

THE WILL OF THE FATHER

John 6:38-40

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“For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (Jn. 6:38-40).

There are always two sides to any matter. This means that what you hear from one person may often be contradicted by another. John 6:38-40 presents two sides to Jesus’ teaching about salvation, but instead of competing they complement one another perfectly.

On the one side, we are told about the sovereign will of God in salvation. “This is the will of him who sent me,” Jesus says, “that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me” (Jn. 6:39). God has given a people to Christ and Christ will keep them. From this, we rightly conclude that salvation is all of God. But there is another side presented here: the human side of salvation. Jesus says that the Father wills “that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life” (Jn. 6:40). Now we find that this divine salvation requires human involvement, so that one must believe to gain eternal life. Salvation is “by grace” – that is, because of God’s merciful favor – but also “through faith” – that is, through man’s believing.

The question might be asked, How can we hold both to full divine sovereignty in salvation, so that God has predestined a people to eternal life, and also teach full human responsibility, so that we must believe in order to be saved? In answering, we believe both because the Bible teaches both. So is this a contradiction in Scripture? Is it

possible for God to be totally sovereign and man yet to remain totally responsible? While admitting that this is a difficult subject for us to grasp, the answer is that it is possible. The Bible not only teaches that salvation relies on both the divine will and human faith, but moreover our faith is the result of God's will. In John 6:37, Jesus states that it is those whom "the Father gives me" who come to him. Paul tells us that the faith which we exercise for our salvation is "the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8). F. F. Bruce writes: "God is at work by his grace in the word, and those who come to Christ come to him by the 'sweet constraint' of that grace. And when they come, they find that Christ undertakes the entire responsibility for the full and final salvation."¹ It is God's will, Jesus tells us in John 6:40, that Jesus will have believers and that "everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life."

SERVANT OF THE FATHER'S WILL

The teaching of John 6:38-40 contains a wealth of theology, beginning with a brief explanation of Jesus' incarnation. He states, "For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me" (Jn. 6:38).

This reminds us of Jesus' heavenly origin. He did not come into existence in the manger of Bethlehem, nor even in the miraculous conception that preceded his virgin birth. Jesus is the eternal, divine Son, and he came to earth from his heavenly glory. The Fourth Century A.D. poet Prudentius wrote: "Of the Father's love begotten ere the worlds began to be / he is Alpha and Omega, he the Source, the Ending he."²

Jesus came with work to be done. The Second Person of the Godhead did not take up flesh merely to enjoy our company. He was incarnated with a mission given by God the Father. This mission involved laying aside his heavenly glory and humbling himself to be the servant of the Father's will. A concise summary of the humiliation Christ undertook is given by the Westminster Shorter Catechism: "Christ's humiliation consisted in his being born, and that

¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 153.

² Aurelius Clemens Prudentius, *Of the Father's Love Begotten*, 348-413.

in a low condition, made under the law, undergoing the miseries of this life, the wrath of God, and the cursed death of the cross; in being buried, and continuing under the power of death for a time” (A. 27).

He who had dwelt in timeless glory took up our mortal condition; he who was appointed Judge over the world took his own place under the law; he who knew no sin bore the penalty of our guilt and shame; and he who is the author of life, suffered death so that we might live. Charles Wesley stated this in memorable words: “Mild he lays his glory by / born that man no more may die / born to raise the sons of earth / born to give them second birth.”³

Jesus is the dutiful Son and the faithful servant of his Father’s will. He says in Psalm 40:8: “I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart” (c.f. Heb. 10:7). In this, he sets us an example, since Christians also are to desire the Father’s will. We are taught to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt. 6:10), and we are to do what we pray. The Christian life is one of obedience to the Father’s will as revealed in the Bible.

This starts with faith in Jesus: “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent,” Jesus taught (Jn. 6:29). We must confess our sin before God, admit our need of Christ, and look to him in saving faith. This is where doing God’s will begins. But it does not end there. Christians often inquire, “What is God’s will for my life?” The answer is found in the Bible. The Ten Commandments express God’s will for our conduct (see Rom. 8:4). Christ saves us from the curse of the law to a life of increasing law-keeping. Paul says, “For this is the will of God, your sanctification” (1 Thess. 4:3). Moreover, it is God’s will that we should lead quite lives devoted to good works (1 Tim. 2:2) and especially to spreading the gospel (Mt. 28:19-20).

Jesus’ example also calls for willing submission to all God-given authority. Jesus as the perfect Son obeyed his Father; Christian children are likewise to obey their parents (Eph. 6:1). Wives are to submit to husbands (Eph. 5:22), workers to employers (Eph. 6:5), citizens to government officials (1 Pet. 2:13), and church members to the elders of the church (Heb. 13:17). We have a Savior because

³ Charles Wesley, *Hark! the Herald Angels Sing*, 1739.

Jesus came not to do his own will – that is, not to serve his own interests – but the will of his heavenly Father. A Christ-like disciple will also submit to the Father’s will and to those he has set over us.

THE FATHER’S SAVING WILL

John 6:38-40 is part of Jesus’ teaching after his miraculous feeding of the five thousand. He had declared himself “the true bread... [who] gives life to the world” (Jn. 6:32-33). But the people still refused to believe (Jn. 6:36). Nonetheless, Jesus confidently spoke of success, explaining, “All that the Father gives me will come to me” (Jn. 6:37). In John 6:39-40, he elaborates on this confidence:

This is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.

Jesus is confident of success because he knows the will of the Father. Moreover, he knows that God’s will is not merely a wish! When we speak of man’s will, we often refer to what someone is hoping will happen. But God’s will is far different!

It is true that the Bible’s commands express God’s will in the sense of what he wants from us. We may reject God’s will, in this sense, to our own loss. But, here, Jesus speaks of God’s will as his sovereign decree. Isaiah writes, “I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose’” (Isa. 46:9-10). Paul adds that God “works all things according to the counsel of his will” (Eph. 1:11). Arthur Pink writes, “This is the absolute, efficacious will of God, always effected, always fulfilled.”⁴

So what is the will of God, we anxiously wonder? Jesus answers, “This is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me.... This is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life”

⁴ Arthur W. Pink: *The Sovereignty of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1918), 244.

(Jn. 6:39-40). What wonderful good news this is! God has willed a people for his Son and salvation for all who believe!

God's saving will concerns a class of people who are described in two complimentary ways: from the divine and human perspectives. God has decreed salvation for certain people. Looking from eternity, they are all those given by the Father to his Son, i.e., the elect. But, looking within time, they are "everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him" (Jn. 6:40). These are the same people. John Calvin compares God's election to a letter that is closed and sealed; no one may open the book of life prior to God's judgment. "But we may read it," Calvin says, "for God gives a witness of it when He called us to Himself by the gospel and by faith."⁵ Calvin asks: "How do we know that God has elected us before the creation of the world? By believing in Jesus Christ... God has his eternal counsel, and he always reserves to himself the chief and original record of which he gives us a copy by faith."⁶

This makes it all the more urgent that we believe on Jesus Christ. Jesus speaks of a people which "looks on the Son and believes in him" (Jn. 6:40). He is perhaps alluding to an illustration he gave to Nicodemus earlier in John's Gospel. During the exodus, the people of Israel had fallen into sin, and God punished them by sending fiery serpents whose bites caused people to die. This aptly depicts the wages of sin, which is death (Rom. 6:23). But God, in his grace, had Moses erect an image of a snake on a pole, and when the people looked to the bronze serpent they were healed (see Num. 21:4-9). In the same way, feeling the poison of sin and the impending judgment of God, we are to look to the cross of Christ, where Jesus was made into sin's image for our salvation. Jesus said, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life" (Jn. 3:14-15).

This is something we do not merely wish or hope for: this is the will of God. We say that nothing is certain but death and taxes. But this, too, is certain, "that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life" (Jn. 6:40). Martyn Lloyd-Jones exults:

⁵ John Calvin: *The Mystery of Godliness* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria,), 44.

⁶ John Calvin: *Sermons on Ephesians* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1562, reprint ?), 47.

There is a purpose to life, there is a purpose to the whole world and God is at the back of all... The purpose of God in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is to save man... What a blessing it is to be able to look up unto God and see that before he even made the world he had a great purpose of redemption... Look up, I say, and look to eternity, the blessed glorious God and his purpose. And it comes especially in Christ Jesus our Lord.⁷

THE FATHER'S WILL CONFIRMED AND FULFILLED

The will of the Father is an eternal will, but it is confirmed and fulfilled in time. This is why Christ came into the world: “to do... the will of him who sent me” (Jn. 6:38).

When we read that Jesus came to do the Father's will, the New Testament emphasizes that he came to save the lost. “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost,” Jesus said (Lk. 19:10). He did this by dying on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins: “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt. 20:28). Now he gathers his own into his flock: “I am the good shepherd... My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (Jn. 10:14, 27-28).

In John 6:39-40, Jesus specifies two ways in which he confirms and fulfills the Father's saving will: “That I should lose nothing of all that he has given me,” and, “I will raise him up on the last day.”

The first of these speaks of Jesus keeping all those given to him by the Father. Charles Spurgeon says:

The Lord Jesus Christ... has taken all those who were given of the Father to him, into his custody. He is the Surety, he is responsible for them, and he keeps them. In what way does he keep them? Seeing they were lost he redeemed them; seeing they were far from him he fetches them back of his grace, by the power of his Spirit; seeing that they are still prone to wander he restores their souls; seeing that they are imperfect he sanctifies them, and he continues the work of sanctification, and he will make them one day to be without spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing.⁸

This does not remove our obligation to persevere in faith, but rather secures it. Our family once lived on a busy city street, with very little play space in our yard. But there was a park up and across the street,

⁷ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *I Am Not Ashamed*, 109-110.

⁸ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 63 vols. (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1971), 19:342.

to which we would often take our small children. But the street-crossing was dangerous, with automobiles flying past at high speed. As we approached the intersection, my wife and I would always cry out, "Hold onto our hands!" Frightened, our little children did. But their safety did not ultimately depend on their own little grips, for we were also holding them tight in our hands! Likewise, how wonderful it is to read that the Lord Jesus, with his conquering, saving might, will hold fast all who come to him in faith. He says of his sheep: "They will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand" (Jn. 10:28-29).

Let me apply this promise to different kinds of believer. What about weak believers, who come to Jesus tentatively and with doubts? Often, they wonder if they have believed enough, and fret that they may not be numbered among God's elect. Are weak believers kept by Christ? The answer is Yes! Weak believers are just as saved as those who enjoy a stronger and bolder faith.

What about children? We always rejoice when the smallest child opens his or her heart to the Lord. But will they stay in the faith? Certainly, we must be clear that they have truly understood and believed the gospel, rather than affirming mere sentimental appeals. But if they truly have believed, can we expect them to be saved in the end, knowing how much they have yet to experience? The answer is Yes! For Jesus will keep even his smallest sheep. James Boice writes, "If you are a child, look forward to a lifetime of service for Jesus Christ. You will grow, and as you grow you will find that Jesus is even more wonderful than you think him now. You will find that he is indeed able to keep you and that you will not be lost."⁹

What about those on the other end of life? Elderly Christians face ill health, physical restrictions, and the nearer prospect of death. "Will I be able to stay strong in faith?" some wonder. The answer is Yes! As your strength wanes, Jesus' will not. You are safe as he is faithful to the Father's will! "He will be as real to you in old age as he has ever been. In death he will be even closer... Jesus himself has said

⁹ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 2:501.

that he will lose nothing of all that has been given to him by the Father.”¹⁰

We could multiply the examples, but the answer will be the same for those who have come to Christ in saving faith. Paul gathers every threat and ponders them in light of Christ’s promise to keep his own:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?... For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:35-39).

But what is Jesus keeping us for? This brings up the second way he confirms and fulfills the will of the Father: “I will raise him up on the last day” (Jn. 6:40).

The most important event in any of our lives takes place not before but after we die. Jesus came down from heaven in humility, but there is a day soon coming when he will return in glory. There is a Day of Judgment appointed by God, and every soul who ever has lived will be summoned. The Bible describes this event in a fearsome way, given that all have sinned against God’s law. Revelation 20:12-15 says, “I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened.... And they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done... And if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”

If you hope to survive that judgment apart from Christ, you are tragically deceived. When the book of your deeds is opened before God, the sins that you have forgotten will be recalled, and the good works on which you depend will be crumble, being corrupt and imperfect.

Napoleon Bonaparte was arguably the greatest conqueror in world history, an acknowledged military genius who attained a staggering extent of earthly glory. But he did not reckon with the reality of God; boasting in his own might, his armies finally were defeated. Like everyone else, he came to the hour of his death and how dark was his despair. His dying words were recorded for all to heed: “I die before my time, and my body will be given back to the earth. Such is the

¹⁰ Ibid.

fate of him who has been called the great Napoleon. What an abyss between my deep misery and the eternal kingdom of Christ.”¹¹

But one who “looks on the Son and believes in him” need never fear death or judgment. He will have eternal life, and Jesus says, “I will raise him on the last day.” J. C. Ryle writes, “Not one lamb of His flock shall ever be left behind in the wilderness. He will raise to glory, in the last day, the whole flock entrusted to His charge, and not one shall be found missing.”¹²

RESURRECTION LIVING

I have said that the most important event in our lives takes place after we die, on the “last day” when every soul will be judged. But that issue will be settled before we die; indeed, the most decisive event in our lives takes place right now, through our response to Jesus Christ. There is a cross standing erect before all mankind. Written on it in gospel letters are the words: “This is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life.” That cross is the only door to forgiveness and resurrection. And if you pass through that door, believing on Jesus, you may look back and see etched on the other side: “This is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me.”

Will you look on Jesus? Or will you turn away? Will you occupy yourself with the things of this world, which soon will perish? Or will you look to the Son? Will you believe, or will you respond like the people to whom Jesus was preaching in Capernaum, who could always think of one more reason not to believe and one more sign that Jesus had to perform? Your eternal destiny can be decided right this minute: look to Jesus, believe on him, and you will have eternal life.

Those who believe may look forward to a glorious inheritance: “I will raise him up on the last day,” Jesus cries. And they may begin living eternal life now. The new birth is the first-fruit of the final resurrection, and believers enjoy the benefits of divine life even in this present world. Amidst the trials of life, with its temptations and

¹¹ Cited from James Montgomery Boice, *The Heart of the Cross* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998), 13

¹² J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: John*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1999), 1:372-373.

all the afflictions of mortal weakness, believers may look forward to a resurrection, and in its power they may live triumphantly now in faith. Knowing that there is a resurrection, we can be servants in this life of the heavenly Father's will. According to John Chrysostom, a great preacher of the early church:

This saying is able more than any other remedy to heal our souls. For there is a Resurrection, and that Resurrection is at our doors, not afar off, nor at a distance... Let us picture these things to ourselves every day. If we are ever revolving them, no care for present things will be able to sting us.¹³

¹³ Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of John and the Epistle to the Hebrews*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, first series, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 14:163.