

# Man's will and God's Grace.

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My dear Brother. — I have often thought of our last conversation, as we walked on the sands at S-, and as often felt the regret which I then expressed to you, that the subject of the eternal security of God's children should be so generally approached through the medium of texts and considerations which are supposed to be attended with difficulty as to it, instead of the substantive testimony to it with which the Word of God abounds, being fairly considered, and difficulties and objections viewed in the light which is thus afforded us. But in turning to the subject, with the thought of fulfilling your request, that I would present you, in a condensed form, with what I regard as the positive testimony of Holy Writ respecting it, I have been divided in my mind between these two modes of presenting it, namely, that of taking the passages in the order in which one comes at them in reading the New Testament, or that of classifying the passages, arranging them under several heads. I had pretty nearly determined to confine myself to neither; but, commencing in the former mode, to take any opportunity which might arise of acting on the latter also; an enquiry into one passage often naturally suggesting a reference to others of like import, even though they should not follow in exact order of occurrence; when it seemed to me, that, ere commencing either, it was almost indispensable to devote a little attention to the previous inquiry, of how a man becomes a child of God. If it be, as so many suppose, by an act of our own will, choosing to turn to God and believe in Christ, that we become Christians, then it is a doctrine feasible enough, that by another act, or by other acts, of our own will, we should finally cease to be such. But if the sentiment placed at the head of this paper be the truth of God, and can be proved to be such, then it will be manifest, that in order to the utter and final defection of a Christian, it requires not only a change in his will (which is indeed fickle and unsteady as the wind), but a change in the grace of Him by whose will and power it is that he has become a Christian — a child of God. The Lord grant us true simplicity and subjection to His word in looking into these matters.

Two passages would of themselves be sufficient to settle our souls as to the subject before us, if we really read them with unquestioning simplicity of faith — "Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1: 13); and "Of His own will begat He us with the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures" (James 1: 18). In the former of these, the new birth is expressly declared to be, "not of blood," or natural descent; "not of the will of the flesh," or the natural will or choice of the person who is born again; "nor of the will of man," any agency which other men may choose, or will, or pretend to exercise upon him. In both passages, it is expressly declared to be "of the will of God." Here I might leave this subject; but, knowing how the thought haunts the minds of those who have had the kind of training both you and I had — "Well, but are not life and death set before us in Scripture? And are we not called on to choose life that we may live?" — I would not thus summarily dismiss the inquiry. There are passages such as these in the Old Testament; and there are some of a somewhat similar character in the New; and every word of God is sacred, and true acquaintance with its meaning important. But it does now appear to me, that they who use

such passages as those just referred to, to show that the new birth is dependent upon an act of the human will, in the reception of Christ, or of the gospel that sets Him forth, have entirely mistaken the scope and meaning of those passages, and betray their ignorance of the scope and design of a great part of the Word of God.

To you I need hardly say, that all doubtless who have been saved in all ages have been saved by grace through faith; but there is a wide difference between the testimony and dealings of God before the crucifixion of Christ, and since that event. Until that event took place God's dealings with mankind were one continued trial, so to speak, of whether there be in man anything whereby he can, under any circumstances, retrieve himself. Not that such trial was needed for God. He knew from the beginning, yea, from before the foundation of the world, what man's course would be, and how he would demonstrate the utter hopelessness of his condition, if left to his own will, with every possible inducement to act aright. But this was to be demonstrated to man himself, and hence the trial. I would not at present dwell upon man's trial in Eden. He was then tried as to whether he could maintain his innocence, by withstanding temptation from without. There was then no tendency to evil within. But when man had fallen — when the great deceiver had succeeded in poisoning all the springs of moral action in man's nature — God neither summarily cut off the offender, nor at once sent the Saviour. Wrapping up a promise of a Saviour in the curse pronounced upon the enemy, he left man, now driven out of Eden, to multiply and fill the earth, and make manifest, without the restraint of an express law such as Adam had been under, what the bent of his will was, the promise all the while affording a resting-place for faith, wherever there was a heart, (such as Abel's, Enoch's, or Noah's,) opened to receive it.

What was the result of this trial? "And God saw that the wickedness of man was great upon the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen. 6: 5). "The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. And God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth" (ver. 11, 12). The evil rose to such a height, that God could no longer tolerate its existence; so the flood was sent to destroy man from off the face of the earth.

Noah had found grace in the eyes of the Lord, and was, with his family, preserved to people the earth. Man was thus put on trial once more. After the flood, a new element was introduced to restrain the violence which had before filled the earth. The ordinance, "Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed," made man a check and a restraint upon the violence of his fellow-man. But how does man acquit himself under this new principle of human government, thus in its essence introduced? Alas! Noah, the one in whom the authority was naturally invested, debases himself with wine; and when thus degraded, his own offspring take advantage of his state to degrade him further still! Babel too, and the cities of the plain; Egypt, with its idolatries and oppressions; and the cities of the Amorites (see Deut. 18: 9-12), all form specimens of what man proved himself to be in the interim between the flood and the giving of the law. Rom. 1: 21-32 presents us with a gloomy picture of what man at this period proved the desires of his heart and the bent of his will to be; as well as of the consequences to which God gave up the Gentile world. But when He did thus give up the Gentiles, He made choice of Israel, that in His dealings with that nation, brought outwardly nigh to Himself and favoured with every possible advantage, further trial might be made, within a narrower sphere, of

what the heart and will of man would produce. It was to this people that the law was given. And Moses, in recapitulating the dealings of God with this people in the wilderness, states that the object was "to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep his commandments or no" (Deut. 8: 2).

It was to Israel that the words, so often quoted to prove that life or death is at our own choice, were spoken: "See, I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil; in that I command thee this day to love the Lord thy God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, and His statutes, and His judgments, that thou mayest live and multiply," etc. Deut. 30: 15, 16). Again, "I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live" (v. 19).

Was it, then, that any were saved by thus choosing life that they might live? This would be to affirm that life could come by keeping the law; and Paul says plainly, "If there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law" (Gal. 3: 21). But then he also says, "If righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain" (Gal. 2: 21). This would indeed be a terrible conclusion to come to. And if you should enquire, as some did in the apostle's days, "Wherefore then the law?" let the apostle answer: "It was added, because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made" (Gal. 3: 19). And if you should still say, Why added because of transgressions? take for answer the same apostle's words in another place, "For by law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3: 20). And again, "Moreover, the law entered that the offence might abound" (Rom. 5: 20). And again, "I had not known sin, but by the law" (Rom. 7: 7). And again, "But sin, that it might appear sin, working death in me by that which is good; that sin by the commandment might become exceeding sinful" (ver. 13;). Yet once more, "The law worketh wrath" (Rom. 4: 15). Now, it seems to me a serious thing, in the face of all these inspired declarations of what ends the law was designed to answer, to affirm that any were saved by "choosing life" according to the tenor of the words of Moses, which have been quoted. Life was then offered them on condition of obedience to the law; and the Holy Ghost solemnly assures us, that "By the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified" (Rom. 3: 20; Gal. 2: 16, 21; Gal. 3: 11); that is, in other words, they could not have life on the terms proposed by Moses.

Of this, Moses was quite aware. In the very next chapter to that from which his words are quoted, we find that the Lord appeared and said unto him, "Behold thou shalt sleep with thy fathers; and this people shall rise up and go a whoring after the gods of the strangers of the land, whither they go to be among them, and will forsake me, and break my covenant which I have made with them" (Deut. 31: 16). They had already broken one covenant of works, in token of which Moses brake the two tables of the law, which were in his hands, when he came down from the mount (see Ex. 32: 19). With all unchanged nature, and placed under a similar covenant of works, what could be expected now? What but the results which the Lord assures Moses, and Moses assures the people, would actually ensue? "Now therefore, write ye this song for you, and teach it the children of Israel; put it in their mouths that this song maybe a witness for me against the children of Israel. For when I shall have brought them into the land which I sware unto their fathers, that floweth with milk and honey; and they shall have eaten and filled themselves, and waxen fat; then will they turn unto other gods, and serve them, and provoke me, and break my

covenant. And it shall come to pass, when many evils and troubles are befallen them, that this song shall testify against them as a witness; for it shall not be forgotten out of the mouths of their seed; for I know their imagination which they go about, even now, before I have brought them into the land which I swear" (Deut. 31: 19-21).

Can anything be more solemn or decisive than these last words? God declared to Moses, that instead of choosing life that they might live, the people would turn to other gods, provoke Him, and break His covenant; and He speaks of these future acts of evil, as only the display of what He knew to be at the then present time working in their hearts. "I know their imagination" etc. Hence, Moses said to them, "Take this book of the law, and put it in the side of the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God." Why? That they might choose life, and live by keeping it? Nay, but "That it may be there for a witness against thee." "For I know thy rebellion," he proceeds, "and thy stiff neck; behold, whilst I am yet alive with you this day, ye have been rebellious against the Lord; and how much more after my death" (ver. 26, 27)? "For I know," says he again to them, "that after my death ye will utterly corrupt yourselves, and turn aside from the way which I have commanded you; and evil will befall you in the latter days; because ye will do evil in the sight of the Lord, to provoke him to anger through the work of your hands" (ver. 29). Surely we need no further answer to those who use Moses' words to prove that salvation depends on human will. If it did, who could be saved?

Joshua's words are sometimes quoted for this purpose, as well as those of Moses; and with as little reason or force. After reminding Israel of the condition in which their fathers were, serving other gods, when the Lord took Abraham from the other side of the flood; after rehearsing to them the wonders which God had wrought, and many of which their eyes had beheld; he exhorts them to fear the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in truth, and put away other gods; and then he adds, "And if it seem evil unto you to serve the Lord, choose you this day whom you will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served, that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell; but as for me and my house we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24: 15). The fact is, he does not call upon them to choose between the Lord and idols. He says, "If it seem evil unto you to serve the Lord, choose ye "whether ye will serve this class of idols, or that. He, through grace, as we know, was resolved on serving the Lord. But when the people, with good intentions perhaps, but in a spirit of self-sufficiency, declare that they too will serve the Lord, how does Joshua receive their protestations? "And Joshua said unto the people, Ye cannot serve the Lord, for he is a holy God; he is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins. If ye forsake the Lord, and serve strange gods, then he will turn and do you hurt, and consume you after that he hath done you good" (ver. 19). And when the people still vow and protest "Nay; but we will serve the Lord," Joshua says to them, "Ye are witnesses against yourselves, and ye have chosen you the Lord to serve him. And they said, We are witnesses" (ver. 21, 22). Ah, yes; to have our words witness against us is the only result that can flow from our declaring that we choose the Lord and His service. And, as though to show in what a poor condition they were for taking such vows upon them, Joshua immediately exhorts them: "Now, therefore, put away the strange gods which are among you, and incline your heart unto the Lord God of Israel" (ver. 23). There were, then, strange gods among them! Their hearts, too, needed inclining to serve the Lord! Plain proof that they were, as we know the human heart is, averse to His service.

Of this we have still further evidence in that part of their history which immediately succeeds. The Book of Judges is but the history of their sins, and of the calamities which these brought upon them, with the Lord's merciful interpositions for their deliverance. Into this I do not now enter. Nor shall I pursue the thread of their history throughout. It would lead me too far. One point, however, must not be omitted; I refer to the ministry of the prophets. It differed materially from the law simply considered. The law left no room for repentance. It demanded obedience; but failing to obtain that, it had nothing to pronounce or bestow but condemnation and the cure. It was obedience, uniform unvarying obedience, which the Lord required; not repentance and a return to obedience.

But the prophets were sent to propose, as it were, new terms. "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon" (Isa. 55: 7). "Thou hast played the harlot with many lovers: yet return again to me, saith the Lord" (Jer. 3: 1). "Go, and proclaim these words towards the north, and say, Return, thou backsliding Israel, saith the Lord, and I will not cause mine anger to fall upon you; for I am merciful, saith the Lord, and I will not keep mine anger for ever, O house of Israel. Is not my way equal? are not your ways unequal? When a righteous man turneth away from his righteousness, and committeth iniquity, and dieth in them; for his iniquity that he hath done he shall die. Again, when the wicked man turneth away from his wickedness that he hath committed, and doeth that which is lawful and right, he shall save his soul alive. Because he considereth and turneth away from all his transgressions that he hath committed, he shall surely live — he shall not die" (Ezek. 18: 25-28). Such was the ministry of the prophets.

But was this, to prove, any more than Moses' or Joshua's language respecting the law, that it was possible for man, of his own will, so to turn from his wickedness and do that which is lawful and right as to live thereby? Surely not. It was a further test — a milder one — to prove whether it was in the heart or will of man to turn to God, and serve and obey Him. It was as though God said, I will not rigorously enforce the claims of My law. It claims uninterrupted and universal obedience. That you have utterly failed to render, and the law knows nothing of repentance, But now I give you an opportunity to begin again. "If the wicked will turn from all his sins that he hath committed, they shall not be mentioned unto him: in his righteousness that he hath done, he shall live." It was a fair offer to blot out all the past, and begin again; and this offer was made, be it remembered, to those who were complaining that their destinies were not in their own hands. Could a fairer offer have been made? But need I say to you, my brother, whether it were possible for any fallen man to be saved thus? What! by keeping all God's statutes, and doing for the time to come that which is lawful and right! Surely this would have been for the doer of these to live by them, which Paul declares to be the righteousness which is of the law. It was simply affording, to those who thought they would have done better than their fathers, an opportunity of showing what they could do!

And what was the issue of this trial of man by the new proposals of repentance and amendment of life! "And the Lord God of their fathers sent to them by his messengers, rising up betimes, and sending; because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling-place: but they mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and misused his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against His people, till there was no remedy" (2 Chr. 36: 15, 16). These

patient dealings of God with Israel were continued after the captivity; and John the Baptist was the last of the long line of those who were thus sent to Israel. "For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John." (Matt. 11: 13).

Did I say, the last in the line of servants who were thus employed? But there was One greater than all these servants of God, who came after them all on the same errand. Will you turn, my brother, to Matt. 21: 33 - 22: 14, where you will find the summing up of all we have now been considering together, and that from the lips of our blessed Lord Himself? You know the two parables which constituted this passage. A certain householder plants a vineyard, and lets it out to husbandmen. When the time of the fruit draws near, he sends his servants to the husbandman, that they may receive it. The husbandman take the servants, beat one, kill another, and stone another. Again he sends other servants more than the first; and they do to them likewise. Last of all he sends his son, saying, "They will reverence my son." So that one object for which the Son of God was sent was to seek fruit of those to whom the vineyard had been entrusted. How was He received? "But when the husbandman saw the son, they said among themselves, This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and let us seize on his inheritance. And they caught him, and cast him out of the vineyard, and slew him." The meaning of this cannot be mistaken. The Jewish nation were the husbandman. All the privileges God had bestowed upon them were the, vineyard. The obedience He required was the fruit, which they ought to have rendered. The law demanded it, but in vain. Prophet after prophet came seeking it; but maltreatment or death was all they received. Last of all came Jesus, the heir. Him, also, they put to death. What can be done more? What further test of man's heart and will can be applied? There is a further test; and the application of this, with the result, is illustrated in the next parable, at the beginning of Matt. 22.

Jesus came, not only as the last of those whom God sent seeking fruit from man; He came as the messenger and minister of God's grace to man. "The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son, and sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding; and they would not come." Here it is not the Lord of the vineyard seeking fruit — God requiring of man the service, the obedience, due to Him. No; it is a king inviting to a wedding feast: God, in His grace, providing everything for man, and inviting him to partake. But he is no more inclined to receive God's bounty than to satisfy God's claims. They would not come. But this is not all; the first refusal is not received as final. "Again he sent forth other servants, saying, Tell them which are bidden, Behold, I have prepared my dinner; my oxen and my fatlings are killed, and all things are ready: come unto the marriage." Christ, as seeking fruit, is rejected and slain. He is equally rejected as inviting Israel, by means of His disciples to partake of the feast which God had provided. But when they have thus rejected Him, grace still lingers over them, and His very death is made the occasion of renewed invitations. "All things are ready" (this could hardly have been said before): "come unto the marriage." "But they made light of it, and went their ways, one to his farm, another to his merchandise; and the remnant took his servants, and entreated them spitefully and slew them." Such is the reception with which all God's overtures, as well as His claims, are met on the part of man. He claims obedience, He seeks fruit — man will not render it. He publishes grace, providing a wedding-feast, and inviting guests — "they would not come." He repeats His invitations, descanting on the plenteousness of the provision, and declaring that all things are ready. It is all to no purpose. Some light-heartedly despise His bounty, preferring their merchandise or their farm: others, more cruel in their

rejection of grace, spitefully entreat and slay the servants who are sent to invite them. Such is man; and such is man's will with every possible advantage short of that Almighty grace which subdues his opposition, and makes him willing to receive Christ, and the salvation He has brought. Such grace it is, and such grace alone, by which any become the children of God.

The marriage was made by the king for his son. The feast was provided to grace this marriage. Is the king's son to be despoiled of his marriage-feast, because of the perversity and obstinacy of those first invited as guests? These, or many of them, perish for their contempt of God's grace; but other messengers still are sent out — not now to those who might have expected to be invited, but — into the highways, to bid as many as they find. "So those servants went out into the highways, and gathered together all, as many as they found, both bad and good; and the wedding was furnished with guests." In Luke 14, where we have a similar parable, the servants are told, "Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in thither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind." They were to bring them in. It is not an appeal to their will, as to whether they will come; they are to be brought in. When this is done, the servant says, "Lord, it is done as thou hast commanded, and yet there is room. And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and COMPEL them to come in, that my house may be filled." If we are really guests at Christ's table, it is not that we have of ourselves chosen to come when invited, nor even when urged; but because we have been brought in, or compelled to come. That is, the opposition of our natural will has been overcome by that Almighty grace, which, in thus overcoming our opposition, has made us willing, and brought us in. This is beautifully expressed in the well-known lines: —

"Nay, but I yield, I yield,

I can hold out no more;

I sink, by dying love compell'd,

And own Thee conqueror.

No man becomes a child of God by an act of his own will!

Affectionately yours in Christ, W. T.