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CHRIST WOULD, BUT
THEY WOULD NOT

Luke 13:31-35

By

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Luke Lesson 67

Christ Would, But They Would Not Luke 13:31-35

If God is sovereign and desires that all people be saved, then why are all people not saved? I hope that you have your thinking caps in place, because our text plunges us into one of the most difficult subjects in God's Word: the relationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility. In approaching a difficult subject like this, we must avoid the tendency to keep it on an intellectual level. If you go away and think, "That was an interesting message," you have missed what I am attempting to accomplish.

My aim is twofold: First, that you would go away glorifying and praising God for the depth of the riches of His wisdom and knowledge (Rom. 11:33). Second, my aim is that if you do not know Jesus Christ personally as Lord and Savior, you would go away knowing that He is your Savior and that He has forgiven your sins. But to deal adequately with our text, I must take you through some deep issues that run through these verses. This will require your mental effort.

Luke 13:31-33 reports the visit of some Pharisees who warned Jesus of Herod's death threat against Him; and, we have our Lord's response, which shows His fearless commitment to the will of God. We don't know the Pharisees' motives for warning Jesus, but given their hostility toward Him, perhaps they wanted to use Herod's threat to scare Jesus out of Galilee (Herod's jurisdiction) and toward Jerusalem, where they could deal with Him.

But whatever their motives, Jesus' reply shows that He knew where He was going and what He had to accomplish in the sovereign will of God. He was moving steadily toward the cross and He would not be deterred by the threats of Herod or the Pharisees. The words, "reach My goal," "must," and "it cannot be" show the divine necessity that propelled Jesus. These verses show us what other Scriptures plainly declare, that the death of Christ was determined by God's sovereign will, not by man's evil designs.

Then, in 13:34-35, we have Jesus' lament over Jerusalem and His prophecy of her future. These verses show us God's great compassion toward sinners and the responsibility of sinners for their own judgment. We also see that sinners who reject the Lord do not in any way thwart His sovereign purpose. Someday there will be a multitude in Israel who will say in response to Jesus, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord."

In dealing with these admittedly difficult themes, of how God's sovereignty relates to human responsibility, some have floundered on the rocks of what has been called hyper-Calvinism. They emphasize the sovereignty of God to the extent that they practically deny human responsibility and they deny God's love for sinners. Others have hit the rocks on the other side by holding to Arminianism. They exalt human responsibility (so-called "free will") to such an extent that they make God's sovereign will depend on man's choices. I want to chart our way through these waters by developing four statements which, I believe, avoid both extremes and are consistent with all of God's Word.

1. God is sovereign over all things, even over evil.

Scripture clearly states that God has predestined us "according to His purpose, who works all things after the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11). This means that nothing happens by chance or apart from God's will; rather, God ordains everything that happens. As David proclaims, "The Lord has established His throne in the heavens; and His sovereignty rules over all" (Ps. 103:19). "Our God is in the heavens; He does whatever He pleases" (Ps. 115:3). Augustine put it, "The will of God is the necessity of all things" (cited by John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* [Westminster], 3:23:8).

Some will say that God has ordained everything *good*, but that He did not ordain evil. But this is contrary both to reason and to Scripture. As Jonathan Edwards reasons, "For all must own, that God sometimes wills not to hinder the breach of his own commands, because he does not in fact hinder it. He wills to permit sin, it is evident, because he *does* permit it. None will say that God himself does what he does not *will* to do" (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [Banner of Truth], 2:528). If you argue that God only *permits* sin, but that He does not decree it, Edwards answers that if

God permits it, it cannot be contrary to His will. "For if it were contrary to his will as he permits it, then it would be contrary to his will to permit it; for that is the same thing. But nobody will say that God permits sin, when it is against his will to permit it; for this would be to make him act involuntarily, or against his will (p. 529).

Edwards also argues that the crucifixion of Christ was the greatest of all decreed events, being the main thing in God's work, namely, the work of redemption. But, as Acts 2:23 declares, Jesus was "delivered up [to be crucified] by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God." As Acts 4:27-28 states, all of the evil people who killed Jesus were simply doing whatever God's hand and purpose predestined to occur. Thus although the crucifixion was an evil deed carried out by evil men, God decreed it.

There are many other Scriptures that show that God is sovereign over everything, even over the evil deeds of Satan and of men, and yet God remains pure and untainted by all evil. Satan had to get God's permission to afflict Job, so that all the evil that he did was under God's sovereignty. On another occasion, God wills to kill the wicked King Ahab. A demon offers his services to go and be a lying spirit among Ahab's prophets, so that the king will be lured into a battle where he will be killed. God sends the demon with the command to go and be that lying spirit (1 Kings 22:20-22).

Another time, God states that He will bring calamity on Judah and Jerusalem, to the extent that men will eat the flesh of their sons and daughters (Jer. 19:3, 9). He declares that Absalom's adultery with his father's wives in the sight of all Israel will be God's work (2 Sam. 12:11-12). God states through Isaiah (45:6b-7), "I am the Lord, and there is no other, the One forming light and creating darkness, causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the Lord who does all these." There are many more such examples in the Bible (see Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:18).

The point is, neither the evil of Satan nor the rebellion of sinners in any way threatens or thwarts the sovereign plan of God. Herod's threat to kill Jesus did not deter Jesus for one minute from doing what God had called Him to do. In calling Herod a fox, Jesus meant that he was both a deceiver and that he was insignificant. Herod is the only man whom Jesus treated with contempt. When Jesus says that He casts out demons and performs cures today and

tomorrow, and the third day He reaches His goal, He is saying figuratively, "I am methodically going about doing what God has given me to do, right on schedule. In a short time I will complete that work." Luke may also intend that his readers see the mention of the third day as a hidden reference to the resurrection. But the point is, the evil Herod was not in any way a threat to God's sovereign purpose through Jesus. As Leon Morris states (*Luke* [IVP/Eerdmans], p. 228), "God, not Herod, will determine when He is to die."

Thus, the first truth that we must affirm is that God is sovereign, even over evil, and yet He is not responsible for evil. The death of Christ did not thwart God's plan; it fulfilled it.

2. God's sovereignty does not negate His great mercy and compassion for sinners.

Sometimes, in affirming God's sovereignty and His election of some unto salvation, people go off the deep end by denying His compassion and love for all sinners. They say that God loves the elect, but that He does not love those whom He did not choose for salvation.

Scripture teaches that God has a special love for His own people: "Having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end" (or, "to the uttermost," John 13:1). "Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her" (Eph. 5:25). Just as I have a special love for my own children that I do not have for all children, so God has a special love for those who are His children through faith in Christ.

But, Scripture also teaches that God loves and shows compassion toward all people, even for those who ultimately reject His offer of mercy. "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son" (John 3:16). "'As I live!' declares the Lord God, 'I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live'" (Ezek. 33:11). God "Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men" (Luke 6:35b). In our text, we see Jesus' heart of compassion for the disobedient nation of Israel, which had repeatedly killed the prophets and stoned those whom God had sent to her. Even after Jerusalem's horrible history of returning evil in response to God's grace, here again Jesus calls out

to her, telling her how much He wanted to gather her children together, just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.

Scripture is very clear that God did not choose all people for salvation. If you ask me how God could *not* choose some to salvation and yet love them, I can only say that Scripture declares both to be true. Again, if you ask how God could desire the salvation of all men and yet not choose all for salvation, I cannot answer; except to say that Scripture affirms both to be true. Martin Luther referred to this as God's inscrutable or secret will and he distinguished it from God's preached or published will. Concerning God's secret will, Luther states, "This will is not to be inquired into, but to be reverently adored, as by far the most awesome secret of the Divine Majesty" (*The Bondage of the Will*, translated by J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston [Revell], p. 169). In response to Jesus' lament about gathering Jerusalem's children together, Luther writes (p. 171),

By why the Majesty does not remove or change this fault of will in every man (for it is not in the power of man to do it), or why He lays this fault to the charge of the will, when man cannot avoid it, it is not lawful to ask; and though you should ask much, you would never find out; as Paul says in Rom. 11 [sic]: "Who art thou that repliest against God?" (Rom. 9:20).

John Calvin also refers to the secret or hidden will of God, into which we are not permitted to probe. He argues that God's "will is one and simple in him, [but] it appears manifold to us because, on account of our mental incapacity, we do not grasp how in divers [different] ways it will and does not will something to take place" (*Institutes*, 1:18:3).

The Arminian answer to the problem of how God can love all people and desire their salvation, and yet they are not saved, is to say that God has given free will to every person and that salvation depends on the sinner exercising his will to choose Christ. Thus they make salvation depend on the will of man. Luther spends a whole book, *The Bondage of the Will*, refuting this error, and I only have time here for a sentence or two! I can do it in two words: Romans 9. There Paul clearly and forcefully slams the door on the view that salvation depends on mans' so-called "free will."

After stating that God chose Jacob and rejected Esau before they were born, so that His purpose according to election might stand, he states, "So then it [salvation] does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy" (Rom. 9:16). If you say, "God has mercy on those whom He foreknew would choose Him," Paul answers, no, "He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires" (9:18). And then if you object, "If it all depends on God and not at all on man, then how can God hold us accountable?" Paul answers, "Who are you, O man, who answers back to God?" (9:20). In other words, you are arrogant to ask the question, so shut up and bow before God's awesome majesty! As Calvin rightly argues throughout his discussion of this subject, if you do not understand and submit to the scriptural teaching on God's sovereign election, you detract from His glory and you "tear humility up by the very roots" (*Institutes*, 3:21:1).

Thus all of Scripture and our text in particular teach that God is sovereign over everything, even over evil, including the evil of killing Jesus. It also affirms that God's sovereignty does not negate His great mercy toward sinners.

3. God's sovereignty does not negate the responsibility of sinners for their rebellion.

Spurgeon has a sermon on these verses titled, "Jerusalem the Guilty." Although God sovereignly ordained the cross, those who killed Jesus were guilty of the worst of crimes. Although Judas was the son of perdition, and the Son of Man would go "as it has been determined, woe to that man by whom He is betrayed" (Luke 22:22). Jesus' lament over Jerusalem is both an appeal and an indictment. He is appealing to them to repent of their history of rejecting God's messengers, and yet He is indicting them for what they have done and are about to do. "I wanted to gather your children, ... and you would not have it!" Although it was sovereignly ordained, they were responsible for their wicked rebellion.

This means that no sinner can blame God when he comes under God's judgment. No one can shake his fist at God and say, "I didn't repent because You didn't elect me to salvation!" He can only say, "I didn't repent because of the hardness of my sinful heart and because I rejected your many merciful warnings."

The clear truth of Scripture is that if you are saved, it is not because of anything you did or ever could do. You were dead in your sins, blinded in your understanding, excluded from the life of God because of your ignorance and hardness of heart (Eph. 2:1; 4:18). "But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)" (Eph. 2:4-5). Salvation is totally from God and not at all from you. But if you are lost, it is completely because you deserve to be lost because of your rebellion and persistence in your sins. It is not due to any fault of God that anyone is lost.

"Wait a minute," you say. "This is a win-win deal for God, but a lose-lose deal for man. God has it both ways: He gets all the credit for saving us, but He doesn't take any of the blame if we aren't saved." Precisely! That is the point. Salvation by God's unconditional election through His sovereign grace brings all glory to Him while it humbles all of our pride. Damnation by God's righteous justice because of our stubborn sinfulness brings glory to Him and just condemnation to us. God is glorified for His sovereign mercy in saving His elect. He is glorified for His righteous judgment in condemning unrepentant sinners.

If the Spirit of God opens your eyes to understand this doctrine and humbles your heart to submit to it, you will have the same worshipful experience that the apostle Paul had at the climax of his discussion of these matters (Rom. 11:33-36):

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

I pray that all of us would enter into that same spirit of worshipful submission to our sovereign God! There is one final point:

4. Sinners will suffer the consequences of their rebellion by being abandoned by God, but those who submit to Him will rejoice in the coming and reign of Jesus Christ.

Jesus declares, "Behold, your house is left to you desolate." These solemn words were literally fulfilled in A.D. 70, when the Roman general Titus destroyed the city and slaughtered thousands of Jews. The nation was dispersed until 1948. When God's judgment falls, it is an awful thing! When God abandons a nation or an individual, that nation or person is truly left desolate! To be without God is truly to be without hope in this world.

Jesus not only issues a warning, but also a promise, that the nation would see Him again and this next time they will say, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord" (a quote from the messianic Psalm 118:26). As Paul argues in Romans 11:11-32, although God has set Israel aside in judgment during the present time of the Gentiles, when this period is fulfilled, Israel will experience a great turning back to God just before the second coming of Jesus the Messiah. At that time the prophecy of Zechariah 12:10 will be fulfilled, "And I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him, like the bitter weeping over a first-born."

The warning and the promise of Luke 13:35 are not only for the nation Israel. They also apply to every individual. If you continue in rebellion against God and reject the Savior whom He sent, God will leave you desolate, not only in this world, but for all eternity. But if you will repent of your sins and trust in the Savior who willingly went to the cross in obedience to the Father to save His people from their sins, then you will know the joy of saying, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" You will be reconciled to God for time and eternity. You will reign with Jesus when He comes in His glory with His holy angels.

Conclusion

A pastor once sat in the vestry of his church to meet anyone who might have spiritual difficulties. One man came and the pastor asked, "What is your difficulty?" The man answered, "My difficulty is in Romans 9, where it says, 'Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated.'" "Yes," said the minister, "there is great difficulty in that verse. But which part of the verse is difficult for you?"

"The latter part, of course," said the man. "I cannot understand why God should hate Esau." The minister replied, "The verse is difficult, but my difficulty has always been with the first part of the verse. I never could understand how God could love that wily, deceitful, supplanting scoundrel, Jacob."

If you understand the sinfulness of your own heart, you will side with that pastor. How could God love a scoundrel like me? Jesus gives us a graphic picture of God's love: it is like a mother hen, gathering her chicks under her wings. Farmers have told of finding a mother hen after a severe hailstorm, beaten to death by the hail. But after the storm, the chicks crawled out from under their mother, unharmed. She gave her life to protect them from the fury of the storm.

The Lord Jesus Christ gave Himself on the cross to save you from the awful storm of God's judgment that is going to fall on every sinner. He pleads with you to take refuge under His wings. If you will run to Christ, you will find shelter and mercy because of His great love.

Discussion Questions

1. A critic says, "To say that God is sovereign over evil makes Him the author of evil." Your response?
2. Is it inconsistent to say that God desires the salvation of everyone and yet that He did not choose everyone for salvation? Why/why not?
3. Why is it unbiblical to say that God elected those whom He foreknew would trust in Christ? What sorts of further errors does this lead to?
4. How can we know if we are out of balance on the side of divine sovereignty or human responsibility? Are these issues merely intellectual or do they affect how we live as Christians?
5. What does the Bible teach about "free will"?

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