

The “Sure” Will of God

(Understanding the Two Distinct “Wills” of God)



God Can Do Anything He Wants

One of the most controversial issues within the Christian community is the relationship between God’s sovereignty and man’s free will. How much free will do we actually have as humans? If God is all powerful and all knowing, if God knows the end from the beginning, if God has predestined us to come to faith, doesn’t it follow that humans are simply along for the ride? After all, there are a number of passages in the scripture that describe the irresistible “will of God” or at least demonstrate that God is powerful enough to accomplish his goals without limit:



Daniel 4:35

“And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, ‘What hast Thou done?’”



Romans 9:15-16

For He says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.



Ephesians 1:5-6

He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.



Romans 1:9-11

For God, whom I serve in my spirit in the preaching of the gospel of His Son, is my witness as to how unceasingly I make mention of you, always in my prayers making request, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you.



The “Make Sure” Will of God

It seems that God has the sovereign power to accomplish whatever He sets out to accomplish. In other words, if God wants to ‘make sure’ that something happens, He can definitely use His power to ‘make sure’ that it happens! When ‘God’s will’ is described in this manner, as it is in the preceding passages, we come to understand that ‘God’s will’ is sovereign. Period. I call this the “make sure” will of God.

Yet this view of ‘God’s will’ presents us with a series of potential ‘problems’ when we read the Bible in its entirety and when we simply think about the nature of life. If God is all-powerful and nothing can thwart ‘God’s will’, the following questions are fair to ask:

When people fail to come to faith, is it God who is preventing them?

After all, if God is all-powerful, shouldn’t He be able to overwhelm each and every one of us and bring all of us to faith? If an all-powerful God exists, why don’t all of us believe in Him? Why isn’t His power and existence obvious?

When evil happens in the world, is it God who is responsible?

Is every action and event that occurs in the world a reflection of the 'make sure' will of God? If God is all-powerful, does this mean that even 'bad' things are the result of His activity? Is God the cause of everything, including those actions that we would consider to be evil?

How could God ever hold us responsible for anything?

If everything is the result of God's 'make sure' will, then even the bad things that you and I do are ultimately the activity of God Himself. How then could God ever blame us for something that HE caused? He is the all-powerful force behind everything, right?

Is the 'will of God' a divine plan for our lives?

Does the 'will of God' also include a plan for our lives? Is it God's will for us to live a certain way, marry a particular person, take a particular job? Is it possible for us to resist this will in some way? What will happen if we fail to do the 'right' thing, marry the 'right' person or pursue the 'right' career? How is it possible for us to step out of God's irresistible 'make sure' will in the first place?

How do we reconcile Bible passages that demonstrate God's limited power?

There are a number of passages in the Bible that seem to tell us that there are some things that God would like to happen, yet (for whatever reason) seems unable to actually accomplish! In some passages, God does not seem to be able 'make sure' a particular thing comes to pass. Take a look at this example:



Matthew 23:37-38

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling."

Here, Jesus tells us that he came to gather Israel, but was unable to do so because they were unwilling. How could this be true? Isn't God powerful enough to accomplish all that He wants to accomplish? Isn't 'God's will' irresistible? And how about this passage:



2 Peter 3:8-10

The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.

Here it appears that God does not wish that any of us should perish but that all of us should come to repentance. But you and I know that many people in our world will NEVER accept Jesus, never come to repentance, and simply will not be saved. So what's up with God's sovereignty? How can it be that something can be within 'God's will' (God can desire something) yet He seems to be unable to make that something happen?



The "Sure Wants" Will of God

These questions seem difficult to answer if there is only one kind of 'will of God'. If 'God's will' is only a 'make sure' kind of will, then how do we answer these problematic questions? Well, it turns out that there are TWO kinds of 'will of God' described in the scripture. The first is what I call the 'make sure' will of God; the second is what I call the 'sure wants' will of God. God has a desire for you and I. He wants us all to be saved; He wants us all to come to faith in Jesus; He wants us all to reflect his moral precepts; He wants us all to love one another. But he also knows that none of this is truly possible unless each and every one of us is allowed to have the 'freedom' to love, obey and follow. Without 'free will', humans are

simply robots who respond according to pre-programming rather than from a position of true love and obedience.

For this reason, God has given us a certain amount of freedom and liberty to make choices. We all have the freedom to choose love. Without freedom, love would not be possible. God wants us to love, but He knows that personal freedom often results in personal rebellion. This is the price that must be paid for love to exist in the first place. The Bible describes a type of 'will of God' that reflects this desire on the part of God to respect the free agency of humans. It's what I call the 'sure wants' will of God. Take a look at these passages:



Mark 3:34-35

And looking about on those who were sitting around Him, He said, "Behold, my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother."



1 John 2:17

And the world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever.



Ephesians 6:5-6

Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ; not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.

It's pretty clear that God has a particular 'will' for those of us who are His own. Those of us who understand 'God's will' and actually seek to do it 'from the heart' are called His children. But what kind of 'will' are we talking about here? Is this the same sovereign irresistible 'will' (God's 'make sure' will) that was described earlier, or is it something different? Additional passages help us to understand the second kind of 'will of God':



Romans 12:2

And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.



1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.



1 Thessalonians 4:3-7

For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; and that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you. For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification.



1 Peter 2:15-17

For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men. Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bondslaves of God. Honor all men; love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king.

This second kind of 'will of God' describes God's desire that we live a moral life that reflects His nature. God 'sure wants' us to live differently; to do "that which is good and acceptable and perfect"; to "rejoice" and "pray" and "give thanks"; to be sanctified; to continue "doing what is right". This is what I call the "sure wants" will of God. God truly desires that all of us should live a certain way, but He has given us free will so that our choices have meaning; they are not simply automatic responses that have been completely controlled and predetermined by God. There are some things that God will "make sure" and there are some things that God "sure wants" but may not "make sure".

Yes, it is God's will that no one should be lost (it's something that God 'sure wants'), but this does not mean that God will 'make sure' that all come to faith. Yes, it is God's will that no evil should exist in the world (it's something that God 'sure wants'), but this does not mean that God will 'make sure' that evil is eliminated. Yes, it is God's will that we should live a certain way and seek to know His heart and character, but this does not mean that he will 'make sure' that no one behaves immorally. There are two kinds of 'will of God' passages in the scripture. Some describe God's sovereignty and some describe God's moral character and desire for our lives. While it is certainly within God's power to eliminate all evil, to control our behavior and to allow none of us the possibility of rejecting Him, to do so would eliminate the possibility for something precious to God: the ability to love.



The Important Distinction

The dangerous gift of love requires that you and I have the freedom to make our own choices, even choices that contradict what God 'sure wants'. For this reason, there are some things that God will 'make sure'; there are things that simply must occur or exist in order for God's overarching purpose to be achieved. But, in the midst of God's 'make sure' will, there are many choices that are left to you and I. As we come to learn God's character and moral desire for our lives (the life he 'sure wants' us to live), we get to make a choice that is grounded in our personal freedom. Sometimes we choose correctly and are in sync with God's 'sure wants' will; sometimes we choose to be disobedient.

God, in his mercy and grace, allows us this freedom, but eventually secures how all of it will end. He 'makes sure' that it all turns out the way he wanted it all along. In this way, God delicately and perfectly balances the tension between what He 'sure wants' and what He 'makes sure'.