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The Paradox in Question

God desires to save all sinners but he has decreed to save only his elect. This is the paradox in question.

What is not at stake

Let me clear the ground and set out what is *not* at stake. God has decreed to save his elect, all his elect, and no others. Christ died for them, and no others. The Spirit works effectively in them, and no others. Ella and I are at one on these vital doctrines. I believe them and preach them. So whatever I think about the two aspects of God's will – the secret and the revealed (Deut. 29:29) – *these* doctrines are not in question.

But has God spoken in Scripture of his desire to save all sinners? This is where Ella and I part company. I say, Yes; Ella says, No.

Fair enough. Here we have something to get our teeth into. Let's discuss the matter. Let's examine the Scriptures. I would like to say I welcome Ella's contribution to this debate, but sadly I have found it very difficult to take him seriously. What was wanted was soft words and strong arguments. Intemperate language does not make a compelling case. If I may echo Job's complaint, and say to my brother: 'How forceful are right words! But what does your arguing prove?' (Job 6:25).

What am I talking about? Just this. Instead of getting to grips with the issue, Ella issued a crescendo of caricature, and indulged in silly – I speak advisedly – silly throw-aways. Let me illustrate. I do not think 'God the Father and God the Son quarrel over the salvation of sinners'; that they 'contend over the souls of sinners'; that 'there is an eternal tension in the Godhead concerning who should be saved';¹ that 'God... is at logger-heads with himself';²

¹ Ella: *The Free Offer* p20.

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that there are two gospels;³ ‘two routes for salvation’.⁴ Nor do I set out ‘a moving Father-Son soap opera relationship [in which] Jesus... wishes to save everyone. But his Father is adamant. He will only save some. Thus the heavenly arches shudder as God the Father and God the Son quarrel over the salvation of sinners... Father and Son contend over the souls of sinners... Whereas Christ wishes to save all, the Father insists on only saving some’.⁵ I say nothing of the sort. Ella’s approach cannot be called serious debate.

Ella has also stooped to nasty suggestion and assertion. On what authority did he say, for instance, ‘Gay tactically leaves out’ ‘the decreed will of God to adopt for himself [that is, God] an elect people for whom Christ died’, ‘so that [Gay] might preach as if God never granted an assured and certain salvation for those for whom Christ died’?⁶ Where have I ever hinted at such a thing? Has Ella ever heard me preach? Can he produce one witness to back his assertion? And I object to what lies behind the word ‘tactically’. I also resent Ella’s suggestion that I have a scheme in mind in which I have to ‘drop’ biblical doctrines to leave myself ‘free to preach to persuade men according to their natural abilities to repent and believe on the purely rational grounds that God, if he is God, must desire it’.⁷ Nor do I think the ‘secret law of God regarding his decrees must fade away before the revealed law of God’.⁸

Leaving aside these personal remarks of abuse, which add

² Ella: *The Free Offer* p9.

³ Ella: *The Free Offer* p22.

⁴ Ella: *The Free Offer* p19.

⁵ Ella: *The Free Offer* p20.

⁶ Ella: *The Free Offer* p21.

⁷ Ella: *The Free Offer* p22.

⁸ Ella: *The Free Offer* p22. In chapter 10 I will answer Ella’s criticism of what I said about Spurgeon. Ella is not alone in his misunderstanding (or misrepresentation) of the free offer. John H. Gerstner in his Foreword to Engelsma’s book, for instance, was wrong to state that ‘the “well-meant offer” is understood... to include the notion that God intends and desires the salvation of reprobates’ (Engelsma vii). Whoever ‘understands’ the free offer like this, misunderstands it! The fact is, God intends the salvation of the elect and the damnation of the reprobate, but desires the salvation of all.

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nothing to the discussion but rather cloud it, let me turn to a far more important question: What Scriptures did Ella tackle on the subject? None! But, reader, I have not grabbed my views out of thin air. That I may be mistaken, I freely admit, but I sincerely believe that Scripture teaches what I have tried to set out. I believe God has shown he has various desires, desires which he has expressed in passionate terms, but which desires, obviously, he has not decreed to fulfil. I say, 'obviously', because they are not fulfilled. I am absolutely committed to the doctrine of God's sovereignty. Whatever God has decreed comes to pass; it always comes to pass; it must come to pass. No power in hell or earth can hinder it. Therefore if God expresses any desire which is not fulfilled it can only mean he has not decreed it. But this is precisely what I *do* find in Scripture. Now I confess I cannot understand it. It is a paradox to me. Even so, I accept and teach what (I think) Scripture says. I do not try to explain the facts away. I may be wrong in my views, and if Ella can show me a better way, I shall be grateful to him, but merely to abuse me and my words is not the best way to help me to understand. I would like to see his scriptural arguments.

Scriptural examples of where God has not decreed to satisfy his desire

Make no mistake, reader, the Scriptures do speak of this matter; I will give some examples. I wish I had space to go further and expound these passages properly, but since I am trying to keep this book in bounds, I submit only brief summaries of my conclusions. I make this offer, however: *If Ella cares to set out his views on these verses, I will debate with him.* I refer to such passages as these:

Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear me and always keep all my commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children for ever! (Deut. 5:29)
See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil... I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life... that you may love the LORD your God, that you may obey his voice (Deut. 30:15-20)

Oh, that they were wise, that they understood this, that they would consider their latter end! (Deut. 32:29)⁹

Wrath came upon Judah and Jerusalem because of their trespass. Yet [the LORD God] sent prophets to them, to bring them back to the LORD; and they testified against them, but they would not listen (2 Chron. 24:18-19)

Hear, O my people, and I will admonish you! O Israel, if you will listen to me!... But my people would not heed my voice, and Israel would have none of me... Oh, that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways! (Ps. 81:8,11,13)

I have called and you refused, I have stretched out my hand and no one regarded... you disdained all my counsel, and would have none of my rebuke (Prov. 1:24-25)

Oh, that you had heeded my commandments! (Isa. 48:18)

I have stretched out my hands all day long to a rebellious people (Isa. 65:2; Rom. 10:21)

When I called, you did not answer; when I spoke, you did not hear, but did evil before my eyes, and chose that in which I do not delight (Isa. 65:12; see also Isa. 66:4)

I have sent to you all my servants the prophets, rising early and sending them, saying, ‘Oh, do not do this abominable thing that I hate!’ But they did not listen or incline their ear (Jer. 44:4-5)¹⁰

⁹ Even though these are Moses’ words, they express God’s own desire since they are a part of the song he gave Moses, and which he said was ‘a witness for me against the children of Israel’ which would ‘testify against them as a witness’ when they turned away from him (Deut. 31:19-21). ‘This song... would be a testimony for God of his goodness to them, of his tender care of them, and concern for them... and a testimony against them for their ingratitude and other sins’ (Gill: *Commentary* Vol.1 p811, emphasis mine). Gill, however, seemed to forget this when commenting on Deut. 32:29.

¹⁰ See also 2 Kings 17:13-14; 2 Chron. 36:15-16; Neh. 9:26,29-30; Isa. 5:1-7; Jer. 7:13,23-28; 11:7-8,10; 13:8-11; 19:15; 25:3-7; 26:2-15; 29:19; 32:33; 35:14-17; Ezek. 2:3-7; 3:7; Hos. 7:13 (NASB, NIV); 11:1-2; 11:7 (AV, NASB); Zech. 1:4; 7:7-12; Mal. 1:10 (NASB, NIV); Matt. 5:12; 23:34,37; Luke 7:30; 13:34; Acts 7:51-53. See also Isa. 15:5; 16:9,11,13; Jer. 48:30-38, especially 31,32,36. Above all, the Jews rejected Christ

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Here God shows he earnestly desired or wished the Hebrews to listen to him, to fear and obey him from the heart, to choose life and not death, and so on, and he commanded and urged them to do so. But they would not. It is clear, then, God desired something which he did not decree, for if he had decreed it, they would have feared him, they would have got their priorities right, they would have heeded his commands. And as Gill, commenting on Psalm 81:13, expressed it: ‘If they had hearkened to him... it would have been well-pleasing to him; for that is what is designed by this wish,¹¹ which does not express the purposing will of God; for who has resisted that? [The fact is,] if he had so willed, he could have given them ears to hear; but [this wish expresses] his commanding will, and what is his approving one’.¹² This is the paradox in question.¹³

(Matt. 21:33-46; 23:37; Luke 13:34; 19:41-44; John 1:11; 3:11-19; 5:37-43; 8:37-38,40,42-43,47; 10:25-26; 12:44-50; 15:24-25; Acts 2:23; 3:14-15; 4:10-11; 7:52), who spoke ‘that you may be saved’ (John 5:34), whom God sent (and was sending), as Peter said, ‘to bless you, in turning away every one of you from your iniquities’ (Acts 3:26); that is, God desired them all to repent and receive his Son, commanding them to do so (Acts 3:19-20), but in general they did not. The apostles met the same refusal (Acts 13:46; 18:5-6; 19:8-9; 28:23-31; 1 Thess. 2:14-16 etc.) If Rom. 11:32; 16:25-27 and Tit. 2:11 express a thought similar to Acts 3:26, extended to all nations, note once again the link between duty faith and God’s desire.

¹¹ That is, God, by this declared wish, intended that Israel should know how they could please him.

¹² Gill: *Commentary* Vol.3 p203.

¹³ As for the link between duty repentance/faith and God’s desire, take Gill on ‘the Pharisees and lawyers [who] rejected the will [counsel] of God for themselves, not having been baptised by’ John the Baptist (Luke 7:30): ‘By their impenitence and unbelief, and through their rejection of Christ and his forerunner, and the gospel and the ordinances of it, they brought ruin and destruction, both temporal and eternal, upon themselves... that is, they rejected the command of God unto them... for by “the counsel of God” here, is not meant his purpose, intention and design... which... never is frustrated; but the precept of God... the command of God’ (Gill: *Commentary* Vol.5 p463). Although Gill went on to speak of ‘the ordinance of baptism’, the fact is John commanded these hearers to repent and be baptised (Matt. 3:1-11) because God desired them to do it – it was his ‘will’ or ‘counsel’ for them – but they refused; they

‘Do I have any pleasure at all that the wicked should die?’ says the LORD GOD, ‘and not that he should turn from his ways and live?... Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies’, says the LORD GOD. ‘Therefore turn and live!’ (Ezek. 18:23,30-32)

Say to them: ‘As I live’, says the LORD GOD, ‘I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live’ (Ezek. 33:11)

God here tells us he delights in, takes pleasure in – that is, desires – the salvation of sinners; negatively, he does not delight in the death of the wicked. The people of Israel were desperate; they saw no hope, no hope whatsoever; their sins had ruined them. God would damn them. Death stared them in the face. But God, in his great mercy, sent the prophet to offer hope to this sinful people. True, they were sinners. True, their sins would damn them. But if this should happen, God would take no pleasure in their death. He wanted them to return. He wanted them all to return. If only they would turn! If only they would turn from their sins and turn back to him, he would have mercy upon them. He would forgive them. Indeed, he would take pleasure in their return; it would please him. He wanted them to come. But, unless they did return, they would perish. God wanted them to turn, but they must do it. If they perished, it would be their own fault. Turn, therefore, turn. Now did all those who heard the Lord’s plea turn? Were they all saved? No! Clearly, therefore, God had not decreed to bring about his expressed desire. This is the paradox in question.¹⁴

I have cleansed you, and you were not cleansed (Ezek. 24:13)

The Jews, particularly in Jerusalem, had become wicked in the extreme, rebellious (Ezek. 24:3), violent (Ezek. 24:6,9), deceitful

would not repent and believe, as Gill observed. See also John 1:7; Acts 19:4.

¹⁴ For Calvin’s comments, see chapter 9.

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(Ezek. 24:12) and lewd (Ezek. 24:13). So bad had things become, God pictured the city as a filthy cauldron (Ezek. 24:11,13), encrusted with scum (Ezek. 24:6,11,12). God was about to judge her; indeed, Babylon was at the gates even as the prophet was speaking (Ezek. 24:2). Even so, God had brought judgement only as a last resort, having, he said, tried to reform the people and recall them to his ways, but with no success. In the parable, filthy cauldron that she was, a fire had been lit beneath Jerusalem to burn off the scum, but it had failed (Ezek. 24:9-13); that is, God had sent prophets to preach, and had visited the people with judgements to get rid of the sin, but Jerusalem would not be cleansed. 'I have cleansed you', he said; that is, 'I have taken all necessary steps to cleanse you', but 'you were not cleansed', you would not be cleansed (Ezek. 24:13). 'I would have cleansed you, yet you are not clean' (NASB). God had 'made use of means for the purgation [cleansing] of them, by his prophets, and by exhortations and instructions given by them, and by various corrections and chastisements; but all in vain, and to no purpose, they were all without effect'.¹⁵ God, it is clear, had desired their cleansing, and taken steps to procure it, even though he had not decreed it. If he had, they would have been cleansed. This is the paradox in question.

Is this the only time God said such a thing? It is not:

In vain I have chastened your children; they received no correction (Jer. 2:30)

I said, after she had done all these things: 'Return to me'. But she did not return (Jer. 3:7)

You have stricken them, but they have not grieved; you have consumed them, but they have refused to receive correction. They have made their faces harder than a rock; they have refused to return (Jer. 5:3)

She has not obeyed his voice, she has not received correction; she has not trusted in the LORD, she has not drawn near to her God... I said: 'Surely you will fear me, you will receive instruction'... But they rose early and corrupted all their deeds (Zeph. 3:2,7)

¹⁵ Gill: *Commentary* Vol.4 p372.

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Listen to what Gill said on these verses: ‘The rod of chastisement was used in vain; the afflictions that came upon them had no effect on them to amend and reform them; they were never the better for them’. ‘The Lord sent to them by the prophets... who... entreated them, saying, “turn unto me”... They were not without admonitions, exhortations and declarations of grace... but remained in idolatry, obstinate and inflexible’. ‘The Lord had corrected and chastised them... he had brought his judgements upon them, and had smitten them... and yet it had not brought them to a sense of their sin, and to a godly sorrow for it... [they] remained obstinate and incorrigible, [and] refused to receive any correction or instruction by such providences’. ‘This is spoken after the manner of men; as if God should say within himself, and reason in his own mind... “Surely... the Jews will take notice...”’. This, humanly speaking, might be reasonably thought would be the case... [namely, that] by these judgements, [the Jews] taking warning by them [would] repent, reform, and amend, and thereby escape the like... [God] chastised them in a gentle manner, in order to reform them, but in vain... The goodness of God should have brought them to repentance, yet it did not’.¹⁶ So said Gill. And he was quite right.

In all this, God had been sincere in his use of means for Israel’s good, and complained of – was grieved over – their refusal to listen. It is clear, therefore, that although he had desired their return, he had not decreed it. If he had, Israel would not have refused him. This is the paradox in question.

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! (Matt. 23:37; Luke 13:34)

Christ said he ‘wanted’; the people were not ‘willing’. Both words ‘wanted’, and ‘willing’, are translations of *θέλω*, which can mean ‘to be resolved, determined, intend, to purpose’, or ‘to desire, to wish’, or ‘to take delight in, to have pleasure’. As for Christ, he

¹⁶ Gill: *Commentary* Vol.4 pp10,14,25,800. See also Jer. 26:1-3; 36:1-3; Ezek. 12:1-3; Luke 20:13.

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could not have meant *intend*. If he had intended to gather the Jews, if he had decreed and purposed their gathering, they would have been gathered. No! Christ *desired* to gather them, he *wanted* to gather them, but they did not *want* to be gathered. He had a heart for them; they had none for him. Jesus wept over them. He desired, yearned, longed for them to yield to his appeals and entreaties, but they were not willing, they had no mind, no desire to turn and be saved. He desired their salvation but he had not decreed it. This is the paradox in question.¹⁷

Christ taught the same principle in two parables recorded close by the passage in Luke.¹⁸ Let us glance at them.

In the first, ‘a certain man had a fig tree... and he came seeking fruit on it and found none’ (Luke 13:6). Did the man want fruit? Did he desire it? Of course he did! Did he get it? He did not. In the parable’s reference to God, this is the paradox in question.

In the second parable, ‘a certain man gave a great supper and invited many, and sent his servant at supper time to say to those who were invited: “Come, for all things are now ready”’ (Luke 14:16-17). Was the man sincere? Did he desire those he invited to accept? Most definitely. He made this very clear when he finally instructed his servant to ‘go out into the highways and hedges, and compel [urge, persuade, entreat] them to come in, that my house may be filled’ (Luke 14:23). The man wanted *all* he had invited to come, but not all came.

The gospel parallel is clear. I cannot understand it, but that is not the point! In coming across this principle in Scripture, do I concentrate on my lack of understanding or on the obvious desire of the Godhead to see sinners saved? God in the gospel has revealed that he desires the salvation of sinners, some whom he has not decreed to save. This is the paradox in question.

Jesus, looking at him, loved him... But he... went away (Mark 10:21-22)

The rich man wanted to know what he had to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus ‘loved him’ and told him the way, but the man ‘was sad

¹⁷ See also chapters 9 and 10.

¹⁸ See also Matt. 22:1-10.

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at this word, and went away grieved, for he had great possessions'. Jesus drew the lesson: 'How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God'; only God can change a man's heart (Mark 10:17-27). Now, it is possible that the man came to his senses, returned and obeyed Christ, but we are not told that he did, nor is there a shred of evidence to support the conjecture. And that it what it is – conjecture. In other words, as far as we can tell – as far as Scripture makes clear – Christ desired the man's obedience – he loved him – yet, although he had the power to effect it, he did not. This is the paradox in question.¹⁹

Jesus said: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do' (Luke 23:34)

Jesus was sincere; it is blasphemous to suggest otherwise. Christ desired the forgiveness of his crucifiers, all of them.²⁰ Did he pray for the forgiveness of only the elect among them? No! He desired and prayed for the forgiveness of them all. It did not matter whether or not they were elect; Christ prayed for them all. But were all of them forgiven? Of course not. Clearly, therefore, he desired something he had not decreed. This is the paradox in question.²¹

Christ, addressing the church of the Laodiceans, said:

¹⁹ See also Matt. 9:35-38. As for Gill's comment – Christ was here showing love 'as man, he had a human affection for [the rich man]' (Gill: *Commentary* Vol.5 p371) – see my note, in chapter 9, on Christ speaking in Matt. 23:37 as both God and man. In Scripture, God often speaks as though he is a man (see the next chapter), and as such he expresses desires which, although he could fulfil them, he chooses not to.

²⁰ See also Luke 24:47 and Acts 1:8. From Luke 24:47, John Bunyan showed how Christ would have his gospel preached first at Jerusalem, the very place where he was crucified, and have it preached to his crucifiers (Bunyan: *Jerusalem Sinner*). See chapter 10 for a further note. As an example of free-offer preaching, I cannot too highly recommend Bunyan's book.

²¹ As for reconciling Luke 23:34 and John 17:9, see my *Particular*. But to try to use John 17:9 (and 11:42) to evade Luke 23:34 is wrong. Luke 23:34 stands in Scripture and has to be reckoned with, not explained away.

You are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth... I counsel you to buy from me gold... Be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with me (Rev. 3:14-20)

Christ wanted changes in the church at Laodicea, and made large promises to encourage those changes. But the changes were not forthcoming. He wanted the church to be either cold or hot, but it was neither. He went so far as to picture himself as knocking outside a closed door, asking to come in. Did the church open to him? The evidence is against it. Christ was not impotent, of course; he was going to spew the church out of his mouth. But if he had decreed it, the church would have reformed itself and welcomed him. Consequently, he could not have decreed what he desired. This is the paradox in question.

Do you despise the riches of [God's] goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? (Rom. 2:4)

Paul asks this question of unbelievers – some of whom at least are reprobate (Rom. 2:5) – addressing them as ‘O man, whoever you are’ (Rom. 2:1,3). We know they are unbelievers, since they despise or underestimate God’s goodness, treating it with contempt. They deliberately and wilfully (2 Pet. 3:5) reject God’s goodness, God’s kindness to them. They do not understand – or want to understand – why he shows them such kindness. Now what is God’s goodness? What is his purpose in showing kindness to sinners? The answer is: God is good to sinners in that he does not merely point them to repentance; rather, he leads or conducts them to it (Rom. 2:4). Sadly, not all sinners do repent. The reprobate never do, but remain hardened in their unbelief, and perish. Indeed, things get worse for them in that they mock the tokens of God’s kindness, and despise his goodness, thus adding to their guilt and condemnation under his wrath (Rom. 2:5). This kindness, it goes without saying, does not speak of God’s inward, effectual, saving grace which is irresistible. Nevertheless, it is God’s goodness. And

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God shows this non-saving, resistible goodness to all men, including the reprobate: ‘The LORD is good to all, and his tender mercies are over all his works’ (Ps. 145:9). God ‘is longsuffering’, and this ‘longsuffering of our Lord is salvation’ (2 Pet. 3:9,15). God is sincere. He desires the repentance of all sinners – indeed, he commands them all to repent (Acts 17:30) – but he has not decreed it. This is the paradox in question.

God our Saviour, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:3-4)

The NASB is the same as the NKJV: ‘God... who *desires* all men to be saved’; the NIV is virtually the same: ‘God... who *wants* all men to be saved’; the AV: ‘God... who *will* have all men to be saved’. Should it be ‘will’ in the sense of ‘decree’ or ‘desire’? $\theta\epsilon\lambda\omega$ can mean either.²² And what about ‘all’? Did Paul mean ‘all sorts of men’? If so, Paul was saying either, ‘God decrees all sorts of men to be saved’,²³ which has no bearing on the issue – all sorts of men will be saved; or, ‘God desires all sorts of men to be saved’, which leaves the issue as it was – if all sorts of men are not in fact saved, then God desires something he has not decreed, and if all sorts of men *are* saved, then the ‘desire’ in effect amounts to ‘decree’. But if ‘all’ means either ‘all the elect’ or ‘all without exception’, Paul was saying:

‘God decrees to save all the elect’, which is a truism; or
‘God decrees to save all men without exception’, which is false; or
‘God desires to save all the elect’, which is a truism; or
‘God desires to save all men without exception’.

²² Please note, reader, three out of the four versions I quote opt for ‘desire’; the AV is neutral.

²³ As Gill: *Commentary* Vol.6 pp596-597. But what, precisely, is ‘all sorts of men’? Gill thought, ‘agreeably to the use of the phrase in verse 1, are here intended, kings and peasants, rich and poor, bond and free, male and female, young and old, greater and lesser sinners’. Now on verse 1, Gill included ‘all the inhabitants of the country and city in which men dwell’. Would those who agree with Gill include such in God’s decree to save? If the ‘all’ is in any way restricted, however, the verse, it seems to me, amounts to: ‘God does not will to save all men’. See chapter 10 for Spurgeon’s comments.

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Of these, the last is the only possibility: God desires to save all men, even though he has not decreed it.²⁴ This is the paradox in question.²⁵

The Lord is not slack concerning his promise... but is longsuffering toward us [or, you], not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9)

There are two points. *First*, βουλομαι means either ‘to will deliberately, to have a purpose, to be minded’, or ‘to desire, to will as an affection’. God is said to be ‘not willing that any should perish’; that is, either he does not *decree* any to perish, or he does not *desire* any to perish. Both, from a language point of view, are perfectly proper. Which is it? *Secondly*, there is the ‘any’ – which is often taken to mean ‘any of the elect’, but it could mean ‘any sinner’. Therefore Peter was saying:

‘God has not decreed that any of the elect should perish’, which is a truism; or

‘God has not decreed that any sinner should perish’, which is false; or

‘God does not desire any of the elect to perish’, which is a truism; or

‘God does not desire any sinner to perish’.

This last is the only possibility: God ‘is longsuffering’ (2 Pet. 3:9), rich in ‘goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering’ (Rom. 2:4), and this ‘longsuffering of our Lord is salvation’ (2 Pet. 3:15). So much so, as Peter explained, God does not desire any sinner to perish.

²⁴ While Calvin thought the passage ‘relates to classes of men, and not to individual persons’, he was very clear: ‘God has at heart the salvation of all’. And even if the passage does teach that ‘God wishes all men indiscriminately to be saved’ – which Calvin did think Scripture teaches elsewhere, though not here – it would not contradict predestination, he said. He argued this from the distinction between God’s decree and his revealed will (Calvin: *Commentaries* Vol.21 Part 3 pp54-55). See also *Calvin’s Calvinism* pp105-106,166-167,276-279, where Calvin claimed he had set out the ‘solution’ ‘in my writings in a hundred different places’.

²⁵ Of course, Paul might have been expressing a truism, but it seems most unlikely.

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Yet he has not decreed to save all of them. This is the paradox in question.²⁶

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Because of one of Ella's recurring criticisms, there is one particular point I wish to emphasise in all this: Whatever I have said about the paradox between God's decree and his desire, it applies equally to the Father and the Son. I have drawn your attention, reader, to passages which show both the Father and the Son expressing desires which are not fulfilled; *both* the Father and the Son, I say.

So I hope I have nailed once and for all Ella's attack upon me for positing a tension or quarrel in the Godhead over the matter.²⁷ I do no such thing. There is no tension within any person of the Godhead,²⁸ nor is there any quarrel between the members of the Godhead. None whatsoever. Let me repeat myself, and make it as clear as I can: Whatever I have said about the paradox between God's decree and his desire, it applies equally to the Father and the Son. There is no frustration or tension with the trinity – the very suggestion is blasphemous.

Even so, reader, I have put before you many passages of Scripture which, I submit, show that God is pleased to reveal himself as having desires which are not always satisfied. This is a paradox, of course – the very point I am trying to make.

* * *

Before I move on, let me illustrate how the principle I have set out has ramifications for all believers. 'Imitate me' (1 Cor. 4:16), said Paul, 'imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ' (1 Cor. 11:1), 'be imitators of God' (Eph. 5:1), 'join in following my example' (Phil. 3:17). That these commands are far wider than the principle I am dealing with, I admit at once, but they do include it, and as such

²⁶ As with Paul, Peter might have been expressing a truism, but in the context it seems most unlikely.

²⁷ See Ella: *The Free Offer* pp9,20. If there is any remaining doubt, see chapter 9.

²⁸ But see chapter 9 for Gill on Hos. 11:8.

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they sharpen the focus of Paul's reply to Agrippa's statement (or outburst): 'You almost persuade me to become a Christian' (Acts 26:28). This is what the apostle called out:

I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me today, might become both almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains (Acts 26:29)

Did Paul desire Agrippa's salvation? Did Paul desire the salvation of all his hearers? Of course he did. Was he sincere? Of course he was. His heart longed for it.²⁹ Gill:

This prayer of the apostle's shows his affection for the souls of men, and his great desire for their conversion... His wish was not that only Agrippa, but that all that were present, were... entirely, in the highest and fullest sense, Christians, as he was; that they knew as much of Christ, and had as much faith in him, and love to him, as he had, and were as ready to serve and obey him... He wished that they were... regenerated by the Spirit of God, new creatures in Christ, called by the grace of God with a holy calling, believers in Christ, lovers of him, pardoned by his blood, justified by his righteousness, sanctified by his grace, children of God, and heirs of eternal life: and all this he wishes for of God... And this wish is expressive of true grace, which desires the good of others... It is an evidence of grace, when the heart is drawn out in desires after the salvation of others... To be made a real Christian... this the apostle wished for, for Agrippa and all that heard him; as does every gospel minister for their [*sic*] hearers.³⁰

Were all Paul's hearers elect? Were they sensible sinners? Was Paul's desire satisfied? Almost certainly, not. Was this an isolated

²⁹ I am sure Paul would have added poignancy to his words by stretching out his arms as far and wide as he could, the chains hanging from his wrists. Reader, if you think this far-fetched, see Prov. 1:24; Isa. 65:2; Rom. 10:21. I am certain he did not utter his heartfelt cry with his hands stuffed in his pockets!

³⁰ Gill: *Commentary* Vol.5 pp999-1000. I heartily agree, of course, with Gill, when he spoke of Paul's 'sense of the power and grace of God, as necessary to it... knowing that the whole of this [which he desired] is not of men, but of God; all grace, and every blessing of it, which make or show a man to be a Christian indeed, are from him... To be made a real Christian is the work of God, and to be ascribed to him'. But this does nothing to detract from the point I am making. The very opposite!

case? It was not:

I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh... My heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved (Rom. 9:1-3; 10:1)

These are very solemn statements, not to say staggering. So much so, Paul stressed he was speaking as before Christ, and assured his readers he was telling the truth and not exaggerating. He also claimed to have the witness of the Spirit.

Paul was deeply grieved over the unbelief of the Jews, never free of the sadness, night or day. He was tormented by the thought of their unbelief and eternal doom. Even though Paul was hated by the Jews (Acts 9:23,29; 13:45,50; 14:5,19; 18:6,12; 2 Cor. 11:24,26), still he loved them, and was deeply anxious for their salvation. Gill: Paul desired 'that they might be spiritually converted, turned from their evil ways, and brought to believe in Christ... and so be saved in the Lord with an everlasting salvation: this he might desire not only from a natural affection for them, but as a minister of the gospel, who cannot but wish that all that hear him might be converted and saved'.³¹

Now where did Paul get such love? Surely from Christ! Where else? Paul told us so: 'The love of Christ compels us' (2 Cor. 5:14).³² As he said: 'We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore [you] on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God' (2 Cor. 5:20). Christ, as part of his law, told his disciples: 'Love your enemies... and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be the sons of your Father in heaven... You shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect' (Matt. 5:44-48). Believers, therefore, must imitate the apostle (as above, 1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Eph. 5:1; Phil. 3:17), and thus imitate their Saviour and his Father, and love all men, including their enemies, desiring their salvation.³³

³¹ Gill: *Commentary* Vol.6 p86.

³² Stephen demonstrated the same (Acts 7:60).

³³ See also Acts 26:15-23. I will return to this vital matter in chapter 9. It

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Paul was, of course, persuaded of the doctrine of election;³⁴ indeed, he more than any taught it! And never more plainly than in this section of Romans, chapters 9-11. Yet he opened the passage with this heartfelt desire for the salvation of all Jews, both the elect and reprobate. Paul – who wrote all three chapters! – was not hung up on trying to reconcile Romans 9:1-3; 10:1 with Romans 9:6-29; 11:1-10,25. Nor should we! If all we can see in this passage is the problem of reconciling – or explaining away – the desire for all sinners to be saved, with an unshakeable conviction of God’s electing decree, shame on us! What is more, if we do not openly preach both, shame on us!

Listen to Spurgeon addressing preachers on the issue:

I question whether we have preached the whole counsel of God, unless predestination with all its solemnity and sureness be continually declared – unless election be boldly and nakedly taught as being one of the truths revealed of God. It is the minister’s duty, beginning with this fountain head, to trace all the other streams... effectual calling... justification by faith... the certain perseverance of the believer, and delighting to proclaim that gracious covenant [or decreed agreement within the Godhead] in which all these things are contained, and which is sure to all the chosen, blood-bought seed... But beloved, a man might preach all these doctrines to the full, and yet not declare the whole counsel of God. For here comes the labour and the battle; here it is that he who is faithful in these modern days will have to bear the full brunt of war. It is not enough to preach doctrine; we must preach *duty*, we must faithfully and firmly insist upon practice. So long as you will preach nothing but bare doctrine, there is a certain class of men of perverted intellect who will admire you; but once begin to preach responsibility – say outright, once for all, that if the sinner perishes it is his own fault, that if any man sinks to hell, his damnation will lie at his own door – and at once there is a cry of ‘Inconsistency! How can these two things stand together?’ Even good Christian men are found who cannot endure the whole truth, and who will oppose the servant of the Lord who will not be content with a fragment, but will honestly present the whole gospel of Christ... I do not see that the whole counsel of God is declared, unless those

is, in fact, the climax of what I want to say.

³⁴ I agree with Gill – Paul prayed and expressed his desire for the Jews, ‘in submission to the will of God’ (Gill: *Commentary* Vol.6 p86). Even so, he had the desire, expressed it openly, and prayed for its fulfilment.

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two apparently contradictory points are brought out and plainly taught. To preach the whole counsel of God it is necessary to declare the promise in all its freeness, sureness and richness. When the promise makes the subject of the text the minister should never be afraid of it. If it is an unconditional promise, he should make its unconditionality one of the most prominent features of his discourse; he should go the whole way with whatever God has promised to his people. Should the command be the subject, the minister must not flinch; he must utter the precept as fully and confidently as he would the promise. He must exhort, rebuke, command with all long suffering. He must ever maintain the fact that the preceptive part of the gospel is as valuable – indeed, as invaluable – as the promissory part. He must stand to it... But let me imagine that I can improve the gospel, that I can make it consistent, that I can dress it up and make it look finer, I shall find that my Master is departed, and that Ichabod is written on the walls of the sanctuary.³⁵

* * *

Reader, I acknowledge I may have drawn the wrong inferences from these passages. As I explained, I have put forward only the briefest of summaries of my conclusions, regretting the lack of space to do more. I realise there are honest differences of opinion. I would like to hear them. Would Ella let us have his? Though he attacked my views on the two aspects of God's will, Ella made no attempt to demolish them scripturally in his book on the free offer. Will he do so now?

But, reader, I submit I have set before you plenty of evidence to show that God has expressed desires which he has not decreed to satisfy; in particular, some of the passages teach that God desires the salvation of sinners whom he has not decreed to save. I go further. God's desire to save sinners – whether elect or not – lies behind all his invitations, commands, declarations and calls to sinners to turn, repent, believe, to come to Christ for salvation. It must be so. God is sincere. If he commands sinners to repent, he must want them to do it. If he argues with them to show them the benefits of trusting Christ, he must want them to trust his Son. If he warns them against refusing his offer, he must want them to accept it. Surely it must be so. God's desire is a *real* desire; the 'seeming'

³⁵ Spurgeon: *New* Vol.6 pp26-29, emphasis his.

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applies only to the ‘seeming’ contradiction between his decree and his desire – and that, only as it ‘seems’ to us. Of course, God does not desire the salvation of sinners in any other way than by their faith and repentance; but desire it, he does. And this not only lies at the heart of the free offer, it is the crux of the debate in which I am engaged in writing this book.

Reader, ponder such scriptures as Psalm 2:10-12; Proverbs 1:20-33; 8:1-11; Isaiah 45:22; 55:1-3,6-9; 65:2; Ezekiel 33:11; Matthew 11:28-30; 22:1-10; 23:37; Luke 14:16-24; John 3:14-19; 6:29; Acts 17:30; Romans 2:4; 10:21; 2 Corinthians 5:18 – 6:2; 1 Timothy 2:3-4; and 2 Peter 3:9. Can you not feel God’s desire? If you are an unbeliever, as you read the verses tell yourself that God commands *you* to turn to his Son and be saved. What is more, he desires it! Think about that! Relish it! Let it melt your heart. Does *God want me to come*? He does! Oh! Come, reader, come. Come now. God wants you to yield to his entreaties. He desires it. Obey his command. Repent and come to Christ, now!

* * *

As I say, the seeming conflict between God’s determination to save only his elect, and his desire to save all, is but one paradox among many. As with all these paradoxes, the seeming contradiction between election and duty faith, between particular redemption and the universal offer, between God’s decree and his desire, is only apparent; both parts of the paradox are true at one and the same time. What is more, although we are not able to explain fully any biblical paradox, there are certain things we may rightly deduce from Scripture.

As Fuller said:

Admitting the divine authority of the Holy Scriptures, their harmony ought not to be called in question; yet it must be allowed by every considerate reader that there are *apparent* difficulties. Nor is it unlawful, but laudable, to wish to see those difficulties removed.³⁶

In this spirit, then, I will now go as far as the Bible warrants in trying to explore the paradox between God’s decree and his desire;

³⁶ Fuller: *Exposition in Works* p529, emphasis his.

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but no further! I certainly do not resort to the various (philosophical) arguments Ella rejected, and which took up a sizeable portion of his book.³⁷

³⁷ Ella: *The Free Offer* pp14-19,24,27,31-37,55-57,59.