

Part Two

God's Desire to Save Sinners

In chapter 5, I explain what I mean by a scriptural paradox, and show there are many such. In chapter 6, I address the particular paradox which concerns the free offer of the gospel; namely, the seeming conflict between God's desire to save all sinners and his decree to save his elect only. Chapters 7 and 8 set out the reasons for this and other biblical paradoxes – in chapter 7, I show that God often speaks as a man, and this leads to the concept of the twofold will of God, the theme of chapter 8. Whilst I do not intend to be patronising, reader, if you find these two chapters difficult on a first reading, it is possible to skip them and go straight to chapter 9, where I show what we should do with the free-offer paradox between God's decree and his desire. Chapter 10 is devoted to Spurgeon's testimony on the subject.

Paradoxes in Scripture

The paradox in question

I said there were two topics I wished to raise with Ella. The first was duty faith. I now turn to the second; that is, the scriptural paradox between God's decree to save his elect and his desire to save all sinners. By a paradox I mean 'a *seemingly* contradictory statement'.¹ There is nothing contradictory in Scripture, of course, but there are many things which *seem* so.

What, precisely, is the paradox between God's decree to save his elect and his desire to save all? It is this: If God desires the salvation of all sinners, why are they not all saved? We know the will of God is irresistible; he can do whatever he pleases (Ps. 115:3; 135:6; Isa. 46:10). So, I ask again, why are all sinners not saved – since God desires it? Here we have the nub of the question. As Calvin said: This is a 'knot for you to untie. Since no one but he who is drawn by the secret influence of the Spirit can approach unto God, how is it that God does not draw all men indiscriminately to himself, if he really "wills all men to be saved" (in the common meaning of the expression)?' The answer, according to Calvin, is to say 'there is with [God] a secret reason why he shuts so many out from salvation'.² In other words,

¹ See *Concise*, emphasis mine. A nice point of semantics arises here. According to J.I.Packer, I should be using the word 'antinomy' instead of 'paradox' (Packer pp18-21), but I have not adopted his suggestion. Although a paradox is merely a figure of speech – 2 Cor. 6:10; 12:10, for instance – in which the seeming contradiction arises out of the words and not the facts, and an antinomy is a contradiction in the facts themselves, I still prefer 'paradox'. The reason is, I am speaking of a *seeming* contradiction, whereas an antinomy *is* a contradiction. Packer himself had to introduce the idea of 'seeming' or 'apparent' in his definition of 'antinomy'.

² Calvin: *Calvin's Calvinism* pp277-278; see also same volume p117. See chapter 9 for more of Calvin's 'untying the knot'. When all is said and

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although God openly reveals his desire to save all sinners, secretly he has determined not to satisfy this desire. This is the paradox with which we must grapple.

Thomas Manton spoke of ‘the will and pleasure of God’ in contrast to his intending decree, saying: ‘God may be said to like the salvation of all men, yet not to intend it with an efficacious will’. This is true, for, as Manton said, even though God has not decreed to save all sinners, yet ‘he is unfeignedly pleased with the salvation of men’.³ This is the paradox.

But before I look at it in detail, let me show that this paradox is far from unique; the Bible records many such.

Biblical paradoxes in general

For instance: God has absolute control over kings; he can make them do whatever he pleases (Prov. 21:1). Scripture affords many examples of the fact (Ezra 6:22; 7:27; 9:9; Neh. 1:11; 2:4-9; Ps. 105:14-15; 106:46; Isa. 49:23 *etc.*), including ungodly kings (Gen. 20:6; 41:37-45; Ezra 1:1; Isa. 44:28; 45:1; Dan. 1:19; 2:48; 3:30; 6:1-3,28; John 19:10-11; Acts 4:25-28; Rev. 17:16-17 *etc.*) Yet in Psalm 2, God calls upon kings to trust Christ. God must be sincere in this call and command; it must represent his desire. Nevertheless, not all kings obey him. Indeed, according to Acts 4:25-27, ‘Herod and Pontius Pilate’ were included in the call, yet they were, as far as we can tell, reprobate, and never did ‘serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling’, they never did ‘kiss the Son’ (Ps. 2:11-12). The same may be said of kings in general. Clearly God could ensure their trust in Christ by decreeing it, but he does not. Thus, although he has commanded all kings to trust Christ, and in this he is utterly sincere – it would please him – he has not purposed it. This is a paradox.

Again: It was a sin for Israel to ask for a king (1 Sam. 12:17), but God must have purposed that they should have a king, for he gave them one (1 Sam. 15:1). It did not please him, nevertheless he decreed it. This is a paradox.

done, however, we are still left with a paradox to which, as he himself declared, we have to submit.

³ Manton: *Complete* p465.

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God moved David to number Israel but in so doing David acted foolishly under Satan's influence and sinned. God judged the people because of it, staying his hand only after David's prayer (2 Sam. 24:1,10,25; 1 Chron. 21:1). The episode is full of paradoxes.

God had appointed Ben-Hadad to utter destruction, but Ahab let him slip out of his hand, and God held him accountable for it (1 Kings 20:42). This is a paradox.

Jehu did the will of God, fulfilling the LORD's pleasure (2 Kings 9:7ff; 10:30), but he did it by means of half-truths, evasion, lies and deceit (2 Kings 9:11-12; 10:18-19); he engaged in false worship in order to deceive (2 Kings 10:19,25); he was guilty of conspiracy, treason and murder (2 Kings 9:14,23-27,33; 10:6-17). In this way, God carried out his will through him (2 Kings 9:25-26,36-37; 10:10,17), and commended Jehu for it (2 Kings 10:30) even though he was a hardened sinner who did not keep God's law (2 Kings 10:29,31). In all this, God was not tainted with Jehu's sin; nevertheless the paradox remains.

And what of the seeming conflict between human responsibility and God's decree? Christ was crucified by the sin of wicked men, yet it was in the purpose of God (Luke 22:22; John 19:11; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28). Joseph was sold into Egypt by his wicked brothers, but God had decreed it (Gen. 45:5-8; 50:20). What of the division of Israel into two kingdoms? It was of God, even though it was sinful. Jeroboam was responsible, he rebelled against Solomon (1 Kings 11:26-27), he wanted power (1 Kings 11:37), but it was God's decree he should do so (1 Kings 11:11-13,29-40). See also 1 Kings 11:14. Likewise, Esau sinned over his birthright. He was responsible (Heb. 12:16-17), but God's sovereign purpose was thus fulfilled (Rom. 9:11-13). These are paradoxes.

As Basil Manley Sr said:

The captivity and bondage of the Israelites in Egypt were fixed, to a day (Gen. 15:13; Ex. 12:41). Yet Pharaoh was exhorted to release them earlier, and that by divine direction. He ought to have obeyed; and, in that case, it would have been better for him. Moses and Aaron were told that he would not let the people go, at the time they were sent with a message from God to demand it. [Similarly] Ezekiel was told that the people would not hear him, yet [he was] commanded to go and exhort them (Ezek. 3:4-7). [And] the crucifixion of our Lord... was by 'the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God' (Acts

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3:23), yet the hands that slew him were ‘wicked hands’... Salvation... was suspended on the fact that the Son of God should die. This fact was foreseen – predetermined. Yet, will any man say that the parties concerned were not both free and guilty in their course, acting as they did from evil motives and the prompting of their own bad hearts?⁴

Take the following three biblical facts concerning justification: the elect were justified in Christ from all eternity; Christ was raised for their justification; and they are justified by faith in Christ. How can these be reconciled? ‘The question may be put, “How could they be said to be justified before, both from eternity and in Christ, if they may be truly said even in God’s judgement to be justified but now [that is, when they believe], and that they were till now [that is, until they believe] unjustified?”’ Having proposed the question, Goodwin answered it: ‘These seeming contradictions, in various respects, are both true’. Goodwin explained: ‘Before God, according to the rules of his word, which are the rules of his proceedings before men, being God’s revealed will, they [the elect before coming to faith] are as yet unjustified; but according to those secret passages of his secret will transacted with Christ, and to which he is privy, they are justified persons before him’.⁵ This explanation is right but, even so, the seeming contradiction remains.⁶

Take God’s providence. John Flavel was right to draw attention to its *mysterious* nature.⁷ God’s providences can seem chaotic; they can seem even to run counter to his promises, when all the time he is serenely and consistently working out his sovereign and eternal purpose. Such things are a paradox to our mind.

Take God’s command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22:2), even though human sacrifice is a pagan practice which God hates (Ps. 106:34-39; Jer. 19:5; Ezek. 16:20), and in this case seemed to contradict his promise (Gen. 17:16,19). This is a

⁴ *Southern Baptist Sermons* p27ff.

⁵ Goodwin p138.

⁶ There is a parallel with the free offer; just as hyper-Calvinists, not willing to let the biblical paradox stand, apply their logic to the free offer, so some of them do to the above question – and thus end up with their doctrine of eternal justification. See my note in chapter 1.

⁷ Flavel: *Mystery*.

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paradox.

Consider the question of faith. Only the elect can believe (John 6:44; 10:26), but all of them will believe (John 6:37), for faith is God's gift to them (Eph. 2:8). Even so, all unbelievers are condemned for not believing (John 3:18; 5:40); it is a sin (John 16:9). This is a paradox.

I leave it there. Having made the point that there are scores of paradoxes in Scripture, let me now move on to consider the one in question; namely, the seeming contradiction between God's desire to save all sinners and his decree to save only his elect.