

God's Ultimate Will

THERE IS A SENTENCE AT THE END OF THE BOOK of Job which summarizes the message of this section: "I know that thou canst do all things, and that no purpose of thine can be restrained"—or, as Moffatt translates it, "Nothing is too hard for thee."

We have spoken of the intentional will of God—that is, God's original plan for the well-being of his children, an intention spoiled by man's folly and sin. We have spoken of God's circumstantial will, his will within the circumstances set up by man's evil. I want to write here of God's ultimate will, the goal which I believe he reaches, not only *in spite of* all man may do, but even using man's evil to further his own plan.

Turning to the Cross once more as the supreme example, we see again that—

1. The intentional will of God was not that Jesus should be crucified, but that he should be followed;

2. The circumstantial will of God, God's will in the circumstances which men's evil provided, was that Jesus should accept death, but

accept it in such a positive and creative way as to lead to

3. God's ultimate will—namely, the redemption of man, winning man back to God, not in spite of the Cross, but using the Cross, born of man's sin, as an instrument to reach the goal of God's ultimate will.

The picture in my mind is that of children playing beside a tiny stream that runs down a mountainside to join a river in the valley below. Very little children can divert the stream and get great fun out of damming it up with stones and earth. But not one of them ever succeeds in preventing the water from reaching the river at last. (Don't press the illustration and remind me that the Royal Engineers could do so!) In regard to God we are very little children. Though we may divert and hinder his purposes, I don't believe we ever finally defeat them; and, though the illustration doesn't carry us so far, frequently our mistakes and sins are used to make another channel to carry the water of God's plans to the river of his purpose.

The omnipotence of God, you perceive, does not mean that by a sheer exhibition of his superior might God gets his own way. If he did, man's freedom would be an illusion and man's moral development would be made impossible. No "end" which God has in mind can be imposed from without; for his end, the at-one-ment of all souls with him, must come from man's choice of God's way, not the imposition of God's will in irresistible might which leaves no room for choice. Power means ability to achieve purpose. Since the purpose is

GOD'S ULTIMATE WILL

to win man's volition, any activity of God's which denied or suppressed man's volition, in that it would defeat the purpose, would not be a use of power but a confession of weakness and an acceptance of defeat.

When we say, then, that God is omnipotent, we do not mean that nothing can happen unless it is God's will (=intention). We mean that nothing can happen which can *finally* defeat him.

If man is to have a real freedom, and if the community is to be bound together in such a close unity that the one suffers for the many, even as the one gains through the many—if, in a word, life is to be on the family and not on the individual basis, then obviously ten thousand things can happen that God did not intend, and millions of innocent people will suffer through the sins of others. Of this great truth we need no far-fetched illustration. The horror of war and the suffering of innocent people prove it with terrible convincingness.

What is meant by the omnipotence of God is that he will reach at last his ultimate goal, that nothing of value will be lost in the process, however man may divert and dam up the stream of purpose nearest him, and that God—if he cannot use men as his agents—will, though with great pain to himself and to themselves, use them as his instruments. "I know that thou canst do all things, and that no purpose of thine can be restrained."

HERE is an illustration which may help. Many years ago there was no such thing as blotting paper. Ink was dried by dusting the page with

THE WILL OF GOD

a light powder. One day in a paper mill one of the workers made a mistake. Let us for the sake of argument say that he committed a sin. Through gross carelessness and inattention to duty he omitted a certain chemical or material, and the result was that the paper was entirely unfitted for writing material. The owner of the mill was angry. It looked as if the mistake meant the sheer loss of the whole material concerned. But when the paper was brought to him and he tried to write on it, he noticed the way the ink was immediately absorbed, and the idea of blotting paper occurred to him. Let us suppose, for the sake of the argument, that the goal of the mill owner was to make money. Then we see that apparent loss was turned to gain. The ultimate end (to make money) was reached when the intention (to make money from writing paper) was defeated and the circumstance thrown up by evil (the worker's careless inattention) was reacted to in a positive and creative way.

Of course no illustration we can devise covers all the ground. From this you might argue, "very well then, let us not bother what we do, however stupid and careless and sinful we may be. If God can use evil as well as good, let him get on with it. Nothing we do matters."

But here is the old argument which Paul fought with such strength in his Epistle to the Romans. When men said, "Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?" he said, "God forbid. We who died to sin, how shall we any longer live therein?" Once we see what sin is—"the raised hand, the clenched fist, the blow in the face of God," as Joseph Parker

GOD'S ULTIMATE WILL

called it—how can we practice it? It would be like a medical student smashing his mother's head with an ax and saying, "What of it? I have increased my knowledge of the structure of the brain." Sin is the blackest thing in the universe. It is one thing to say, "This evil has been done. How can I win good from it?" It is another thing to say, "I will deliberately do evil in order to win good from it."

Further, though God may use an instrument for the achievement of divine purpose, if that instrument is human, he has to pay for his sins. God used the Cross, we said, as the instrument of a divine purpose, but that did not stop our Lord from saying of Judas, "It had been good for that man if he had not been born," and again, "It must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!"

With this clear in our minds, however, the message comes to me in these days with immense comfort. These are days full of loss and pain, of suffering and sorrow. *But they are not days of waste.* They are the fruit of the whole world's sin. To go back to the blotting paper illustration, here is the work of slackness on the part not of one worker but of millions. We will not go back in thought with sentences that begin, "If only in 1918 we had . . ." That is too painful now. The result of that slackness is not wasted paper, but wasted lives, wasted homes, wasted cities, wasted money, wasted energy. But will it be waste? My answer is a ringing No! For the simple reason that I trust the Owner of this great mill of a world that is grinding out his purposes. He doesn't lose his

THE WILL OF GOD

temper and say of this world, "I'm sick of you. I wish I'd never created you."

Gash the earth with your railway cutting, and nature at once gets busy on the scar and covers it with not only the kind of green grass which grew on the surrounding fields but with tender violets and primroses which would not grow until a cleft in the earth provided shelter from the north wind. With evil intent men crucified the Son of God, and within six weeks other men were preaching about the Cross as the instrument of salvation. They hardly once referred to it as the crime of man. They—with a daring almost alarming—spoke of it as a redemptive act of God.

Now the whole world is crucified. But look what is happening! There is a new social conscience. What's all this talk about an education act, about new health provisions, new housing, new city planning? Why, what has that to do with war? There were slums before the war, and bad education and inadequate health provision. War hasn't made them. I tell you the Spirit of God is at his glorious task. He is making the wrath of man to serve him and further his ultimate will. He is using the moment when men's hearts are awestruck at the horror their own evil has brought upon them, to rouse them to what has always been God's will, so that, awakened and responding, they may, through doing God's circumstantial will, reach his ultimate will as certainly as it would have been reached if his intentional will had been done. For surely the extreme horror of war was not necessary before men could un-

GOD'S ULTIMATE WILL

derstand God's intention for his children who live in great cities.

A YOUNG WOMAN, widowed in an accident, says to me, "Yes, I can see your point in regard to world affairs and civic facilities, but come down to the individual. My man has been killed, and my two little children are left fatherless, and I'm young, and life stretches on in an infinite loneliness. How can God ever reach in my life his ultimate will? His intentional will was surely home and married happiness. His will is defeated forever."

If I offered you a glib answer to that, I should hate myself and you would despise me. I set down the question because I want to be honest and not evade it. And here no one can answer save in faith, for no one can see the end from the beginning. Let me tenderly say one or two things. On Good Friday night eleven men, in the deepest gloom felt like you. They said in their hearts: "We trusted him, we followed him. It was his will to establish his kingdom. He told us so. And evil has been allowed to take him from us. It's the end of everything."

But they were wrong, weren't they? It was only the end of their mistake and the beginning of the most wonderful use of evil which God has ever effected. And if you give way to despair, you are wrong too! And one day, like them, you'll find out how wrong you are *and be sadder at your despair than at your loss.*

For you know your loved one is not lost. He is alive. He is working out a plan. And God is still using him in his plan. Maybe from the

THE WILL OF GOD

other side he's helping you. Can you take up life bravely in spiritual communion with the one you've lost? Can you be father and mother to your little ones? Can you comfort weaker hearts than your own in this dark night of the world? Can you say to yourself with Tennyson

That nothing walks with aimless feet;
That not one life shall be destroy'd,
Or cast as rubbish to the void,
When God hath made the pile complete?

If so, I'm certain you won't be defrauded, that all will be woven into the pattern, that when you get to the end of the road you will not feel any sense of injustice or any sense of loss. God's intentional will was the fulfillment of your personality via what we might call the mountain stream of years of married life. That stream is now blocked. Are you certain, standing where you stand, with your limited human vision, that God cannot fulfill your personality by any other route? Big words these, but underneath them is the conviction of all the saints and the supreme evidence of the Crucified that God is a Father, that the ultimate meaning of the whole universe is Love, and that God will never fail with one of his family unless that one opposes him forever.

Evil can do terrible things to us. The more I read and think, the more I believe in a Devil. "God lets the Devil have a long rope these days," said a friend of mine, a doctor of divinity, to his mother. "Yes," said the old lady, "but he keeps hold of the end of it himself." God still reigns—a God who is like Jesus, who

GOD'S ULTIMATE WILL

died to make a dream come true that is better than our wildest dreams. Rest in this thought about God's ultimate will. "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him." Trust God. Rest in the nature of God. He who began this strange adventure we call human life will also control the end. "I am Alpha and *Omega*, the beginning and the *end*, the first and the *last*." The last word is with God—

That God, which ever lives and loves,
One God, one law, one element,
And one far-off divine event,
To which the whole creation moves—

"one far-off divine event" whose nature no man may dream, but which we may call the accomplishment of the ultimate will of God.