

The Two Wills Of God

God's job of election and my job of obedience

"The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law."

Deuteronomy 29:29

I'm not the first student of the Bible (thank God!)

I stand in a long line of people who have studied the Bible throughout the ages. And I also stand in a long line of people who have asked the very big question, *Does God truly predestine people to salvation?* The Bible seems to clearly say so, which makes me (and all of us) ask how that works. Because if God predestines it, then why does He also command me to believe in Him? If it's already predestined, then what is left for me to do?

When I was 14 years old I came under the conviction of the Holy Spirit as I heard the gospel message preached. My youth pastor taught me that I was a sinner, and that because of the holiness of God, my sin needed to be punished. That punishment was eternal separation from the holy God. Being separated from God was not something I was interested in. Thankfully, the pastor also taught me that Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God, died on the cross to bear the punishment for my sin. Jesus died in my place, and if I honestly told God that I believed in Jesus' work on the cross and was thankful for it, I would be reconciled to God forever. (John 1:11-12, 3:16, 1 John 5:11-12, Romans 10:9, etc) Over the course of about three months of hearing this message I came to believe it and accept it. *From my vantage point as a 14 year old teenager, I had made a choice to believe in the saving work of Jesus Christ.* It was the most important decision of my life.

However, as I studied the Bible during the first few years after my conversion, I came to realize that God had a lot to do with "my" decision to follow Him. In fact, as I now understand, God had everything to do with it so that **HE** would get the full glory for what has transpired in my life.

The two wills of God

As we read the Bible, we quickly discover two ways in which God "wills" human events to happen. Theologians have sometimes called them God's SECRET WILL and God's REVEALED WILL. (Other titles for the two wills have also been: Decreed and Desired, Sovereign and Moral, Permitted and Commanded, Decretive and Preceptive).

GOD'S SECRET WILL

aka:

DECREED WILL
SOVEREIGN WILL
PERMITTED WILL
DECRETIVE WILL

GOD'S REVEALED WILL

aka:

DESIRED WILL
MORAL WILL
COMMANDED WILL
PRECEPTIVE WILL

God's Secret Will

One author has stated that God's "*secret will is that attribute of God by which he has determined what he will do.*"¹ For humans, the future is unknown. But for God nothing comes as a surprise. It's a secret to us, but not to God. In fact, **nothing** that ever happens falls outside of the predetermined plan of God. Let me say it in a different way: Everything that ends up happening in human and cosmic history is within the decreed, secret will of God. The fact that I chose to become a Christian in 1978 was not a surprise to God. He not only knew that it would happen, but in a very actual sense He foreordained it to take place.

¹ M.E. Osterhaven, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Baker Book House, 1984, pp. 1172-1173.

The Westminster Larger Catechism states in its twelfth question, “What are the decrees of God? Answer: God’s decrees are the wise, free, and holy acts of the counsel of his will whereby, from all eternity, he has, for his own glory, unchangeably foreordained: whatsoever comes to pass in time, especially concerning angels and men.”²

We find God’s secret will all throughout Scriptures. Consider these Bible passages:

Romans 11:33-34... “O the depth and riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?”

Proverbs 25:2... “It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings.”

Isaiah 46:9-10... “I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.”

Isaiah 45:6-7... “I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form the light and create darkness, I bring prosperity and create disaster; I, the Lord, do all these things.”

Psalms 33:1... “But the plans of the Lord stand firm forever, the purposes of His heart through all generations.”

Ephesians 1:11... “In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.”

Romans 8:29-30... “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.”

Therefore, within God’s secret will it was determined before I was born that one day I would make a free choice to believe in Him.

God’s Revealed Will

God’s Revealed Will, on the other hand, is “*that attribute by which he tells us what to do.*”³ God’s revealed will is clearly spelled out in Scripture. Therefore, the commands of God are a wonderful articulation of the character of God because in His commands we discover His holy will. There is nothing secret about it. It is announced in a multitude of ways.

Deuteronomy 29:29 makes the key distinction between the two ways that we understand the will of God when it says quite clearly, “*The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.*” Some things God has chosen to keep to Himself until they unfold in human history, but what He has revealed through His commands is our job to obey.

Consider these numerous Bible passages that call for humans to believe in God, obey God, or make proactive plans:

Romans 10:8-9... “But what does it say? ‘The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,’ that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”

Acts 16:31... “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household.”

John 7:17... “Whoever chooses to do God’s will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.”

Matthew 12:50... “For whoever does the will of my father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

Proverbs 16:3... “Commit to the Lord whatever you do and your plans will succeed.”

Proverbs 21:5... “The plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty.”

² Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 12.

³ M.E. Osterhaven, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Baker Book House, 1984, pp. 1172-1173.

So Scripture makes clear that we have human responsibility in living our lives. We must believe in God, obey God, make plans and work hard. God has revealed His will to us in Scripture so that we can live rightly.

But how do we reconcile these two wills of God?

In some senses these two wills of God seem mutually exclusive. Either God chooses the events of my life or I do. Which is it? There seems to be a paradox here. As humans we have the urge to reconcile this apparent contradiction.

It's interesting that Scripture never attempts to completely reconcile the two truths. In fact, Pastor John MacArthur states very succinctly that there is a "humanly unreconcilable tension between God's sovereignty and man's will."⁴ So, for the most part, we shouldn't worry about God's secret will, but rather focus our attention on His revealed will... which is why it is revealed... so that we can understand it and obey it.

In Acts chapter 1, the disciples were talking with Jesus after His resurrection. They wanted to know if Jesus was about to "restore the kingdom to Israel," presumably taking it back from the Romans. Jesus' response informs our present discussion: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses..." (Acts 1:7-8). In other words, "don't worry about God's secret will, just get ready to obey Him when you discover his revealed will!" Our primary concern should always be obedience to what we know.

Nevertheless, Scripture does make us aware of both aspects of God's will at the same time in some passages. I've already quoted Deuteronomy 29:29 above, which includes both. Here are some others:

John 6:37... Jesus said, "All that the father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away."

Philippians 2:12-13... "...work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose."

Romans 16:25-26... "Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him."

Does God's secret will violate my free choice to obey His revealed will?

This is sticky question, for sure. How can God's predestination be said to *not violate* my free choice? Let me make a few comments and then one extended philosophical response.

First, as is mentioned above it is not our primary objective to reconcile this paradox. Scripture never attempts to completely reconcile the paradox, so why should I? If I (or all the other theologians throughout the ages) cannot reconcile the paradox, does that mean that God is confused? Absolutely not! There is mystery in God that we do not understand. There are things that are beyond our description. If we cannot live with mystery in God then we are trying to be god ourselves.

Isaiah 55:9... "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

Isaiah 40:13... "Who has understood the mind of the LORD, or instructed him as his counselor?"

Jeremiah 23:18... "...which of them has stood in the council of the LORD to see or to hear his word? Who has listened and heard his word?"

Second, when we deepen our understanding of God and admit that His secret will (decree) is perfect, then we give credit where credit is due. If, for instance, I maintain that my salvation was due primarily to the fact that I chose God when I was 14 years old, then all the glory goes to me for choosing. But when I realize that God chose me first, all the glory suddenly goes back to God for being so merciful. To believe in the sovereign plan of God is to give Him ultimate glory.

Psalms 66:5... "Come and see what God has done, how awesome his works in man's behalf!"

Psalms 77:14... "You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples."

⁴ John MacArthur, Romans 9-16, Moody Publishers, 1994, p.35.

A potential philosophical reconciliation: ‘circumstantial persuasion’

But as I remember back during the days when I became a Christian, I know that with all determination in my heart *I chose God*. I don’t have any recollection of feeling like God chose me. So how can it be that my free choice was not violated? I still yearn for an answer. Theologian Loraine Boettner has written this simple explanation which is a good beginning for me... “Perhaps the relationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom can best be summed up in these words: God so presents the outside inducements that man acts in accordance with his own nature, yet does exactly what God has planned for him to do.”⁵

Boettner’s point is that God so orders the infinite combinations of circumstances around us that when we make individual free choices, we make them in alliance with his secret will. So, for instance, when I was 14 years old, God put into my life a young girl who invited me to church, a church that was near my home, a pastor who preached the gospel, etc. Within the context, then, of these circumstances I made my free choice to follow Christ.

Millard Erickson uses very similar reasoning when he writes:

“God is in control of all the circumstances that bear upon my situation in life. He may bring to bear (or permit to be brought to bear) factors which will make a particular option appealing, even powerfully appealing, to me. Through all the factors that have come into my experience in time past he has influenced the type of person I now am.

“God works in such a suasive way with the will of the individual that he freely makes the choice that God intends... And further, God is operative in the life of the individual long before his work of suasion and regeneration: God has from eternity decided that the potential individual who comes into actual existence is the one who will respond to this set of circumstances precisely as God intends.

“According to this position we are espousing, the answer to the question, ‘Could the individual have chosen differently?’ is yes, while the answer to the question, ‘But would he have?’ is no.”⁶

Circumstantial persuasion as a philosophical explanation is not Scripture, therefore I only offer it as a possible way to reconcile divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Again, God has NOT called us to reconcile the two aspects of His will. We ought to primarily focus on His revealed will and “trust and obey.”

Does the extent of God’s decree include evil?

Considering the nature of God’s decree is always easier until you bring up the topic of evil. Philosophically we can easily agree that God determines good things to happen. But when we include the evil and sinful acts of human beings, we quickly want to distance God from the equation.

And that seems partly correct from the Biblical evidence, for we know that the Bible says that, in essence, God is always morally righteous and is never the *author* of sin.

Isaiah 6:3... “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

James 1:13... “When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone.”

Habakkuk 1:13... “Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong.”

But over and over again the Bible is clear that in another sense God does will evil to happen, while not being the direct author of it. And this willing is not simply a “permission” of evil, but extends to “using” evil for his purposes, and even seems to extend to arranging evil in some sense (though still without being the author of it). Here are some classic examples:

The Death of Christ. There is no more compelling example of God’s sovereignty over a situation that includes evil than the death of His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. The author of this most heinous act was Satan, himself, of course (Luke 22:3), when he put it into the mind of Judas to betray Jesus. But in Acts 2:23 we read these strikingly clear words: “*This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.*”

⁵ Loraine Boettner, Reformed Doctrine Of Predestination, Eerdmans, 1932.

⁶ Millard Erickson, Christian Theology, Baker Book House, 1983, pp.358-359.

John Piper comments, “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.”⁷ As Christians studying the Bible, we need to think deeply about the character of God. Understanding the sovereign decree of God stretches our understanding. God has a perfect decree before the foundations of time and human history. That decree which He has willed includes sinful acts. At any time God could have stopped the sinful acts. He did not because in the larger picture of human history, even sinful acts bring glory to God... glory when he forgives, glory when he redeems, and glory when he transforms evil back into good.

In case we aren’t convinced that God’s will was preeminent in the death of Christ, Luke records these words two chapter later in the Acts 4:27-28: “*Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.*” Everyone involved in the crucifixion of Jesus (Herod, Pilate, the soldiers, the crowds, the religious leaders) were all unwitting servants in the inscrutable designs of God.

Joseph’s move to Egypt. Joseph’s transfer to Egypt in the book of Genesis is another classic example of God’s sovereign (secret) will. Joseph’s brothers hated him, so they conspired against him by throwing him into a pit and then selling him into slavery in Egypt. For 17 years Joseph struggled in Potiphar’s house as a servant and then in an Egyptian jail. For 17 years it seemed that nothing good ultimately worked out. But then, while in jail, Joseph interpreted a dream for the Pharaoh, gaining Pharaoh’s favor, for which Pharaoh then promoted him to something like vice-president in charge of all the food of the country just as a seven-year famine was about to begin. Because of the famine, Joseph’s brothers came to Egypt for help.

The poignancy of the story, which is the ‘sovereignty of God,’ comes through in three Bible passages. First, in Genesis 45:7 Joseph tells his brothers who have come to him for help, “*God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.*” Joseph understood the sovereign activity of God. **God** had sent him to Egypt, not, ultimately, his brothers.

The same truth is reiterated in Psalm 105:16-17: “*He [God] called down famine on the land and destroyed all their supplies of food; and he sent a man before them – Joseph, sold as a slave.*” Again, God did the sending. Note also that God arranged the famine by His sovereign decree.

Finally, Joseph says to his brothers in Genesis 50:20, “*You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.*” God had sent Joseph to be their savior from the famine and sure destruction. Notice, though, that God did not just “use” the sinful acts of the brothers, but in some sense arranged them ahead of time.

Job’s misery. Job’s story is easy to recall. He experienced extreme pain when Satan became the servant of calamity upon his life. Job lost his wealth, his children, and his health. Horrible circumstances. In the last chapter of Job (42:10-11), however, we find a very surprising summation: “*After Job had prayed for his friends, the Lord made him prosperous again and gave him twice as much as he had before. All his brothers and sisters and everyone who had known him before came and ate with him in his house. They comforted and consoled him over all the trouble the Lord had brought upon him...*” So, again we see that God was given the credit for the misery, though not as the author of the misery. Why? Because God has decreed all things that have ever come to pass.

This credit to God is supported in another passage, James 5:11 (ESV): “*Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.*” So we see that God was purposing the misery in Job’s life, not just responding to it. John Piper comments: “In all Job’s pain and loss God was aiming at compassion and mercy. He planned and purposed and worked all things for Job’s good.”⁸ Even in the misery, God was bringing glory to Himself by providing mercy. A deeper understanding of the decree of God helps us understand the great glory that belongs to our Sovereign God.

The timing of Esther’s enslavement. Another classic example of God’s arranging the timing of sinful acts for His purposes is Esther. Esther was a young, beautiful Jewish girl who was forced into the harem of an unclean, pagan King. A horrible circumstance. A sinful circumstance. Senseless, many would say. But Mordecai, Esther’s adoptive father, understood the deep purposes of God. While worried for the safety of Esther, he still encouraged her with the very famous statement in Esther 4:14:

⁷ John Piper, “*Are There Two Wills In God?*”, Desiring God Ministries, 1995.

⁸ John Piper, “*All Things For Good, Part 2*” – Desiring God Ministries, 2002.

“For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?” Who knows? God knows. And now that we have seen the end of the story we know, as well. Esther was appointed by God for a special purpose. God did not stop her from being forced into sexual slavery. The purpose of her pain was the physical salvation of the Jews.

What is your trial?

So we see here four classic examples of God orchestrating the events of human history which include horrible acts of sin... Jesus being crucified, Joseph being sold into slavery, Job losing his wealth and family, Esther being forced into a harem. And that’s just the beginning of the people in the Bible who suffered horrible circumstances, not as senseless events without purpose, but with the underlying purpose of God to reveal His goodness and His glory in all things.

Romans 8:28 declares, *“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”* The “all things” in that verse really means ***all things***... whether those things are good and easy or whether they are difficult, discouraging and sinful. God decrees that all things will be used for the good of His children and for the glory of Himself.

What is your particular trial? Is it a health issue, like cancer or heart disease or a disability? Is it an emotional struggle that involves your past or a sense of failure in the present? Is it a relationship challenge in your marriage or with a family member? Or maybe your trial has to do with money or employment or housing. All of these challenges in our lives are very real and very immediate.

But as we step back and seek God in a way that understands His deeper purposes for our lives, we will begin to understand that our own happiness is not God’s primary purpose for us. Individual happiness is a core value of our American culture. But God is teaching us His greater purposes in His Kingdom. His greater purposes involve the good of others and the exaltation of His Name. Here are some ways that the harsh things in life end up for God’s glory:

- *God’s forgiveness and love are magnified.
- *God’s redemption and transformation in Christ are glorified.
- *The Holy Spirit’s inward strength is appreciated.
- *The opportunities for the church to provide relief from pain and suffering are made apparent.
- *Suffering in the world drives us to inquire about the nature of God, which then leads us to His eternal Word, the Bible, for answers. And His Word provides those answers as we see from this simple discussion, which then teaches us to think Biblically, not as the world thinks.

As Christians we are learning this new way of thinking. Sometimes we learn it very slowly, for we still struggle with our sinful, selfish nature. But as we grow into Christlikeness, we accept the mantle of purpose that Jesus and Joseph and Job and Esther wore.

And as we grow we can more heartily agree with Deuteronomy 29:29...

“The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.”

Deuteronomy 29:29

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