

The Defeat of God's Perfect Will¹

by M. M. Campbell

Throughout history the insubordination of God's people has persistently thwarted His plans. Scripture shows His frequent gracious though reluctant surrender to their wresting of His purposes, and the church has then interpreted these adjustments to be His ideal will. Many examples of this appear in the word.

Perhaps most obvious is ancient Israel's decision to have a visible human king. In this instance Scripture leaves no doubt of God's disapproval of the action:

"But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, 'Give us a king to judge us.' So Samuel prayed to the Lord. And the Lord said to Samuel, 'Heed the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them.'"²

The Lord had, through His prophets, foretold that Israel would be governed by a king; but *it does not follow that this form of government was best for them, or according to His will. He permitted the people to follow their own choice, because they refused to be guided by His council. . . . When men choose to have their own way, without seeking counsel from God, or in opposition to His revealed will, He often grants their desires, in order that, through the bitter experience that follows, they may be led to realize their folly and to repent of their sin.*"³

God adjusted to the people's desire to have a king. Although He did not cast them off for this offense, it altered the future history of the nation and thus the world. What might that history have been, had they not, contrary to God's will, installed a human king? We have no doubt that the history of Israel's monarchy did not unfold from God's perfect will. The people lived to experience the suffering from which God tried to warn them⁴ and to repent of their disloyalty⁵, but He did not revoke their decision to have a king. Instead, He attempted to work with them within the circumstances they themselves had established.

While this example clearly shows God's adjusting to the people's voice, rather than rejecting them for rebellion, Scripture contains other examples where the people chose ways of which God did not approve, but no inspired record exists clearly expressing His disapproval, and He, again, did not reject them for it but attempted to lessen the harmful results of their choice. Two obvious examples of this are slavery and polygamy. We have no proof of God's voice directly condemning either practice in sacred writ. Instead, His counsels assure the humane treatment of the slave or multiple wife:

"And if a man sells his daughter to be a female slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. If she does not please her master, who has betrothed her to himself, then he shall let her be

redeemed. He shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people, since he has dealt deceitfully with her. And if he has betrothed her to his son, he shall deal with her according to the custom of daughters. *If he takes another wife*, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, and her marriage rights. And if he does not do these three for her, then she shall go out free, without paying money” (Ex 21:7-11).

It is virtually impossible to find within Christendom today anyone who believes that either slavery or polygamy were God’s will, even though Scripture lacks a blanket condemnation of either practice. What we do find in Scripture are *principles* that inform us that neither was ever His intent. The church eventually saw this truth and, through her influence, the world has come to see it too.

Polygamy, slavery, and Israel’s decision to have a king are obvious examples of human choice to which God yielded in order to try to save the people. God can do this, even though He is changeless in character. The rules of the great controversy allow Him to take us where He finds us and to bring us to where we ought to be. Unfortunately, ancient Israel failed to learn, to experience the character growth demanded of her, culminating in the rejection of Christ, and, again, the unbending rules of the great controversy required that eventually, because they would not grow, He had to let them go.

Scripture contains abundant evidence of God’s adjusting in other ways and in other areas we have not historically seen. We have accepted the surface history as “the way it was meant to be,” but a careful review of the inspired record suggests that, in a number of instances, this may not have been the case.

“If man had kept the law of God, as given to Adam after his fall, preserved by Noah, and observed by Abraham, there would have been no necessity for the ordinance of circumcision. And if the descendants of Abraham had kept the covenant, of which circumcision was a sign, they would never have been seduced into idolatry, nor would it have been necessary for them to suffer a life of bondage in Egypt; they would have kept God's law in mind, and there would have been no necessity for it to be proclaimed from Sinai or engraved upon the tables of stone. And had the people practiced the principles of the Ten Commandments, there would have been no need of the additional directions given to Moses.”⁶

Imagine a world that that knew nothing of ritual circumcision, nothing of Israel’s Egyptian bondage, no law proclaimed from Sinai, no tables of stone, no statutes and ordinances. Imagine a world where the people humbly obeyed God. What would have been the fate of such a nation? The inspired record tells us.

Ending the Reign of Sin

During the days of the Babylonian empire the prophet Daniel had dreams and visions, which detailed the history of earth down to second coming, spanning from Babylon and Medo-Persia to the 21st century. The prophecies seemed to decree Christ’s appearing in our own day—and it makes good sense. Six thousand years of sin, one thousand years of rest in heaven until executive judgment and the final end of sin and sinners. Under this plan, it would take seven thousand years, a perfect number, to defeat the reign of sin permanently and forever. Daniel’s prophecies describe, in great detail, earth’s history until Christ’s return. Judging from the language of those prophecies, we have no reason to think this was not God’s original intent. Did another plan ever exist?

The Exodus

As Christians we are familiar with Israel's nomadic history from Egypt to Canaan. In *The Everlasting Covenant*⁷ E. J. Waggoner draws evidence from Scripture that God intended to bring them, not merely to an earthly home, but into eternity.

“It was to this place, —to Mount Zion, the hill of God's holiness, and to the Sanctuary upon it, His dwelling-place, —that God was leading His people Israel when He delivered them from Egypt. . . .

“But they did not get there, because they did not ‘hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end.’ ‘So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.’”⁸

“There can therefore be no doubt but that God designed that the return of Israel from Egyptian bondage should be the time of the resurrection and restoration of all things.”⁹

Again, Scripture is the source of Waggoner's thesis that God intended eternal heaven as the destination of the freed Israelis—not continued lingering in the present world, which came about due to their unbelief—certainly not a stretch of another several thousand years. Importantly, Waggoner had to go beyond the surface statement of Scripture to find this original plan. But is not the model in the book of Daniel—a stretch of millennia—the *apparent* teaching of the word?

The Jewish Repatriation

Waggoner goes even further. He says in the same work that Israel's seventy-years' captivity in Babylon was to end in the eternal world:

“. . . if Israel had learned the lesson of trust in God and had not continued still in the bondage of pride and self-confidence, the seventy years would have brought them to a point where the long-deferred promise of an everlasting inheritance might speedily have been fulfilled.”¹⁰

You probably did not know this, even though Waggoner supports his position from Scripture. He mined deep in the word of God to make this discovery.

Waggoner describes Daniel's thinking, when he learned the seventy years would not end in eternity. The prophet fainted upon learning that eternity would occur far, far beyond the end of the seventy years.

Was Daniel's prophecy God's ideal will? Based on the language of Daniel, we have no reason to think it was not. But God's first purpose was clearly to bring them in to eternity thousands of years sooner.

The Testimony of Jesus' Life

After sin entered Eden, God could only save the seed of Adam by the death of His divine Son. There was no other way, even though it is certain God's first choice would be that sin had never arisen in the first place. Christ's death was needed, but not His death on the cross at the hands of an angry mob.

The difference between the people's expectations and Christ's intentions surfaced early in His ministry when He read from the Isaiah scroll.

“In the regular service for the day, the elder read from the prophets, and exhorted the people still to hope for the Coming One, who would bring in a glorious reign, and banish all oppression. He sought to encourage his hearers by rehearsing the evidence that the Messiah's coming was near. He described the glory of His advent, *keeping prominent the thought that He would appear at the head of armies to deliver Israel.*”¹¹

Influenced by Rabbinical teachings and focused on surface Scripture, they saw only those passages describing a military Messiah; *their eyes were blind to its descriptions of a suffering Servant.* The disciples James and John show evidence of the elders' influence as they, with the other disciples, accompany Jesus on His final walk to Jerusalem. He knew the journey would end at the cross, but they did not. For now they sought lodging in Samaria.

The Samaritans saw His going to Jerusalem as a slight against themselves, Judea's traditional rivals, and because they thought He favored Judea, they refused Him the customary hospitality.

How utterly both disciples and Samaritans misinterpreted the moment. Reality eluded them, steeped as they were in tradition, yet they thought they knew. Have we moved beyond the place where we could make a similar mistake?

“Coming to Christ, they [James and John] reported to Him the words of the [Samaritan] people, telling Him that they had even refused to give Him a night's lodging. They thought that a grievous wrong had been done Him, and *seeing Mount Carmel in the distance, where Elijah had slain the false prophets*, they said, ‘Wilt Thou that we command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them, even as Elias did?’” (DA.487)

They saw in the distance a reminder of Elijah's slaughter of the priests of Baal. Who's to say they wouldn't have suggested taking the Samaritans to the brook Kishon and dealing with them in a similar fashion, had they adequate manpower? They apparently saw *nothing* objectionable in that solution. But it would be far easier to command fire from heaven to consume the offenders—another of Elijah's apparent remedies. Scripture presents these destructive acts clearly, raising no doubts in the disciples' minds or in ours that they occurred exactly as God intended. Yet the disciples “were surprised to see that Jesus was pained by their words.”¹² Jesus clearly saw the matter in a different light.

The religious leaders of His day had inculcated into the minds of the people the idea that Messiah would appear at the head of armies.¹³ Yet “. . . the words of Jesus indicated that His work for them was to be altogether different from what they desired.”¹⁴ Abundant evidence could be offered that Jesus was the diametric opposite of what the people expected, yes, and demanded in a Messiah, leading to His rejection and crucifixion. Are we plowing the same ground today in our discussions of God's character? On which side would Jesus stand? Some are as baffled at the idea of a nondestructive God as the disciples were baffled at the pained look on Jesus' face. They could not make sense of it.

Daniel 8 places Christ's second coming and the end of sin's reign in our day. Was this God's ideal will? Some, reading this prophecy, might think it was; however, other inspired statements present a very different picture of God's will, had the nation accepted her Messiah:

If Jerusalem had known what it was her privilege to know, and had heeded the light which Heaven had sent her, she might have stood forth in the pride of prosperity, the queen of kingdoms, free in the strength of her God-given power. There would have been no armed soldiers standing at her gates, no Roman banners waving from her walls. The glorious destiny that might have blessed Jerusalem had she accepted her Redeemer rose before the Son of God. He saw that she might through Him have been healed of her grievous malady, liberated from bondage, and established as the mighty metropolis of the earth. From her walls the dove of peace would have gone forth to all nations. She would have been the world's diadem of glory.”¹⁵

E. J. Waggoner says God's intention at this point in history was to make the kingdom of Israel “the fifth and last universal kingdom.”¹⁶ agreeing with Spirit of Prophecy that, “The crown *removed from Israel* passed successively to the kingdoms of Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome” (RH 12/9/1905 (Week of Prayer Reading; see RH 11/23/1905). God never intended the supremacy of Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, or Rome, nor did He intend the reign of the divided kingdoms. He intended the supremacy of *His own* kingdom, but where were His servants, who understood and lived by faith, who should populate that kingdom?

It appears that the same opportunity afforded Israel at the exodus and at their repatriation from Persia to Jerusalem also existed at the time of Christ. Even though prophecies predicted His crucifixion and the long period until second coming (Daniel 8), such predictions came from God's foreknowledge, not from His wish list. He is omnipotent, yes, but His omnipotence can only be exercised on behalf of His servants when they make a full, free will surrender and *allow Him* to exercise that power in their lives. This is the part that His servants of old missed.

Had the people humbly obeyed God, He would have magnified them before the nations without their need to take the sword in military conquest. We shall see that this was His original plan.

What God Wanted vs. What He Got

Scripture is full of other examples that contrast God's ideal will with the way things were. Here are just a few:

- *Reconnoitering Canaan*—Scripture says God asked men to explore the land.¹⁷ Did God need humans to tell Him what was there? Not likely. If we did not have Deuteronomy 1:22 we would still not know that the people themselves asked that the land be explored and God merely acquiesced. He wanted them to go into Canaan, not to delay seeking unneeded information. That little hike cost the people everything. Of those over twenty years old in that great multitude only Caleb and Joshua lived to enter the Promised Land.
- *Circumcision*—Adam, Seth, Enoch, Noah walked with God without the necessity of circumcision. “If man had kept the law of God, as given to Adam after his fall . . . there would have been no necessity for . . . circumcision.” But the rite was of God's appointment. Scripture suggests it was extremely important that Israel observe circumcision in Old Covenant days. However, a deeper look into the inspired word shows God's preference for a surrendered heart and a daily walk with Him than for circumcision. A converted nation would negate the need for this ritual.
- *Ten Commandments on Stone Tablets*—“. . . if the descendants of Abraham had kept the covenant . . . they would never have been seduced into idolatry . . . there would have been no necessity for it [the Ten Commandments] to have been proclaimed from Sinai, or

engraved on tables of stone . . . there would have been no need of the additional directions given to Moses.” We cannot imagine Old Testament history without these fixtures, but they were never God’s ideal will. He wanted from Israel the kind of connection He had with Adam, Seth, Enoch, Noah and the great patriarchs of old. Had this been forthcoming, it is likely He would have phased out the ritual. The one probable exception is the slaying of a lamb to foreshadow the death of Christ; however, even this He intended to end, as Israel learned to live above sin and thus negate the necessity for a sin offering.

- *The Quail Incident*—Regarding this matter, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 382, says “God gave the people that which was not for their highest good, because they persisted in desiring it.” This again shows that everything we read in Scripture is not necessarily God’s ideal will, even though it is often written as though it were. In the case of the quail, Scripture states, “Now the Lord will give you meat, and you will eat it” for thirty days. But with the quail still in their teeth, “the wrath of the Lord was aroused against the people, and the Lord struck the people with a very great plague.”¹⁸ What kind of parent would treat his or her child as a surface reading of Scripture suggests God treated Israel here? let them have their way then punish them for it. But SOP clearly states it was not what God ideally wanted for the people. Great controversy rules apparently decreed that He remove His protection from them to a certain degree, and punishment followed.

Israel’s Wars

Surface evidence exists of God’s commanding Israel to go to war against her enemies:

“Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass.”¹⁹

These and other statements convey what appears to be God’s clear will that Israel execute her enemies with the sword. This picture of God has influenced history, in that nations claiming to be Christian have felt at liberty to take up weaponry against those they identify as God’s enemies. However, this picture of a military God flies in the face of other portions of the Old Testament, for example:

“And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed, The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin” (Ex 34:6-7).²⁰

Some profess to see no conflict between these two descriptions of God. Like the eight-hundred pound gorilla, God can do whatever He wants, as long as I get to heaven. However, a great number of individuals both in and out of the church cannot reconcile these two pictures. Philosophically, they do not mesh. Is it possible we are looking at another adjustment of God’s perfect will in order to meet the people where they were? Like those of Christ’s day, have we excluded a vital set of data from our vision?

Here is just a sample of the innumerable statements that raise questions regarding God’s role in the military conquest of the Promised Land:

- His eternal law states, “You shall not kill” or “murder,” as some newer translations phrase it. Whether one “kills” or “murders,” there lies a deceased person when the matter is through.²¹ The law transcribes or describes God’s character, but the sixth commandment

- says He doesn't kill or murder. How do we reconcile this with all the killing done by Him and in His name in Scripture. Was all this killing His true nature, His perfect will?
- God gave them flawed instructions due to their hardness of heart. "Therefore I also gave them up to statutes that were not good, and judgments by which they could not live."²² Have we now interpreted these flawed instructions as God's perfect will? As the way He planned and intended matters to be?
 - Israel left Egypt unarmed.²³ Where they acquired weapons is still a mystery. At Moses' direction they asked gifts of precious metals from the Egyptians before leaving Egypt.²⁴ We have no record that they asked for weapons.
 - God did not intend Israel to engage in war on her journey to the Promised Land. "Then it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, 'Lest perhaps the people change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt.' So God led the people around by way of the wilderness of the Red Sea."²⁵
 - Much evidence exists that God did not rely upon Israel's swords in the conquest of Canaan: "For they did not gain possession of the land by their own sword, nor did their own arm save them; but it was Your right hand, Your arm, and the light of Your countenance, because You favored them."²⁶ This statement and common logic say that God had no need of Israel's swords in order to bring them into their new home and to keep them there.
 - God never told them to fight their way into Canaan. "The Lord had never commanded them to 'go up and fight.' *It was not his purpose that they should gain the land by warfare*, but by strict obedience to his commands."²⁷ Some want to confine this statement to the conquest of Ai, but the context shows that it describes His ideal will for the conquest of "the land" or Canaan. This example illustrates how subtle our preconceived ideas can be, as the statement clearly refers to "the land," not just to Ai.
 - Scripture says God intended to bring Israel into Canaan in the same manner as He brought them out of Egypt, by use of natural phenomena.²⁸
 - King David could not build the temple, because he was a man of war and had shed blood.²⁹

As ancient Israel before us, we have focused our vision on their military exploits and ignored a set of data showing an entirely different picture.

The Heaviest Weighted Evidence of All

The first and best method of discovering God's character is to measure it by *Christ's* character. Truth always begins and ends with Jesus, who came to demonstrate the Father's character, because humanity did not understand it. Jesus speaks for Himself in these words:

- "I and My Father are one."³⁰
- "He who has seen Me has seen the Father."³¹
- "... I do nothing of Myself; but as My Father taught Me, I speak these things. And He who sent Me is with Me. The Father has not left Me alone, for I always do those things that please Him."³²

- ““You know neither Me nor My Father. If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also.”³³
- “Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me.”³⁴
- The thief does not come except to steal, and *to kill, and to destroy*. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.”³⁵ Does this say that thieves do not give abundant life and that Jesus does not steal, kill, or destroy?

The obvious conclusion from these inspired statements is that if Jesus wouldn't do it, the Father wouldn't do it, no matter how clear and self-evident the opposite appears elsewhere in the record. We must find the manner in which Jesus looked upon warfare in order to see the perfect will of the Father toward it.

- Already mentioned is Jesus response to the suggestion He call down fire onto the heads of the Samaritans. In view of His response, may we conclude that anytime fire comes down from the sky *and burns humans* the event is not of God?
- Jesus told Peter to put up His sword, that those who take the sword will perish with the sword.³⁶
- As the True Witness, Jesus repeats this admonition in Revelation 13:10.
- Jesus said, “. . . the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service. And these things they will do to you *because they have not known the Father nor Me.*”³⁷
- He said, “. . . love [*agapao*] your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, *that you may be sons of your Father in heaven*; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”³⁸

Jesus revealed His attitude toward exacting vengeance upon one's enemies as much by what He did *not* do as by what He said. He did not exact vengeance against the religious leaders who eventually took His life; He did not expose either Simon of Bethany or Judas. Such things as vengeance were beneath Him. We would not recognize Him with a sword in His hand. Neither will our own characters exhibit the final polish until we put away “the sword” in all its dimensions from our own social interactions.

Conclusion

Throughout history God has rarely achieved His perfect will in the plan of redemption. Ideally, He would have brought earth's sin history to a swift conclusion probably within a short time of the fall in Eden. Why, then, has it continued to this day? Clearly the fault lies with us, His people. We have been surface readers of the word. We have never understood, never learned the lessons of humility and faith, never learned to walk with Him in full surrender. Today He calls upon us to focus upon the lessons in the life of Jesus, who was the absolute picture of the Father's character. He is the absolute picture of what we must be in character in order to bring earth's sin history to a close. As long as we think God sometimes personally strikes His enemies, we will make allowances for that same behavior, in all its facets, in ourselves.

Footnotes

¹ Scripture references are to the New King James Version of Scripture, unless otherwise stated. Emphasis supplied throughout, unless otherwise stated.

² 1 Samuel 8:6, 7.

³ *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 605.

⁴ See 1 Samuel 8.

⁵ 1 Samuel 12:19.

⁶ *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 364.

⁷ Waggoner, *The Everlasting Covenant*. (Berrien Springs, MI: Glad Tidings Publishers, 2002).

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 221-2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, (pp. 128-9).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 342.

¹¹ *Desire of Ages*, p. .236.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 487.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 242-3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 576.

¹⁶ Waggoner, p 346.

¹⁷ Numbers 13:2

¹⁸ Numbers 11:33.

¹⁹ 1 Samuel 15:3.

²⁰ “The Deity proclaimed himself, ‘The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, of those that love him and keep his commandments, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation.’

“God did not mean in his threatenings that children would be compelled to suffer for their parents' sins, but that the example of the parents would be imitated by their children. If the children of wicked parents should serve God and do righteousness, he would reward their right doing. But the effects of a sinful life by the parents are often inherited by the children. They follow in the footsteps of their parents. Sinful example has its influence from father to son, to the third and fourth generations” (ST 6/3/1880).

²¹ See *Light On the Dark Side of God* and its Supplement for a thorough treatment of this point.

(www.BeholdYourGod.info/sda.php)

²² Ezekiel 20:25-26; also Matthew 5:21-48; 19:8.

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Patriarchs and Prophets 282. Some believe Exodus 13:18 teaches the Israelites went up from Egypt “equipped for battle” or “fully armed.” However, please consult a good concordance regarding this text. Here is how some versions translate it:

New King James: “And the children of Israel went up in orderly ranks out of the land of Egypt.”

New American Standard: “The sons of Israel went up in martial array from the land of Egypt.”

King James Version: “The children of Israel went up harnessed [“by five in a rank,” margin] out of the land of Egypt.”

The original language conveys the idea that they left Egypt organized, as a marching army is organized. This agrees with information from Spirit of Prophecy. The original says nothing about their having weapons.

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Exodus 11:2.

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Exodus 13:17-18.

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(Psalm 44:3; also Ezekiel 33:26 and Deuteronomy 3:22).

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Review and Herald, 11/5/1903.

28

Deuteronomy 7:17-20.

29

1 Chronicles 28:3.

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John 10:30.

31

John 14:9.

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John 8:28-29.

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John 8:19.

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John 14:11.

35

John 10:10.

36

Matthew 26:52.

37

John 16:2-3.

38

Matthew 5:44-46.