

THE
SOVEREIGN DECREES
OF
GOD

By

Isaac Backus, 1773

Beloved Friend,

Although we should endeavor to avoid all needless contention, yet the "faith once delivered to the saints," is sometimes treated in such a manner as to make it our incumbent duty earnestly and publicly to contend for it. Such a case I think is presented before us by means of a printed paper lately spread in Providence, R.I., and towns adjacent which you have requested me to make some remarks upon. It begins in this manner:

"On Traditional Zeal: Some good Christian pastors will not scruple to tell you that they could find no joy in "their own state, no strength or comfort in their labors of love towards their flocks, but because they know and are assured from St. Paul that God never had, nor ever will have, mercy upon all men; but that an unknown multitude of them are, through all ages of the world, inevitably decreed to the eternal fire and damnation of hell; and that an unknown number of others are elected to a certain, irresistible salvation. Wonder not, my friends, if the inquisition has its pious defenders, for inquisition, cruelty, and every barbarity that must

have an end, is mere mercy if compared with this reprobation doctrine. And to be in love with it, to draw comfort from it, and to wish it Godspeed is a love that absolutely forbids the loving our neighbors as our own selves and makes the Scripture-wish, that all men might be saved, no less than a rebellion against God." -End quotation.

This writer's evident design is against the doctrine of particular election and efficacious grace in our salvation, and against those who preach it. And he takes the same "method" that the heathen persecutors did with the Primitive Christians, viz., to cover them with skins of wild beasts in order that they might be devoured by dogs, or if not, yet that they might be hated and avoided by all men. He asserts that some "Christian pastors" tell their people such a story as he has here related. If he can find any man upon earth that teaches so, he is welcome to correct him as much as he deserves, but till he exhibits his proof he ought to be accounted a blasphemer of God's Sovereignty and a false teacher of Christ's ministers. Yea, out of his own mouth he is condemned, for as short as his paper is he has not been able to keep to one consistent story, but the same preachers that he accuses of rejoicing that God never will have mercy upon all men, when he comes to give us their own language it is, "O, the sweetness of God's election!" And neither the Devil nor any of his children will ever be able to make a rejoicing in God's everlasting love to a chosen number to be the same thing as it would be to rejoice in the destruction of the rest.

Our Lord says, "Every one that doth evil hateth the light, but he that doth truth cometh to the light" (John 3:21); and let the reader judge which of these characters suits the conduct of the writer before us. He cast out these horrid accusations against some good Christian pastors without naming any one, while his evident aim is against all that profess a sweetness in sovereign election; at the same time (like savages) he tries to keep himself and his own principles hid. Though it fares with him as it did with the old

enemies of the sure foundation that God has laid in Zion, whose bed was shorter than a man could stretch upon it, and the covering narrower than that he could wrap himself in it (Isaiah 28). For though by the title of his piece he would have people esteem him as a bold champion against tradition and a friend of Paul and the sacred writings, yet he does not so much as attempt to prove that sovereign decrees and irresistible grace are not fully taught by them. No, instead of confusing us or defending himself by the sacred oracles, he, like those who prophesied out of the deceit in their own hearts, first makes his address to men's passions and exerts all his art to bring up the horrid ideas of an inevitable decreeing of multitudes to hellfire, of cruelty vastly worse than the inquisition, of God's sacrificing of myriads of His creatures to the devil, etc., and having done his utmost thus to raise a tempest in the souls of men, he winds up by asserting that "The only possible way of avoiding every prevailing error and of finding every saving truth is to listen, solemnly, attentively to listen, agreeable to the written word, to the "still small voice within you."

This is just like the old Serpent who, with malicious reflections upon God's government and lying pretences of friendship to man drew him into rebellion against God's revealed will and to gratify his own heart's lust. Yet from that day to this, when the tempter thinks it will serve his turn, he is very ready to catch at some portion of Scripture words, to entice people into violations of the truth which is therein taught.

Let the pretended advocate for the truth now before us mean what he will by the voice within, yet when he or any others are brought solemnly and attentively to listen either to reason, conscience, or the Spirit of God they will teach them that the way to avoid error and to find the truth in any case, is not first to inflame our passions before our judgments are well formed. No! for a gift will blind the eyes of the wise and pervert the words of the righteous (Deuteronomy 16:19); therefore we must have our eye single or

else our whole body will be full of darkness. Hence appears the necessity of the Holy Spirit to renew us in the spirit of our minds and to guide our souls into all truth.

The grand contest ever since sin entered into the world has been between the will of the Creator and the will of the creature. But as it is too shocking for human nature to have it openly appear in that light, God's enemies in all ages have "made lies their refuge and under falsehood have hid themselves" (Isaiah 28:15). And in the controversy before us we may take notice of the following refuge of lies that the enemies sovereign grace try to hide themselves in.

First, As the sacred writers often appealed to men's reason and conscience and exhorted the saints to regard the teachings of the Holy Spirit in their souls above all human authority on earth, deceivers of various denominations have caught at and perverted that sacred custom as a place for setting up a standard in themselves to decide every case so as not to admit anything for truth that does not agree with their inward imaginary test. But it is well known in our nation that in order for us to enjoy our just rights and liberties, rulers as well as subjects must be governed by known laws and established legal rules, and for judges to assume a discretionary power to dispense with old laws or to make NEW ONES as occasion serve would introduce arbitrary government, or rather a CRUEL TYRANNY. And were not people deluded with the religious names and great swelling words of deceivers, as their attempts to set up a voice within that speaks in any respects contrary to God's written Word would appear as arbitrary and tyrannical as any such proceedings of earthly judges can be. Those holy men whom God employed to write His Word had their authority so to do "with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to His own will" (Hebrews 2:4) and woe to that man who presumes either to add to, or take from, those holy oracles.

Second: The advocates for their own "free will" in opposition to sovereign grace have determined that the doctrine of eternal fixed decrees in the Divine Mind concerning the future state of men, is consistent with the "liberty" of their own wills, and with proper influence of precepts and promises, rewards and punishments. And, having quoted a number of precepts with considerations to enforce them (of which the Bible is full) they boast that they have gained their argument, when in truth they have never even touched the point in debate! We know, and as firmly as any free willer on earth, that all men are under moral government where precepts and promises, exhortations, warnings, etc., have their proper place, and ought to influence us in all our conduct. And I believe from the bottom of my heart that God never did or ever will punish any but the guilty, and that He will finally reward "every man according to his works" (Matthew 16:27). But in the present controversy the true state of the question is this, viz., Whether the whole plan of God's government and the final issue of every action throughout the universe has not been known and Am' in His counsel from the beginning, so that "nothing can be put to it nor anything taken from it" (Ecclesiastes 3:14), Or, whether many events are not held in suspense and uncertainty in His infinite Mind, till they are decided by "free will power" of men? We hold the first, they the last side of this question. But instead of attending to the true state of the controversy, and instead of referring the decision of it to the Divine oracles, tradition and corruption has carried them into the way which this writer pursues of representing our doctrine to be that God decrees some to misery in the same manner that He does others to happiness. Yea, this slanderer, in imitation of those who have gone before him, sets reprobation foremost and would have people believe that we hold God's .first design to be the damnation of "multitudes" and then, secondly, the "irresistible salvation of a number"! Hoping no doubt by these horrid colorings to guard people sufficiently against all the Gospel weapons that are appointed to pull down the strongholds that are raised against the knowledge of God, and to cast down the imaginations which keep

men's thoughts too high to yield their all to a meek and lowly Jesus (II Corinthians 10: 4,5). Many in latter ages have carried their imaginations so high on this subject as to:

Third. To assume a dignity to themselves that they will not allow in the Eternal God, for they claim for themselves a self-determining power in their supposed free wills while they deny it to the Most High God, and insist upon it that His choice of some men to salvation rather than others, is from either a foresight or after sight of good dispositions and "good doings" in them more than others, so making that to be the cause of His choice which He declares plainly is the effect of it, and representing that God is influenced in His work by motives without Himself, at the same time that they hold a power to determine all their own actions within themselves! Can any imagination ever be entertained more absurd or more contrary to Holy Writ and sound reasoning than these are? "I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in Thy sight. All things are delivered unto Me of My Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal Him" (Matthew 11:25-27); "For whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the Firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He did predestinate, them He also called: and whom He called, them He also justified: and whom He justified, them He also glorified" (Romans 8: 29,30); "According as He bath chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love: having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will" (Ephesians 1: 4,5); "Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ" (I John 4:19).

The people we are now speaking of commonly deny the doctrine of man's universal depravity, but if to claim a sovereignty of their own will, they deny it to God, does not prove them to be rebels against heaven, I know not what can do it.

Nebuchadnezzar made trial how it would do to ascribe all his achievements to himself, but after he had grazed among the beasts of the field till seven times had passed over him, he declares that, "All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing (before the Most High) and He cloth according to HIS WILL in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay His hand, or say unto Him, What doest Thou? " (Daniel 4:35). Thus it happens that "the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: He turned it whithersoever He will" (Proverb 21:1), and if so of kings, or absolute monarchs, how much more of lesser men than kings? That is, while the king acts voluntarily as he designs yet only as God designed to have them to do. From hence it appears evident that there is no inconsistency in holding God's decrees to be immutable, yet that men act as voluntarily as if it were not so. And the great reasoners on the other side cannot avoid this consequence, if they would once own that the will of man is always determined in its choice by motive or by what they at present prefer and think to be best, for that person must be stupid indeed who cannot see that "He in whom we live, move, and have our being," can at any time set things in such a view before our minds as to make us think it best to choose one way of acting rather than another, which proves the will of man is not "free." Do not men often do the same to other men as well? Though Balaam was so madly set after the "wages of unrighteousness" that he would not be turned ever by the reproof of a dumb ass, yet when the Lord opened his eyes to see the angel with a drawn sword before him, he at once choose to fall to the earth or to turn back rather than run upon it! (Numbers 22:31). In order therefore to keep up their conceit and delusion that eternally fixed decrees

interfere with men's liberty, some of their greatest "doctors" have:

Fourth. Tried to shelter themselves in such a miserable refuge as to pretend that they have a power in their wills to act with motive or against motive just as their will pleases. But I suppose it is as great a piece of nonsense in itself to hold that a rational soul can act voluntarily in any case without or against motive, as it would be to say there can be a rational action without any influence of reason in it! Thus "professing themselves to be wise, they became fools," for as Mr. John Locke truly observes, even delirious persons are influenced by reason only they reason from wrong premises. As when such a man imagines that he is all made of glass; he is moved to act with the caution that would be necessary if the case were so. And the like may be said of other imaginations. And persons must be idiots and not reason at all, or else reason and motive will always influence their choice and conduct. Evil imaginations and thoughts always move men to act wickedly, "But unto Cain and his offering He had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell" and "Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass when they were in the field, Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him" (Genesis 4: 5,8). But when any are brought to know the truth it makes them free, free from sin's dominion, so as to become "servants of righteousness" (John 8:31, & Romans 6:18). The main objections I ever heard against Sovereign Election and certain salvation, by free grace alone, appear to me to spring from this root, viz., Man, who was flattered with the notion of "being as gods" still conceits that he has a "power of will in himself" to do as he pleases, let that pleasure be to comply with or to disappoint God's designs; and therefore, if they are not disposed at present to engage in His service, that He must wait their leisure, and be ready, whenever they set about the work in good earnest, to grant them the assistance of His grace and, if they improve it well unto the end, then to receive them to His glory. But for my part, I have no more notion of worshiping a deity that can possibly be mistaken or disappointed in any one event,

than I have of worshipping Baal, who could not defend either his altar or grove when his votaries were asleep (Judges 6:31).

Those who are determined to believe nothing but what they can comprehend, are determined to be idolaters, for 'Us certain that anything that can be comprehended by a finite mind cannot be the Infinite Jehovah whose wisdom, knowledge and judgments are "unsearchable and His ways past finding out; of whom, through whom and to whom are a thinks; to whom be glory forever, amen" (Romans 11: 33-36). Thus to believe, adore, and obey is not, as many would have it, a sacrificing of reason to tradition and blind devotion, but the contrary. As, for instance, should any man conceit that he could not know whether or not there was light in the sun or warmth in the fire without looking through the one and running into the other, and should try the experiment till he became blind or burnt, he could not from thence convince me that I had lost both my sight and feeling because I still professed to enjoy great comfort in the cautious improvement of those blessings. Now the perfections of God are compared both to the sun and fire, to teach us the importance of receiving His grace as "free gifts", of acting towards Him uprightly, and serving of Him with "reference and Godly fear" (Psalm 84:11; & Hebrews 12: 28,29).

Some serious persons are afraid to give in to the doctrine of immutable decrees lest they should make God the author g I sin, but Mr Norton, one of the fathers of this country [Signer of the Declaration of Independence- Ed], justly replied to this objection that "sin is a defect, and God is the author of all efficiency but not of any defect at all." An illegitimate child is the creature of God, but its illegitimacy is wholly from its parents (see Genesis 49:10 with 38: 15-29, with Matthew 1:3). It was their lusts that caused the defect or want of its being lawfully (before men) begotten. Yet the child is God's creature, and if He pleases He makes it a subject of His grace, as with any other child. The heat of the sun that attacks the secret virtues of the earth is not the cause of the stink of

the dunghill. And though reasoners try to persuade people that to hold to absolute predestination, that every event to be certain in the Divine counsel takes away the guilt of evil actions, and the virtue of good ones; yet the Word of Truth abundantly shows the contrary. It shows that Joseph's brethren were as verily guilty in their actions against him as if they could have frustrated God's design, and yet that He overruled their wrath and cruelty towards their brother, for His own praise, (Psalm 56:10) and to make Joseph much more of a public and extensive blessing than they could have made him in Canaan, if they had tried their uttermost for it. At the same time the sacred story clearly shows that they acted quite voluntarily, both in their wretched abuses to their brother, and in humbly prostrating themselves before him afterward, they acted by motives; when they first saw Joseph coming to them, they felt so that they thought they would slay the dreamer. But upon another view murder appeared so shocking that they thought it best to gratify themselves another way, which moved them to choose that way — so they sold him instead, fulfilling the very dreams that were told to them and for which cause they hated him. On the other hand, when Joseph was tempted by his wicked mistress, though men were absent, yet God to whom he was under infinite obligation, was present in his thoughts, and that proved a sufficient motive to make him choose any suffering rather than to sin against such a glorious Being.

The inquiry and pursuit of all men is after good, and the believer finds it only in God, who is good and is always doing good, and this causes his soul to be in earnest to "learn His statutes" (Psalm 4: 6,7 and 119: 68). Others do not like to retain the true God in their knowledge; neither His nature nor His government appears good to their carnal minds. Therefore they "worship and serve the creature more than the Creator" (Romans 1:25), setting up gain, honor, or pleasure as their chief good. Yet to appear nakedly irreligious is too shocking to multitudes, who at the same time are far from desiring to set the Lord always before them, so as to be

influenced by Him in all their conduct. Therefore they choose their idol shepherds that will prophesy smooth things to them rather than faithful watchmen who represent the true character of the "Holy One of Israel before them" (Isaiah 30: 8-11; Zechariah 11:17).

A darling topic with the carnal reasoners of our world is this: they say that either men are able to obey and serve God, or else, if they cannot do it, until God is pleased to convert them, they are not to blame for neglecting of it; that God will never command a man to do what he cannot do. To them, this is contrary to their natural reason. But the truth is, the natural man cannot serve God because he does love and serve an idol. And the soul before it is slain by the law, cannot be married to Christ because it is wedded to its own doings (Matthew 6:24; Romans 7). Yet this inability is so far from being any just excuse that the more unable they are to love God or to believe in Christ the greater is their "condemnation" (John 3: 16,19).

It is a most wicked device in the writer of the paper now in hand, to use the word inevitable concerning reprobates and irresistible, concerning the elect in such a manner as to exclude the idea of their own wicked choice; whereas the vessels of wrath say, "We will walk after our own devices, and we will every one do the imagination of his evil heart" (Jeremiah 18:12) and of such the Lord said, "For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reprov'd" (John 3:20). The vessels of mercy pursue the same ways till God works in them "to will and to do of His good pleasure," "working in them that which is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever" (Philippians 2:13, Hebrews 13:21). Therefore though the final event is as certain to the one as the other, yet in the manner of its accomplishments is vastly different. The vessels of wrath, "after their hard and impenitent heart, treasure up wrath to themselves, while God endureth with much longsuffering with them," but He "makes known" the riches of His

glory in effectually "calling the vessels of mercy which He had afore prepared unto glory" (Romans 2:5 and 9:22-24). And renewed souls are so far from assuming to themselves a free will power to be God's counselors or venturing to act upon those "secret things which belong to God" (Deuteronomy 29:29), that where He has told them of His designs concerning any future event they have not made the design of the great Ruler, but the laws He has given to His subjects the rule of their conduct; and the great difference between subjects and rebels is discovered by this. As, for instance, God let David know that He designed to remove Saul and make David king in his stead. Yet David refused to smite Saul when he had opportunity but left it with God to remove him in His own way (I Samuel 24:12,13). Whereas when the Jews heard Caiphias' prophecy concerning the death of Jesus, "from that day forth, they took counsel together for to put Him to death" (John 11:49-53). That is quite a difference between the two! And God's accomplishing His infallible decrees in that great event, while the Jews were inexcusably guilty – "ye by wicked hands has seized and slain" – in their actions about it, are strongly asserted by the inspired apostle. "Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, YE have taken, and by WICKED HANDS have crucified and slain" (Acts 2:23).

They acted most wickedly in conspiring against the Savior who was perfectly holy and harmless and constantly went about doing good. Yet God's purpose and promises were thereby exactly accomplished in bestowing infinite and eternal mercies upon guilty and miserable men. Pharaoh used great subtlety and cruelty in order to keep Israel in bondage and set up his will at the highest rate against releasing of them. Yet God in His Providence caused things to appear so to him and his subjects that they voluntarily furnished Israel with silver and gold, and "Egypt was glad when they departed" (Psalm 105: 37,38), "and that on the selfsame day" God told Abraham of above four-hundred years before (Exodus 12:41) !

These and many other instances of men's voluntary actions, the Lord declared with a perfect exactness before they came to pass, because He knew that with a brazen obstinacy and willful treachery they would rather give this glory to their idol than to Him (Isaiah 48: 3- 8).

But the firm faith of the saints in every age in the certain accomplishment of God's promises has made them the more watchful and active in the rational choice that He furnished them with for attaining the desired end. Jacob wrestled and prevailed with God, yet that did not make him neglect, but to wisely improve the best that he had in his power to calm his angry brother, and it had the desired effect. Paul believed God that the lives of all those who were with him in the ship should be saved (Acts 27:24), yet when the men who were skilled in managing the ship were about to leave it, he said to the centurion and to the soldiers, "Except these abide in the ship ye cannot be saved" (Acts 27:25-31). Here was a certainty of an event, and yet it is expressed conditionally, while both were true! It was true that all should be saved, and they were; and it was also true that the mariners must be instrumental of it.

Thus, my dear friend, I have endeavored in as plain and brief a manner as I could, in the little time I had for it, opened and vindicated the great Scriptural doctrine of GOD'S SOVEREIGN DECREES against a malicious attempt which has been made to vilify the same. It may well seem surprising to those who are acquainted with the "Seventeenth Article of the Church of England," to hear that a minister who has solemnly engaged to maintain the truth therein expressed, should have a great hand in spreading this blasphemous paper which is diametrically contrary thereto, as has evidently been the case. But I leave him and all others in the hand of a righteous and gracious God, and rest,
Yours, etc., Isaac Backus, 1773, Boston.