

Christian Classic Series

MOUNTAINS OF BRASS: The Decrees of God

HERCULES COLLINS (D. 1702)

MOUNTAINS OF BRASS

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MOUNTAINS OF BRASS

A Discourse upon the Decrees of God

“Who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will.”

—Ephesians 1:11

Introduction

EPHESUS was a great and rich city, but given much to idolatry. Through Paul, Apollos, and Aquila preaching the gospel among them, God brought many off from their idolatrous temples and worship. The Word of God grew mightily, and many believed and were baptized. The idol-worshippers, seeing their idolatry likely to fall before the gospel (as Dagon before the ark; 1Sa 5), and their craft in danger—their great goddess Diana despised, and “her magnificence” destroyed, whom all Asia and the world worshipped—a great uproar was among them (Act 19:23-28). When it ceased, Paul called the disciples together, embraced them, and went to Macedonia. He left Timothy there to charge some that they must preach no other doctrine than Christ crucified, and not to “give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions, rather than godly edifying” (1Ti 1:3-4).

In the context of this verse, the apostle is treating of election, predestination, redemption, justification, adoption, sanctification,¹ and an eternal inheritance. He comes in our text to resolve the source from which all flowed, which is from no other fountain than the counsel of God’s own will. Those who were by nature children of wrath—who walked ac-

¹ **election** – God having, out of His good pleasure from all eternity, elected some to everlasting life (2Th 2:13), entered into a covenant of grace to deliver them out of the state of sin and misery, and to bring them into a state of salvation by a Redeemer (Rom 5:21). (*Spurgeon’s Catechism*, Q. 19) See also *Whitefield’s Letter to Wesley on Election* by George Whitefield (1714-1770), both available from CHAPEL LIBRARY.

predestination – Predestination is God’s appointing all things beforehand according to His eternal purposes.

redemption – Redemption is the deliverance of God’s children from sin through the ransom paid by Christ on their behalf.

justification – Justification is an act of God’s free grace, wherein He pardons all our sins (Rom 3:24; Eph 1:7), and accepts us as righteous in His sight (2Co 5:21)—only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us (Rom 5:19) and received by faith alone (Gal 2:16; Phi 3:9). (*Spurgeon’s Catechism*, Q. 32) See FGB 187, *Justification*.

adoption – Adoption is an act of God’s free grace whereby we are received into the number, and have a right to all the privileges of the sons of God. (*Spurgeon’s Catechism*, Q. 33) See FGB 246, *Adoption*.

sanctification – Sanctification is the work of God’s Spirit whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God and are enabled more and more to die to sin and live to righteousness. (*Spurgeon’s Catechism*, Q. 34) See FGB 215, *Sanctification*.

cording to the course of this world and the dictates of the prince of the power of the air, fulfilling the delights of the flesh and of the mind—were without hope and God in the world as to any saving knowledge of Him. Those that were afar off are made nigh. From being as strangers, they are made fellow citizens with the saints and made of the household of faith. Those who were once idol-worshippers are now sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise. These all are gracious works in time flowing from His purposes in eternity, as the apostle in our text affirms.

A. *The Agent*

In the words of our text, we will consider several parts. First, the agent: *Who*. The agent is God the Father: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who...hath chosen us in him” (Eph 1:3-4)—that is, as He is the head and the church the body, as He is the King and the church the kingdom. For Christ, as man, is God’s elect (Isa 42:1): yea, the head of election and predestination. He was fore-appointed to be the head of a holy, glorious, mystical body, the king of a glorious kingdom, captain of a glorious company, the bridegroom of a glorious bride. Yet, if He will have this honor, He must purchase it. If He will “make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed” (Isa 53:10). He shall be head of this body, king of this kingdom, captain of this company, bridegroom of this bride. Is it likely that this purchase can be capable of failing? If so, then He may be a king without a kingdom, a bridegroom without a bride, a head without a body. But how could that be possible? If He be a head, He must have a body; if a king, He must have a kingdom; if a captain, He must have a company; if a bridegroom, He must have a bride—because His people are His relatives. He that is a father must have a child; he who is a husband must have a wife; and if Christ be a bridegroom, He must have a bride. If so, where is any room for a total and final fall from true grace? A child cannot cease to be a child, and if once children, then heirs (Rom 8:17). There is no fear, then, of losing the inheritance!

Mark, when it is said, “God...hath chosen us in him,” we are not to understand it as if the death and merits of Christ were the foundation of election. No, election is from the grace and love of the Father; this is the fountain from which election flows—so Jesus says: “Thine they were, and thou gavest them me” (Joh 17:6). Yet the death of Christ is the foundation of all grace in the church militant, and glory in the church triumphant (1Th 5:9-10).² From free sovereign grace, the Father chooses a number out of the world in their fallen state when in misery, and makes them “vessels of mercy” (Rom 9:23). But if Christ will have the honor to be their Lord, He must pay a certain sum for them, which is no less than His blood—because Justice had said the man (if he transgressed) should die, either in

² **church militant** – In Christian theology, the Christian church is traditionally divided into 1) the church militant (*Latin: Ecclesia militans*), which consists of Christians on earth who fight as soldiers of Christ against sin, the devil, and the world; and 2) the church triumphant (*Latin: Ecclesia triumphans*), which consists of believers in heaven.

his person or in a surety³ (Eze 18:20). So, here “mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other” (Psa 85:10). Here the mercy of the Father meets the righteousness of the Son—the mercy of the Father in providing a surety to pay and satisfy Himself, the justice of Christ in laying down His life. These sweetly agree in order to produce the everlasting peace of a lost sinner; so that when it is said we are chosen in Christ (Eph 1:4), it means He was to be the head and the church the body; Him to be the king and the church to be the kingdom. But to be chosen in Christ does not mean that His death was to merit our election—election was from the Father’s love—yet His death is the fountain of all grace in time, and all glory in eternity.

B. The Act

Secondly, the act: “*worketh*.” It is not said, He has worked, or will work, but He *works*; signifying that all the acts of divine providence, past, present, and to come, are nothing but the execution of His eternal counsel, purpose, and will.

C. The Universality

Thirdly, the universality of it: “*all things*.” This word *all things* is not limited to the context; but it is as if the apostle should say, all that I have spoken of before concerning redemption, justification, salvation, and all other acts of divine providence that I have not mentioned, are all according to His eternal purpose and counsel of His own will.

D. The Manner

Fourthly, the manner of the agent’s acts is “*according to the counsel of his own will*.” It is not work according to the counsel of another’s will, but His own. As God took no counsel of man’s will in the work of creation (Isa 40:13-14), neither does He in the work of salvation. As He worked according to His own will, and not man’s, in the first creation, so He works according to His own will and counsel, and not man’s, in the new creation (Rom 11:34). Of His own will the child of grace is begotten and the seed of grace sown, as the apostle James asserts (Jam 1:18). If then it is of His own will, it is not of man’s.

Observation

*All the acts of divine providence in time, whether in the church
or the world, are all the effects, products, and executions
of God’s eternal pleasure, purpose, counsel, and will.*

I shall speak to four general heads. First, I will speak to the demonstration of the divine will. Secondly, I will speak to some properties of the divine will. Thirdly, I will draw some natural inferences from the doctrine. Fourthly, I will offer some uses of this doctrine.

³ **surety** – one who assumes the responsibilities or debts of another; as our surety, Christ guaranteed our deliverance and a full legal satisfaction for our sin upon His payment of our debt upon Calvary’s cross (Heb 7:22).

1. Demonstration of the Divine Will

A. *In the World*

That this doctrine is true appears from the creation; if God had not first willed and decreed it, it had not been. David's members were written in the book of God's decrees when there was none of them in being (Psa 139:16), but yet in time had a being by virtue of their being there written. Yea, our very habitations where we dwell were before time determined and appointed. Paul preached this doctrine to the Athenians, to bring them off from their idolatry in order to worship the true God, Who made heaven and earth and all things therein, and made all nations of one blood to dwell upon the face of the earth. God has determined the times before appointed and the bounds of their habitations, so that they might seek the Lord (Act 17:26). Thus, the time and place of our being is according to God's determination aforetime. Moreover, Pontius Pilate, and the Jews' and Gentiles' act of crucifying Christ was the fulfilling of God's counsel, which He "determined before to be done" (Act 4:27-28). God may be said to be the cause of an action, and yet not the cause of the sin of that action, because the sin arises out of the heart—as said our Lord, "evil thoughts, murders, adulteries," etc. (Mat 15:19). Everyone will grant that no man can do any sinful act—such as swear and lie with the tongue, steal and murder with the hand—without the power of God concurring to uphold and strengthen those organs and members, "for in him we live, and move" (Act 17:28). Yet, they are not upheld and strengthened for that end, but for His glory. It is man that abuses his physical and natural strength for selfish purposes.

Another⁴ has observed that God's determination for Christ to die in order to save man laid none under a necessity of sinning. God foreknew what the malice of the devil, Jews, and Gentiles would be against this Person to put Him to death; and God determined not to prevent it, but allow it, because He knew how to bring glory to Himself out of it. It was necessary that Christ should suffer because God could not be mistaken in His foreknowledge, or come short of His determinate decree. But this did not take away the liberty of Christ's suffering; neither did it take away the liberty of the Jews and their voluntariness in putting Christ to death. God's decree that Christ should suffer did infallibly secure the event; but did not annihilate and destroy the liberty of the act, neither in Christ as afore-said, Who freely volunteered Himself. Neither did God's decree remove the guilt of the Jews, who as freely and voluntarily put Him to death, as if there had been no decree of God at all about His death.

The gardener's foreknowledge that certain seeds and roots will in the spring produce specific kinds of leaves and flowers is no cause of their rise and appearance in the spring—but knowing the nature of such roots, he nevertheless so concludes that it is so. God's foreknowledge of what wicked works would proceed from the roots of wicked hearts concerning Christ's death is no more cause of those evil acts than the gardener's knowledge is

⁴ Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God* (London: 1682). Stephen Charnock (1628-1680) was a fellow of New College in Oxford and a Puritan Presbyterian clergyman.

the cause of the rise of such flowers in spring from such roots. God's foreknowledge that Adam would fall put him under no necessity of it, but it was done voluntarily and freely—yet God foresaw infallibly that Adam would fall; and God determined not to prevent it, knowing how to glorify Himself by it. So God's foreknowledge of the Jews' putting Christ to death did not necessitate them to it, but it was done as freely as if it had not been fore-known, nor any determination of God about it. Thus we have proved those acts of divine providence in time in the world are the product of God's eternal purposes.

B. In the Church

Now we come to show that all the gracious acts and providences in the church are the products and execution of God's eternal will. As for the act of effectual vocation,⁵ it is “not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began” (2Ti 1:9). The Gentiles believed in Christ because they “were *ordained* to eternal life” (Act 13:48); the Ephesians were holy because they were chosen to it, not for it, before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:3-4). The reason why a people are drawn in time to God is because they are “loved...with an everlasting love” (Jer 31:3). The new creation and good works found in the Ephesian church were the pure effects of what God had before ordained (Eph 2:10). The saints' hope of eternal life is the product of that promise which was made by God, Who cannot lie, before the world began (Ti 1:2). The sanctification of the church at Thessalonica, and their belief of the chosen truth, was in order to the salvation they were chosen and appointed unto from the beginning (2Th 2:13; 1Th 5:9). In a word, our calling, justification, and glorification are all the effects of God's eternal purpose. This was the doctrine Paul taught the church of the Romans (Rom 8:28-33), Ephesians, and Thessalonians, as well as Timothy and Titus, etc.

Christ's appearing in time to the church was from His foreordination to it “before the foundation of the world” (1Pe 1:20). His being slain in time was actually from the decree in eternity; hence He is called “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Rev 13:8)—though not so actually, but truly in God's decree.

2. Properties of the Divine Will

A. Eternal

First, it is an eternal will. His will is as Himself and [His] habitation: eternal. God's will is not suspended unto time in order to see the creatures' will before He wills concerning them—as if man's will were to determine His; as if God could not determine His own will until He saw man's. His counsels are called “counsels of old” (Isa 25:1) to signify the eternity of them. We poor creatures choose and make decisions in time; but there is no time with God, all is eternity with Him. His mercy is said not only to be everlasting, but “from

⁵ **effectual vocation** – Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit (2Ti 1:9) by which, convincing us of our sin and misery (Act 2:37), enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ (Act 26:18), and renewing our wills (Eze 36:26), He persuades and enables us to embrace Jesus Christ freely offered to us in the gospel (Joh 6:44-45). (*Spurgeon's Catechism*, Q. 33)

everlasting” (Psa 103:17). His love is said to be the same. His covenant is “an everlasting covenant” (2Sa 23:5)—as it has no end, so no beginning.

The acts of God are all one with His will; His will is all one with His essence; His essence is one pure simple act. God is love essentially, wise essentially. We may have a being, yet be neither good nor wise; but God can as soon cease to be, as cease to be either. “If there be no divine will,” says one, “the glass of the divine prescience⁶ must needs be broken, because as God knows all essences in His own glorious essence, all possibles in His own wonderful omnipotence, and all congruities⁷ and tendencies⁸ to His own glory in His own unsearchable wisdom, so He knows all futures in His own will.” This is because “all things future were in their own nature but mere possibles, and could never...become futures without the divine will.”⁹ This future of the saints’ holiness is from the divine will “before the foundation of the world” (Eph 1:4).

B. Righteous

The second property of the divine will is righteousness. Isaiah tells us, “Thy counsels of old are faithfulness and truth” (Isa 25:1). They are called “counsels” in respect of the wisdom of them, “old” in respect of the eternity of them, “truth” in respect of the performance of them. Men often will what is unjust, as Ahab Naboth’s vineyard; as the Jews the death of Christ, though [He was] innocent; as Pharaoh and Haman the destruction of the church. But it is incompatible with the divine being to will anything unrighteous—as Elihu said, “Far be it from God, that he should do wickedness” (Job 34:10). The Judge of all the earth will do right (Gen 18:25); He Who takes no pleasure in wickedness cannot will wickedness. The sanctification of the Thessalonians was the will of God: that they “should abstain from fornication” (1Th 4:3-5).

Things may be better said to be just and righteous because God wills them, than that He wills them because they are just and righteous—for God’s will is the rule of righteousness. “His work is perfect,” says Moses, “for all his ways are judgment: a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is he” (Deu 32:4). When the vials of God’s wrath are poured out upon His implacable¹⁰ enemies, it is said, “Just and true are thy ways, thou King of saints” (Rev 15:3). Though the foundation of justification is from the free grace of God the Father, yet in consideration of Christ’s paying the sinner’s debt, God is said to be just in justifying him that believes in Jesus. God’s willing honor and eternal life to those who by patience continue in well-doing, and God’s willing the wicked to the day of evil, are all according to the holy and righteous will of His nature. And when you cannot comprehend some mysterious providence, still retain Jeremiah’s principles: conclude that God is righteous (Jer 12:1).

⁶ **prescience** – foreknowledge; knowledge of events before they take place.

⁷ **congruities** – things that harmonize with God’s glory.

⁸ **tendencies** – things that tend toward God’s glory.

⁹ Edward Polhill, *The Divine Will Considered in Its Eternal Decrees, and Holy Execution of Them* (London: 1673), 5.

¹⁰ **implacable** – irreconcilable.

C. Gracious

A third property of the divine will is graciousness. The Ephesians were predestined unto the adoption of children according to the good pleasure of God's will. It was also according to the praise of the glory of His grace. In the same way, our redemption and justification are according to the riches of His grace (Eph 1:5-7). That a Savior is proclaimed by the angels in order to accomplish man's eternal peace was from the good will of God. What would have become of the burning bush in Egypt had not the good will of God dwelt in it? There God commanded His name to be proclaimed as "the LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth...forgiving iniquity transgression and sin...shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love [him]," etc. (Exo 34:7; Exo 20:6).

There is a great deal of unmercifulness in sinners' wills, because the devil has a will to destroy them all. But blessed be God (Who has the great red dragon in a chain), his power is not absolute—for though he go up and down seeking the destruction of souls, yet it is not whom he *will*, but "whom he *may* devour" (1Pe 5:8). God's will is a gracious will. He gives to His church in covenant Himself and all His attributes; His Son and all His offices and purchased blessings; His Spirit and all His saving operations. From where can this flow but from the fountain of free grace? Hence it is said, "By grace are ye saved...not of yourselves: it is the gift of God" (Eph 2:8).

D. Immutable

"The mountains were mountains of brass" (Zec 6:1-2).

A fourth property of the divine will is immutability; hence His decrees are compared to mountains of brass, which are immoveable. With Him is not the least shadow of turning; it is not compatible with Him—Whose name is Jehovah, the Self-Existent One—to change. If God could change, the church would have been destroyed by now. It is not for lack of sin in Jacob that they are not destroyed, but because He is Jehovah and changes not (Mal 3:6). Neither is it possible that He should change, because He perfectly foreknows whatsoever will come to pass.

Indeed, men who have not that power do often will and purpose this and that, and change their mind after, not foreseeing the cause of the change. If they had seen a cause for change coming, they would not have willed that which they must undo again, because it is some dishonor to men to be changeable. But "God is not a man...that he should repent" (Num 23:19), "for the gifts and calling of God are without repentance" (Rom 11:29). When the Scripture speaks about God's repenting that He made man, it is not to be understood properly as if God were capable of repentance, as man is (Gen 6:6). It is spoken, rather, to our capacity: God is said to repent when He does such things as men do when they repent. When God withheld those judgments and effects of His anger that He had threatened against Nineveh, He is said to repent; and also when God lets out His judgment (the effects of His anger) upon the old world, He is said to repent. This statement about God is

according to man's capacity and practice: when he does repent of a thing, he shows it by some visible act.

It is because God's compassions fail not, but are ever the same, that the church is not consumed (Lam 3:22). Although David's house and heart was never as it should be, yet this was his comfort: God had made with him an everlasting covenant (2Sa 23:5). God foreknew Israel would be "a transgressor from the womb" (Isa 48:8), yet for His name's sake He would defer His anger. For the praise of His grace, He would not cut them off. God foreknew Peter's sin and Paul's sin, yet that hindered them not from being chosen vessels, "elect according to the foreknowledge of God" (1Pe 1:1-2). Therefore, whom He once loves, He must love to the end, because there can be nothing hid from Him that might make Him change His mind, as it is often with men. Therefore, we may conclude this with the apostle: "He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it" (Phi 1:6).

E. Sovereign

A fifth property of the divine will is that it is a sovereign and supreme will. He has an absolute freedom of will; if He will work, none can stop Him (Isa 43:13). "He doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?" (Dan 4:35). "Who is he that saith, and it cometh to pass, when the Lord commandeth it not?" (Lam 3:37). God's "kingdom ruleth over all" (Psa 103:19). He has an absolute power over men and devils: hence He will be gracious to whom He will be gracious, and He will show "mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth," even after the abuse of much patience (Rom 9:18). What reason can be given why Christ must take the human nature to save man, and not the angelic nature to save angels? We must answer as Christ in another case: "Even so, Father; for so it seemed good in thy sight...for it is your...good pleasure" (Luk 10:21; 12:32).

God will choose Abel, and pass by Cain; choose Shem, and pass by Ham; choose Isaac, and pass by Ishmael; choose David and Solomon, and pass by Saul; choose Peter and Paul, and pass by Judas; elect some of the natural seed of Abraham, and leave the rest in their own blindness and hardness (Rom 11:7-8). What shall we say to these cases, but as Moses and the apostle, He "will be gracious to whom [He] will be gracious" (Exo 33:19)? Consider that God converted a profligate sinner in the thief upon the cross, and took his soul into paradise the same day—who never gave God a day's service, but was a subject of the black prince all his days. If God will give him the same happiness He gives another, who hath served and suffered for Him forty years, who shall fault God? May He not do with His own grace and glory what He will?

When the apostle said, "God is no respecter of persons" (Act 10:34), the meaning is that God does not respect the person of a Jew because he is a Jew, more than a Gentile or a Roman—as Peter did suppose before God showed him otherwise in a vision. And then Peter saw Cornelius, though a Roman or Italian and no Jew, yet believing in Christ, and working righteousness; Cornelius was accepted as much as the believing Jew (Act 10). Ef-

factual calling and saving faith must always be concluded to be, not according to our works, but to God's purpose in election, as the apostle asserts in Romans 9:11, whether it be a Jew or Gentile that is effectually called.

God's will is a sovereign, supreme will, and yet a righteous will. God's power is suitable to His will. Many will great things against the church, as the devil and his kingdom wills the destruction of Christ's kingdom; but their power is not suitable and adequate as God's is to His will. If He has a mind to open and change such a heart, rescue such a one out of the devil's power, He can do it. He can carry His will through. God's will is a sovereign and supreme will; for there is none above Him, that He should give any account unto any of His matters (Job 33:13), as Elihu said to Job when under some discontent about divine providence.

F. Wise

A sixth property of the divine will is its perfect wisdom: hence "counsel" is joined with it in the text. It is not a mere will, but a will with depth of wisdom. God does everything, which would render anyone wise. If it be wisdom to act to a right end, so God acts all for Himself and His own glory. As He made, so He ordered all things for Himself (Pro 16:4). Moreover, He knows and orders all circumstances of actions. All second causes¹¹ are before God—how they will act and when—and He carries all on in an exact harmony with His divine will and pleasure. This will is not mere will, but a will guided by the reason and counsel of His own infinite understanding. We never count a willful man a wise man, but all God's acts are said to be wise in their judgment and working. The wisest of men often miscarry in their ideas and contrivances, but God never did miscarry for lack of wisdom in anything. All the wisdom of men and angels is from Him. The prophet Isaiah speaks of man's wisdom in plowing, sowing, and threshing: "This [wisdom]...cometh forth from the LORD of hosts, which is wonderful in counsel, and excellent in working" (Isa 28:24-29). As He made the world in wisdom, so He governs it, for he "worketh all things after the counsel of his own will."

G. Independent

Does God work "all things after the counsel of his own will"? Then we infer this blessed Agent is an independent being and worker: if He works all after the counsel of His own will, then He does not depend upon the will of another. Regeneration¹² is not according to the will of man, but of God (Joh 1:13)—that is, of God's free grace and divine power; for a child cannot beget itself. He who is dependent upon another's will, cannot do his own, because it depends upon another's. God depends upon none for being, wisdom, power, or authority to act anything, for He works all after the counsel of His own will. The work of sanctification, spoken of in the context, was the product and effect of God's eternal counsel and will, and not the effect of man's.

¹¹ **second causes** – causes caused by something else; God is the primary cause of all things.

¹² **regeneration** – God's act of creating spiritual life in a sinner by the Holy Spirit's power; the new birth (Joh 3:3).

God's will depends not upon the creature's will, for when He speaks of a new heart, He does not say, if the creature will be willing he shall have it; but He speaks like a monarch, "I will take away the stony heart...I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes" (Eze 36:26-27). God says in effect: I wait not the creature's motion till he is willing, but I will make him willing, in My working all things after the counsel of My own will.

If we consider what regeneration is, it will clearly demonstrate God's will does not depend upon the creature's will in that work at all, because it is a divine seed and principle of grace put where there was never any before—so that in regeneration man is wholly passive, and can contribute no more to his being a new creature than his being a creature in the first place. Wherever regeneration is wrought, it is the pure product of God's eternal will, and not of the creature's: "Of his own will begat he us" (Jam 1:18). The creature's will does not determine God's. God's will does not wait the motion of the creature's will before He determines about him, "but he worketh all things [about the creature] after the counsel of his own will." God works in time according to His own purposes, and not men's purposes, in the way of salvation: for "it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy" (Rom 9:16). It is from the merciful purpose of God, and not the creature's will, that any are vessels of glory, and that all are not vessels of wrath. So then, man's will cannot prevent nor determine God's, because He "worketh all things after the counsel of His own will." Both the will and the deed are wrought in the Philippians according to God's good pleasure (Phi 2:13), and not according to man's pleasure.

H. Irresistible

If God works all things after the counsel of His own will, then we infer He is irresistible in His will, because He actually brings to pass what He wills. In this sense, we say with the apostle: "Who hath resisted his will?" (Rom 9:19)—that is, His effective and determinative will. Indeed, God's ordinative, revealed, commanding will¹³ may be rejected; so the Pharisees rejected the counsel of God against themselves in not being baptized with the baptism of John (Luk 7:30). Likewise, the Jews resisted the Spirit in the doctrine of the prophets (Act 7:51), and the false prophets in Jeremiah's time are said not to stand in the counsel of the Lord (Jer 23:22). In this same way we are to understand the prophet Isaiah to the church when he says, "What could have been done more...that I have not done?" (Isa 5:4).

This is in respect of His revealed will and external means, but not in respect of internal grace—for all must confess in that respect He could have done more. But in respect of His revealed will and external means, what could have been done more? He gave His Law to Jacob and statutes to Israel. "He hath not dealt so with any other nation" (Psa 147:19-20). To Israel were "committed the oracles of God" (Rom 3:1-2); no nation was so great in this

¹³ **God's ordinative, revealed, commanding will** – the moral will of God revealed in His Law to man, which can be resisted by sinful man—as distinguished from His determinative, effective, decretive will, which He sovereignly and omnipotently always brings to pass, as in election and providence; some theologians call these the preceptive and decretive wills of God.

respect (Deu 4:7). But though the ordinative will of God may be resisted, yet His will whereby He has determined to effect this or that, cannot; for in this sense “he is in one mind, and who can turn him?” (Job 23:13). This counsel of the Lord shall stand; whatever devices may be in a man’s heart, this counsel of God shall stand (Pro 19:21). [Through] the prophet Isaiah [the Lord] says, “I will do all my pleasure” (Isa 46:10).

We can as soon stop the ebbing and flowing of the water, and the sun from going its course, as supersede and put a stop to God in His determinative will. How soon did God change the will of the thief when this will of God came to act (Mat 27:41-44; Luk 23:40-43)? Though many strong bars were upon his heart against God, by nature and action, yet if this be the counsel of His will, He “will work, and who shall let it?...[for he] worketh all things after the counsel of his own will” (Isa 43:13; Eph 1:11).

3. Inferences from This Doctrine

A. *Omnipotence*

If God works all things after the counsel of His own will, then we infer He must be an omnipotent and almighty operator and worker, for He works what He has a will to do. He willed the creation of the world; but had He not been omnipotent, He could never have made all things out of nothing, with only “Let there be” (Gen 1:3). He must be omnipotent, because He wills that which none but an omnipotent arm can perform.

He willed Christ’s and the saints’ resurrection, which none but omnipotence can effect: God can raise the dead, though none else can. He willed the working of saving faith in the souls of the Ephesians, and the knowledge of the riches of the glory of the saints’ inheritance. The apostle said about this: no less power can effect it than that which raised Christ from the dead. This the apostle set forth by several gradations: he calls it “power,” great power, “mighty power,” and “the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, Which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead” (Eph 1:18-20).

And as by a mighty power saints are put into a state of grace, so they are kept in that state by the mighty power of God through faith unto salvation. This was the doctrine and the experience of the Apostle Peter (1Pe 1:5). God is able to keep you from falling because of His omnipotence; and He is willing because of His eternal purpose—for he “worketh all things after the counsel of his own will”! It is His purpose and will to overthrow mystical Babylon, but this could not be done if God were not omnipotent and did not reign over her (Rev 19:1-6). Omnipotence is required in the second creation, just as in the first.¹⁴ Omnipotence brought light into a dark world, and the same brings divine light into a dark heart. Can less than omnipotence raise and quicken a dead body from the grave? Then no less power is required to quicken one who is dead in trespasses and sins. Thus the Ephesians were quickened according to the counsel of His own will (Eph 1:11-12).

¹⁴ **second creation** – regeneration of a lost soul; the new birth.

B. Foreknowledge

If God works all things “after the counsel of his own will,” from this we infer God’s prescience and foreknowledge. If whatever comes to pass, comes to pass because it is the counsel of His own will, then He must foreknow all things; for, “known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world” (Act 15:18). If there can be nothing come to pass but what He has determined, then He must of necessity foreknow whatever comes to pass.

This is an incommunicable¹⁵ property of the divine being. When Jehovah would debase all false gods, He interrogates their worshippers if they could declare things to come as He could: “Who hath declared from the beginning, that we may know? and beforetime, that we may say, He is righteous?” (Isa 41:26). The true God declares “the end from the beginning” (Isa 46:10); therefore He must foreknow whatever comes to pass.

And although God did not decree sin to be in the world, because such would be contrary to His nature, yet He decreed to permit it, knowing how to bring glory to Himself out of it—else He would never have permitted it. Now, if God foreknows all things, then He cannot be disappointed in anything as man is, who knoweth not what shall be on the morrow (Pro 27:1). Therefore, when the Scripture says, God “looked that [His vineyard] should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes” (Isa 5:2), it is not to be understood as if God were disappointed—as a man is who sometimes looks for one thing, but instead another occurs, which he looked not for, nor foreknew anything of it. But it is written thus to show what God might justly expect from that people, considering that both the means and mercies were bestowed on them.

It is not compatible with Jehovah to be frustrated in His expectations as man is: He declares “the end from the beginning” (Isa 46:10). Before He made man, He foreknew infallibly¹⁶ who would be saved and who would miscarry. Notwithstanding all the means afforded for each person to be saved, God foresaw that many thousands would perish. Yet let none say, “If so, why did God make man?” Oh, have a care of your thoughts!

Who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour? What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory. (Rom 9:20-23)

God foreknew the defects of the elect, who are, says Peter, “elect according to the foreknowledge of God” (1Pe 1:2). Yet that did not hinder them from being vessels prepared

¹⁵ **incommunicable** – not capable of being transferred or shared (His omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, transcendence, etc.). This is in contrast to God’s communicable attributes, those that we may share with Him by the Holy Spirit’s gracious work in us: His holiness, love, mercy, forgiveness, etc.

¹⁶ **infallibly** – without error.

afore to glory (Rom 9:19-23). If all things in time come to pass according to His eternal will, then He must foreknow all things, seeing He could not be ignorant of His own will. Therefore, He works in time all things after the counsel of His own will in eternity.

C. Omnipresence

If God works in the world, and in the church, all things after the counsel of His own will, then we may infer God's immensity and infinite presence. He must be in all places if He works in all places. Nothing is more clear than that. He fills heaven and earth with His presence (Jer 23:23-24). He is in the world in the way of His providence, in heaven in His glory, in hell in His power and justice. God is in every place and totally in every place, not a part of God in one place and a part in another. Neither is God like earthly kings, who can be but in one place at a time in person, and act in other nations by their representatives. Rather, God is personally present in every place (Psa 139:7-9). How else could He work all things for the best to them who love God, and work all things "after the counsel of his own will"? (Rom 8:28; Eph 1:11).

He Who is of an infinite being must be of an infinite presence. This must be because He has promised His presence to the church to the end of the world—therefore He must be with them in all places of the world, or else He cannot make good His Word. God's power is everywhere, therefore He Himself is also—for He and His attributes are all one. It is not enough to say, God knows all things in the world as one upon a high mountain sees what is under him; but God is everywhere personally present. As David said, "Whither shall I flee from thy presence?" (Psa 139:7). God is everywhere inclusively, and nowhere exclusively. Therefore David would cry unto God "from the end of the earth" (Psa 61:2), believing God would work "all things after the counsel of his own will"—for answering the saints' prayers is according to His purpose.

D. Providence

Does God work all things after the counsel of His own will? Then we infer that all those things we call casual, fortuitous, accidental, or chance are all the product of the counsel of His will. If we can refer to "chance" happenings as "things," then they must be some of those "all things" in the text that God works. What we call casual "chance" in the way of second causes are all ordered by God, the First Cause. A man cuts down a tree, the head slips off the handle, and it gives his neighbor a mortal wound, though done not designedly but accidentally by the man—yet the text says, "God deliver[ed] him into his hand" (Exo 21:12-13; cf. Deu 19:5).

As for the periods of preservation, they are all fixed by the divine decree. There the days of men are determined, their months numbered, and their unpassable bounds appointed—as Job said (Job 14:5). Hezekiah had fifteen years added to his days, but there was no addition to God's divine decree. Bloody and deceitful men shall not live out half their days, yet they live out all the days set down in the divine decree. The Jews, though they had great malice against Christ, could not kill Him until His time was come. Rain nor drought, fruitfulness nor barrenness, riches nor poverty, health nor sickness, prosperity nor adver-

sity, life nor death—come not upon us by chance, but according to the counsel of God’s own will. Divine providence extends itself to all persons, things, places, and times. This Job knew; he saw God in the loss of his estate and children (Job 1:20-21), though God made use of the Sabeans and Chaldeans as instruments. Yet he looked beyond the second to the First Cause. David was speechless under very severe providences from this principle (Psa 39:9).

God’s divine providence extends itself to the lion, unicorn, whale, raven, hail, and snow, as God tells Job (Job 38-41). Yea, not the fall of a sparrow nor a hair is without it. If our hairs are all numbered, much more our years; if a sparrow cannot fall without it, much less a child or a man. That which is chance to us is all ordered by God in infinite wisdom. Many things fall upon us we never dreamed of, yet nothing comes to pass but what God did foreknow. Whatever second causes God may make use of, it is all to bring about the will of the First Cause. Joseph’s being sold into Egypt, Shemei’s cursing David, Ahab’s going up to Ramoth Gilead (with the arrow entering between the harness though shot at a venture) were disposed of by God. [The arrow] had its commission to give [Ahab] his death wound. The change of government we are under¹⁷ is God’s working according to the counsel of His own will, “for promotion cometh neither from the east, nor from the west, nor from the south. But God is the judge: he putteth down one, and setteth up another” (Psa 75:6-7). The great reason there are so many discontented under general and particular providences is because they overlook the finger of God in it. They are always quarrelling with second causes, not considering that God works all things after the counsel of His own will.

4. Uses

Now we will present some considerations to quiet any who are under pressing trials, so that they may submit to them patiently and do the divine will cheerfully.

A. *Wise Governance*

First, consider who can govern the world better than He Who made it. Who can dispose of His creatures better than He that gave them a being? Who can tell how to keep a house or a watch in order better than He that made them? Shall magistrates acquire the name of wise governors? And shall not the Governor of the world, Who is essentially wise, be so accounted in His working all things after the counsel of His own will? Who is more fit to govern the world than He Who made it? This was the very argument with which God stilled Job (Job 38-42), as if He were to say, “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Did you have no hand in making the world; and would you have a hand in governing it? Am I not able to govern and dispose of My creatures by the same wisdom I made them? Did I take no counsel of man in framing it; and shall I come to man for wis-

¹⁷ Hercules Collins preached the substance of this booklet in 1689, the same year that Protestant William III of Orange and his wife Mary were given the English crown by Parliament, and Catholic King James II fled.

dom to govern it? Had I no counsel of man when I made My decrees; and shall I come to man for wisdom to execute them? Therefore, it is for My own glory to work according to the counsel of My own will!"

B. Pleasure

Secondly, consider that God takes pleasure in all His purposes and decrees. As God's counsels will stand because they are immutable, so His counsels are called His pleasure (Isa 46:10). God's electing, redeeming, adopting, sanctifying, and saving the Ephesians is called "the good pleasure of his will" (Eph 1:5)—that in which He took delight, or which was well pleasing to Him. Shall God take pleasure in His decrees and the execution of them, and shall we not be pleased with what God is pleased with? Shall we cheerfully submit to the just decrees, will, and pleasure of earthly governors, and not to Him Whose kingdom rules over all (Psa 103:19)? All good men do delight in their own just decrees and purposes, and shall not God in His, Who cannot go out of Himself or His own purposes to a greater good, because He already is the chief good? If it pleases God "to make you his people" (1Sa 12:22), and for your profit He is pleased to correct you (Heb 12:10), shall we not say, "Blessed be God for the one as well as for the other" (Job 1:21)?

Also, it is too low for a Christian to say, "I *must* submit"; for it is the glory of a Christian to choose the divine will. Reprobates and devils must submit. If God will dispossess a poor sinner of the devil, he must come out, whether he will or not. Pharaoh indeed obeyed God's will in letting Israel go, but it was sore against his will. A believer should submit to the divine will out of choice, not force, which is no more than devils and reprobates do. In this, Christ is our pattern, though human flesh sometimes recoils and draws back under the sense of approaching trouble, as good men sometimes do—yet Christ's judgment and will was for complying with the divine will, though it be to die (Luk 22:42). This was not only from the eternal transaction between the Father and Him about man's salvation; but also in knowing that it was best to choose the will of such a One Who is not only righteous, holy, and good, but Who also "worketh all things after the counsel of his own will."

C. Contentment

Thirdly, consider that godly contentment arises alone from this principle. Am I content with this revolution, this alteration in the nation, in my family, in my person, in my estate, because it is my Lord's will? In the same way, Paul could never be content in every condition but from this principle (Phi 4:11), knowing not only that the condition he should be in was best for him, but that it was also according to the purpose of God's own will. Some heathens called Stoics¹⁸ labored after contentment in every condition by the improvement of natural principles, but that was far from divine contentment—God's contentment and satisfaction arises out of Himself and His decrees, knowing Himself perfect. Now, when our contentment is from God, it flows from this principle purely, and is removed from all

¹⁸ **Stoics** – members of an ancient Greek school of philosophy, which believed that people should repress emotion, be indifferent to pain or pleasure, and accept calmly all occurrences as the unavoidable result of divine will or natural order.

other considerations. We say then, “This is the divine will, therefore I submit, and therefore am content, and can do no other but choose it, because it is the will of One Who is perfect in wisdom. Lord, if You should refer any case to me, to make my own choice, I would refer it to You again. I would say, ‘The will of the Lord be done’—just as the brethren would have said concerning Paul, whom they loved dearly and shed so many tears for at parting” (Act 21:14).

D. Furtherance of the Divine Will

Fourthly, consider that all in God, and all about God, serves to bring about His decrees and counsel.

1. All God’s attributes

First, all the attributes of God are concerned in the accomplishment of His will: His will decrees all, His wisdom orders all, His truth and power accomplish all. Mark, God’s power acts not beyond His purpose—though in point of power God could do many things more than He does, and could prevent many other things from coming to pass—yet, in point of His decree, He does not. In point of power, God could prevent those garments from becoming red with the blood of the nations of the world; and He could prevent many family, relative, and personal afflictions upon us, and upon the churches—yet, in point of His decree, He does not.

The power of God is active for a time to accomplish His will (Act 17:24-28), and at another time it seems to cease to act. If God withdraws His power from a creature, it quickly ceases to move; and if God does send forth His Spirit, we are created (Psa 104:29-30). Some may say, I committed my near relation, husband, wife, or child into God’s hand, with a firm belief God could raise them up—and yet they died. Soul, you did well to believe in God’s power! But would you have God act His power contrary to or in the preventing of His decrees? Remember, God’s power acts not beyond His decrees; but all in God, either in a way of action or cessation from action, serves to bring about His own eternal will.

2. All people and angels

Secondly, all about God serve to complete His divine purposes and decrees. I mean the holy saints and angels in glory: They “do his commandments, hearkening unto the voice of his word” (Psa 103:20). In Ezekiel’s vision, the wheels and the spirit of the living creatures went wherever the Spirit of God went in order to accomplish His will (Eze 1:20).

In the same way, the four spirits or chariots in Zechariah’s vision (Zec 6:1-4)—which came out from between the mountains of brass, the immutable decrees of God—these are all employed in the four quarters of the world to accomplish those eternal decrees. Whatever providences they were employed about, whether frowning providences toward the enemies of God and of His church (signified by the red and black horses); or mixed providences (signified by the grizzled and bay horses), some mercy and some affliction; or whether smiling providences upon the church (signified by the white horses in the third chariot)—these all serve to accomplish the immutable decrees of God.

Seeing none shall enter the holy place “but he that doeth the will of [the] Father” (Mat 7:21), let it be our daily cry: Lord help me to do Thy will on earth as it is done in heaven (Mat 6:10). To suffer patiently and do cheerfully the will of God upon earth is a very great resemblance of the heavenly life. There is nothing in heaven but the divine will done and delighted in. The hearts of the angels that are in chains of darkness no sooner rose against the divine will, but they were cast out of heaven into hell; and all such as obey not the gospel of Christ can expect no less than flaming fire (2Th 1:8). Is it fit that a king should entertain a company of rebels that continually oppose his will? Let such remember that, as God has power and goodness enough to fix the godly and obedient in everlasting bliss, so He has power and justice enough to fix the disobedient in complete misery.

Remember, O disobedient soul, He can work all things according to the counsel of His own will! Will you not tremble at His presence Who appointed the sand for the bound of the sea (Jer 5:22)? Who knows the power of His anger (Psa 90:11)? Whoever hardened himself against God and prospered? Who but a lunatic would oppose the just commands of a general whose army is an hundred thousand strong, which can crush him as a moth? Oh! What armies in heaven and earth can God raise against an impenitent sinner—armies of angels, stars, lice, frogs, caterpillars, or locusts! Yes, God can arm your own conscience against you, which is more than all. Provoke not this Lord to jealousy! Are you greater than He Who can “destroy...soul and body in hell” (Luk 12:5; Mat 10:28)? Rather labor to make peace with Him; and you *shall* make peace with Him (Isa 27:5).

In conclusion, does God work all things after the counsel of His own will? Then, “blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD; and the people whom he hath chosen for his own inheritance” (Psa 33:12), because

*“The counsel of the LORD standeth for ever,
the thoughts of his heart to all generations.”*

—Psalm 33:11

