

If The Lord Wills

When I receive book orders by email, I often respond stating, "I will put your books in the mail tomorrow, IF THE LORD WILLS." You remember that James teaches us to include such a conditional statement in our plans (James 4:13-17; see Acts 18:21; 21:14; 1 Cor. 4:14; 16:7; Heb. 6:3). This is not used as a ritualistic formula but in recognition that God works in our lives. A few days ago, as I was following James' instruction, it struck me that he did not teach us to say, "IF THE LORD HAS WILLED IT."

"If the Lord has willed it" would indicate that sometime in the past, God had already determined whether or not I would put those books in the mail the next day. But "*if the Lord wills*" indicates God's present working in our lives. He continues to make decisions relating to us.

If all is pre-determined or foreknown by God, then that rules out prayer. If prayer cannot prevail to cause God to change his will, then it is a futile, ineffective exercise. But James also assures us that "*The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects*" (5:16).

"*And this is the confidence which we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us*" (1 John 5:14). What does it mean to ask according to his will? Does that mean that, if God has pre-determined that it will happen, that we may pray for it to transpire? That makes no sense. If the outcome was determined "before the worlds began," then why pray for it? Unless prayer is effective in changing the present will of God, then it becomes a simplistic, misguided ritual.

Even prayers of erring disciples for forgiveness of sins become an exercise in ignorance if, as we hear commonly, "God has already forgiven your sins. He did it on the cross." If that is true, then all are saved already and no current dealing with sin is in order! While it is true that the atonement continues to be effective, it is applied only to those penitent persons who establish and live in a covenant relationship with God in Christ and continue to confess the sins they commit (1 John 1:5-10).

All of the complicated theological argumentation about predestination, foreknowledge, and foreordination must bow to the simple truths expressed above.

The theory of predestination is based upon the philosophy of determinism. Determinism is defined as "a doctrine that the acts of the will, occurrences in nature, or social or psychological phenomena are determined by antecedent causes." Thus, the chain of "cause-and-effect" predestines our course eliminating the free will of man. What we call choice would be only a response to previous stimulus.

This can be argued from the materialistic viewpoint or involving belief in a sovereign God who predestined all things to respond only to antecedent causes. Either of these

routes would take man “off the hook” of accountability for his actions because he would be unable to alter God’s programmed cause-and-effect. By this theory, sociologists exonerate criminal action holding no person truly accountable. By this theory, religionists relieve persons of actual responsibility for their actions, whether good or bad, because they are thought to be the results of cause and effect set in order by sovereign divinity. How then could one be called into judgment for his actions? Contrary to that, James would hold us accountable for our choices, for he concludes with, “*Whoever knows what is right to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin* (4:17). Predestination would force compliance to God’s will; freedom of will allows us to choose.

Continuing in this line of reasoning, since God knew from the beginning the chain of cause-and-effect, he has known every outcome from the beginning before it happened. That is supposed to be the foreknowledge of God. If God set in order the chain of cause-and-effect which led man to do evil, then God is responsible for the evil.

Either route rules out coincidence, chance, or deviation other than through God breaking his chain of cause-and-effect by introducing a new cause. We might then wonder what new cause affected God to make the change. Would God foreknow his own change due to a different stimulus?

Who can understand all these things? No one! We can marvel with Paul, “*O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen*” (Rom. 11:33-36).

This will be sent to you as FR 154 next week, IF THE LORD WILLS!

(Cecil Hook; January 2003) []