

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine God's will. Dr. Spencer, we ended last time by looking at 1 Peter 1:18-20, and in verse 20 it says that Christ "was chosen before the creation of the world"¹. You also pointed out that he was chosen for the purpose of becoming incarnate and giving his life as an atonement to save his people from their sins. And that all of this is part of God's decretive will.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is part, God decrees everything that happens, even our sin. Listen to what the apostle Peter said to the crowd on the day of Pentecost. We read this in Acts 2:22-24, "Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. 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. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him."

Marc Roby: And in Acts 4:28 we read that the believers were praying about the authorities crucifying Jesus Christ and they said, "They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen."

Dr. Spencer: God's will is wonderful. He can work directly in this universe, as he did in creation and as he does in regeneration, but he normally uses secondary agents to accomplish his purposes. In this case, he used this horrible sin of crucifying the completely innocent God-man Jesus Christ to bring about the redemption of his people. It completely boggles the mind. God used what was the worst sin ever committed to bring about the greatest good ever achieved.

Marc Roby: And yet Judas, who betrayed Jesus, was still morally culpable for his sin. And so were the Jewish leaders who conspired against him and condemned him, and so was Pontius Pilate, the prefect of the Roman province of Judaea, who acceded to their demands; they were all morally culpable for their sins even though they were accomplishing God's set purpose in doing so.

Dr. Spencer: They most certainly were morally responsible for their sins. No one forced them to sin, even though God had ordained from before the creation of the world that they would do so. The theological term used to describe the fact that God's free will and our free will can work together to accomplish exactly what God has foreordained, or decreed, is called concurrence. It is a very important concept.

Marc Roby: And, of course, the crucifixion of Christ is not the only dramatic example of concurrence. The story of Joseph being sold into slavery in Egypt gives us another great example.

¹ All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® (1984 version). Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it does. But in order to give that example, we need to remind our listeners of some of the facts relating to Joseph's life.

Marc Roby: Alright, let me begin. Joseph was one of the twelve Patriarchs of the Jewish people. He was the favorite son of his father Jacob, who was the son of Isaac, the son God promised to Abraham and Sarah. Joseph's brothers hated him because he was his father's favorite, so they sold him to some Midianite slave traders who were heading down to Egypt and then told their father Jacob that he had been killed by a wild animal. Joseph was later sold to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard.

Dr. Spencer: And we read about all of that in Genesis Chapter 37. But God was gracious to Joseph in Egypt and through a long process, which included his being unjustly imprisoned for years, he miraculously became second in command in Egypt as we read in Chapters 39-41 of Genesis. We also read that there was a severe famine in the land and Joseph was in charge of Pharaoh's storehouses of grain.

Marc Roby: And in Chapter 42 of Genesis we are told that there was also famine in the land of Canaan, where Joseph's brothers and father lived. And because they heard that there was grain in Egypt, Joseph's brothers came to Egypt to buy grain for their families. In doing so, they came before their brother Joseph.

Dr. Spencer: And there is a lot that we are leaving out in order to get to our main point. This is a marvelous story of God's grace and sovereignty and I encourage our listeners to read it if they don't know the story. But to move on, Joseph's brothers didn't recognize him because he now spoke, dressed and acted like an Egyptian, but he recognized them. I will again leave out a lot of wonderful and edifying material from Chapters 43 through 49 and just say that Joseph eventually revealed himself to his brothers and then his entire family, including his father Jacob, moved down to Egypt.

Marc Roby: And Jacob died in Egypt, which then left Joseph's brothers worried. In Genesis 50:15 we read that "When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, 'What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?'"

Dr. Spencer: And we finally come to the verses we want to discuss today. In Genesis 50:19-21 we read, "But Joseph said to them, 'Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.' And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them."

Marc Roby: What a gracious response that was.

Dr. Spencer: It was incredibly gracious, but Joseph saw God's purpose in all that had happened. I'm sure that as a human being he must have struggled with all of the trials he went through because of his brother's hatred, and in the material we skipped over we do see him exacting a bit of revenge. But the main point here, just as we saw in Acts regarding the crucifixion of Jesus, is the concurrence between the free, sinful actions of human beings and God's ultimate purpose and decrees.

Marc Roby: Now I suspect that that will sound very strange to many of our listeners. The idea that God would, in any way, concur with sinful acts.

Dr. Spencer: I'm sure that does sound strange to anyone who has not heard of this doctrine before. The word concur is often used to indicate agreement or approval, but it can also simply mean to act together toward some common goal, in which case it does not imply approval of the actions of the other person. And that is the sense in which we are using the word here.

God's actions and the sinful actions of human beings can work together to bring about a result that God has decreed will happen, but there is no implication that God approves of the sinful actions.

Marc Roby: Louis Berkhof gives a good definition of concurrence in his systematic theology text. He writes that "Concurrence may be defined as *the cooperation of the divine power with all subordinate powers, according to the pre-established laws of their operation, causing them to act and to act precisely as they do.*"²

Dr. Spencer: That is a great definition. We will have more to say about concurrence, which is part of the doctrine of God's providence, when we finish with God's attributes. But for now, let me just point out a couple of things. First, note that Berkhof talks about divine power and subordinate powers. God is in complete control of his creation. That does not mean that we are all puppets, but it does mean that we are completely subordinate. No one can thwart God's plans. He brings about exactly what he has decreed will happen. When we sin, he uses our sin, together with other factors, to bring about his purposes.

Marc Roby: That's an amazing thing to think about.

Dr. Spencer: It really is. But I also like the fact that Berkhof mentions the "pre-established laws" that are in operation. There are, for example, the laws of nature, which God himself established and upholds, but there are also laws, if you will, of human behavior. As we noted in Session 84 and will talk about more when we get to biblical anthropology, we do have free wills, but our wills are not *absolutely* free. We cannot violate our own nature. Which is perfectly logical and reasonable. It strikes me as exceedingly strange, to say the least, to think that I have the freedom to choose to do something that goes completely against all of my own inclinations and desires.

Marc Roby: That is indeed illogical. But, now that we have established that in order to accomplish his decretive will God works through secondary agents, including even the sinful actions of human beings, what else do you want to say about the will of God?

Dr. Spencer: Well, since we have been talking about human sin and its relation to God's will, I want to stick with that general idea and talk about what is usually called God's permissive will. I can't find a good definition of this term in any of my theology texts because theologians seem to not use the term. But Christians use it reasonably often, so I think we should discuss it. I think that what people usually mean by God's permissive will is that it encompasses all those things

² Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1938, pg. 171

that God allows to happen even though they are not what he desires or commands to have happen.

Marc Roby: And these actions may include sin as well as things that are not, in themselves sin.

Dr. Spencer: I think that's right. And although I can't find a theologian speaking about God's permissive will, Berkhof does talk about the fact that God's eternal decree, which is basically synonymous with what we have been calling God's decretive will, is permissive with respect to human sin.

Marc Roby: Now, that's an interesting statement, can you explain what he means by that?

Dr. Spencer: Yes, I can. He wrote that when God decrees human sin, "It is a decree which renders the future sinful act absolutely certain, but in which God determines (a) not to hinder the sinful self-determination of the finite will; and (b) to regulate and control the result of this sinful self-determination."³

Marc Roby: This sounds like concurrence again, mixed in with God's sovereign control of all things, including human sin. Berkhof's point seems to be that God permits sin, but it is never outside of his control and is used by him to accomplish his own purposes.

Dr. Spencer: I think that's a fair summary.

Marc Roby: When people speak of God's permissive will, it is usually in some way contrasted with his perfect will.

Dr. Spencer: That contrast is what you typically hear.⁴ And what is usually meant by God's perfect will for us is almost synonymous with his revealed, or preceptive will. It is what God has commanded us to do, although it often goes beyond that. For example, someone might talk about it not being God's perfect will for them to marry a particular individual, whereas Scripture, of course, does not command us to marry or not marry a specific individual. It only gives us the command that as Christians, we must marry another Christian.

Marc Roby: I've certainly heard that kind of talk, and it does make a valid point. We can make decisions that are not necessarily sinful, they aren't the wisest choice. God will not usually intervene in any direct way to stop his people from making bad decisions, or even from sinning, so we need to be careful to not conclude that just because he allows us to do something, that it is the best thing to do, or even to conclude that it isn't sin.

Dr. Spencer: I agree that is the point usually being made when people talk about God's permissive will versus his perfect will. And it is an important point. It should scare us to know that God will allow us to make bad decisions. And it should scare us even more when we read, for example, that God allowed King David to commit adultery and murder. We would prefer to read that David was prevented from doing so. But the reality is that, for his own perfect

³ Ibid, pg. 105

⁴ It shows up, for example, in a popular old daily devotional called *My Utmost for his Highest* by Oswald Chambers, see the entry for December 16.

purposes, God allows his people to sin, sometimes grievously. And we cannot take any solace in the fact that he is sovereign even over our sins and will somehow use them to accomplish his good purposes. It would *always*, without exception, be better for us to not sin.

Marc Roby: I completely agree. We need to seek to be led by the Word of God, with the help of the Holy Spirit, in order to avoid sin and even decisions that are not sinful, but that are also not the wisest choice.

Dr. Spencer: And we have a great promise from God about temptation to sin. In 1 Corinthians 10:13 we read that “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.”

Marc Roby: Yes, that is a great promise. But it does *not* say that God will not allow us to be tempted. It only says that he will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we can bear.

Dr. Spencer: And the painful truth is that we sometimes give in to temptation in spite of God keeping it limited to what we can bear. We need to be very careful to watch our life and doctrine closely as the apostle Paul wrote to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:16. God will provide a way out of every temptation, but we must look for it and avail ourselves of it. If we don’t, we will suffer harm.

Marc Roby: Yes, and very often others will be harmed as well.

Dr. Spencer: That’s quite true. This is why Jesus taught in the Lord’s prayer to pray that God would deliver us from temptation. He also told us to pray “your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt 6:10), which is obviously speaking about God’s preceptive will; in other words, we are praying that people, including ourselves, would obey God’s commands. It would make no sense for this to refer to God’s decretive will since whatever God decrees will, in fact, happen. Therefore, if this referred to God’s decretive will we would be praying that God would cause what is going to happen to happen.

Marc Roby: That certainly wouldn’t make any sense. But I doubt that many people are consciously aware that they are praying for their own obedience when they pray the Lord’s prayer. What else do you want to say about God’s will?

Dr. Spencer: I think it is important to distinguish between what theologians call God’s necessary and free wills.

Marc Roby: We have already pointed out that there are things that God cannot do, so his necessary will must refer to those things which he must do because he is God. Things like continuing to exist and always telling the truth.

Dr. Spencer: That is exactly what is meant, so in a sense we’ve covered God’s necessary will already. But the important point I want to make is that God also does many things freely, and it is particularly important for us to know that creation was God’s free decision. He did not *need* to create this universe for any reason. Nor did he need to redeem anyone after the fall.

Marc Roby: You do sometimes here Christians talk about God creating us for fellowship, which sounds a bit like he would be lonely without us.

Dr. Spencer: That is precisely the view I want to oppose. It is unbiblical. God is love as we are told in 1 John 4:16, and that is an essential attribute of God. It is part of his fundamental nature. It was true before he ever created this universe. There was absolutely perfect love and fellowship between the persons of the Trinity prior to the creation of this universe. God did not need to create. Wayne Grudem states it well in his systematic theology. He wrote that “It would be wrong for us ever to try to find a necessary cause for creation or redemption in the being of God himself, for that would rob God of his total independence. It would be to say that without us God could not truly be God. God’s decisions to create and to redeem were totally free decisions.”⁵

Marc Roby: That is a very important, and humbling, point. Is there anything else you wanted to say about God’s will?

Dr. Spencer: I want to go back to the Lord’s prayer and note again that in that prayer Christ taught us to pray that God’s will would be done on earth, which certainly includes in our own lives. If we have surrendered our lives to Christ, we must work hard to submit our will to his will. When Jesus was crying out to the Father from the Mount of Olives prior to his crucifixion, we read in Luke 22:42 that he prayed, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.” That is the kind of complete submission to God that all of us should strive to achieve in our own lives.

I’ve heard that people used to add the letters D.V. to statements of their intentions for the future. For example, I might write that I will visit you in Oregon this summer, D.V. The letters D.V. stand for the Latin phrase *deo volente*, and mean God willing.

Marc Roby: Which comes, of course, from James 4:13-15, where we read, “Now listen, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.’ Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.’”

Dr. Spencer: I assume that is where it comes from, yes. And although I’m sure it can easily become a meaningless cliché used to try and sound godly, it is a good sentiment to have in mind at all times. As Christians, our job is to seek to know and do the will of God. As Jesus himself told us in John 13:17, “Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.”

Marc Roby: I think that is a good place to end for today, so let me remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org and we’ll do our best to respond to them.

⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, pg. 213