



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Systematic Theology

TRANSCRIPT

“The Will of God”

[Prayer]Father, we thank Thee again for the privilege of the study of the Scriptures and we ask Thy blessing upon us as we look into Thy word. We thank Thee that we can be assured that Thy will is perfect and that Thou will carry it out and we do not have to worry about it falling through or it being nullified by some contingency of which Thou wast not aware.

We thank Thee for the assurance that the will of God is perfect and unconditional, and efficacious and, therefore, we can count upon it. And now we pray that as we study tonight, Thou will strengthen us through the Scriptures.

For Jesus' sake. Amen.

[Message]Our subject tonight as we continue our series of studies and the attributes is “The Will of God, or Is God Responsible for All Existence and Every Event.”

And for a text tonight -- to which we may refer more than once -- Daniel chapter 4, verse 35 in the well-known words of Nebuchadnezzar after his return to sanity, he says, verse 35, “...that all the inhabitants of the Earth are accounted as nothing.” This is Daniel 4:35. “But he does according to his will in the host of Heaven and among the inhabitants of Earth. And no one can ward off his hand or say to him, ‘What hast Thou done?’” “He

does according to his will in the host of Heaven and among the inhabitants of Earth. And no one can ward off his hand or say to him, ‘What hast Thou done?’”

Now we will wrestle again tonight with some profound and mysterious questions in our study. For example, if all men are created equal, why are there states different? Some are wise. Some are dolts. Some are *dummkopfs* as the Germans would say, or dum-dums as we might say. Some are morons.

If all men are created equal, why are their states not equal? If all men are created equal, why are not their conditions equal? Some men are born rich. Some men are born poor. And some men are born in between.

If God created all men equal, why is it that their circumstances are different? Some men are born in free countries, such as the United States of America. Some are born in countries in which they are enslaved mentally and spiritually. If all men are created equal, why are these things different?

Now since they are not equal -- for it is evident that men are not created equal -- why are they not created equal? Who is responsible for this inequality?

Now perhaps you have been believing which you have been hearing that all men are created equal. That, of course, is not true. A fiction. It’s amazing that people really do believe it because they have heard it so much.

A second problem, if God wills all things, does he will sin? If he wills sin, how can he reasonably command then to “sin” not?

A third problem, if God wills all things, does he will calamity? Are we to say, it is God who is responsible for the calamities of men?

Now one of my pilot friends told me the other day -- on Saturday to be exact -- a story that was passing around among the airline pilots. He said it was somewhat irreverent, but he told it to me anyway.

He said a pilot was trying to land a plane and he was having very little success in controlling it. And as he came down toward the runway, he was going this way and this

way and up and down and bouncing around and finally he landed and bounced on one side and bounced on the other side. And finally, he righted it near the end of the runway and he was heard to say something like, “Alright God, I’ll take over now.”

If God wills all things, does he will calamity? Now we say that it was a disaster brought or wrought by God.

Now it is true that in the Bible we read, I am reading from Isaiah chapter 45, verse 7. “The One forming light and creating darkness, causing well-being and creating evil,” the Authorized Version reads. The Hebrew word *hauvab*, which is used there, probably should be rendered ‘calamity.’ Creating calamity, I am the Lord who does all these things. In Amos chapter 3, verse 6, Amos says, “If a trumpet is blown in the city will the people tremble? If an evil occurs in the city has not the Lord done it?”

Now in both of those cases, the word evil should be translated calamity. Is it true that if God wills all things, he wills calamity?

And my final question, are things right or wrong because God commands or forbids them? Are they right because he commands them? Are they wrong because he forbids them? Or does God command or forbid them because they are right or wrong? For some reason other than in his will. So are things right or wrong because God commands them? Or does he command them because they are right or wrong?

Tonight we’re studying the “will” of God. All of these questions arise when we study the will of God. It is the second, remember, of his volitional attributes. We have studied the incommunicable attributes; those in the left hand column. We are now looking at the communicable attributes, knowledge, wisdom, and veracity. These are the intellectual attributes of God. And then we’re looking at two of the volitional attributes, his power and his will. And we have looked at his power. Together, God’s Power and God’s Will, make up his sovereignty. So in a sense we can say that God’s sovereignty is the sovereign “power” of God and the sovereign “will” of God.

Now this is the outline that we will be following tonight -- part of it -- page one of it. And after a few words of introduction, we want to look now at the meaning of the “Will of God.”

In order to hasten through our subject tonight, I’m going to make only some general comments regarding the Hebrew words and the Greek words because I don’t have a board, really, to write on effectively, so let me just make a few comments about them.

The words in the Old Testament for the will of God are the words *chaphets*. You don’t have to write them down. *Chaphets* which means, delight, will, purpose. The word *ratsoun* means, goodwill, favor, acceptance or will. That is the word, by the way, that is used in Psalm 40, verse 8, when the Psalmist speaks by inspiration looking forward to Jesus Christ, and says “Lo, I come... to do Thy will, O God.” It is the word *ratsoun*. And the final word is the word *tsifu* which is an Aramaic or Chaldean word. It, too, means simply God’s will. It is used here in Daniel chapter 4, verse 35, “But he does according to his will in the host of Heaven.”

There are two Greek words that are common in the New Testament. One is, *boulomai*, which means “will.” And the other, *Thelema*. It too means “will.”

It is sometimes been said by Bible students that the word *thelo* means to wish and the word *boulomai* means “to will.” But actually in the New Testament text these words mean very much the same thing. And so there is no particular point that we want to make regarding the terminology.

I want to say just a word about the common meaning of the term “The Will of God.” This term has different meanings. When we talk about the will of God what do we really mean? The chances are we would have to sit down and with ourselves discuss the matter back and forth before we could reach an understanding of what we really think the will of God to be, because probably most of us have a slightly different idea about the “Will of God.” For some people the will of God means the whole moral nature of God,

including his love, his holiness, and his justice, all of his attributes. This is the will of God the whole moral nature of God. And we would say, for example that “that’s not in accordance with the Will of God.” We would mean by that -- using the term in that sense -- it’s not in accordance with what we know of God. What we know of him and his attributes, and his being.

Then some use the term the will of God in a more limited sense of his faculty of self-determination. That’s the way we often use the term “will” when we speak of will. We say, “My will is to do so and so.” We mean a self-determination, that is, what we think is a self-determination. “I will to do this.” That is my determination, which I made in myself. And so in the Bible the term is used of the faculty of self-determination.

Third, the will of God is used of the products of self-determination. The purposes of God. I may say, “I will to do such and such... And that was my will.” What I did. And the Bible even speaks of the thing’s will, that is, those products of ones decision.

Fourth, it is used of the power to realize these purposes. And so we say, God does certain things according to his will. That is the power of God used to carry out his purposes. So when we say the will of God in that sense, we mean his active working will.

The Holy Spirit distributes gifts to the Church according to his willing, the text of the New Testament says. That is, according to his working, according to his will.

And, finally, the term the will of God is used of the rule of life for men. The “Will of God.” Well that’s what we ought to do before God; his rule of life as is set forth in the Scripture.

Now we are concerned with that second meaning -- the faculty of self-determination -- when we speak of the will of God because we are talking about his attributes. We are not talking about our responsibility at the moment, we’re talking about his nature, and his being, and his attributes as they reflect his being. So we are concerned with the faculty of self-determination. God’s will then is his faculty of self-determination.

It is his delight in himself, that seems a strange thing to say. If we say of men, “He is delighted with himself,” we think of him as egotistical. Now I asked my wife last night -- when I was thinking about this -- “Is God consumed with self-love?” And she said, “I don’t think you ought to speak like that.” I said, “Is God egotistical?” And she again said, “I don’t think you ought to use terms like that of God.” And she was absolutely right, because when we use terms like that, we are really almost blaspheming. And yet that, of course, is precisely what we must believe when we come to the “Will of God.” For you see, the will of God is his delight in himself. He is the supreme good for himself and for his creatures. And so if he is delighted in himself, it is only proper and right.

It is self-love. Self-love is bad among us. But it is not bad in the Godhead. For a perfect being sets his perfect affection upon that which is perfect. And so it is only natural that he should set his affection upon himself. It’s self-love. It’s absolute. It’s right. It’s divine. And so God’s love is his delight in himself.

Now I know that you are saying that he delights in his creatures. Yes, that’s true. But he delights in his creatures only in so far as they are a means to delight in himself.

That is why, in the case of every one of us, the ultimate theme that we should have and do have before God, is to glorify God. That’s the supreme end of a man’s existence, to glorify God. In other words, to be the kind of person who will be the instrumentality for the return of the delight of God in himself. As he is seen in us, so God is a person who is delighted in himself. He does not delight in us, per se; he delights in us for his sake. He does not need us. We need him.

Now that’s why Paul says in Romans, for “from him and through him and.” What? “To him, are all things,” from him everything comes. Through him, everything comes. And if it is to be God glorifying, if it should be in his will, it must return to him. To him! He is the goal of everything, because he is the only infinitely perfect being in this Universe. It’s right. It’s divine.

So his willing toward his creatures then is not a striving to obtain something from us. It is not because he is unhappy and needs us. It is for his glory through us. Now the Reformers were very strong in saying that the ultimate aim of all of the work of God is solely Deo Gloria.” To God alone be the glory. They understood this.

Roman II: Philosophy and Christianity and the Will of God. Now I’m not going to say anything about that. For those of you who are interested, I suggest that you take a look at Herman Bavinck’s *Systematic Theology* or dogmatics. Bavinck was a Dutch theologian. His theology is in Dutch. But one volume of it was translated. And you might want to take a look at *The Doctrine of God* by Herman Bavinck. And Professor Bavinck discusses to some -- with some degree of length and a great deal of perspicuity -- the question of philosophy’s misunderstanding of the “Will of God.” Philosophers have notably failed to understand the “Will of God,” especially, they have failed to understand or appreciate the fact that the human will is in bondage. And they have failed to understand the absolute character of the “Will of God.”

But let’s move on to Roman III: The Freedom of the Will of God.

Does God act necessarily and freely? Why does he do what he does? His necessary and free will, Capital A.

Now when we were discussing knowledge, you remember that we discussed God’s necessary knowledge and his free knowledge. His necessary knowledge we referred to those things, which God absolutely knows concerning the relationships within the trinity. Those things that he knows because he knows everything. And then we talked about his “free” knowledge; the knowledge of things that he wills. A similar thing is found when we study the “Will of God.” There is his necessary will and his free will. In his necessary will, he is the object. He wills himself. His nature. The Godhead distinctions. He necessarily and yet freely delights in himself. That is his necessary will. His free will has to do with us. We are the objects of his free will. He creates according

to his plans. He uses us. He determines our destiny. And he does it all, freely. He does not have to do any of this.

But he does it freely and, consequently, voluntarily. In Proverbs chapter 21, verse 1; remember the writer of that book says, “The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; like the rivers of water, He turneth it whithersoever He will.” And then in Romans 9:15 through 18; let me read these verses. We’ll refer to them again, I hope. Paul is arguing the question of the sovereignty of God and the history of Israel, and he says, “For He says to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.” So then it does not depend on the man who wills, or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.

For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I raised you up to demonstrate my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth.” So then he has mercy on whom he desires or wills and he hardens whom he wills. Isn’t that an amazing thing? He has mercy on whom he wills and he hardens whom he wills. Now some of you look like you’re getting mad at me. It’s Paul who wrote that; remember.

In verses 20 and 21, he says, “On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder ‘Why did you make me like this?’ Will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?”

So God has a necessary will by which he wills himself, his nature, the distinctions and the Godhead, and this is his free will. But his free will on the technical sense has to do with us. He creates us. Uses us. Determines our destiny voluntarily. As a matter of fact, there is no person free but God.

Wordsworth -- at the beginning of his Prelude -- rejoiced that he had escaped the city where he had long been pent up and was, “now free, free as a bird to settle where I will.”

Now we often use the expression, “Free as a bird.” But really, a bird is not free at all. I’ve seen some good evidences of that around my house. I’ve reached the stage in life where I’m interested in the garden and in the birds.

Now you can tell that over half of my life is surely gone because I did not know a thing about birds and cared less, nor anything much about a garden, and cared a great deal less about ten or fifteen years ago. But I’ve reached that stage in life. Now a naturalist learns this when he’s young of course. But a bird is not free. The supposedly free bird actually lives its entire life in a cage made up of fears, hungers and instincts. It is limited by weather conditions, varying air pressures, the local food supply, and predatory beasts. Think of a bird who, everyday, has to think of a cat. In my yard, in the back of my yard, over my fence, everyday one or two cats climb the fence, hide under the birdbath waiting for the poor little sparrow or the blue jay or the red bird that comes. And so, I open the door, and the minute I open the door, it dashes for the fence and climbs over because I have a slingshot. And I am rather good with that slingshot. At least good enough to scare all the cats off. And it really is quite a job for me to be able to get out and get a shot at them because they’re gone.

But think of the poor birds. I’m beginning to feel sorry for the poor birds already just talking about it. Poor little things, they are limited and the strangest of all bonds is the fact that in bird land -- now I know this because they told me -- in bird land, each bird has this irresistible compulsion to stay within a certain little territory.

Now we have a mockingbird. The thing went crazy last year because there was no female around. And consequently, it dove into our windows over and over and it was a general pest. But this year there are two. And, consequently, there’s a great deal more happiness in the mockingbird family. But that mockingbird family resides in my neighborhood. As a matter of fact, half the time it’s on my chimney, singing some beautiful notes. Waiting for, of course, the berries on the holly trees to ripen so that they can take them. And I’ve actually seen that mockingbird chase a cat because, apparently,

the cat was ignoring the fact that that belonged to the mockingbird. But at any rate, a bird, a bird is not a free thing. We say, “free as a bird.” I don’t want to be free as a bird.

There is only one person who is free in this entire universe, and that person is God. His free will was to bless us and to go out toward us in creation, election, reprobation, redemption, justification, and ultimately, glorification. But that was his free will. He did not have to do it.

The reason for divine determination? Why does God will what he does? Well, now, we can seldom know the reasons why God does things. Occasionally, he tells us some things. But generally speaking, we have to say there are things about God’s willing that we shall never understand, at least, until we get to Heaven.

But we must not think of God sitting like a professor at his desk, with the alternatives before him asking himself, “Now I wonder which one of these is the right alternative.” So we must not think of him as in a period of uncertainty and hesitation and deliberation. That is all foreign to God. He knows because he is omniscient; remember. Precisely what is the perfect will of God? And so his decisions arise out of a perfect certainty of that which is good and proper and glorifying to himself.

Four, some distinctions apply to the “Will of God.” Some distinctions, some of them good, some of them bad, have been used when speaking of the “Will of God.”

The decretive and the preceptive “Will of God.” -- That looks a little unclear to me. Is that better? -- The decretive and preceptive will of God. These are distinctions that theologians make and I think that we should learn some of them at least. This is one we should learn. What is his decretive will? Well his decretive will is the will of his decree, of course. And it is his decree of everything that is to come to pass, either causatively or permissively. In other words, everything that comes to pass is the result of the decree of God.

Now he cannot be surprised by anything, else he would gain in knowledge. And since he is omniscient he cannot gain in knowledge. And since he is eternal, of course,

his knowledge is an eternal omniscience. So he must decree all the things that come to pass. All of them.

Will you turn with me to Ephesians chapter 1, verse 11. Ephesians 1, verse 11, this is the familiar text we’ve looked at more than once. Now I’m reading again from the New American Standard Bible but your version has essentially what I’m going to read. “Also, we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to his purpose, who works all things after the counsel of his will;” He works all things “after the counsel of his will.” All things, his decretive will. The decree is God’s determination to accomplish everything that he accomplishes. And everything that is accomplished in our universe, everything is included by the decree.

Vernon McGee, whom many of you have listened to on the radio, is a good friend of mine. And many years ago, when he first began to fly in airplanes, he was deathly afraid of them. And whenever he possibly could, he would take a train. When he would come to Dallas, instead of flying back on a DC-6, or a DC-4, he would catch the train and ride all the way back to California on the train. And I can remember many years ago -- about twenty years ago at least -- saying to Vernon, “Why don’t you ride the plane? You’re wasting a day or so.” And he said, “I don’t like to get on the plane. I don’t like to get up there in the air like that. I like to be on the solid ground.” He said, “Of course, my friend, Donald Grey Barnhouse told me that it’s all in the decree and I needn’t worry. But I still worry.”

Well it all is in the decree. The only thing is, we don’t know what the decree is.

Now the decretive “Will of God,” is his decree of everything that comes to pass -- past, present or future. He either brings it to pass, causatively or permissively.

His perceptive will, what is that? Well his perceptive will is the rule of life for men. This is what he sets forth in the word of God as his requirements for men. First of all, as we know, the first command that God issues to all men who are born in sin, for we

all are in sin is that we should believe on our Lord Jesus Christ in order that we may have everlasting life. That is the first commandment of God for men.

Now this is the will of God. That ye believe on him whom he hath sent. That’s the basic commandment of God. Now out of this, of course, flow all of the other commandments. And the total of the word of God is his preceptive will. The will of precept -- what he has written -- expressing to us what we must do, so his decretive will is his will concerning all things. His preceptive will is the rule of life for man.

Let’s turn over to Colossians chapter 1, just to read a text on this point. Colossians chapter 1, verse 10. Paul, writing to the Colossians, says, “So that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord to please him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God.” Now the term “will” is not here, but you will notice he says, “to please him in all respects.”

Now turn over to the fourth chapter. In the fourth chapter, verse 12, Paul writes about Epaphras and he writes about similar things, but this time he uses different terminology. “Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bond-slave of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers, that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God.”

Now this is his preceptive will. So every time you read in the Bible the will of God ask yourself, “Is this his decretive will? Or is this his preceptive will?”

His decretive will is that which has come to pass. His preceptive will is his will for us.

Now the second distinction, the secret and the revealed “Will of God.” This is a very similar kind of distinction. The terms are slightly different. This distinction is based upon Deuteronomy chapter 29, verse 29. So turn over there. Deuteronomy 29:29, a very famous text, easy to remember because anyone can remember 29:29 -- if he’s just said 29.

Deuteronomy 29:29, Moses writes, “The secret things belong unto the Lord, our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons, forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.” “The secret things belong unto the Lord, our God.” That is his secret will. This is the will of the decree. It is fixed. Eternal. It’s the thing that we found in Romans, chapter 9. His secret will. His revealed will? What is his revealed will? Well here it is again. His revealed will. So the secret will is his decretive will. The revealed will is his preceptive will.

For the sake of time I’m going to skip over the absolute and conditional will of God, because it really does not make a whole lot of difference to what I’m saying. But I suggest, again, that some of you who are interested in theology, go into the library and take out Berkoff’s *Systematic Theology* and read what Professor Berkoff has to say on that.

Fourth, the antecedent and consequent “Will of God.” Now this is one of the distinctions that is wrong. And I want to say a word or two about it, because you know how I am about Arminianism. Now the antecedent and consequent will of God is a collection of terms that the Calvinists used when they spoke of the order of the decrees. For example, the decree to create, the decree to permit the fall, the decree to have redemption through Jesus Christ, the various decrees and consequently the Calvinists spoke of the antecedent and the consequent “Will of God.” The antecedent will of God to glorify himself. The consequent will of God decree, the consequent will of God to allow the fall, the consequent decree of God to have redemption through Jesus Christ, and so on. Now that is, of course, a good sense which we can use antecedent and consequent.

But the non-Augustinians, the non-Calvinists, the Arminians, the Remonstrans, and the Lutherans, used these terms. By antecedent will, they referred to God’s will to save all men. And they referred to 1 Timothy, chapter 2 verses 4 through 5. And I think we ought to turn there. 1 Timothy chapter 2, verses 4 and 5. Now I want you to notice what

Paul says. He says, “...who desires all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man, Christ Jesus.” And so they pointed to this, the Remonstrans? The Arminians, and they said that it is evident that God wills to save all men. That’s his antecedent will. He wants or wills to save all men.

Now in the first place, that text is misinterpreted. You will notice it says, “...who desires all men to be saved,” but is this all men without exception, or all men without distinction? All men without exception, refers to every man. But all men without distinction means whether rich or poor, whether bond or free, whether kings or otherwise.

And I notice right up here, in verses 1 and 2, “... first of all, then I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgiving be made on behalf of all men; for kings and all who are in authority; in order that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity.” “All kinds of men,” it is evident that text means. And so when we read, “...desires all men to be saved,” he means all kinds of men, whether kings or otherwise. And to come to the knowledge of the truth.

So the Remonstrans or the Arminians said God’s antecedent will was to save all men. But then, all men are not saved. What about that? Well, they said, he foresaw that men would not believe and so he then chose those whom he foresaw would believe. And that was his consequent will. So his antecedent will is that all men be saved, but his consequent will as a result of what he saw would take place, touched those that he foresaw would believe.

Now if you were to go in evangelical churches today, and ask them, “Whom does God choose?” Ninety percent of evangelical churches today would say, God chooses those whom he foresees will believe.

And they actually believe -- although they do not know how to express it -- in an antecedent and a consequent “Will of God.” What are the weaknesses of the view?

On the first place, God’s purposes are mutable, changeable, and voidable. He may will all men to be saved but when he sees that’s not going to work, he tries something else. And so his will changes. His will may be nullified.

Isaiah says, however, in Isaiah chapter 46, verse 10, concerning God, he says, “Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, my purpose will be established and I will accomplish all my good pleasure.” That says plainly that God will accomplish all of his purposes. He’s not going to say, “You know I have a few purposes but they fell through. So I tried something else. But I managed to get some things through.”

In chapter 14, verse 24, we read in Isaiah, “The Lord of hosts has sworn, saying, Surely just as I have intended, so it has happened; and just as I have planned, so it will stand.” Verse 27, “For the Lord of hosts has planned, and who can frustrate it? And as for his stretched out hand, who can turn it back?”

There are no “wishes,” “would be,” in God. He does not say, “I wish that so and so would come to pass but Isaiah’s not going to be able to come to pass and so I’ll try something else.” He’s not that kind of god. He is a sovereign God, who accomplishes all of his purposes.

Furthermore, he would not be happy if he willed all men to be saved but he only managed to gain a remnant. If he really did will all to be saved, and that did not come to pass, he would be eternally displeased. Unhappy. Frustrated. That sounds terrible, doesn’t it? To even say that.

Third, who really becomes the Savior? Well, ultimately, man becomes his own savior because, you see, he supplies the vital thing, the faith. It’s he who supplies it.

Who really does the choosing? Why, it’s man who does the choosing. It’s not God. For God looks down through the years and he sees who will believe and so he chooses them. Who has done the choosing? Not God. It was man.

As a matter of fact, man’s salvation depends upon man by that. Who gets the glory for the salvation? Men. Well, God gets a great deal of it, but man gets some, too, I believe. I have positive volition. I supplied my part. God supplied his part.

As a matter of fact, the New Testament says that if we supply any part of our salvation, our salvation is a worked salvation. It doesn’t have to be but just a little bit, you know. All you have to believe is that Jesus Christ has done everything, but I must be baptized in order to be saved. That one thing makes the salvation a worked salvation.

If we believe that Jesus Christ has done everything, but my faith is initiated by me -- out of my own will -- apart from the initiating power of God, we’ve fallen into the trap of a works salvation. And, in reality, we are Arminians. We should be part of the Remonstrans. That’s what they believe. We are in the school of Saumur, and followers of Boice and [Indistinct] You don’t want to be that, do you? No, God’s decrees are independent. Shedd says, “A conditional decree is incompatible with a divine foreknowledge. God cannot foreknow an event unless it is certain.”

No man, not even God, can foreknow an uncertain event. If the event is uncertain, even God cannot know it. If he can know it, it is not an uncertain event. It’s certain. Now, if it’s certain, or it cannot be certain if it ultimately depends upon a finite will, because our wills are finite.

So we have a terrible problem then. As Shedd says, “God cannot foreknow an event unless it is certain.” And it cannot be certain if it, ultimately, depends upon a finite will. And so, consequently, God’s decrees arise out of independence -- not dependent upon men at all.

Now, of course, there is an independent or -- individual I should say -- an individual secret and revealed “Will of God.” God has his secret will for you and his revealed will for you. There are things about your life that he has revealed. For example, now you know where you were born. Now you know your father or your mother. You know whether you are rich or poor. You know the experiences of life. You know you

have come to know Jesus Christ as your Savior. Or you know that you have not. You know that that decision has been made. You know the experiences that you have had up to this point, but you still do not know when you shall die. You do not know where you shall die.

I always -- when I think of that -- I always think about the black man who said, “If I knew where I was going to die, I’d never go near the place.” So there is a secret and a revealed will for all individuals. It may just be part of his secret will now revealed that you have come to this class on theology tonight, of all things, to hear something about God.

Now five, the will of God and sin. There are two problems here. The function of the will of God gives rise to these serious problems. They are probably unsolvable. So if you expect a complete solution by me, you shall be disappointed. Theologians have wrestled with these problems for centuries, and it’s highly unlikely that S. Lewis Johnson, Jr. shall be able to solve all of these problems.

The first problem is this; by God’s decretive will, he decrees all things that come to pass. Does that not then make him the author of sin? If he decrees everything that comes to pass, does he not decree sin? Is he not responsible for it?

Furthermore, since sin is contrary to God’s moral perfection, does he will something that is contrary to his moral perfections?

That’s why Arminians make his will to permit sin dependent on his foreknowledge. They say, “No, God did not will all these things, but he knew what was going to happen and so based on his foreknowledge, he determined what was going to come to pass.”

The difficulty with that is, as we say, it does not measure up to the truth concerning events. As a matter of fact, God does decree things that involve sin. Let me give the shining illustration.

Let’s turn over to Acts chapter 2, verse 22. Now Peter is preaching on the day of Pentecost, and he says, “Men of Israel, listen to these words. Jesus, the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through him, in your midst, as you yourselves know, this man delivered up by the predetermined plan and the foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of Godless men and put him to death.”

Now it is evident that God did will that Jesus Christ should be crucified by the hands of sinful men. Perhaps the supreme illustration of sin in the universe is the result of what Peter calls the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God. You notice the order, too, by the way? Do you know why God knows the things that are going to happen? Because he has “determined” them, he does not determine what he foreknows will happen. He foreknows what is going to happen because he has determined. That’s how he can be certain about the future.

If it depended on man, it would not be certain and he could not be certain. He would be learning. He would be looking down through the years and saying, “Ah, you know Lewis Johnson believe? Goody goody -- I’ll choose him. I didn’t know that a little while before, but now I know it.” So he would be gaining knowledge.

But by the predetermined counsel and foreknowledge of God; Jesus Christ was crucified. Now then, reformed theologians are very careful to point out that while God’s decree does include sin, there is no evidence that God took delight in the sin. They carefully distinguish the will of delight in sin from the will of permission of sin. While they say, “Yes, it is true. God’s decree includes sin. But God does not delight in the sin that it includes. He permits the sin that is included.”

Will you turn over to chapter 14, verse 16 of the Book of Acts. Paul is preaching and saying, “Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of like of the same nature as you and preach the gospel to you in order that you should turn from these vain things to a living God who made the Heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in

them. And in the generations gone by, he permitted all the nations to go their own ways.”

That’s the will of his permission of sin. Now one might ask, “Well why did God, who is sovereign, why did he decree sin?” Well because there are some things that can only come to pass through sin. Do you know what they are?

Well, for example, we would never know that God is a gracious God. How can we come to know the grace of God? How can we come to know the wonderful grace that brought us to Jesus Christ? That reached down to us when we were lost and in sin. When we did not have any will to love God at all. Who moved in our wills and changed our wills, through his wonderful grace. Revealed his grace to us in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and brought us out of our sin and the bondage of sin to him. We could never know that if God had not permitted sin. And so it is obvious that the greater good of the knowledge of the grace of God and the publication to the ends of the Earth was one of the determining features in God’s permission of that which is contrary to his preceptive will for us.

Furthermore, we could never know God’s justice. For it is by reason of the permission of sin, first among the angels and then among men that we come to know that God punishes sin. That he is a just God. And thus, he reveals himself and all of his perfections through the permission of sin -- that which is, in itself, contrary to his own moral nature.

As a matter of fact, in the Bible we read of places where God used the sin of men. Take Joseph. Joseph, remember, gives a theological lesson concerning the problem of the decretive and preceptive will of God in Genesis chapter 50, verse 20 when he -- talking to the brethren, his brethren. And he explains to them how it is that they sold him to the Midianite traders who came by in sin, but how God used it.

He says, in verse 20, chapter 50, “And as for you, you meant evil against me. But God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result to preserve many alive.”

And so he permitted the sin against Joseph in order for the greater good that should come. Well we solved that problem pretty well.

What about the second one? This one is harder. The problem: The decretive and the preceptive will are often contradictory.

The decretive will includes things forbidden by the preceptive will and it excludes things commanded by the preceptive. For example, God will by his decretive will decree that Abraham shall not offer up Isaac, but by his preceptive will he may say to Abraham, “Offer up Isaac.” It’s amazing, isn’t it?

The decretive will was that Isaac should not be offered up. For at the precise moment when Abraham had the knife in his hand, ready to slay Isaac, he was stayed by Heaven.

What of Hezekiah? Hezekiah appealed to God on his sick bed for four years. God said, “All right, Hezekiah, I’ll give you fifteen more.” It was his decretive will that he have fifteen more. It was his preceptive will that he should die, apparently. And Hezekiah managed to get fifteen more years.

This thing is probably an inscrutable mystery but we must remember that by the decretive will, God is determined what he is going to do. By the preceptive will, he talks about what “we” must do. They’re not the same things. The preceptive rule or will of God is not a law for his conduct; it is a rule for our conduct.

And Berkoff, I’ll read this quotation for you. He comments, “The decretive and preceptive will of God do not conflict in the sense that in the former he does and according to the later he does not take pleasure in sin. More, in the sense, that according to the former he does not and according to the later he does will the salvation of every individual with a positive volition. Even according to the decretive will God takes no pleasure in sin. Even according to the preceptive will, he does not will the salvation of every individual with a positive volition.”

Dabney, one of our Southern theologians -- I like him because he was Chief of Staff of Stonewall Jackson during the War of Rebellion -- Dabney says, “There is a just sense in which a wise and righteous man might say that he sincerely wishes a given subject of his would not transgress, and yet that foreseeing his perversity he fully purpose should permit it and carry out his purposes thereby.” Shall not the same thing be possible for God in a higher sense?

Now that probably is over your head at this hour -- since we’ve been going for fifty-four minutes -- so I’ll give you an illustration that is more adaptable to you at this hour. Let’s say a father is in the kitchen and there is a sharp knife there. And so, one of the local babies comes up in his family and he says, as the little child reaches for the knife, “Don’t you touch that knife!” And then he proceeds to give him a lecture on the dangers of the knife telling him that he is not under any circumstances to play with that knife. And then he takes up the knife and performs some useful task with it.

Now there is a contradiction in such a thing as that. So God forbids us to sin though he himself is able to use and does use sin as a means of self-glorification. And, consequently, in one way I do not think these problems are so serious that we cannot believe what the word of God teaches.

Now the Persians sought to solve it in this way. They solved it by having two gods. One god was the god who was a good god. The other god was the evil god. And if you’re familiar with Zoroastrianism -- which is probably one of the noblest of the non-Christian religions -- you are maybe familiar with what is said concerning the two gods. In the Zend-Avesta, which is their book, there is the god “Ormaz” Angra Mainyu, who is the evil god, he is responsible for the creation of the evil things. Ahura Mazda, he is responsible for the creation of the good things. And then Angra Mainyu is the god who is responsible for the creation of the evil things. These two gods seem to get along together very well with each other and do not have any particular conflicts. But the God of the Bible is one.

He says that he is the beginning and the end. He is the first and the last and “beside me there is no one else.” So there are not two gods. There is only one God.

Now I’m getting warm -- so, very quickly, some distinctions -- wait, we’re on the wrong page.

The “Will of God and Sovereignty.” Let me just say one or two things about this. The “Will of God and Sovereignty.” In discussing that nature and properties of God’s will, we can say, concerning his will that his will is an essential part of his being. His will is eternal. It is immutable. It is always efficacious. It is never frustrated. It is uncaused outside of himself. It is not caused by man’s foreseen faith. It is unconditional. It does not depend upon man. It depends upon God. And it is most free and sovereign.

And I wish I had about 50 minutes now to point out to you the things that the Bible says about the sovereign will of God. Let me just list them and you may want to look up the texts.

The Bible says that from the sovereign will of God there comes, first, the creation and the preservation of the universe. Revelation chapter 4, verse 11. Secondly, the government of the universe, Ephesians chapter 1, verse 11. Third, the election and the reprobation of men, Romans chapter 9, verses 15 and 16. Fourth, the sufferings of Jesus Christ. They come by the “Will of God.” Five, the regeneration of men, your new birth. Remember James says, “Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth.” Sixth, the sanctification of believers. It is God that worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure. Seventh, the belief of sufferings by the will of God. Eight, our life and destiny, Acts chapter 18, verse 21. Even the most insignificant things of our life are determined by the “Will of God.” Matthew chapter 10, verse 29.

What are the implications of this? Well God is not sovereign when it appears that one must think of the universe as determined by un-designed chance, blind faith or fallible human contingency. What peace, comfort or assurance could a Christian possibly

have if he was not sure of the “Will of God?” To what refuge could we fly in a time of trial if we did not have a sovereign God who was in control of everything.

Finally, the “Will of God and moral obligation.” Are things right or wrong simply because God commands or forbids them or does he command and forbid them because they are right or wrong, for some reason outside of his own will?

Today, if you ask people what things are right or wrong, well, they will say, “Well the things that tend to promote the greatest good for the body politic.” We hear news reporters, you know, say, “Such and such a thing is immoral.” I want to always interrupt. I want to say, “Why? Why? Please tell me the foundation of your values system?” “They say this is moral. This is immoral.”

I know what some of them will say. “What ever is good for all of us, that’s right.” Or, “Whatever promotes my happiness.” In that case, vice might be nice. Or because it’s in harmony with an eternal and necessary difference between right and wrong to which even God is subject.

But a Christian says, “What is right or wrong is determined by the will of God.”

And so what he says is right, and what he says is wrong, is wrong, because it is his will. The norm is the will of God. In other words, things are right or wrong because God commands them or he forbids them. Now that’s not arbitrary. He cannot make right what is wrong, or wrong what is right. But when we say that, we mean, he cannot make things right, which are contrary to his nature. Or wrong. Because, you see, the will of God is the expression of his nature.

And consequently, the will of God is the standard for all human activity because it’s the expression of his nature. It’s what he is of himself. That’s his will.

Now I want to tell you there is no doctrine more comforting than this doctrine of the sovereignty of God. Men will allow god to do everything today except assume the throne. They do not like for God to be absolutely supreme. They will allow him to get in his workshop, to fashion the worlds and make the stars. And everybody will say it is

wonderful the things that God has made. And they will let him light the lamps of heaven, the sun, and the stars. And they will allow him to control the seas. And they will allow him to do all of these things. But when he gets in his throne and says that he will have mercy upon whom he will have mercy and whom he wills, he heartens. And they say, “I don’t like that God. That’s not the kind of God I worship.” Because they don’t like for God to be supreme and sovereign.

Let me read some words that Spurgeon said. “When God ascends his throne, his creatures then gnash their teeth and proclaim an enthroned God and his right to do as he wills with his own, to dispose of his creatures, as he thinks well, without consulting them on the matter. Then it is that we are disconnected, then it is that men turn a deaf ear to it for God on his throne is not the god they love.”

But, it is God upon the throne that we love to preach. It is God upon his throne whom we trust. And I’m glad. I have a God who is sovereign and supreme and it is he whom I preach and it is he whom I trust.

Let’s bow in prayer.

[Prayer] Father, we are grateful to Thee for Thy will. We are grateful unto Thee for the decreive Will of God, for we know that Thou are good and righteous. And we see Thy word that Thou art also gracious. We thank Thee that Thou hast permitted sin, for now we are able to see Thy glory more plainly. And may oh God by Thy preceptive will, the expression of Thy nature, recorded in holy Scripture, be through the Holy Spirit, the norm and standard of our lives. If there should be one person here who has not believed in Jesus Christ, does not know the peace that passes all understanding. The forgiveness of sin, give no rest nor peace until they rest in him.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.