

Cause of God & Truth

God's Pleadings Resisted?

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Introduction

The rediscovering by many of their Reformed theological heritage is a trend welcomed in some circles, but it is also causing great alarm in other circles. This threat to the evangelical "status quo" is producing books and articles attacking the Reformed or Calvinistic faith. The main concern with Calvinism is that it does not square with the popularly held view that fallen sinners have a right to salvation, questioning the fairness of God in electing some to be saved while passing over others. Predicated on the assumed ability for anyone and everyone to evaluate freely the claims of the gospel and to decide freely for or against those claims, there is also an insistence that every sinner be given the opportunity to accept or reject the gospel. Although people are sinners and would rather live without any thought of God and, although they are fallen and corrupted by sin, anti-Calvinists believe that people are either (1) still in possession of their ability to choose freely for or against salvation (the Pelagian error of the 5th century), or (2) their ability to choose freely for or against salvation has been graciously restored to them (John Wesley's semi-Pelagian view made popular in the 18th century). If sinners possess free-will ability to decide for themselves, then Calvinism's doctrine of irresistible grace is not *necessary*.

(1) Irresistible Grace Defined

The growing revival of Calvinism is evidence that many believers are seeing that the doctrine of irresistible grace is biblical truth. Because sinners are dead in sin and hostile to the God, then, if any are to be saved, the Holy Spirit must infallibly overrule their nature and bring them to faith in Jesus Christ. This doctrine focuses on the regenerating ministry of God's Spirit, the new birth, by which dead sinners are made spiritually alive so that they may exercise repentance and faith. This work is *gracious work*, for no one deserves it nor would he ever willingly come to Christ without it.

Sinners are not born again because they can be persuaded to believe the gospel; rather, they willingly believe the gospel because they have been regenerated—made alive—by the power of the Spirit (John 3). This is not a doctrine invented by men. The Bible teaches the natural inability and the unwillingness of sinners to come to Christ for salvation. Jesus explained to the Jews: "You will not come to me that you may have life" (John 5:40). Again, in the next chapter, Jesus declared, "No one can [a word of ability] come to me unless the Father who sent me draws [a word of power] him" (John 6:44). If anyone is to be saved, the Holy Spirit must work in him to enable him to come to Jesus. "It is God which worketh in you both *to will and to do* of his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13—italics are for emphasis). "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, *by the washing of regeneration*, and renewing of the Holy Ghost" (Titus 3:5).

(2) Irresistible Grace Rejected

A number of articles refute the doctrines of grace because certain Scriptures seem to show God's pleading with sinners to repent and believe. Therefore, they reason, those to whom the appeals are made must certainly possess the ability to choose either to respond to or to refuse God's pleading. One passage cited, for example, is Proverbs 1:23, 24: "Turn you at my reproof: behold, I will pour out my spirit unto you, I will make known my words unto you. Because I have called, and ye refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded." After citing this text, one typical article com-

ments: "God was pleading with the nation. He was pleading with the people. He was saying, 'I have done everything that I know to do to bring you to myself, but you would not.'"

Another text cited was Jesus' lament over Jerusalem: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!" (Matthew 23:37). The responding comment has Jesus saying, "I worked with you, I pled with you, I tried to get you to come to Me, but you would not come." According to this assumption, these texts teach that "God sends forth the invitation. Man has the choice to resist." Free-will—"the Arminian idol," as the English Puritan John Owen referred to it—is a doctrine that will not easily surrender to truth; however, do these texts really teach that sinners have free-will power to refuse God's efforts to bring them to salvation?

I shall respond by, first, showing that the very premise on which irresistible grace is rejected—that sinners have the power to resist God—is both derogatory and demeaning to God. To have God saying, "I have done everything I know to do, now it is up to you," is to reduce God to creature level—to change "the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man" (Romans 1:23).

Second, I will show that the texts in question are not appeals for sinners to choose salvation offered but are, rather, warnings to obey God and that judgment is about to fall on responsible people for their failure.

I. The Fatal Flaw: Degrading God to Win Sinners

God does not plead with sinners. Where has God ever said, "I did all that I know to do; now it is up to you either to accept or to reject my offer to you"? Of course, there are some texts that on casual reading might be taken as such. God did say, "I called and you refused" (Proverbs 1:24). These references demonstrate that God's creatures are responsible to observe His rebukes, reproofs, admonitions, and warnings and that sinners do refuse to heed them. What must be rejected is the implication that any such refusal on man's part somehow frustrates the intention of God. When God is made to say, "I have done all I know to do," it implies that God is limited in what He can get done if He cannot persuade His creatures to cooperate.

The logical conclusion of this position is that God's goal in the planning and execution of redemption will be met with some degree of futility that only eternity will reveal. Some will choose to accept His offer; many, however, will reject it. If God's success in redemption hinges on sinner willingness, does He already know infallibly the degree that His plan will be frustrated? If so, that would be degrading to His wisdom in developing such a plan. If it is left for God to discover the final tally of those who frustrated His plan in eternity, then that would be degrading to His omniscience. Just how God-like is the anti-Calvinist's God?

The one text always raised in support of the view that God wills the salvation of every sinner, even though it is a futile goal, is 2 Peter 3:9: "The Lord is . . . not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance." In the opinion of the critics of the Reformed position, this one verse alone refutes the doctrine of unconditional election (as if Calvinists have never considered the verse). *Any* must be interpreted to mean "none at all" and *all* must be interpreted to mean "every sinner that ever lived or will ever live" in order to make salvation universal in scope. If these terms, *any* and *all* are indeed inclusive of each and every person, then, since everyone also has the option to not repent, God's will that none perish will be frustrated. What does this failure do to the image of our omnipotent God, "who works all things after the counsel of his own will"?

Here is the heart of the issue. God declares "My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish *all* my purpose [will]. . . . I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed, and I will do it" (Isaiah 46:10, 11). Will any deny that the Lord has both will and ability to bring about whatever He pleases? "And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?" (Daniel 4:35). "There is no wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against the

LORD" (Proverbs 21:30). "There are many devices [plans and schemes] in a man's heart; nevertheless the counsel of the LORD, that shall stand" (Proverbs 19:21). Man may plan many things, but, if they are not in the Lord's will, they cannot succeed. So, if God wills that a man be saved, but the man plans to say no, whose counsel stands? "Whatsoever the LORD pleased, that did he in heaven, and in earth, in the seas, and all deep places" (Psalm 135:6). "The counsel of the LORD standeth for ever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations" (Psalm 33:11). "I will work, and who shall turn it back [who can stop the work]?" (Isaiah 43:13).

Do you get the picture of our great and prevailing God? It amounts to blasphemy to suggest that God cannot save a sinner unless the sinner permits Him. "God sends forth the invitation. Man has the choice to resist"? That is not Bible language. Jesus declared, "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me" (John 6:37). Paul attributed the salvation of the Ephesian believers to "the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will" (Ephesians 1:11). So, if it is in the mind of the sinner to say no to Jesus but it is God's purpose to save him, who wins?

Back to 2 Peter 3:9. Is God not willing that anyone perish? We all agree that many do perish. The references I have just cited reveal a God whose will and purpose cannot be resisted. Since many perish, it should be plain that the *any* God is not willing should perish do not include those who are perishing. By *any*, Peter means *us*, His elect, those are to "obtain like precious faith with us through the righteousness of God and our Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:1). God is certainly not willing that these should perish but come to repentance. "Who has resisted His will?" (Romans 9:19).

On the other hand, is God willing for some to perish? Please, observe Romans 9:22: "What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction." This verse offers basically the same argument as Peter's. Why hasn't the Lord come yet? Why is God holding back His wrath? Paul's answer is that God is patiently enduring "vessels of wrath" in order "that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory" (Romans 9:23). God is not willing that any of these "vessels of mercy" should perish; however, He is willing that the "vessels of wrath" perish! Yes! In Romans 9:22, God is willing for the "vessels of wrath" to perish in order to display the glory of His wrath. Here is a dilemma. God cannot contradict Himself. He cannot both will the salvation of every sinner and the perishing of some sinners.

In this same ninth of Romans, verse 15, Paul cites God's word to Moses in Exodus, explaining God's will with respect to His sovereign bestowal of mercy: "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." Are these the words of an empty braggadocio? According to the popular opinion, He should have said, "I will have mercy on those who will let me." Paul shuts that door. He concludes that, if it is God's will to show mercy, "then it is not of him that *willeth*, nor of him that *runneth*, but of God that sheweth mercy" (Romans 9:16). God alone is sovereign. Scripture is always consistent.

II. Where Does God Plead For Sinners to Choose Him?

What about those references that seem to show God's pleading for sinners to return and repent and not perish? God said to Israel through the prophet Isaiah, "When I called, ye did not answer; when I spake, ye did not hear" (Isaiah 65:12). Again, in Zechariah 7:11 we read, "But they refused to hearken, and pulled away the shoulder, and stopped their ears, that they should not hear." Are these refusals of God's offer of mercy to them; or do these texts reveal the stubbornness of the natural man, only making him more culpable in judgment? Stephen declared of the Jews, "Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye" (Acts 7:51). Calvinists do not deny that sinners resist the truth. That is the point: they always resist. It is only as they are overcome with irresistible grace that they willingly yield to God.

God does not merely *plead* with the "stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears." In the Hebrew the verbs that may be translated "to plead" have the idea of making a case for or against something. To request someone to "plead my cause" is to ask for that one to reason a good case. *This*

pleading is never used of God. God is never seen to plead His cause to anyone. He is the almighty sovereign King of Kings. He has never justified Himself to anyone, nor does He need to justify Himself. There is not a single reference that has God pleading with people to do anything, contrary to popular sentiment. "I did everything I know to do, now you must decide" is not Bible language.

The texts containing warnings and exhortations are given to responsible creatures in order to inform them that God's wrath and judgment are about to fall on them for their refusal to hear Him and obey Him. Take Ezekiel 33:11, for example: "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 ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?"

First, contrary to the usual interpretation of Ezekiel 33, eternal salvation is not the subject of the admonition. The context is, rather, the *temporal judgment* that is coming to Judah by the Chaldean captivity. Second, the message Ezekiel is to bring from God is that in the judgment, a degree of mercy will be shown to those who turn from their sinful idolatrous practices. "None of his sins that he hath committed shall be mentioned unto him: he hath done that which is lawful and right; he shall surely live" (Ezekiel 33:16). On the other hand, the righteous must not think that his past obedience is sufficient to cover his present iniquity. "When I shall say to the righteous, that he shall surely live; if he trust to his own righteousness, and commit iniquity, all his righteousnesses shall not be remembered; but for his iniquity that he hath committed, he shall die for it" (Ezekiel 33:13). The context of this chapter has to do with doing and not doing: "Obey Me and you live, commit iniquity and you will die." That is not salvation, which is expressed in these terms: "*Not by works of righteousness* which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost" (Titus 3:5).

If Jesus came to plead with the nation that was "stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears" in order to bring them to salvation, there is a problem in Matthew 11:20-24. In that passage, Jesus upbraided the cities of Chorazin and Bethsaida because they did not repent when His mighty works were done there. Because they did not repent, Jesus told them that "it shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment, than for you" (Matthew 11:22).

Here is the problem. Jesus said that if the miracles done in Chorazin had been done in Tyre and Sidon, "they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes" (Matthew 11:21). How is it then, if God is not willing that anyone should perish, that these miracles were not done in Tyre and Sidon, since the people would have repented? Why were not these mighty works done in Sodom? They would have repented also. It appears that God was willing for those in Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom to perish, since He did not do there that which would have produced their repentance. On the other hand, these mighty works *were done* in cities that did not repent. It should be obvious that these mighty works were done there not to evoke repentance, but to increase their guilt in the day of judgment. "It shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment, than for you."

Interestingly, Jesus concluded his rebuke with a prayer, thanking God that He hid the truth from these "wise and prudent" ones. Then He added, "No man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to *whomsoever the Son will reveal him*" (Matthew 11:27). The implication is that the Son did not reveal the Father to these cities. It appears that God was willing that these should perish since He hid the truth from them.

The declaration of judgment is also the theme of Jesus' lament over Jerusalem quoted at the beginning of this article. "How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!" (Matthew 23:37). According to the author cited earlier, Jesus was saying, "I worked with you, I pled with you, I tried to get you to come to Me, but you would not come." Read Matthew 23:37 again. Jesus is simply lamenting that those "stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears" would not let their Messiah minister to His own people. Where in the text is Jesus pleading for sinners to come to salvation? He informed those whom

He rebuked already in this chapter (verses 13-36) that they could not escape the damnation of Hell (vs. 33).

Matthew 23:37 is Jesus' official rejection of Israel in light of their official rejection of Him, their Messiah. Jerusalem must now face impending judgment: "Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city: *That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth*, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar. Verily I say unto you, *All these things shall come upon this generation . . . Behold, your house is left unto you desolate.*" (Matthew 23:35, 36, 38).

Jesus "came unto his own, and his own received him not" (John 1:11). He did everything Messiah was to do; yet, we read, "Then came the Jews [the leaders in Jerusalem] round about him, and said unto him, How long dost thou make us to doubt? If thou be the Christ [Messiah], tell us plainly. Jesus answered them, I told you, and ye believed not: the works that I do in my Father's name, they bear witness of me. [Notice that Jesus did not plead with them to believe, He only informed them that, in spite of every evidence to the contrary, they do not believe Him. Then, He told them why they did not believe. Was it because He couldn't convince to do so? No.] But ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep, as I said unto you" (John 10:24-26). Jesus informed the Jews of the judgment that was about to fall on them—the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 when the Romans under General Titus leveled the city.

In John 12 is an explanation of why the Jews did not believe in their Messiah: "But though he had done so many miracles before them, yet they believed not on him: That [here is a purpose clause] the saying of Esaias the prophet might be fulfilled, which he spake, Lord, who hath believed our report? and to whom hath the arm of the Lord been revealed? [Listen carefully now to John's conclusion.] Therefore they could [a word of ability] not believe, [because they refused to believe? Of course, they did that, but] be-cause that Esaias said again, He [God, who is willing that some should perish] hath blinded their eyes, and hardened their heart; that they should not see with their eyes, nor understand with their heart, and be converted, and I should heal them" (John 12:37-40). Oops! To parody the commercial, "It looks like the facts have just rained all over the anti-Calvinists' parade."

Conclusion

Is irresistible grace an error, or is the free-will doctrine in error? Which is taught in the Bible? Paul's letter to the Romans ought to settle the argument forever. Sinners are indicted. "When they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man . . . Wherefore God also gave them up" (Romans 1:21-24). His *giving up* is not in disappointment over His futile attempts to convince them otherwise. Defying God is all sinners choose to do, and in their efforts they seek to bring God down to their level and have power over Him, i.e. free-will salvation.

The fact is, already under the wrath of God, sinners have no will or power to escape their doom. It is only through grace that "the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth" (Romans 9:11). "Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth. Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will? Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?" (Romans 9:18-21). The conclusion? "So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth [free-will doctrine], but of God that sheweth mercy [sovereign grace]" (Romans 9:16). To God be the glory!