

God's Willingness And Man's Unwillingness

A Problem For Extreme Calvinists

Introduction

In no uncertain terms the Bible declares that God is a sovereign God who “worketh all things after the counsel of His own will” and who has “done whatsoever He hath pleased” (Eph. 1:11; Psalm 115:3). God’s purpose and plan will be accomplished without fail: “My counsel shall stand, and I will do all My pleasure: yea, I have spoken it, I will also bring it to pass; I have purposed it, I will also do it” (Isaiah 46:10-11).

We must, however, be careful to distinguish between what God purposes to accomplish directly by His own actions and what God permits His creatures to do, both of which will ultimately bring glory to His holy Name. Examples of God purposing to accomplish something directly by Himself would be creating the world, sending the Genesis Flood, bringing judgment upon Babel and Sodom, causing the miracle of the virgin birth, etc. Man has nothing to do with these things. God’s direct will and activity brings them about. The sovereign God also accomplishes His overall purpose of bringing glory to Himself by allowing His creatures to perform in certain ways, even ways that are contrary to His revealed will. His creatures are allowed to act in ways that are contrary to the desire and wish of the Creator. This we call sin,

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and God is not the Author of sin. God, for example, did not want or wish Adam to eat of the forbidden fruit as indicated in His command to the contrary (Gen. 2:16-17), but God allowed Adam to partake of the fruit and this terrible sin and momentous fall was part of God’s overall plan whereby He would ultimately bring glory to Himself by revealing the riches of His grace and the depths of His mercy.

Extreme Calvinists seem to have difficulty in understanding how a sovereign God can “desire” something that will never come to pass. They believe that whatever God wills and desires must come to pass. If God desires to save certain men then these men must be saved. If God so loved the world, then the world must be saved (the “world” referring to the world of God’s elect). If Christ died for all men, then all men must be saved. This is how they would reason. Of course, they believe that Christ did not die for all men but that He died only for the elect. They believe that all who Christ died for will be saved (but they say He only died for some and not for all).

In 1 Timothy 2:4 we learn of God’s compassionate desire for the salvation of all men. One Calvinistic writer made the following comment in light of 1 Timothy 2:4—“What God *desires* that He will do” (thus he believes that the phrase “all men” in this verse refers only to the elect). They feel that if God wants men to repent, then they will repent (God will work in their hearts and bring about repentance). They reason that if God wants men to believe, then they will believe. The logic of this implies that God does not want the majority of men to believe, and hence, does not want these people to be saved, 1 Timothy 2:4 and 2 Peter 3:9 to the contrary.

Extreme Calvinists have difficulty understanding how God could love someone and not save that person. For example, the Scripture says that Christ loved the rich young ruler (Mark 10:21), a man who “went away” and as far as we can tell never followed Christ. A.W. Pink did not believe that Christ could love a man who would never be saved. He said, “We fully believe that he (the rich young ruler) was one of God’s elect, and was saved sometime after his interview

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with the Lord” [*The Sovereignty of God*, p. 125, footnote]. This is Pink’s theory, but the Scripture provides no support for this view. It is a view based on Pink’s theology, not based on Pink’s Bible.

Every honest believer knows that what God desires is not always fulfilled. In 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 we learn what God desires for every believer. His revealed will (“this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you”) is that believers rejoice evermore, pray without ceasing and give thanks in everything; yet how many times do we fail to fulfill God’s will in these areas?

If God is willing, then the extreme Calvinist believes that man must be willing also, because God will make him so. If man is unwilling, then it must be because God was unwilling to make the person willing. The Scripture, however, teaches that even though God is willing and desirous that men should turn from sin and go in His direction, ***He often allows men to have their own way and go their own way according to the stubbornness of their own sin-hardened hearts.*** God was willing, but they were not. God would, but they would not.

Thus our purpose in this study is to examine certain key words (especially in the Old Testament) which demonstrate that God’s compassion and desire and invitation does indeed reach out to all men, even to those who refuse to repent and believe and come to Him. We shall see the wonderful willingness of God in sharp contrast to the stubborn unwillingness of man. We will gain a better appreciation for our Lord’s words in Matthew 23:37 which cannot be fully understood apart from certain Old Testament passages which we shall study. May the Lord open our eyes to these truths.

The Hebrew Verb אָבַח [Strong’s #14]

אָבַח

This verb means “**to be willing**, to consent, to desire, to

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wish.” It is an interesting verb because it is always used with a negative particle except for two places (Isa. 1:19 and Job 39:9). With the negative it means “to be unwilling, to refuse.” For example, in Exodus 10:27 it is used of Pharaoh’s stubborn refusal to let the children of Israel go (“he would not,” he refused!). This word is also illustrated in 2 Samuel 23:16 where David refused to drink the water (“he would not”) even though he was terribly thirsty. This word is also used in Isaiah 42:24 (Israel’s refusal to walk in God’s ways) and in Ezekiel 3:7 (used twice) and 20:8 (Israel’s refusal to listen to God). The following passages which contain this verb especially relate to our study:

- 1) Psalm 81:11—“But my people would not hearken to my voice, and Israel **would have none** of me.” God wanted them to open their mouth wide (v.10). God wanted to bless them and fill them (v.10). God earnestly desired that they should hearken unto Him and walk in His ways. How could God’s willingness and desire be stated any clearer than in verse 13? “Oh, that my people had hearkened unto me, and Israel had walked in my ways!” (Psalm 81:13). God was willing! God would have done so much for them (verses 14-16), but they would not. They refused! God had a heart for them; they had no heart for God.
- 2) Proverbs 1:25,30—“But ye have set at nought all my counsel, and **would have none** of my reproof . . . They **would have none** of my counsel; they despised all my reproof.” Is God willing that men should love simplicity and hate knowledge (v.22)? Wisdom cries out (v.20) and invites men (v.23) and promises great things to those who come to her (v.23). God was willing; man was unwilling (v.25,30).

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- 3) Isaiah 28:12—"This is the rest by which ye may cause the weary to rest, and this is the refreshing; yet they **would not** hear." God graciously offered rest (compare Matthew 11:28) and refreshment, but they refused (compare Jer. 6:16). God was willing to give them rest but they were unwilling to receive it.
- 4) Isaiah 30:15—"For thus saith the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel: In returning and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness and in confidence shall be your strength: and **ye would not**." God graciously offered rest and deliverance, but the rebellious ones (v.1,9) refused. They said NO (v.16) to God's kind offer.
- 5) Isaiah 1:19—"If ye be **willing** and obedient, ye shall eat the good of the land. This is one of those rare places where the verb is used without the negative. God's desire was that they would be clean (v.16). God wanted them to learn to do well (v.17). God was willing to reason with them and to offer them the forgiveness of sins (v.18). God was willing. Would they be willing (v.19) or would they refuse (v.20)?"

The Hebrew Verb **ma'en** [Strong's #3985]

מאן

This verb means the opposite of the last verb. It means "to refuse, to be unwilling, to refuse with a resolved mind." Thus it means the very same thing as אבה **abah** [Strong's #14] with the negative. Pharaoh is a good illustration of this verb also. In Exodus 7:14 he refused to let the people go. Let us now examine some of the

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passages where this verb is used:

- 1) Jeremiah 5:3—"O LORD, are not thine eyes upon the truth? Thou hast stricken them, but they have not grieved; thou hast consumed them, but they have **refused** to receive correction. They have made their faces harder than a rock; they have **refused** to return." God wanted Israel to return to Himself (Jer. 4:1) but they refused! God was willing, they were not.
- 2) Jeremiah 11:10—"They are turned back to the iniquities of their forefathers, who **refused** to hear my words." God earnestly protested to their fathers (v.7) because He wanted them to obey His voice (v.7), but they refused (v.8). God wanted them to obey, but He allowed them to walk in the imagination of their evil heart (v.8).
- 3) 1 Samuel 8:19—"Nevertheless, the people **refused** to obey the voice of Samuel; and they said, Nay, but we will have a king over us." God was willing to be their King and the Lord was grieved that they had rejected Him (v.7).
- 4) Nehemiah 9:16-17—"But they and our fathers dealt proudly, and hardened their necks, and hearkened not to thy commandments, and **refused** to obey." God was ready, willing and eager to pardon and to be merciful and to hold back His anger (verse 17), but the people who lived in the days of Moses refused to obey.
- 5) Proverbs 1:24—"Because I have called, and ye **refused**; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded." God (personified by wisdom-v.20) called but man refused! God was willing to pour out His spirit unto them and make known His words to them, but they were unwilling (verses 23-24). God stretched out His hand (v.24) but they could care less.
- 6) Isaiah 1:20—"But if ye **refuse** and rebel, ye shall be devoured with

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the sword.” God was willing and able to PARDON and WASH His people from their sins (verses 16,18). He was willing to pour out His blessing and give them the good of the land (v.19). God was willing, but were they?

- 7) Zechariah 7:11—“But they **refused** to hearken, and pulled away the shoulder, and stopped their ears, that they should not hear.” God’s will and desire was clearly revealed in His commands. He wanted them to turn from their evil ways (verses 9-10), but they refused to hearken. Their hearts were as hard as stone (v.12).
- 8) Jeremiah 13:10—“This evil people, who **refuse** to hear my words, who walk in the imagination of their heart, and walk after other gods, to serve them, and to worship them, shall even be like this belt, which is good for nothing.” God wanted the whole house of Israel and Judah to be unto Him for a people and for a name and for a praise and for a glory (v.11). This was His desire, but **THEY WOULD NOT HEAR** (v.11). **THEY REFUSED TO HEAR** (v.10).

The Hebrew Verb **bachar** [Strong’s #977]

בַּחַר

This is the common Hebrew verb which means “**to choose**, to select, to elect.” This word has been made famous by Joshua in Joshua 24:15—“**Choose** you this day whom ye will serve.” Let us now consider some of the other passages that use this word:

- 1) Deuteronomy 30:19—“I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore, **choose** life, that both thou and thy seed

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may live.” A choice must be made between life and death, good and evil (v.15). God wanted them to live and be blessed by loving Him and keeping His commandments (v.16). God, through Moses, warns them about making the wrong choice (verses 17-18). Finally Moses said, **CHOOSE LIFE** (v.19). Doubtless Moses was reflecting the desire of the living God that He might be their choice. God was willing for them to have life, but they must choose (compare John 5:40—God was willing for them to have life, but they must come).

- 2) Proverbs 1:29—“Because they hated knowledge, and did not **choose** the fear of the Lord.” God was willing (verses 20-23) but man was not (verses 24-25; 29-30).
- 3) Isaiah 65:12—“When I called, ye did not answer; when I spoke, ye did not hear, but did evil before mine eyes, and did **choose** that in which I delighted not.” God was not delighted by their choice. It’s obvious that their choice did not please the Lord. It was not God’s wish or desire that they should choose in such a way. Notice God’s gracious appeal to these people. He “called” (v.12). He spread out His hands (v.2). He was willing, but they were not.
- 4) Isaiah 66:3-4—“Yea, they have **chosen** their own ways and their soul delighteth in their abominations . . . when I called, none did answer; when I spoke, they did not hear; but they did evil before mine eyes, and chose that in which I delighted not.” God allowed these people to go their own sinful ways. The people made a choice and the people were delighted in the choice that they made! God, however, was not delighted in their choice. He was grieved. God wanted the people to choose His ways not their own ways. Their choice was contrary to God’s desire.

Hebrew Verbs Meaning “To Stretch Out the Hands”

God’s willingness is seen by the way He earnestly and urgently calls to His people and pleads with them and entreats them. How can the Bible writers describe this divine entreaty in terms that we can understand? One of the ways is by picturing God as stretching forth His hands as He invites and urges His people to come unto Himself. In Proverbs 1:24 the verb נָטַח **natah** [Strong’s #5186] means “to stretch or extend the hand.” In Isaiah 65:2 the verb פָּרַשׁ **paras** [Strong’s #6566] is used with a similar meaning (“to spread out or extend the hands”). Consider the following passages:

1) Proverbs 1:24—“Because I have called, and ye refused; I have **stretched out my hand**, and no man regarded.” Here we have wisdom making her wonderful appeal and invitation which man foolishly rejects.

2) Isaiah 65:2—“I have **spread out my hands** all the day unto a rebellious people, that walketh in a way that was not good, after their own thoughts.” Notice that God was not pleased in the way that they were walking. God stretched out His hands and wanted to draw them unto Himself, but they wanted to go their own way. And God allowed it to be so! God let them have what they wanted even though it was not what He wanted. This verse is quoted by the Apostle Paul in Romans 10:21 (see below).

3) Romans 10:21—“But to Israel he saith, All day long I have **stretched forth my hands** unto a disobedient and gainsaying people.” The word “gainsaying” means “rebellious, contrary, refusing to

have anything to do with God.” What words could better express God’s tender invitation to sinful men as He extends wide His arms. As Hodge remarks, “God has extended wide His arms, and urged men frequently and long to return to His love.” What yearning, what love, what pleading, what patience! As Barnes has said, “This denotes an attitude of entreaty; a willingness and earnest desire to receive them to favour, to invite and entreat.” “The arms outstretched all the day long are the symbol of that incessant pleading love which Israel through all its history has consistently despised” (*Expositor’s Greek New Testament*). God was so willing; man was so rebellious!

The New Testament Verb **thelo** [Strong’s #2309]

θελω

This common verb means “to wish, desire, be willing, take delight, have pleasure.” In the Septuagint it is used frequently and often it corresponds to some of the Hebrew verbs we have already studied. For example, it occurs in Isaiah 1:19-20; Isaiah 28:12; Jeremiah 5:3; 8:5; Ezekiel 3:7; 18:23,32. Let us now consider a few New Testament examples of the usage of this word:

1) Matthew 23:37—“Oh Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them who are sent unto thee, how often **would I** have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chicken under her wings, and **ye would not**.” The verb is used twice in this verse. Jesus was saying: “I would . . . ye would not.” “I was willing . . . you were not willing!” God was willing to gather these murderers unto Himself but they were not willing! God wanted to gather them, but they did not want to be gathered! God’s willingness and man’s stubborn

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refusal are so clearly expressed in this passage! We will say more about this verse later.

- 2) Luke 13:34—parallel to Matthew 23:37.
- 3) John 5:40—“And **ye will not** come to Me, that ye might have life.”
A literal translation: “And ye do not desire to come to Me, that ye might have life.” Again we see man’s wicked refusal to come to the living God. Why do people not have eternal life? They refuse to come to the One who is LIFE and who desires to give LIFE (John 10:27-28). Is God willing that men should come to Him and have life? Consider the next verse:
- 4) 1 Timothy 2:4—“Who **will have** (desires) all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth.” This is God’s desire for all men. God is willing (1 Tim. 2:4) but man is unwilling (John 5:40). God does not desire that any should perish.

Note: This verb, **thelo** [Strong’s #2309], in its noun form, is often used in relationship to God’s will for the believer (1 Thess. 4:3; 5:18; Eph. 5:17-18; etc.). God’s will and desire for every believer is that we should be holy, constantly filled with the Spirit and constantly filled with thanksgiving, etc. Yet often we fall short of these things and our God is grieved. God is willing to fill us with Himself, but often we hinder and quench His working in our lives even though He is willing to do so much in and through us (compare Psalm 81:10). So even when it comes to practical sanctification, God is willing but His believers are unwilling at times.

The Hebrew Verb **chaphets** [Strong’s #2654]

צפח

This verb means “to delight in, take pleasure in.” Here are

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some of the places it is used:

- 1) Isaiah 65:12—“When I called, ye did not answer, when I spoke, ye did not hear, but did evil before mine eyes, and did choose that in which I **delighted not**.” God was not pleased by their choice. He wanted them to choose differently.
- 2) Isaiah 66:4—“When I called, none did answer; when I spoke, they did not hear; but they did evil before mine eyes, and chose that in which **I delighted not**.” God is not delighted when men choose their own ways (v.3), but He allows them to make such a tragic choice. God desires something else, but often He gives men up to their own desires.
- 3) Ezekiel 18:23—“Have I any **pleasure** at all that the wicked should die? saith the Lord GOD, and not that he should return from his ways, and live?” God is not delighted when the wicked continue in their wicked ways. God is delighted and pleased when the wicked turn from their wicked ways. God’s will and wish for every wicked person is this: Turn from your evil ways and live!
- 4) Ezekiel 18:32—“For I have no **pleasure** in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord GOD; wherefore, turn yourselves, and live.” In this verse God answers the question raised in verse 23. God is not willing that sinners should continue in their sin. God is willing that they should turn in the direction of the living God. Question for the extreme Calvinists: *If God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, then why do the wicked die?*
- 5) Ezekiel 33:11—“Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no **pleasure** in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn ye, turn from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?” Nothing could be more clear. God desires that the wicked should turn from

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their evil ways. God pleads with these sinners and urges them to repent and be converted. "Why will ye die, O house of Israel?" Certainly not because God wanted you to die!

The Hebrew Verb **shakam** [Strong's #7925]

שָׁכַם

This interesting verb means "to rise up early in the morning."

Figuratively it came to mean "speaking early and often, to speak earnestly, eagerly and urgently, to urge earnestly." Let the following verses speak for themselves:

- 1) 2 Chronicles 36:15-16—"And the LORD God of their fathers sent to them by his messengers, **rising up early** and sending, because he had compassion on his people, and on his dwelling place. But they mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words."
- 2) Jeremiah 7:13—"I spoke unto you, **rising up early** and speaking, but ye heard not; and I called you, but ye answered not."
- 3) Jeremiah 7:25-26—"Since the day that your fathers came forth out of the land of Egypt unto this day I have even sent unto you all my servants, the prophets, daily **rising up early** and sending them; yet they hearkened not unto me, nor inclined their ear, but hardened their neck."
- 4) Jeremiah 11:7-8—"For I earnestly protested unto your fathers in the day that I brought them up out of the land of Egypt, even unto this day, **rising early** and protesting, saying, Obey my voice. Yet they obeyed not, nor inclined their ear, but walked every one in the imagination of their evil heart."

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- 5) Jeremiah 25:3-4—"I have spoken unto you, **rising early** and speaking, but ye have not hearkened. And the LORD hath sent unto you all his servants, the prophets, **rising early** and sending them, but ye have not hearkened, nor inclined your ear to hear" (see also verse 5).
- 6) Jeremiah 26:4-5—"If ye will not hearken to me, to walk in my law, which I have set before you, to hearken to the words of my servants, the prophets, whom I sent unto you, both **rising up early**, and sending them, but ye have not hearkened."
- 7) Jeremiah 29:19—"Because they have not hearkened to my words, saith the LORD, which I sent unto them by my servants, the prophets, **rising up early** and sending them; but ye would not hear, saith the LORD."
- 8) Jeremiah 32:33—"And they have turned unto me the back, and not the face; though I have taught them, **rising up early** and teaching them, yet they have not hearkened to receive instruction."
- 9) Jeremiah 35:14-15—"I have spoken to you, **rising early** and speaking, but ye harkened not unto me. I have sent also unto you all my servants, the prophets, **rising up early** and sending them, saying, Return now every man from his evil way, and amend your doings . . . but ye have not inclined your ear, nor hearkened unto me."
- 10) Jeremiah 44:4-5—"I sent unto you all my servants, the prophets, **rising early** and sending them, saying, Oh, do not this abominable thing that I hate. But they hearkened not, nor inclined their ear to turn from their wickedness."

[See also Neh. 9:29-30 and Zech. 1:4 where this word is not used but the same idea is there.]

Conclusion

Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet, but his tears were but a mere reflection of a grieved and weeping God. When this God became a man these tears could again be seen as He wept over Jerusalem (Matthew 23:37; compare Luke 19:41) and said, "HOW OFTEN would I have gathered you." These words can only be understood in light of the verses cited above: "How often have I sent my prophets unto you, rising up early! How often have I stretched forth my hands unto you! How often have I pleaded and entreated and invited! How often have I called unto you and spoken unto you! How often have I offered you REST and REFRESHMENT! How often would I have filled your mouth if you had but opened it! How often would I have reasoned together with you about your sins! Oh Israel, WHY WILL YOU DIE? Why do you choose the way that I do not delight in? Why do you go your own way? HOW OFTEN WAS I WILLING TO GATHER YOU UNTO MYSELF BUT YE WERE NOT WILLING!!!

I trust that this study has taught you something about the terrible depravity of man and the compassionate and tender heart of the Saviour who desires all men to be saved and who has no pleasure in the death of the wicked. God is willing, but tragically man is often unwilling.

He, blessed be His Name, has not confined Himself within the narrow limits of any school of doctrine, high, low, or moderate. He has revealed Himself. He has told out the deep and precious secrets of His heart. He has unfolded His eternal counsels, as to the Church, as to Israel, the Gentiles, and the wide creation. Men might as well attempt to confine the ocean in buckets of their own formation as to confine the vast range of divine revelation within the feeble enclosures of human systems of doctrine. It cannot be done, and it ought not to be attempted. Better far to set aside the systems of theology and schools of divinity, and come like a little child to the eternal fountain of Holy Scripture, and there drink in the living teachings of God's Spirit.

Nothing is more damaging to the truth of God, more withering to the soul, or more subversive of all spiritual growth and progress than mere theology, high or low—Calvinistic or Arminian. It is impossible for the soul to make progress beyond the boundaries of the system to which it is attached. If I am taught to regard "The Five Points" as "the faith of God's elect," I shall not think of looking beyond them; and then a most glorious field of heavenly truth is shut out from the vision of my soul. I am stunted, narrowed, one-sided; and not only so, but I am in danger of getting into that hard, dry state of soul which results from being occupied with mere points of doctrine instead of with Christ.

A disciple of the high school of doctrine will not hear of a world-wide gospel—of God's love to the world—of glad tidings to every creature under heaven. He has only gotten a gospel for the elect. On the other hand, a disciple of the low or Arminian school will not hear of the eternal security of God's people. Their salvation depends partly upon Christ, and partly upon themselves. According to this system, the song of the redeemed should be changed. Instead of "Worthy is the Lamb'," we should have to add, "and worthy are we." We may be saved today and lost tomorrow. All this dishonors God, and robs the Christian of all true peace.

C.H. Mackintosh, "One Sided Theology," The Mackintosh Treasury

—George Zeller, revised 12/97, 6/02, 10/08