

SPECIAL EDITION

The Sovereignty of God, Part 4

by Aaron Welch

Greetings. Here is the final installment of Aaron Welch's brilliant series on the sovereignty of God. I will be back with you next Sunday wringing insights from my own pen on this same theme from the ninth chapter of Romans. Keep plugging away, people. Our redemption draws nigh. —MZ

In contrast with Paul's apostolic calling, it's equally clear from Scripture that God's "providential will" for people sometimes involves his "preceptive will" not being done (in fact, during this present wicked eon, at least, it seems to the exception rather than the rule when God's "preceptive will" is actually done). Consider the following examples:

1. The Crucifixion of Christ

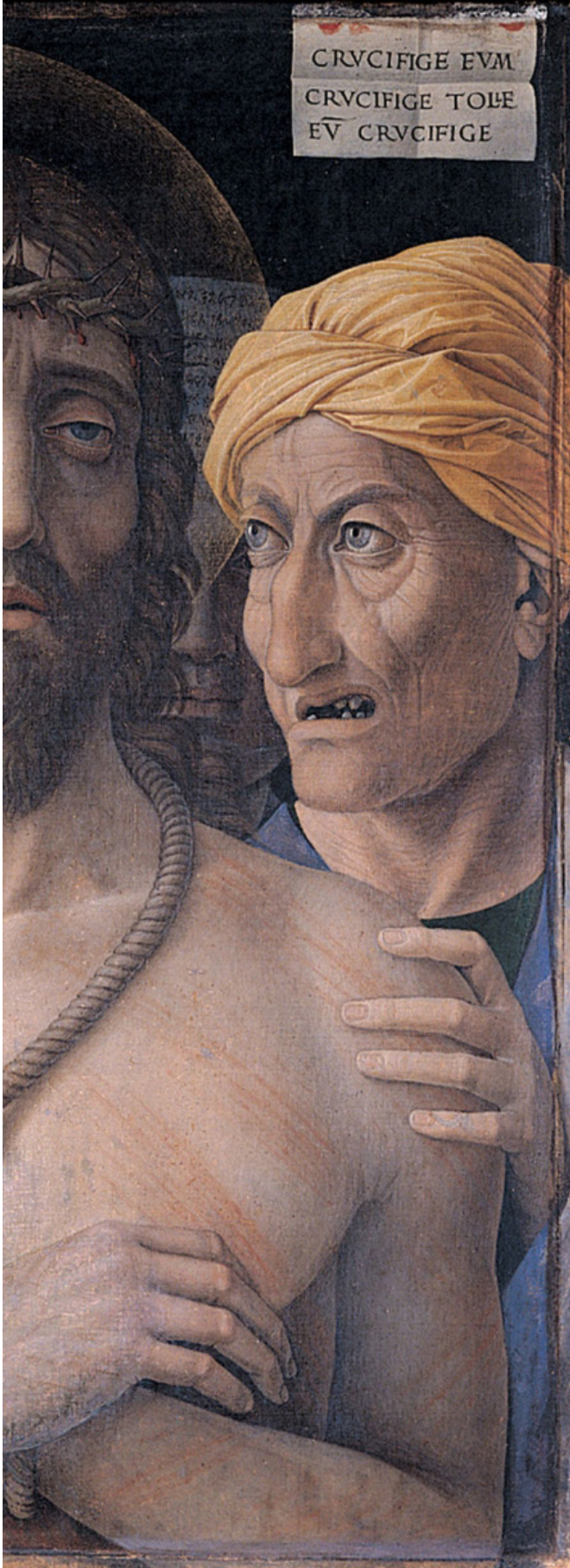
In Exodus 23:7 we find that it's God's preceptive will that innocent people not be put to death. Yet it was according to God's sovereign plan and intention that wicked men put Christ (the most innocent man who has ever lived) to death.

In Acts 2:23 we read that "Jesus was delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God." This "delivering up" of Jesus involved the sinful actions of



many people, including the chief priests and scribes. But it first involved Jesus' betrayal by Judas. This was, of course, a morally evil act, and is said to have been inspired directly by Satan (Luke 22:3). But Judas' betrayal of Christ had been prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures. It had to happen, and was thus in accord with God's purpose and intention (see John 13:18; Psalm 41:9). So here we find that God willed something in one sense that He obviously did not will in another sense. That is, God purposed/intended that a sinful act take place, but he did not approve of or delight in the sinful act in itself (as is evident from his precept/command against it).

The evil that God purposed to take place was a means to a greater good. As we read in Isaiah 53:10, it was "the will (or desire) of Yahweh to crush" His Son, and it was God who caused Him to be wounded (in the Septuagint, the Greek word translated "will" or "desire" in this verse is *boulomai*, which means "to will deliberately"). But this great evil that was in accord with God's purpose and intention—and which necessarily involved the sinful actions of human (as well as celestial) beings—was all for a greater good.



In Acts 4:27-28, Peter declared:

For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your plan had designated beforehand to take place.

What's interesting is that the word translated "plan" or "counsel" in both of these verses (*boule*) refers to God's sovereign will and purpose, since it's something that could not be thwarted by human beings. But this same word also appears in Luke 7:30, where we're told that "the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose (or counsel) for themselves, not having been baptized by John." In this verse, the same word refers to God's preceptive will for certain people at that time. So we have here yet another example in which the same word in Scripture can be used to refer to both God's sovereign purpose/intention (which can't be withstood) and his precepts/commands for people (which can be either obeyed or disobeyed).

2. The Persecution of the Righteous by the Wicked

Peter wrote about God's involvement in the persecution of believing Israelites at the hands of their unbelieving antagonists. In his first letter he spoke of the will of God as something to be pursued and lived up to: "Live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men but for the will of God" (1 Pet. 4:2). But in the same letter he spoke of the will of God as God's purpose and providential control over the circumstances in which believers found themselves: "For it is better to suffer for doing right, if that should be God's will, than for doing wrong" (1 Pet. 3:17). And in this latter context, the suffering which Peter had in mind is the suffering which comes from the persecution of unbelievers, and which therefore cannot come about without disobedience to God's preceptive will. Whether or not a person suffers for doing good rather than for doing evil is not up to them; it's up to the will of God—i.e., God's purpose and intention— which embraces all the circumstances of life. It is this will that Peter has in view here. In any given situation, whether a righteous person suffers for doing good or not, is completely up to God, and (unlike God's commands/injunctions) is not something that can be thwarted or resisted.

3. The Activity of Satan

In the opening chapters of the book of Job, it is clear that the activity of Satan was in accord with the counsel of God's will. Had it not been a part of God's purpose and intention that Satan do what he did, God could have (and would have) prevented Satan from doing it. God was just as capable of taking away Satan's power and authority in Job's day as he will be in the future. But this God did not do. Instead, God gave Satan the full authority to do exactly what he (Satan) ended up doing. Satan's actions after he left the divine throne room did not take God by surprise. God had perfect knowledge of Satan's character and disposition, and knew exactly what he would do if given the opportunity. There was nothing that Satan did that God did not fully expect him to do, and which He did



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not give him the authority to do; consequently, everything that Satan did must be understood as being in accord with the counsel of God's will. And it should be noted that Job himself understood all the evil that he suffered as ultimately coming from God, and as being in accord with God's will: “Yahweh gave, and Yahweh has taken away; blessed be the name of Yahweh” (Job 1:21-22). “Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?” (Job 2:10).

Now, it is clear that the activity of Satan described in Job was not motivated by love for Job, and that his heart was just as full of malice toward humanity in Job's day

as it was when he tempted Eve in the garden of Eden. When Satan took almost everything of value away from Job (including his children), it was not because he loved God. Nor was it because he loved Job as he loved himself. Satan's actions were motivated by a malicious desire to expose Job as one who didn't really love God. His desire was that Job would, in response to the adversity brought upon him, curse God to his face (Job 1:9-11; 2:5). In other words, what Satan did was sinful; he did not have Job's best interests at heart. And his actions did not cease being sinful merely because they were in accord with the counsel of God's will. But does this make God evil? No. What Satan meant for evil, God meant for good. God's motive in giving Satan the authority to do what he did to Job and his family was completely pure and good. God did what he did out of love for Job rather than hatred or indifference.

4. The Life of Joseph

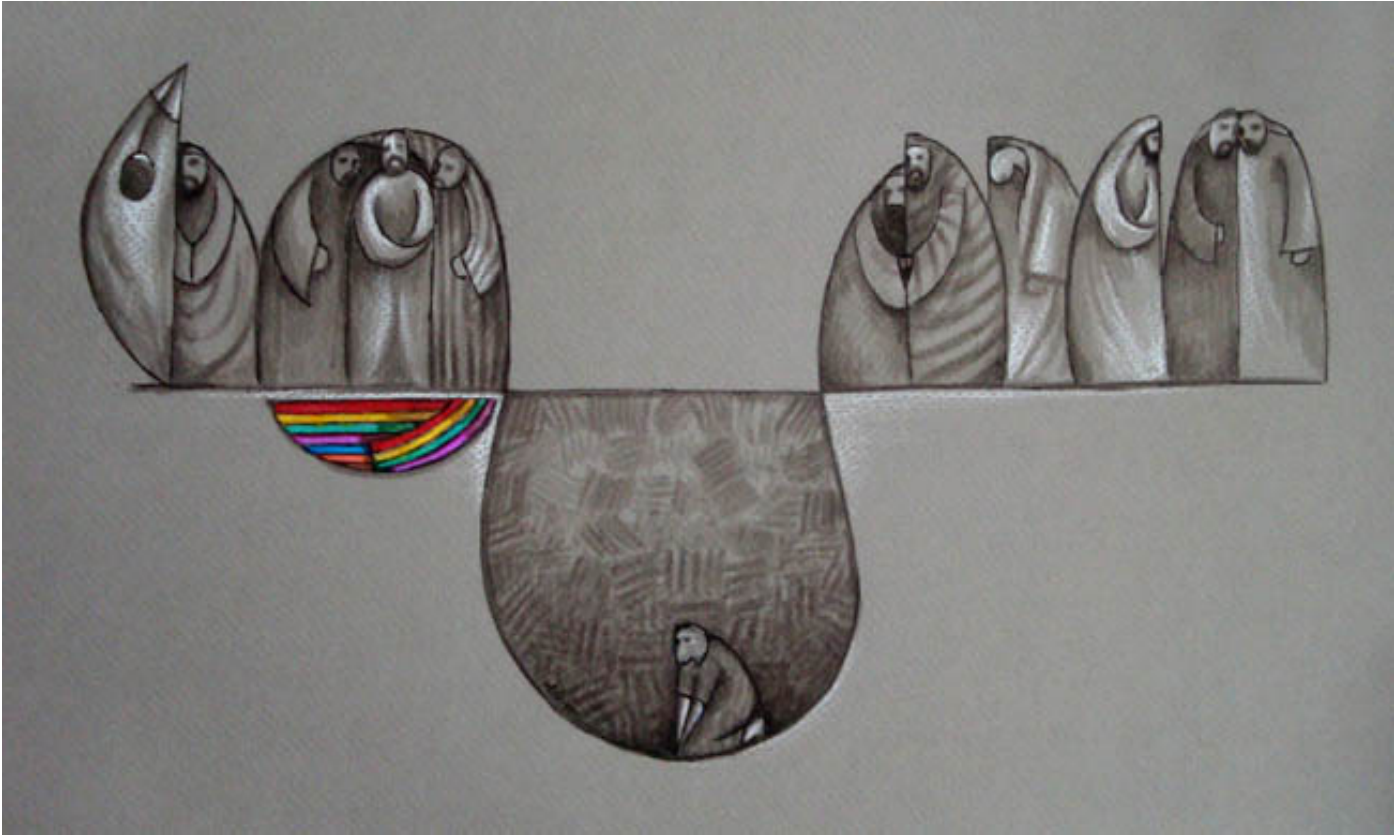
God prophesied to Abraham that his descendants would spend many years as slaves in Egypt, and that they would ultimately be delivered. He even gives the exact number of years during which they would be afflicted (Genesis 15:13-14). But in order for Abraham's descendants to be delivered from Egypt, God first had to get them there. So how does He do it?

In Psalm 105:16-17, we read, “When he summoned a famine on the land and broke all supply of bread, he had sent a man ahead of them, Joseph, who was sold as a slave.”

Here we find that God was responsible for the famine that ultimately brought the people of Israel into Egypt (Genesis 45:6-16). It wasn't just a random event that God had to respond to or attempt to work into His plan. It was part of God's plan all along. Similarly, we find that God was responsible for the events that brought Joseph to Egypt. This is in agreement with what Joseph himself told his brothers. In Genesis 45:5, 8, Joseph said,

“And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life...It was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.”

Joseph was essentially telling his brothers not to dwell on the relative (the fact that they had sold their brother into slavery) but to focus on the absolute (that God was ultimately responsible for what took place).



It is significant that the circumstances which brought Joseph to Egypt involved—and were dependent on—the hatred that Joseph’s brothers had for their brother and their evil decision to betray their brother and sell him into chattel slavery (which was contrary to God’s preceptive will for them, since they knew what they did was wrong). After hearing Joseph’s dreams, Joseph’s brothers’ jealousy and hatred for Joseph grew to the point of leading them to conspire to kill him (Gen. 37:5, 8, 18-19). But who gave Joseph the dreams that so intensified his brothers’ hatred and jealousy toward him? God, of course! But evidently, Joseph (like Paul) believed that God was operating all in accord with the counsel of His will, and that this included both the good and the evil that takes place. For Joseph later told his brothers,

“As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.”

Thus, we see that God’s benevolent purpose involved the occurrence of hatred and deceit, jealousy, selfishness, kidnapping (etc.)—all of which are contrary to God’s revealed “preceptive will” for human beings. This, then, is yet another example of how God’s purpose to bless His creatures can and does involve the sinful intentions

and actions of His creatures. There is nothing inconsistent about the purpose of a good and loving God involving sin and evil. —*Aaron Welch*



“God’s benevolent purpose involved hatred, deceit, jealousy, selfishness, and kidnapping.”