

The Crucifixion: The Will of God?

Hugh Spurgin
February 1975



Photo date and location unknown

God promised the Hebrews a great Leader -- coming as mighty God, everlasting father, and prince of peace. Coming on the throne of David, he would bring peace at last to Israel. "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you..."

Violence shall no longer be heard in your land, devastation or destruction within your borders; you shall call your walls salvation and your gates Praise. The least one shall become a clan, and the smallest one a mighty nation, I am the Lord; in its time I will hasten it." (Isaiah 60)

Even nature was to be in peace: "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fading together, and a little child shall lead them.... They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea..." (Is. 11:6, 9)

Waiting for deliverance

Since the time of Isaiah, the Hebrews were conquered in turn by Babylonia, Persia, Greece, Egypt, Syria, and finally Rome. Their suffering during Roman rule intensified their desire for a Messiah, or God's chosen one, to deliver them. Because their hardships were so great, they imagined that the one who was to rescue them would come in a spectacular, unrealistic way -- perhaps on the clouds, as described in the book of Daniel.

When Jesus came, he didn't come in such a spectacular way. Uneducated, trained as a carpenter, when he began his ministry he preached his simple message to anyone who would listen. And his message was, "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!" (Matthew 4:17). This remained the predominant theme

of Jesus' ministry. He described it at length, though symbolically, in his parables. It was like a grain of mustard seed that would grow into a large tree, like a treasure hidden in a field, like a marriage feast, and like a pearl having such high value that it caused a merchant to sell everything he had to buy it.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus described the nature of those who would enter the Kingdom: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peace-makers, for they shall be called the children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake; for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." (Matthew 5:8-10)

Whether the Kingdom of God would in fact have materialized 2000 years ago depended upon man.

The Will of God

In his book, *The Will of God*, Leslie Weatherhead contends that the crucifixion was not God's original intent, but that "circumstances wrought by man's evil set up such a dilemma that Christ was compelled either to die or to run away, then in those circumstances the cross was the will of God.

"He came with the intention that men should follow him, not kill him. The discipleship of men, not the death of Christ, was the intentional will of God."

Thus, Weatherhead acknowledges the possibility that God can be defeated, but he contends that such defeats are only temporary and that in time His ultimate will must be achieved.

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

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....

Thus, though he allows for the possibility that God's intentional will can be thwarted, Weatherhead contends that His ultimate will can never be defeated.

Man's cooperation

God's will cannot be achieved apart from man's cooperation. If men choose to disobey God they have the power to "cut across God's plans" and postpone God's intentional desire, but they do not have the power to defeat God's ultimate desire. Thus, though circumstances may compel God to choose a course other than He had originally intended, "in spite of evil... (God) arrives, with nothing of value lost, at the same goal as would have been reached if the intentional will of God could have been carried through without frustration."

In regard to Jesus one can distinguish between God's ultimate will that the people accept and follow Jesus and His circumstantial will that Jesus die on the cross. "Given the circumstances of evil, it was God's will that Jesus should be betrayed, taken, crowned with thorns, crucified, left there in the blazing sun to die." But if man had been more receptive to Christ's teachings circumstances would have been different and there might never have been a crucifixion.

Jesus came as a perfect man to redeem mankind from the clutches of sin. He had the Christ-mission of returning all men to God.

The time had come for the Messiah that all men might be perfect through him and live forever in the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom was imminent. There was no time to concern oneself with the ordinary pursuits of life. God was seeking to establish His ideal then and there at that precise moment in time.

Few understood

Unfortunately, the people were not interested in what Jesus had to say. Some followed him (mostly harlots, tax collectors, and the poor), but then only briefly and often in search of his miracles, not his message. Only a few understood the importance of his message and the imminence of the Kingdom.

He wanted to tell them of the Kingdom of Heaven, but they would not listen. How could he reveal the deepest secrets of human life if men could not understand even the simplest or were too proud to listen.

If only the people had believed in him, Jesus could have explained many things. But few were ready and willing to listen. Only in the intimacy of his discussions with his disciples could Christ speak freely and reveal the hidden secrets of the Kingdom. To the public he spoke only in symbols and parables about things they could understand.

Poor and uneducated, the peasants could only understand things that related directly to their daily lives. They could not comprehend an abstract, future Kingdom of joy and harmony.

Jesus said: "You are to be perfect like your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). He had come to raise mankind to perfection and all but a few condemned or ignored him.

Christ's sorrow

In sorrow he cried out, "I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth." (John 16:12-13a) "If I have told you of earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" (John 3: 12)

The scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees condemned him as a heretic, calling him Beelzebub. In anger Christ scolded them saying: "You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires," so evil was their intent. (John 8:44a) And in sorrow he wept, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate." (Matt. 23:37-38)

In vain, again and again, Christ exhorted the Jews to follow him. But still the people refused. Proud, stubborn, and deceitful, they condemned him, crying out "crucify him, crucify him."

Betrayed and "despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53: 1-4), Jesus was compelled to the cross.

The people wanted something different from what God sent. They wanted an all-powerful, supernatural king, not a man, and as a result they failed. Jesus was forced to bear the cross alone.

In pity and in deep prayer he cried out: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34a)

The Crime of Man

The crucifixion was thrust upon Jesus by men of evil intent. It is the crime of men not the will of God.

Only because of the unwillingness of the people to respond and because of the power of the forces of evil was Jesus crucified. The crucifixion was Satan's victory, not God's. God had sent His Son, but the people out of malice and ignorance killed him.

"God used the cross," Weatherhead 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.'"

Victory in Resurrection

Considering the circumstances God had no alternative but to allow His Son to bear the suffering of the cross. Then, on the foundation of that suffering, God acted to resurrect him. He showed us through Jesus' life that the way to God is through total love and service.

Through the resurrection, Jesus laid the spiritual foundation for the Christian church, as God was able to inspire belief through the risen Jesus and his counterpart, the Holy Spirit.

Thus, the resurrection is God's victory and forms the basis upon which we as Christians are redeemed through Christ.

If we can look at the world in terms of God's desire to redeem mankind and establish a heavenly Kingdom on Earth, then it is evident that God's plan was for the people to follow and attend Jesus as the Christ, then with love and truth, united around him, they would have been able to turn the hearts of all mankind to God's divine ideal.

If the people had responded and accepted his Kingship all of humanity could have been redeemed at that time, but instead we await another time in history -- the Second Coming -- when God will again seek to fulfill His ultimate will.

God's Ultimate Will

No doubt God's will is supreme and ultimately will be fulfilled, but as to when depends upon man. If man rebels, then God's will must be delayed until some future time and if at that point man again fails to respond it will be prolonged a second time until at some point it is fulfilled.

The Kingdom that God desires was not established two thousand years ago as originally intended. Jesus, as the central figure or channel through whom God was working, was rejected by the chosen people, thus delaying the Kingdom of God's desire.

Man, in his free will, rejected God's will, leaving it to be fulfilled in another age. God's ultimate will had not been thwarted, but His intentional will had.

If we can see this tragedy from the vantage point of God, with the realization of the Kingdom of Heaven as the goal, then both man and God suffer as a result of man's failure, though ultimately the goal will be realized at another point in time.

The establishment of the heavenly ideal of a Kingdom of Heaven on Earth remains to be accomplished in another age, because man failed to fulfill his portion of responsibility for the Kingdom. Today, both Christians and Jews await the consummation of that Kingdom and many people are beginning to sense that we are on the verge of its realization.