11; John 9:1-3).
- ▶ The death of human beings through the instrumentality of other human beings (2 Chronicles 22:7-9; Isaiah 10:5-15).
- ▶ When disaster comes to a city (Amos 3:6).

- ▶ When a sparrow dies (Mt. 10:29, 30).
- ▶ The losing or gaining of wealth (Deut. 8:18).
- ▶ Every step we take (Job 31:4; Proverbs 20:24; Jeremiah 10:23).
- ▶ The result of a lot cast into the lap (Prov. 16:33).
- ▶ Whether one sins or not (Gen. 20:6; 1 Samuel 2:25).
- ▶ Whether or not our plans find fulfillment (James 4:13-15; cf. Prov. 16:1).
- ▶ A person's being wounded, healed, killed and made alive (Deut. 32:39).

The last verse referenced above is an example of what can be called a "spectrum text," since it affirms that both ends of the spectrum—and by implication everything in between—fall within God's sovereign will:

See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.

The point of mentioning life and death and wounding and healing is to establish the extremes of life over which God has complete control. And notice that God's very claim of uniqueness ("I am He, and there is no god besides Me") rests on this assertion. Controlling the full spectrum of human existence is God's self-chosen basis for upholding His Deity.

Another example of a "spectrum passage" is 1 Samuel 2:6-8, which reads,

Yahweh kills and brings to life; He brings down to Sheol and raises up. Yahweh makes poor and makes rich; He brings low and He exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust; He lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor.

"Control over the hearts of human beings"

In Proverbs 21:1, we read, "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of Yahweh; He turns it wherever He will."

The word "heart" in Scripture, when used figuratively, refers to the center of volitional, reasoning and moral activity. Solomon singles out kings in this verse to make a point: even the most powerful people on earth are only acting in accordance with God's purpose. God runs the universe, and He directs the flow of world affairs as simply and easily as a farmer directs water around his fields. We've already looked at how God controlled the heart of Pharaoh to accomplish His purpose. The following are some more examples that illustrate the complete control God has over the hearts of human beings:



“Controlling the full spectrum of human existence is God’s self-chosen basis for upholding His Deity.”

► Deuteronomy 2:30— But 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 he is this day.

► Deuteronomy 30:6— “Moreover Yahweh your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live.”

► Jeremiah 24:7— “And I will give them a heart to know Me, for I am Yahweh; and they will be My people, and I will be their God, for they will return to Me with their whole heart.”

► Joshua 11:19-20— “There was not a city that made peace with the people of Israel except the Hivites, the inhabitants of Gibeon. They took them all in battle. For it was Yahweh’s doing to harden their hearts that they should come against Israel in battle, in order that they should be devoted to destruction and should receive no mercy but be destroyed, just as Yahweh commanded Moses.”

► Ezra 6:22— “And they [the returned exiles of Israel] kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy, for Yahweh had made them joyful and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that He aided them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.”

► Ezra 7:27— “Blessed be Yahweh, the God of our fathers, who put such a thing as this into the heart of the king, to beautify the house of Yahweh that is in Jerusalem.

► Psalm 105:23-25— “Then Israel came to Egypt; Jacob sojourned in the land of Ham. And Yahweh made His people very fruitful and made them stronger than their foes. He turned their hearts to hate His people, to deal craftily with His servants.”

► Psalm 33:14-15— “From the heavens Yahweh looks down; He sees all the sons of humanity. From His established dwelling— He peers upon all those dwelling on the earth, He Who is forming their hearts individually, Who is understanding all their doings.”

► Ezekiel 36:22-27, 31-32—

Therefore, say to the house of Israel, “Thus says Yahweh God, ‘It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for My holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you went... Then the nations will know that I am Yahweh, declares Yahweh God, when I prove Myself holy among you in their sight. For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands, and bring you into your own land. Then I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances...Then you will remember your evil ways and your deeds that were not good, and you will loathe yourselves in your own sight for your iniquities and your abominations. I am not doing this for your sake,’ declares Yahweh God, ‘let it be known to you. Be ashamed and confounded for your ways, O house of Israel!’”

A good example in the Greek scriptures demonstrating God’s control over the hearts of human beings can be found in Revelation 17:16-17. There, we read,

And the ten horns that you saw, they and the wild beast will hate the prostitute. They will make her desolate and naked, and devour her flesh and burn her up with fire, for God imparts to their hearts to form His opinion, and to form one opinion, and to give their kingdom to the wild beast, until the words of God shall be accomplished.

The “wild beast” here is obviously an evil person (he’s the coming “man of lawlessness” referred to by Paul in 2 Thess. 2:3). And the ten horns are ten evil kings who are

said to “make war on the Lamb.” So at this future time it will be God’s “providential will” (his plan/intention) to cause these kings to align themselves with the wild beast and to destroy a city and its inhabitants (which the “prostitute” represents). Notice we’re also told that their destroying the city will accomplish the words of God. As noted earlier, this means that God’s prophecies are not mere predictions which God knows will happen, but rather are divine intentions to make sure certain events come to pass.

“Even the wicked”

In Proverbs 16:4 we read, “Yahweh has made everything for its purpose, even the wicked for the day of trouble.” Peter reaffirms this remarkable truth when he describes the unbelieving Jews of his day as “...stumbling also at the word, being stubborn, to which they were appointed also” (1 Pet 2:8).

According to Christ, no one knows God except those to whom Christ has chosen to reveal him (Mt. 11:25-27), no one knows the “mysteries of the kingdom” or can re-



ceive Christ’s teaching except those to whom it has been granted (Matthew 13:11), and no one can come to Him unless they have been drawn by the Father (John 6:44). We cannot receive even one thing unless it has been given to us from heaven (John 3:27). God alone is ultimately responsible for whether one receives the truth or not.

According to Paul, a person becomes a believer rather than an unbeliever because God chose them before the disruption of the world and predestined them for adoption as sons through Christ Jesus (Ephesians 1:5). Those who believe were chosen beforehand as the “firstfruits”

to be saved (Rom 8:28-30; 2 Thess. 2:13). It was granted to them by God that they should believe (Phil 1:29), and thus God graciously assigned to them a measure of faith (Rom 12:3). In order for one to come to a knowledge of the truth and escape the snare of the devil, God must grant them repentance (2 Tim. 2:25-26; cf. Acts 11:18). Paul understood that it was God’s grace—not his own in-

“No one remains an unbeliever apart from divinely-controlled circumstances.”



nate goodness or willingness—that was the source of his faith and love (1 Tim 1:13-14). When a person believes and becomes a “new creation in Christ,” this is no less the sovereign work of God than the creation of the heavens and the earth. It is all God’s doing (2 Cor. 5:17-18).

Although God certainly works through the instrumentality of human beings in reconciling people to Himself, it is God alone who “gives the growth” (1 Cor. 3:5-9). There is nothing that we contribute to our salvation that does not ultimately have its source in God. Apart from God’s Spirit at work in one’s mind and heart, one would have no interest in spiritual things (1 Cor. 2:14). Our hearts must be opened by God just so that we will pay attention to what is being said when the gospel is proclaimed to us (Acts 16:14), and those who hear and believe the truth do so only because they were appointed or set by God for this (Acts 13:48). No one becomes a believer or remains an unbeliever apart from the divinely-controlled circumstances that God is using to accomplish His redemptive purpose in the world. God also determines who goes on to spiritual maturity, and who doesn’t (Heb. 6:1-3).

I will close this section with the beautiful and inspired words of Job (who, as noted earlier, clearly understood and believed in the absolute and universal sovereignty of God over His creation):

But ask the beasts, and they will teach you; the birds of the heavens, and they will tell you; or the bushes of the earth, and they will teach you; and the fish of the sea will declare to you. Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? Who among all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this? In His hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind. Does not the ear test words

as the palate tastes food? Wisdom is with the aged, and understanding in length of days.

With God are wisdom and might; He has counsel and understanding. If He tears down, none can rebuild; if He shuts a man in, none can open. If He withholds the waters, they dry up; if He sends them out, they overwhelm the land. With Him are strength and sound wisdom; the deceived and the deceiver are His. He leads counselors away stripped, and judges He makes fools. He looses the bonds of kings and binds a waistcloth on their hips. He leads priests away stripped and overthrows the mighty. He deprives of speech those who are trusted and takes away the discernment of the elders. He pours contempt on princes and loosens the belt of the strong. He uncovers the deeps out of darkness and brings deep darkness to light. He makes nations great, and He destroys them; He enlarges nations, and leads them away. He takes away understanding from the chiefs of the people of the earth and makes them wander in a trackless waste. They grope in the dark without light, and He makes them stagger like a drunken man (Job 12:7-25).

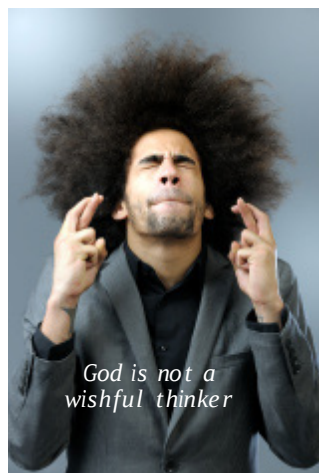
Both obedience and disobedience to God’s “preceptive will” is in accord with God’s “providential will”

One of the verses I provided earlier as an example of God’s “preceptive will” was 1 Corinthians 1:1, where Paul speaks of having been called an apostle “through the will of God.” The reason I included this verse as an example of God’s preceptive will (rather than His “providential will”) is because of what Paul says in 1 Tim. 1:1 (where he speaks of his apostleship as being “according to the commandment [or “injunction”] of God”). It’s also clear that Paul considered the heavenly vision through which he was called an apostle as being something to which he was obedient rather than disobedient (Acts 26:19). At the same time, I think it’s equally clear that Paul’s apostolic calling was also in accord with God’s “providential will” (His intention or purpose) for Paul’s life.

In Acts 26:15-16, when recounting his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus, Paul quotes Christ as declaring, “Rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen Me and to those in which I will appear to you...” This purpose was, ultimately, the purpose of God (which Christ was carrying out when he appeared to Paul). And since Christ knew that God is operating all in accord with the counsel of His will, we have no reason to think that, when Christ left

heaven to appear to Paul on the road to Damascus, He was unsure of whether He would be successful or not, or that He had a “Plan B” in case Paul wasn’t obedient to his commission.

That Paul understood his apostolic injunction from God as being inseparable from God’s sovereign purpose for his life seems clear from the fact that he spoke of himself as having been severed by God from his mother’s womb, and called by His grace (Gal. 1:15; compare with God’s words concerning the prophet Jeremiah in chapter 1, v. 5: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations”). The fact that Paul connects his apostolic calling with his being severed by God from his mother’s womb implies that Paul understood his calling as being in accord with God’s providential control over the entire duration of his life. Similarly, Paul’s mention of God’s



grace in this verse indicates that Paul understood his apostolic calling as being something that he couldn’t have been disobedient to. For Paul, God’s grace was not something that merely invited or attempted to persuade people to act a certain way, or to follow a certain path. Rather, Paul considered God’s grace as being an irresistible force or power that overwhelms us (1 Tim. 1:14). It was God’s grace—not he himself, Paul—that Paul understood as being the explanation for why he’d become an apostle, as well as the reason for his toiling “more exceedingly” than the other apostles (1 Cor. 15:8-10). In other words, Paul attributed his initial obedience to the “heavenly vision” through which he was made an apostle (as well as his continued obedience and effort) to God’s grace, rather than to himself.

—Aaron Welch (To be continued.)

