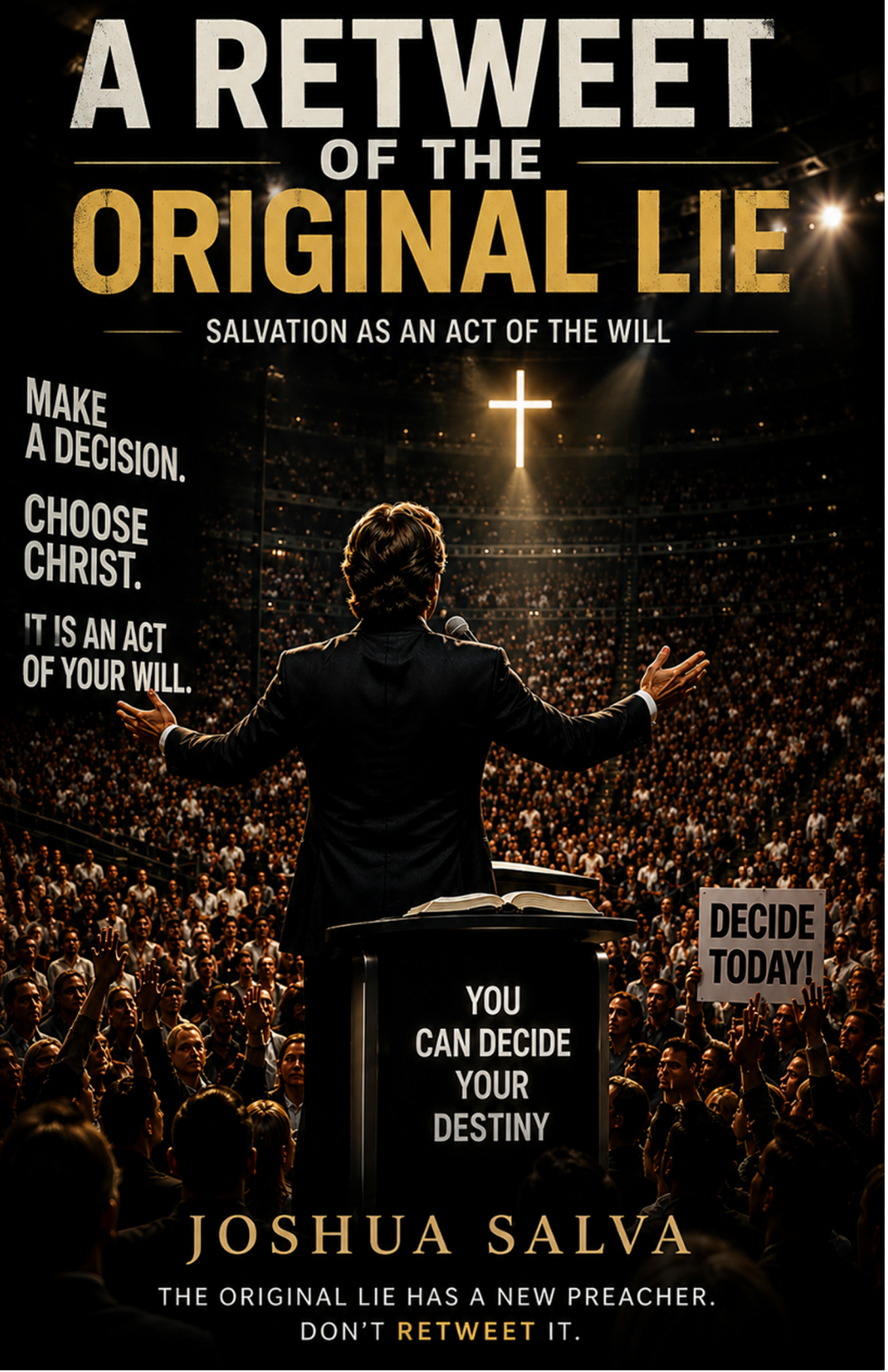
A RETWEET OF THE ORIGINAL LIE

SALVATION AS AN ACT OF THE WILL



JOSHUA SALVA

THE ORIGINAL LIE HAS A NEW PREACHER.
DON'T RETWEET IT.

A Retweet
of the original lie

“Make a Decision, it’s an act of the Will”

Who needs Mercy when you can will yourself into salvation?

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ISBN: 9798994559178

Table of Contents

Prologue *The Charm of the Antichrist* viii

Won't He Be a Charismatic Preacher? viii

Chapter 1 *The Original Lie: "Ye Shall Be as Gods"* 1

Chapter 2 *When the Creature Wanted His Own Light.* *An original lie re-tweet*.... 13

Chapter 3 *The Will Was Free Until It Chose Bondage* 23

Chapter 4 *The Will in Bondage*..... 31

Chapter 5 *Dead Men Don't Resurrect Themselves*..... 41

Chapter 6 *"No Man Can Come"* 49

Chapter 7 *Except "It Were Given Unto Him"*..... 59

Chapter 8 *It Is Not of Him That Willeth*..... 67

Chapter 9 *Not of the Will of Man* 77

Chapter 10 *Of His Own Will Begat He Us* 87

Chapter 11 Repentance Must Be Granted 92

Chapter 12 Faith: The Fruit, Not the Root 101

Chapter 13 Grace Conquers the Will 111

Chapter 14 God Works the Will..... 121

Chapter 15 The Altar Call and the Decisive Moment..... 129

Chapter 16 "Make a Decision" The Religious Re-Tweet. 139

Chapter 17 The Altar Call from Hell.. 149

Chapter 18 The Gospel with Handles and fees. 157

Chapter 19 It Is Finished..... 167

Chapter 20 The Sovereignty of God 175

Chapter 21 The Sovereignty of Mercy 183

Chapter 22 The Sovereignty of Election 195

Epilogue 205

Prologue
The Charm of the Antichrist

Won't He Be a Charismatic Preacher?
He will be indeed

The Antichrist will not come with arguments. He will come with persuasion. With charisma. With signs. With a message powerful enough to deceive.
And what better lie to repeat than the original lie?
"You can will your own destiny".

The serpent's message from the beginning was an appeal to human autonomy—to man becoming the master of his own destiny, his own will, his own way.
And the retweet form of that ancient lie sounds remarkably spiritual:
"Make a decision."
"Choose Christ."
"It is an act of the will."

But Scripture strikes at the very heart of it:

“So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy.”

And again:
“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
The original lie exalted the creature’s will against the will of God.

The everlasting gospel does the opposite.
Salvation is not man willing himself toward God. It is God showing mercy to a man who could never come unless he were drawn.
“*No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him.”*
The final deception will not necessarily sound godless.

It may sound profoundly religious.
It may speak of Jesus.
It may fill stadiums.
It may call men forward.

But it demands a decision and leaves the sovereignty of salvation in the hands of man. **The oldest lie does not need a new message. It only needed a new Preacher.**

Chapter 1
The Original Lie:
“Ye Shall Be as Gods”

There is a moment, often so small that we do not feel it pass, when a human soul silently says, “I will.” It might be in a hospital corridor, staring at a diagnosis. It might be at a computer, lingering over a site you swore you would never visit again. It might be in a church pew, resolving to forgive—or refusing to. In that hidden instant, the most important drama of your life unfolds. Not on a screen. Not on a stage. Inside the will.

We like to imagine that we are primarily thinking creatures who occasionally feel. Or emotional creatures who occasionally think. Scripture, however, draws a sharper line: we are worshiping creatures whose worship is expressed in our willing. To will is to worship. To decide is to bow. Every decision is an act of the will and, therefore, an act of faith in someone’s authority—God’s or our own.

The first great temptation did not attack God's existence, but God's right to define good and evil. The serpent did not plant philosophical atheism in the garden; he planted autonomy. "You shall be as gods." What began as a hiss has become a global chorus, endlessly retweeted in new forms, yet always confessing the same old lie.

In this chapter, we return to that ancient scene in Genesis 3, not as distant spectators, but as those whose wills are still being wooed by that same voice. Later chapters will explore how this lie seeps into our identities, our sexuality, our politics, and our digital age. Here, at the beginning, we stand under the first tree, listening again to the first question, watching the first decision, and realizing with a shudder that we echo it every day.

The Lie Behind Every Decision

If we read Genesis as mere myth, we miss its precision. "Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made." The first revolt of the human will

arrived not with a shout of blasphemy, but with a quiet suggestion. It did not deny the presence of God; it doubted the goodness of God.
The serpent's first tactic was not, "There is no God," but, "Yea, hath God said?" Before he challenged God's law, he questioned God's voice. Doubt the word, and the will soon follows. When the authority of God's speech grows faint, the authority of my inner opinion grows loud. The creature looks at the Creator sideways, wondering if perhaps He is holding something back.

He does not command Eve to hate God or urge her to dramatic revolt. He invites her to take a fresh look at the fruit, to reconsider boundaries, to explore her options. Sin rarely walks in the front door with horns; it usually sends an email marked "Reconsider."

Decision-making is never neutral. We imagine ourselves as free agents, weighing options like a shopper in an aisle. Scripture paints a starker picture. Standing at every crossroads are two competing voices: the Creator's "Thou shalt" and the creature's "I will." To choose is to side

with one voice or the other. Even when we "keep our options open," we already affirm the autonomy of the self.

Later, when we examine how the lie of autonomy plays out in modern culture, we will see that most of our ethical debates are not really about facts. They are about who has the right to say "good" and "evil." Genesis 3 is not an old story; it is the operating system beneath every new controversy.

Autonomy as the Heart of Rebellion

"Ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil" is not only a promise of power. It is a promise of epistemic authority: you shall define reality. The knowledge of good and evil in Scripture is not merely information; it is adjudication. To be "as gods" is to sit on the bench and bang the gavel.

The fall was a transfer of jurisdiction. The creature, designed to receive and reflect, chose instead to declare and determine. Adam and Eve did not become atheists; they became self-

theists. They did not erase God; they relocated the center of authority from God's word to their assessment. Their will became the final court of appeal.

Autonomy is the essence of sin. Sin is not first the breaking of a rule; it is the enthroning of a rival. Beneath every action lies a deeper allegiance. The question is not only, "What did I do?" but "Who did I believe has the right to tell me what to do?" The human will, intoxicated with autonomy, bows to itself and calls that freedom.

The serpent does not care what form our rebellion takes, so long as the will unhooks itself from God. Some will chase pleasure, others power, others religious self-righteousness. It matters little whether you wear your rebellion in leather or in liturgy, provided that at the core you reserve the right to overrule God. Autonomy, not atheism, is the preferred poison.

This is why the language of "choice" has become sacred. We defend not merely what is

chosen, but the sheer act of choosing, as if the unrestrained will were the highest good. We no longer ask first, “Is this good?” but “Is this mine to decide?” Autonomy is the new altar, and the self is the new deity.

In a later chapter, when we confront the mantra “Follow your heart,” we will see that this is simply a poetic rephrasing of “Ye shall be as gods.” The lie has learned our vocabulary, but not changed its intention.

Genesis 3 as the Pattern of Our Wills

Genesis 3 is not only a record of the first sin; it is a pattern of how sin still works whenever we whisper, “My will be done.”

First comes distortion. “Hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?” God is painted as stingy. Obedience feels like deprivation, not delight. When God’s commands are caricatured, rebellion starts to seem like sanity.

Then comes denial. “Ye shall not surely die.” Judgment is recast as overreaction. If there is no death, there is no dread, no urgency. The will relaxes.

Finally comes deification. “Ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.” You will not merely disobey; you will graduate. Autonomy is sold as maturity, self-definition as growth. To submit is childish; to assert is adult.

And then the simple act: “She took… and did eat… and gave… and he did eat.” No thunder. No speeches. Just hands, mouths, and wills. The universe tilted on the hinge of an ordinary motion.

In your life and mine, the pattern repeats. We distort God’s word. We deny the seriousness of sin. We deify our preferences. Then we act: a signature, a click, a silence when truth should be spoken. Each motion is a liturgy of the will, either worshiping God or the self.

Future chapters will trace how this pattern plays out in relationships, nations, churches,

and identities. The story behind every story is Genesis 3.

To make a decision, then, is never casual. It is an act of the will standing before two trees: the tree of self-rule and the tree of surrender. The original lie still offers its glittering promise: "You shall be as gods." The gospel offers a better word: "You shall be sons and daughters." One path exalts the will and ends in death. The other bows the will and finds life.

To see how deeply this reaches into us, listen to our vocabulary: "It's my life. My body. My truth. My path." Each phrase carries a quiet assumption: I decide what is good and evil for me. The serpent's boast has been compressed into a slogan.

We call this authenticity, self-actualization, empowerment. There is real courage in refusing false masks, but beneath our noble names a claim often hides: I am answerable only to myself. My will is its own justification. The only remaining sin is to question the sovereignty of another's desire.

Yet our wills were never designed to bear this weight. When the self becomes its own god, it must also become its own savior, lawgiver, and judge. No wonder anxiety blooms where autonomy is most exalted. To be as gods is a heavy vocation.

Genesis 3 exposes not only our rebellion, but our misery. “Their eyes were opened,” and what they saw first was shame. Autonomy delivered not liberation, but hiding. Leaves were sewn, excuses rehearsed, blame redirected. The self that took the throne scrambled for cover.

This is still the pattern. When we enthrone the will, we must protect it at all costs. We curate our image, edit our histories, unfollow dissenting voices. Critique feels like blasphemy. To question my choices is to question my right to choose, and that right has become sacred.

The gospel’s first work is profoundly offensive to the autonomous will. It comes with a verdict: “All we like sheep have gone

astray; we have turned every one to his own way." Our problem is not simply that we have done bad things, but that we have insisted on "our own way" as the highest good. The gospel names this treason.

Yet the same verdict opens the door to mercy. If autonomy is the problem, surrender is the cure. If self-rule has enslaved us, then the call of Christ—"Follow me"—is not an invitation into drudgery but into restored design. The will that was made to answer "Amen" to God's voice is summoned back to its rightful posture. Not erased. Reordered.

In later chapters, when we examine how the lie of autonomy distorts our identities, desires, and online lives, this truth will stand as the plumb line: freedom is not the absence of authority, but the presence of the right authority.

For now, linger with two postures of the will. In the first, the will stands upright, chin lifted, gavel in hand. It treats obedience as negotiable, commands as suggestions,

holiness as optional. Its favorite word is “maybe.” It keeps every sentence about God on probation.

In the second, the will kneels. It still thinks, questions, wrestles, but settles the prior question: who is Lord here? It receives God’s word as light for its path. It does not trust its impulses as infallible; it cross-examines them before Scripture.

These postures appear in kitchens, boardrooms, dorm rooms. In each case, beneath the details, the same drama unfolds: whose voice will be believed?

There is Another whose will has already stood where ours has failed. In a different garden, under a different tree, a Second Adam faced the pull of autonomy: “Not my will, but thine, be done.” Where the first humans grasped at godhood, the true God humbled Himself. Where we declared independence, He embraced obedience unto death.

You cannot silence the serpent on your own. Neither can you choose which voice your will, will worship, your will is in bondage.
To decide is to worship. And to worship Him, rather than the small, quivering god of self, is the beginning of wisdom, freedom, and life.

Chapter 2
When the Creature Wanted His Own Light.

An original lie re-tweet

Rebellion never begins with a roar. It begins with a whisper: what if I could shine on my own? Before there was any rebellion, there was only one kind of light—uncreated, self-sustaining, blazing with endless fullness in God Himself. Every other brightness was borrowed. The universe was a hall of mirrors, and every mirror existed for one purpose: to catch that Light and fling it back in praise. Creature and Creator were not rivals or peers. They were never meant to be compared at all. Yet somewhere in the quiet, a thought formed in a creature's heart: I am tired of being a mirror.

That thought, more than any outward act, was the first tremor of cosmic revolt. In it, the lines between creature and Creator blurred. The lie was born: the borrowed could behave as if it were the source; the dependent could pose as

if it were self-sufficient. This chapter is about that first “re-tweet” of the original lie, the way it still circulates through our hearts, timelines, and cultures, promising a light that looks like glory but tastes like dust.

The distinction between creature and Creator is not a small theological footnote. It is the architecture of reality. The Creator alone possesses life in Himself. He is not plugged into any outlet, not refueled by any external stream. He does not improve, tire, or recharge. He simply is. His righteousness is native to Him, the way heat is native to fire and wetness to water. His light is not something He carries; it is what He is.

The creature, by contrast, is entirely derivative. Every breath is borrowed air. Every heartbeat is a rented rhythm. Every virtue is a reflection of Someone else’s goodness, traced in fragile lines across temporary flesh. We have no independent life, righteousness, or light. Our very existence is a confession of dependence. To be a creature is to be contingent: if He stops willing, we stop being.

This dependency is not an insult. It is our dignity. A mirror is most glorious when it is turned toward the sun. The shimmering sea does not resent the sky it reflects. The moon does not apologize that she has no light of her own; she glows because she consents to borrow. Creation's highest honor is to say, "Not from me, but through me. Not mine, but His."

Yet the original rebel did not want to be a mirror. Scripture sketches him as a creature of great beauty, saturated with reflected glory. But reflected glory felt like a restraint. He wanted ownership, not stewardship; origin, not overflow. "I will ascend," he said. That sentence is the DNA of every later rebellion. It is the fantasy of creaturely independence dressed up as destiny: I will define myself; I will establish my own righteousness; I will generate my own light.

Notice what changed in that moment. God did not become less glorious. Creation did not suddenly gain new capacities. Only perception shifted. What had always been gift began to be

imagined as property. What had always been reflection began to posture as source. Rebellion is not the discovery of new power; it is the mislabeling of borrowed power as personal capital. The lie is not that we are nothing; the lie is that we are everything by ourselves.

When reflected glory is exchanged for imagined self-sufficiency, distortions follow. Dependence, which once felt like delight, starts to feel like humiliation. Prayer becomes optional at best, burdensome at worst. Obedience looks like a chain instead of a lifeline. We begin to speak in the language of rights rather than gifts, of autonomy rather than worship. We no longer ask, “How can I magnify Him?” but “How can I maximize me?”

Righteousness becomes a personal project rather than a received robe. Instead of standing under the steady shine of God’s holiness, we try to manufacture a glow. We curate behaviors, polish reputations, and angle ourselves in flattering light—anything to avoid

the simplicity of saying, “I have nothing good that I did not receive.” The creature, hungry for the Creator’s role, performs as if the stage belongs to him.

Light itself is redefined. Once, light meant the unveiled presence of God—truth burning away illusion, love chasing out fear, purity exposing and cleansing corruption. Now, light is reduced to visibility, attention, acclaim. If others see me, applaud me, affirm me, I must be shining. The bright screen replaces the burning bush. A “like” feels more urgent than “Well done, good and faithful servant.” The original lie goes viral: You can be your own light. You can be enough by yourself.

This is what I mean by a “re-tweet” of the original lie. The first rebellion set the pattern; every later rebellion is an echo, a reshare of the same poisonous thought. We recycle it in spiritual language, psychological language, entrepreneurial language. We baptize self-sufficiency as wisdom and rename independence as maturity. We call our reflections “original” and our borrowed gifts

“innate greatness.” In Chapter 1, we traced how the first whisper of deception entered the story; in this chapter, we watch how that same whisper is amplified across generations and technologies, from ancient altars to glowing phones.

The tragedy is that the creature’s attempt to be its own light does not enlarge the creature. It shrinks it. A mirror turned away from the sun does not become a star. It simply grows dim. When you disconnect a lamp from the socket, it keeps its shape but loses its purpose. It is still a lamp, but it is no longer luminous. So it is with us: the more we insist on independent life, the more we become shadow-versions of what we were meant to be.

Yet the lie still seduces, precisely because it flatters. It does not begin by saying, “Reject God.” It begins by saying, “Improve God’s work. Optimize His design. Why be content as a reflector when you could be a source?” It appeals to our God-given longing for glory but redirects that longing inward. It promises the Creator’s crown without the Creator’s cross,

the Creator's throne without the Creator's heart.

Authority, then, must start by telling the truth about our place. We are not accidents, but we are also not Absolutes. We are glorious, but our glory is derivative. We are responsible, but we are never self-sustaining. To confess this is not to diminish human worth; it is to locate it. The diamond is magnificent, but only because it drinks in and scatters light it does not create. The more clearly we distinguish creature from Creator, the more clearly we apprehend both humility and hope.

Humility, because there is no ground for boasting. Every skill, every success, every insight is a loan. As Paul asks, "What do you have that you did not receive?" The creature who understands this stops advertising himself as an origin story. Hope, because if our life and light are sourced in God, then our failures cannot finally extinguish them. We are not asked to generate divinity from dust; we are invited to abide in One who cannot go out.

In the chapters ahead, we will trace how this original lie continues to mutate, how it dresses itself in religious robes, secular slogans, and spiritual-sounding mantras. But here, at the foundation, we must hold fast to this: rebellion begins not with dramatic evil but with a subtle exchange—reflected glory surrendered for imagined self-sufficiency. Whenever we prefer the thrill of being seen over the joy of seeing Him, whenever we chase applause more than Presence, we participate in that same exchange.

The cure is not to despise our desire for glory, but to re-anchor it. We were made to shine, but only by turning toward the Light. We were made to live, but only by admitting we are not the Life. The line between creature and Creator is not a prison wall; it is the boundary of our freedom. Inside it, we can rest. Outside it, we must pretend, forever anxious that our self-made light will flicker and fail.

And it will. Every counterfeit sun eventually sets. Yet above all borrowed brightness, the true Light remains, undiminished,

unthreatened, inviting every weary mirror to turn back and shine again.

Chapter 3
The Will Was Free
Until It Chose Bondage

There is a terrible irony at the heart of human history. Creatures fashioned to walk upright before God, radiant with borrowed glory, now shuffle under burdens they once freely chose. We feel the weight in our habits, in our addictions, in the dull ache of repeated failure. We speak of "willpower" with a kind of nervous optimism, as if a few more resolutions might finally break the pattern. Yet beneath the slogans lies a quieter confession: something has gone wrong with the will itself. It was once free in a way we can scarcely imagine; now its very exercise reveals how deeply it is entangled.

In the previous chapter we traced how sin spirals outward from the heart into lives and cultures. Here we go further inward, returning to the decisive moment when humanity's will turned from freedom to bondage. And as we

look ahead to later chapters, especially those on grace and new birth, we will see why any real hope must begin with an honest diagnosis of this captivity. To understand the promise of liberation, we must first face the strange story of a will that shackled itself while reaching for independence.

In the beginning, the human will stood straight, unbent, aligned with the Creator's goodness. Adam and Eve were not robots, pre-programmed to perform divine routines without awareness or choice. They were image-bearers, able to deliberate, to love, to prefer one thing over another. Their obedience in Eden would not have been mechanical but the joyful agreement of a heart that knows and desires the good. Freedom, at first, did not mean hovering between good and evil as equal options; it meant the unforced ability to live within the will of God, without internal contradiction.

This original freedom was not autonomy but harmony. The human will was genuinely ours—personal, active, responsible—yet it

moved along the currents of God's wisdom like a ship on a favorable wind. The boundary set around the tree in the garden showed that our will was creaturely, not absolute. But that limit was not a prison wall; it was the perimeter of a vast playground. Within that circle of obedience, our first parents could choose, explore, name, cultivate, and celebrate. Their liberty was the liberty of a musician who can improvise endlessly because she is at home within the key.

The tragedy of the Fall was that this well-tuned will chose to retune itself. The serpent's temptation was not merely about fruit; it was about authority. "You will be like God." The lie implied that freedom meant cutting loose from the Creator's command, that dependence was humiliation, that obedience diminished the self. The first sin did not prove the greatness of autonomous will; it showcased the disaster of attempting to become autonomous. In stretching for a throne that was never theirs, Adam and Eve did not rise; they fell.

Notice how the lie worked. It did not deny God's existence; it questioned His goodness. It suggested that God was holding something back, that His "no" was control rather than care. Under that suspicion the human will turned in upon itself. Instead of receiving reality as gift, it began to calculate reality as opportunity. Instead of asking, "What has God said?" it now asked, "What do I want?" That pivot—subtle, interior, deadly—was the moment the will stepped into its own shadow. It was still a will; it still chose. But now its choices flowed from a newly distorted center.

Scripture describes the result not as a minor bruise but as a dominion. Having rebelled against God, humanity came under the reign of sin. The language is political and legal: sin does not merely visit; it rules. Our ancestors traded the gentle yoke of divine authority for the harsh mastery of a counterfeit king. In that covenant wreckage, the will did not cease to exist, but it ceased to be upright. It became bent, biased, tilted toward self. Like a compass whose magnet has been scrambled, it still spins, but it no longer points true north.

This is why the Fall is not a triumph of human freedom but the story of its collapse. When a person jumps from a cliff in the name of autonomy, the flight feels exhilarating—for a moment. Gravity does not negotiate. In the same way, the early exercise of rebellious will might have felt like liberation to our first parents: no more boundaries, no more prohibitions. Yet the new "freedom" was already a fall in motion, and the impact was catastrophic. Instead of discovering themselves as gods, they discovered themselves as fugitives, hiding from the One whose presence had once been their joy.

From that moment onward, the will of fallen humanity has been both active and enslaved. We still choose; we still weigh alternatives; we still speak of "I decided." Yet at the deepest level, our choosing operates within a corrupted landscape of desire. Sin is not only in what we do; it seeps into what we want. We freely select, yet our selections arise from a heart already curved inward. This is why, as later chapters will emphasize, grace must reach

deeper than our external decisions; it must pierce the dungeon of our affections.

Think of a person addicted to a destructive habit. On the surface, they are making daily choices: to drink, to scroll, to rage, to indulge. No one holds their hand and forces them. Yet we instinctively speak of them as "enslaved." The pattern is bigger than any single decision, and the decisions themselves are powered by cravings stronger than their stated intentions. So, it is with sin writ large. Humanity is not chained to a wall, unable to move; we are chained to a false master, eagerly serving what is killing us. Our will is in motion, but its orbit is captivity.

The Fall, then, did not erase responsibility; it magnified it. We cannot plead helpless neutrality. We collaborate in our own bondage, loving the chains even as we curse them. This is the bitter paradox: the will was free until it chose bondage, and now its very bondage is maintained by its willing participation. Each generation re-signs the ancient contract, re-tweets the original lie that

independence from God is the path to life. Every act of proud self-assertion echoes that first, fatal declaration: “I know better. I will decide good and evil for myself.”

Yet even as we trace this ruin, we must resist despair. A diagnosis is not a eulogy. The point of exposing the will’s slavery is not to sneer at humanity but to clear the ground for hope. In a later chapter we will see how divine grace does not abolish the will but resurrects it. God does not save by overriding the human person as if hacking a system; He saves by liberating us from within, giving us new desires that begin to love what we once resisted. But we will never rejoice in that miracle if we cling to the flattering myth that our deepest problem is a lack of information or motivation.

For now, it is enough to let the truth settle: we were not created as slaves to sin. Our chains are neither original nor natural; they are historical, chosen, inherited, reinforced. The disaster of the Fall was not that humans became too free, but that we twisted freedom into self-worship and so handed ourselves over

to another lord. The will that turned from God did not ascend to sovereignty; it sank beneath a power it could neither comprehend nor control.

If we listen carefully to our own conflicted hearts, we can hear the echo of Eden's loss and the faint memory of a better liberty. Our longing for wholeness, our grief over our own duplicity, our frustration with "the person I keep being" are not illusions; they are the groaning of a will that dimly remembers what it was made to be. To name our bondage is already to stand, however shakily, facing the direction of home. In that posture, the ancient promise of Another—One whose will never bowed to the serpent's lie—begins to sound not like a doctrine only, but like deliverance. The will was free, until it chose bondage; grace will be grace, when it makes the bound will truly free again.

Chapter 4
The Will in Bondage

The language of our age celebrates choice as the highest freedom. We are told that as long as we can select among options, chart a path, and "be ourselves," we are free. Yet Jesus' sober words cut across that modern confidence: "Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin". He does not say that the sinner negotiates with sin or occasionally stumbles into it. He says the one who practices sin is its slave. To the crowd that heard Him this was an affront; to us, raised on slogans of autonomy, it is an outrage. But the outrage reveals how deeply the will itself is implicated in the bondage Christ describes. We do not experience sin as a chain clamped on from the outside. We experience it from the inside, as desire, as choice, as "what I really want."

This is the misery of the fallen will: it is truly our own, yet it is not truly free. The hand that signs the contract is our hand; the ink is our blood; the fine print is written in the language

of our cravings. When Scripture speaks of humanity "under sin," it does not portray passive victims dragged unwillingly to evil, but active agents whose agency has been captured, bent, and weaponised against the God who made them. Fallen man still wills, chooses, desires, and acts—but as one whose nature has been corrupted, like a compass whose needle still moves but no longer points to true north.

Romans 6–8 is the great laboratory where the Spirit, through Paul, dissects this condition. In Romans 6, the apostle stacks images of slavery, obedience, lordship, wages. "Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey?" (6:16). Yielding is an act of the will. We present ourselves, we step forward, we say with our choices, "You may command me." Yet the result is not neutral. Sin, once obeyed, does not remain a polite employer; it becomes a master. The will, thinking it negotiates, in fact capitulates. Every act of disobedience tightens a cord around the heart, until what

began as flirtation hardens into habit and habit ossifies into character.

Paul presses the point by personifying sin as a tyrant reigning in mortal bodies (6:12). He speaks of "the old man" crucified, "that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin" (6:6). Here "body" is not merely flesh and bone, but the organised equipment of life, the complex of faculties now commandeered. The mind still thinks, but now in crooked lines. The affections still burn, but toward idols. The will still chooses, but along the grain of its own corruption. Bondage does not cancel activity; it corrupts it.

Chapter 2 described how the lie of the serpent echoed through the ages; Chapter 3 explored how that lie clouded our minds and affections. Now we face its most unsettling consequence: the lie has wrapped itself around the will. We are not merely deceived; we are devoted. We do not only believe falsehood; we love it. The retweet of the original lie is not just mental assent, but pledged allegiance. "Ye shall be as

gods" was not simply a false prediction; it became a cherished promise, and the will rushed to embrace it.

In Romans 7, Paul gives us a window into the inner drama of the enslaved will. "That which I do I allow not," he cries: "for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I" (7:15). The will appears split, at war with itself. On one side stands a renewed delight in God's law—"I consent unto the law that it is good" (7:16). On the other side stands another law "in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin" (7:23). There is desire for righteousness, yet a counter-desire, deeper and more insistent, bends the person back toward disobedience. The will reaches, but its reach is shackled.

This passage is not Paul shrugging, "Nobody's perfect." The tone is desperate. "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (7:24). The problem is not that man sometimes chooses wrongly. The problem is a ruling power—"sin that dwelleth

in me" (7:17)—which commandeers the very faculty of choosing. The prisoner wants the door open, but is also the jailer, clutching the keys. He both longs to be free and loves his chains.

We must be careful. The bondage of the will does not mean fallen people always pick the worst option. A slave may obey cheerfully or reluctantly, intelligently or foolishly; he may even perform acts that seem noble. Scripture can acknowledge this kind of relative goodness. Yet beneath the variety of outward choices runs a single allegiance: apart from grace, the will does not and cannot choose God as God. It may choose religion as comfort, morality as self-definition, spirituality as ornament, but it will not bow in adoring surrender to the living Lord. That is the core of its bondage.

Jesus' stark word in John 8 comes in a context that makes this clear. He is speaking to Jews who had believed on Him, promising that if they continue in His word, they will know the truth, and the truth will make them free (8:31–

32). They protest, “We be Abraham’s seed, and were never in bondage to any man” (8:33). Their denial is absurd, given slavery in Egypt and subjugation under Rome. But Jesus cuts through historical pride to the spiritual reality: “Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin” (8:34). They think birthright secures freedom; He exposes a deeper lineage: “Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do” (8:44). That is the will in bondage—doing the desires of another, yet doing them willingly, as one’s “own” lusts.

Notice that Jesus does not say the devil drags them screaming into actions they detest. He says they “will” to do his desires. The tragic genius of satanic bondage is that it works through our own wanting. The chains are forged out of our loves. We are not puppets with strings; we are idolaters with cravings. The heart builds its own prison and then hangs curtains to make it cozy. The barred window is painted with slogans of authenticity. The locked door is decorated with self-chosen symbols. We call this décor freedom.

Romans 8 turns the corner to hope, but without flattering the unaided will. “The carnal mind is enmity against God,” Paul writes, “for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God” (8:7–8). The problem is not lack of information, but hostility; not weakness alone, but enmity. The will is not a neutral umpire between God and sin. It is a combatant, already enlisted and armed against heaven. And it “cannot” change sides by itself. The “cannot” is moral, not mechanical; it marks the depth of our aversion, not the absence of faculties. We have eyes, but we love the darkness. We have ears, but we resent the Voice. We have wills, but they are turned against the Good.

Yet into this battlefield comes another will: the will of God in Christ and by the Spirit. “For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death” (8:2). Where the law could command but not empower, the Spirit both commands and creates new desires. He does not bypass the human will, treating us as puppets. He

liberates it from within, breaking sin's spell, exposing its false promises, kindling a new affection for God. The same person who once could not submit now finds a new "I" arising: "Ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father" (8:15). The cry "Abba" is the sound of a will set free to love.

Later chapters will explore this liberation more fully, tracing how grace reorders our choices and reshapes our habits. But we must first let Scripture strip us of every illusion about natural freedom. The sinner is not an independent sovereign occasionally making poor decisions; he is a servant whose daily obedience accrues wages, and "the wages of sin is death" (6:23). The mind that boasts in its autonomy is reenacting the first boast in Eden and retweeting its ruin. The will that claims to be godlike is, in truth, enslaved to a parasite that cannot create, only corrupt.

To recognize this is not to despair; it is to step into reality. Only those who know they are slaves can hear good news in the words, "If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be

free indeed” (John 8:36). The gospel does not negotiate with the old will; it crucifies it with Christ and raises a new life in its place. The lie promised, “Ye shall be as gods.” The truth answers, “Ye shall be sons and daughters,” no longer bound to sin, but bound in love to the Lord whose service is perfect freedom.

Chapter 5
Dead Men Don't Resurrect Themselves

You do not flatter a corpse by calling it "unwell." You do not step into a morgue and ask the bodies if they would like to try harder today. Scripture refuses our sentimental softening. It speaks with an accuracy that cuts through self-deception: apart from Christ, we are not merely limping, searching, or indecisive. We are dead. The Apostle Paul, in Ephesians 2:1–5, breaks the illusion with one hard, holy word: dead. This chapter is about facing that verdict without flinching, and discovering that only when we accept the depth of our helplessness can we see the height of God's mercy.

Earlier, we considered how the original lie in Eden whispered, "You will not surely die." That lie has been retweeted through the centuries in more polished language: "You're basically good," "You just need a little

guidance," "Look within." The storyline of this book has traced how that lie distorts our view of God (chapter 2), inflates our sense of autonomy (chapter 3), and makes us think we can climb to heaven by self-improvement (chapter 4). Now we come to its sharpest version: the idea that spiritually dead people can resurrect themselves. Ephesians 2 silences that illusion.

Paul writes, "And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked." Notice the strange pair: dead, yet walking. It is a description of a humanity moving, choosing, desiring, building empires, falling in love, writing songs—and yet, in relation to God, utterly lifeless. The heart beats, the mind calculates, the imagination dreams, but the spiritual pulse is flat. This is not insult; it is diagnosis. The same God who spoke the universe into being now speaks into our condition, and He calls it death.

We protest. Death feels too strong. We instinctively downgrade the verdict: "broken," "wounded," "lost." Those are true, yet

insufficient. A broken bone can knit; a wounded arm can heal; a lost traveler can find the right path if someone hands over a map. But a corpse cannot cooperate. It cannot meet God halfway or turn over a new spiritual leaf. Paul is not saying we are as bad as we possibly could be. He is saying that, regarding our ability to know, love, and obey God from the heart, we have no independent life. We are, by nature, separated from the Source.

This is why, in chapter 4, when we dismantled the myth of neutral free will, we emphasized that sinners are not standing in a spiritual voting booth, serenely weighing options between God and sin. Ephesians 2 reveals the deeper backdrop: the will is not an impartial judge; it is the expression of a dead heart. Our choices are real and responsible, but they rise from a root already turned away from God. Death is not just a metaphor; it is a condition of incapacity toward God.

Paul continues, “following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air… among whom we all once lived in the

passions of our flesh." Dead people drift. They are carried. Instead of standing in truth, we float with the current of a fallen world and an unseen enemy. Our "freedom" is, in fact, captivity that feels like autonomy. The passions of the flesh do not look like chains; they feel like desires. Yet they bind as surely as iron.

Here is the insight: death is not only the end result of sin; it is also its atmosphere. We breathe it, normalize it, decorate it. We call self-worship "authenticity," greed "ambition," lust "self-expression." The retweeted lie refreshes itself on every generation's feed: "You are not that bad; you are enough." But Paul will not let us hide behind curated self-images. "We were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind." Nature, not accident. Wrath, not neutrality. Like the rest, not the exception.

At this point, the human ego cries out for a loophole. Surely there is something, however small, that we contributed to our rescue. A spark of wisdom, a noble impulse, a final yes that tips the scales. Surely we dragged

ourselves at least an inch out of the grave. But dead men do not claw through coffin lids, steady the surgeon's hand, or initiate their own heartbeat. To say we were dead is to say that the first move of salvation could never have risen from within us.

This is where the argument of this book tightens like a knot. In chapter 1, we traced how God speaks reality into being by His Word. In salvation, He does the same. In chapter 3, we saw that His sovereignty is not a threat to our personhood but its foundation. Now that logic comes home: if God is God, then spiritual life must begin with His sovereign initiative, not our independent decision. Ephesians 2 is not a blow to human dignity; it is the burning away of our illusions so that real dignity—life with God—can be received as a gift.

Then, in the middle of the graveyard, two words thunder like creation's first "Let there be": "But God." Not "But you got serious." Not "But you finally listened to your heart." "But God, being rich in mercy, because of the

great love with which he loved us… made us alive together with Christ." The grammar is brutal on our pride and beautiful for our hope. God is the subject; we are the objects. He made us alive. He did not offer a self-help program to the dead. He performed resurrection.

Resurrection is not consensus. It is not a compromise between divine effort and human contribution. It is a unilateral act of power and mercy. The power that raised Jesus bodily from the grave is applied spiritually to sinners. Paul ties our life to Christ's: "together with Christ." Our story is stitched into His. When He walked out of the tomb, the blueprint was set for every future spiritual resurrection. No one can repeat Easter from the inside of their own soul. They can only be joined to the risen Christ by an act of sheer grace.

This grace is not vague kindness; it is laser-focused initiative. "By grace you have been saved" is Paul's refrain. Grace does not mean God lowers the bar; it means Christ has already met the bar, shattered the chains, and now bestows life on those who could never

earn it. The dead bring only their death; the living Christ brings everything else. There is no negotiation across that divide, only a one-way miracle.

Someone may ask, “If I was dead, what about the moment I believed? Did that not come from me?” Your experience of turning, of trusting, of calling on Christ was real and conscious. You were no puppet. But Ephesians 2 insists that beneath that conscious act lay an unseen miracle: God had already spoken “Live.” Your faith was the first breath of a resurrected heart, not the self-generated gasp of a corpse deciding to wake. Faith is the evidence of prior life, not the cause of it.

This is why spiritual pride is absurd. To boast in your salvation is like a once-dead man bragging about how well he lay in the coffin. The only proper posture is wonder. The truest sentence a Christian can say about their story is, “I was dead, but God made me alive with Christ.” That sentence is the funeral of self-congratulation and the birth of gratitude.

It also reframes evangelism. In later chapters we will consider how this doctrine fuels our witness instead of paralyzing it. For now, see this: if people are spiritually dead, then our cleverness cannot awaken them, but neither can their resistance finally defeat God. We preach, plead, and pray because we know that over every closed heart there hovers a God who specializes in resurrection. Our task is not to manufacture life, but to announce the One who gives it.

This chapter presses us to relinquish the last, stubborn claim of the original lie: that somewhere, deep down, we possess the power to fix ourselves. We do not. Dead men do not resurrect themselves. But God, being rich in mercy, loves the lifeless and calls them into being. When you finally stop insisting that you are "basically fine," you are ready to hear the best news in the universe: your condition is beyond self-repair, but not beyond His reach. Only those who know they are dead can truly celebrate resurrection.

Chapter 6
“No Man Can Come”

Most people assume that coming to Christ is a matter of finally deciding what we have always been able to do. We imagine faith like a door we could open at any moment if only we grew serious enough, desperate enough, or religious enough. Yet the words of Jesus cut directly across that comforting assumption: “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him.” In that brief sentence, the drama of salvation shifts from the level of our moods and choices to the deeper question of our very ability. Christ does not merely lament that men will not come; He declares that they cannot come—unless Another acts first.

This is not a puzzle tossed into Scripture to keep theologians employed. It is a surgical statement, exposing the real condition of every human heart. We are not neutral wanderers considering the merits of Christ among many options; we are spiritually disabled, unable to

walk toward Him at all. When Jesus speaks this way, He is not trying to confuse the humble but to humble the confident. He strips us of the flattering illusion that, at bottom, we are the decisive cause of our salvation. Before we willed, believed, or moved, the Father drew.

To hear Him rightly, we must listen with the same honesty that earlier chapters demanded. When we considered the depth of human sin, we saw that our rebellion was not a surface irritation but a corruption of the heart. When we explored the nature of grace, we saw that it was not God's gentle applause for our good intentions but His powerful intervention for the helpless. Now those threads are drawn tighter. "No man can come" gathers our sin and God's grace into a single, stark line: human inability answered by divine action.

From "Will Not" to "Cannot"

We are comfortable admitting that many people will not come to Christ. We see unbelief all around us: indifference, hostility,

polite distance. We recognize the stubbornness in our own past. “I did not want Him,” we might say. Scripture affirms this: “Ye will not come to me, that ye might have life.” There is real guilt in that refusal; it is a chosen turning away.

But John 6:44 presses beyond the level of will. Jesus does not say merely, “No man will come.” He says, “No man can come.” The shift is subtle yet seismic. “Will not” speaks of refusal; “cannot” speaks of inability. One is about what we do; the other is about what we are. A man who “will not” is frowning at the open gate. A man who “cannot” is chained to the ground.

Some recoil at this. “If we cannot come, how can we be blamed for not coming?” Scripture does not hush that with slogans. Instead, it asks us to reconsider our assumptions about freedom. We imagine that so long as we act according to our desires, we are fully free and fully able. But what if our desires themselves are diseased? What if the heart is not a neutral chooser but a factory of enmity against God?

When Jesus says “no man can,” He is naming the slavery of a will that always walks away from the light when left to itself.

This is why earlier chapters lingered over the depth of sin. If sin were only a series of unfortunate choices, then a firmer will could solve it. But if sin is a death in the soul, then exhortation alone is useless. A corpse cannot obey a command to rise. It must first be given life.

The Nature of the Father’s Drawing

Into that impossibility, the second half of Christ’s sentence arrives: “…except the Father which hath sent me draw him.” Where human ability fails, divine drawing begins. The verse that closes the door on self-salvation opens a greater door onto the Father’s initiative.

We must be careful here. To many, “drawing” suggests a soft persuasion, a heavenly advertising campaign that leaves the final decision untouched and sovereign. In that

view, God draws everyone in the same general way and then waits to see who will finally choose Him. But that picture does not match the tone of Jesus' words. He is explaining why some believe and others do not, why crowds can hear the same sermon yet walk away unchanged while a few confess, "Thou hast the words of eternal life."

The drawing of the Father is not a mere suggestion; it is a re-creation. It is not God whispering to a neutral heart but God awakening a hostile heart. It is the difference between a magnet politely inviting a nail and a magnet seizing the nail because iron cannot resist metal. When God draws, He does so as the Maker of the heart, not as a salesman at its door.

This drawing is not coercion. God does not drag the unwilling into a heaven they loathe. The wonder of His drawing is that He changes what we love. He bends the crooked affections until Christ becomes beautiful to the soul that once found Him dull. The will still chooses—but it now chooses what it has come to delight

in. Behind this new delight stands the Father's prior work.

The Humbling of Human Pride

At this point, pride begins to tremble. If "no man can come" unless the Father draws, then we are robbed of any boast. We cannot say, "I was wiser," for wisdom is the fruit of the drawing. We cannot say, "I was more serious," for holy seriousness is its effect. Even our repentance is revealed as a gift, our faith as the hand that God Himself has opened.

This humbling is not cruelty; it is mercy. Pride wants a salvation in which we make the final difference—a story in which God does much, but we do the last bit that tips the scales. That story feels flattering, but it is the old lie retweeted in religious language: "Ye shall be as gods." The gospel shatters that narrative. It announces that the decisive difference was made not by our will but by the Father who drew us to the crucified Son.

Earlier, when we considered grace, we described it as one-sided favor. Here we see the inner engine of that favor. Grace is not God

adjusting Himself to our choices; it is God creating in us the very choice by which we cling to Christ. To confess this is to lay the crown of our salvation entirely at His feet.

The Comfort of Divine Inability

What begins as an offense to pride becomes a profound comfort to the broken. For the sinner who has finally despaired of self-improvement, the words "no man can come" ring true. "I have tried," he says. "I have made resolutions, walked aisles, recited prayers, and yet my heart remains cold." To such a soul, the doctrine of inability is not an insult but an honest diagnosis. It explains why moral renovation projects fail: the foundation itself is cracked.

But Jesus does not end with our inability. He adds, "except the Father draw him." The verse that closes the path of self-rescue opens the path of divine rescue. If coming to Christ depended on a final, elusive act of our own strength, the despairing would be lost indeed.

But if coming depends on the Father's drawing, then even the weakest may hope. For the question is no longer, "Can I make my heart come?" but "Is the Father able to draw hearts like mine?" The answer of the gospel is yes.

As this book has unfolded, conviction of sin and amazement at grace have been woven together. You were meant to feel cornered by your inability so that you might fall into the arms of God's ability. You were meant to see that every step you took toward Christ was itself carried by a hand you did not see at the time.

Living Under the Draw of God

If the Father's drawing is the hidden root of our coming, then the Christian life is the long discovery of how deeply we have been acted upon. We look back and realize that what we once called coincidence was providence, that what we once called curiosity was awakening, that what we once called "finally getting

serious" was the quiet conquest of the soul by God.

This recognition changes how we view others as well. We stop treating evangelism as a contest of human cleverness. Our task is to sow the word, to preach Christ crucified, to call all men everywhere to believe. But beneath that call, we trust the Father to draw whom He will. We speak boldly, pray earnestly, and rest in the truth that no man can come—yet some surely will, because God surely draws.

It also guards us from despair when people we love remain unmoved. Their resistance is real; their guilt is real. Yet their conversion does not hang on our skill or their emotional stamina. It hangs on the same divine action that once overcame us. The doctrine that humbles the convert becomes the pillow of the evangelist.
In the end, Christ's words in John 6:44 call us to worship. The Father who sent the Son also draws to the Son. The Son who was lifted up draws all kinds of men to Himself. The Spirit who breathes life makes the dead hear the

Shepherd’s voice. Our coming is wrapped on every side by God’s going forth. We did not build the bridge, we did not begin the journey, and we will not be the ones who finally secure our arrival. The Father drew; the Father draws; the Father will yet draw, until every chosen heart has come and every boasting tongue is silenced except the tongue that says, with wonder, “Of Him, and through Him, and to Him, are all things.”

Chapter 7
Except
“It Were Given Unto Him”

Some verses in Scripture take away our illusions in a single sentence. John 6:65 is one of them: “No man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father.” The words land like a thunderclap in a culture that assumes the will of man is the final court of appeal. We like to think of ourselves as spiritual shoppers, free to stroll the aisles of religious options and select Christ if and when we please. Jesus quietly removes that fantasy. “No man can come.” Not merely “no man may,” as if it were a legal permission, but “no man can,” a statement of inability. The gate of salvation is not merely narrow; it is locked from the inside, and the Father holds the key.

The Shattering of Spiritual Self-Sufficiency

Christ’s assertion in John 6 does not float in empty space. It follows His hard teaching

about being the bread of life, about eating His flesh and drinking His blood. The crowd had loved Him when He multiplied loaves; they turned cold when He multiplied truth. Many were offended and prepared to leave. Jesus answers their grumbling not by softening His claims but by exposing a deeper reality: what offends them is not simply hard doctrine, but a heart incapacitated by sin.

Here the gospel collides with our native pride. We naturally believe that coming to Christ is mainly a matter of information plus decision: inform the mind, move the emotions, then press the will. But Jesus says there is an earlier question: can the sinner come at all? Is there in him, by nature, the moral power to embrace the holy Christ? His answer is stark: no man can. This is not a weakness that can be overcome with extra effort, but a radical inability rooted in a dead heart. When He spoke of men loving darkness rather than light in John 3, this is what He meant. Darkness does not stroll into light of its own accord; light must visit it.

The Gift Beneath Every Coming

Yet the impossibility is not the last word. “Except it were given unto him of my Father.” The inability of man is answered by the generosity of God. Here is the doctrine of grace in sharp outline: coming to Christ is a gift before it is a decision. The Father does not merely offer an opportunity; He bestows an ability. He does not stand at a distance, watching who will be wise enough to choose His Son; He stoops into the graveyard of spiritual death and gives life, sight, and movement toward Christ.

This gift does not bypass the mind and will; it liberates them. The Father does not drag a resisting soul to Christ like a prisoner to the dock. Rather, He removes the chains that bound the heart to its idols, opens blind eyes to the beauty of the Son, and bends the stubborn will so that it freely, gladly comes. Your coming is real; your choosing is genuine; yet beneath and behind it all is a prior giving. Faith is the flower; grace is the hidden root.

In earlier chapters we traced the misery of sin and the utter lostness of man. Here the emphasis sharpens: not only are we guilty; we are helpless to escape our guilt. That truth, embraced, crushes boasting and prepares the soul for mercy. What chapter 3 showed about the depth of our ruin, this chapter applies specifically to the act of coming to Christ: the ruined cannot rescue themselves; the invited cannot accept the invitation unless the Father first grants them feet.

Offense and Assurance in the Same Sentence

Christ's statement cuts in two directions. On the one hand, it offends human pride. Those who heard it in the synagogue at Capernaum felt the scandal. They had followed, listened, and eaten. To be told that even their coming to listen required a prior gift was intolerable. So "from that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him." Grace exposes the counterfeit disciple because grace insists that man contribute nothing to his own awakening.

On the other hand, this same sentence offers deep assurance to the true believer. If your coming to Christ rests on the stability of your own will, then every dark night of doubt, every storm of temptation, threatens to undo you. But if your coming was given—authored, sustained, and guarded—by the Father, then your hope rests where no enemy can reach. The same hand that unlocked the gate will hold it shut against all who would drag you out.

Here this chapter leans forward into what we will explore in chapter 9 about perseverance. The God who gives the coming also gives the staying. Election, calling, perseverance, and glorification are not fragments of a shattered plan but stages of one unbreakable purpose. To know that your first step toward Christ was given is to know that your last step into glory will be guarded.

Humility at the Door of Faith

What then becomes of boasting? Paul answers: “By grace ye are saved through faith… not of yourselves: it is the gift of God.” John 6:65 is that same truth on the lips of Christ. The true Christian, when he traces his story back to its secret beginning, discovers not a moment where he was wiser or better than his neighbor, but a moment—known or hidden—when the Father gave him to the Son and drew him with invisible cords.

This truth does not make the believer proud of being chosen; it makes him amazed at being loved. It does not turn him into a fatalist, cold and passive, but into a worshiper who knows that every holy desire, every tear of repentance, every movement of trust is already a miracle of grace. He cannot look down on the unbeliever, for he knows that apart from the same gift he would still be unmoved. Evangelism becomes an appeal to the dead that is simultaneously a prayer to the Giver of life.

In a later chapter we will consider more fully how this view of grace reshapes our witness. For now: those who believe that coming is given will both preach boldly and pray desperately. They will sow the seed widely, knowing that God uses means, and plead that the Father would grant coming to many.

The Freedom Found in Holy Dependence

When Jesus says, “No man can come,” He is not closing the door of hope but the door of self-reliance. The only way into the kingdom is through the poverty of spirit that confesses, “I cannot, unless You give.” This is where true freedom is born. As long as you cling to the illusion of autonomous choice, the gospel will remain a negotiation. You will bargain, delay, calculate. But when you see that even the act of coming is itself mercy, you stop bargaining and start begging.

Here is a paradox: the soul that knows it cannot come, unless given, is the soul most ready to be given. Empty hands are best suited to receive. The proud disputant who argues

against his own inability proves it by his resistance. The broken sinner who cries, “Draw me, and I will run after Thee,” has already felt the first tug of that drawing. Grace creates the very hunger it intends to satisfy.

So let this sentence of Christ stand over every conversion, every church, every movement of revival: “Except it were given unto him of my Father.” It is a hard word to pride, but a soft pillow for weary saints. It humbles the strong and heartens the weak. It silences boasting and ignites thanksgiving. And as you continue through the chapters ahead—tracing the golden chain of salvation from eternity past to eternity future—remember that the first conscious step you took toward Christ was already the footprint of a God who had been moving toward you from everlasting.

Chapter 8
It Is Not of Him That Willeth

Mercy, if it is truly mercy, must arrive before we deserve it, before we can request it, and before our will can form its own sentences. Mercy is older than our choices and deeper than our resolutions. Paul captures this in a single stroke: “So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy.” The sentence falls like a hammer on the altar of self-determination. It exposes an ancient whisper: if I will hard enough, if I run far enough, I can secure the blessing and rescue my story. Romans 9:16 answers with a quiet, immovable no.

This chapter presses into that no, not to crush your humanity, but to free it. Earlier we watched the lie of self-origination unfold: the belief that we can be our own source, our own light. Here we face its refined cousin—the lie that our will is the decisive hinge of salvation.

If only I choose correctly and run without stumbling, then God will respond. Paul reverses the order: it is not your willing that coaxes mercy out of God; it is mercy that awakens your will at all.

Notice the two verbs: willeth and runneth. Willing is inner resolve; running is outer zeal. Together they picture the full spectrum of striving. Paul gathers both and says, “Not this. Not as first cause.” He does not deny that we will and run; he denies that they stand at the center of the story. Mercy stands there like a sun, and every motion orbits it.

To say mercy does not wait for the human will is to say God is not a vendor responding to spiritual currency. Mercy is not wages or reward calibrated to desire. Mercy erupts from God’s own heart, born in His freedom, not in your urgency. Long before you began to will, mercy was spoken over you in Christ. Long before you started to run, mercy had already charted your finish line.

This does not make your will irrelevant; it makes it derivative. Reflected light is real but does not invent itself. Likewise, your awakened will is true, yet it has been stirred and summoned. When desire for God rises in you like dawn, that dawn did not schedule itself. It is the sun of mercy appearing, scattering the night you thought was natural.

Here is the scandal for religious pride: you do not stand at the control panel of your salvation. The decisive difference between the one who believes and the one who does not is not a secret reservoir of superior willpower. If salvation rested on the sharpness of your choice, grace would be a polite assistant to human excellence. Romans 9:16 refuses this. God will not let his mercy be a supporting actor in the drama of human achievement.

Earlier chapters traced how the lie of autonomy seeps into thoughts, emotions, and habits. There the self tried to enthrone its own strength. Here the same impulse wears religious clothing. It quotes verses and speaks devotion, yet still believes, “I must generate

the decisive spark." What we unmasked as self-sufficiency there, we now unmask as a lie about the will here. The same pride that claims, "I am my own," now claims, "My willing is ultimate."

Yet Romans 9 also builds a new architecture of assurance. If it is not of him that willeth, then your security does not evaporate when your will grows weak or double-minded. If it is not of him that runneth, your hope does not shatter when you stumble or collapse. Mercy is not tracking your pace; mercy is carrying you. The God who shows mercy looks at his Son and anchors mercy there.

Here, the earlier chapter on surrender finds its completion. There we spoke of laying down arms. Now we see why surrender is not sentimental but necessary. If the decisive cause is God who shows mercy, clinging to your will as sovereign is gentle madness. Your yes to God is already nested inside a larger Yes that came first.

This reorders prayer. When you believed your will was the hinge, prayer was a frantic effort to upgrade desire. Under Romans 9:16, prayer shifts from negotiation to participation. You are not manufacturing a will God can respect; you agree with mercy that already moves toward you. You pray not to awaken a sleepy God but to awaken a sleepy self.

It reorders repentance. If you imagine your tears as the price of re-entry, you will weep from fear. If repentance is a gift of mercy, your tears become a river flowing from God back to God. You are not paying; you are being washed.
You really will. You really run. Scripture never treats you as a puppet. Yet beneath and before every authentic motion lies the prior motion of God's mercy. Your will is like a sail; mercy is the wind. The boat moves because the sail is raised, yes—but the power is in the air, not in the canvas.

Romans 9:16 is not an abstract doctrine but a word for trembling hearts. It tells the exhausted runner, "You were never asked to

be the engine." It tells the paralyzed will, "Your incapacity is not final; mercy is." It speaks into shame and says, "Your hope is not the steadiness of your wanting but the steadiness of God's giving."

To live now in light of that future day is to renounce the quiet idolatry of self-willing and rest in the God who shows mercy. Not passively, as if you were excused from willing and running, but peacefully, knowing your effort is response, not origin. The logic is severe, but not cruel. Mercy's primacy is oxygen. You were never built to be self-powered. The demand to become your own generator is the quiet torture of modern spirituality. Romans 9:16 walks in and turns on the light: you are not the source, and you never were.

The lie flatters and exhausts. It tells you your will is mighty, that you sculpt eternity; underneath it mutters, if you fail or lose focus, everything you love might unravel. The "empowerment" masks panic. The gospel of self-willing is a beautiful knife.

When Paul says it is not of him that willeth, he is removing the knife from your hand. You may stop pretending you are the decisive factor. You are allowed to belong to a mercy that will not break when you do, to be small in the presence of a love that is not.

Consider the night seasons when your will feels like wet paper. You read and nothing lands; you try to pray and words disintegrate. The religion of the autonomous will offers one script: try harder; if nothing changes, blame yourself. Romans 9:16 brings another: the absence you feel is not the measure of God's mercy. The dizziness does not move the anchor. The God who shows mercy holds your breath and the faint ember of faith in the same steady hand.

This truth reshapes how we speak of conversion. Many testimonies sound as if the human will were the plot twist: I finally decided, I finally let God. There is truth—you did decide. Yet Romans 9:16 invites a deeper angle: for years mercy pursued and hemmed you in. At the moment you thought you

reached out, you found a hand that had long reached toward you. Your turning remains, but its center shifts from “I chose” to “I was chosen.”

If mercy is first, boasting cannot survive, even in whispers of comparison: Why did I respond while my friend did not? The lie of the autonomous will answers: because you were more sincere. Romans 9:16 tears that up. If there is any difference, it is not finally traced to you, but to God who shows mercy. Your standing becomes an altar of intercession, not a platform of superiority.

When you pray for those who resist, you no longer trust technique or the latent nobility of their will. Your confidence is in the same mercy that ambushed you. Hope for others is born where hope for yourself was: not of him that willeth, but of God.

The same is true of ongoing transformation. Sanctification built on the autonomous will becomes a treadmill of self-improvement. You measure resolve and affection, treating every dip as a crisis of identity. Romans 9:16 lays a

deeper foundation. Your identity is not riding on the daily temperature of your will. The fiercest day of devotion and the coldest day of indifference are held within a larger reality: the God who shows mercy has set his love on you in Christ. You do not secure mercy by stability; mercy steadies you in instability.

From this vantage point, even failure becomes teacher. Crashing into the limits of your willing and running, you discover your resolutions cannot keep you alive. The collapse of self-confidence is not the end but the crumbling of a false beginning. Out of the rubble, mercy speaks: it is not of him that willeth.

In the end, every endeavor answers one question: who gets the first verb? Does the story begin with “I” or with “God”? The lie insists the holiest sentence starts with the self: I believed, I surrendered, I invited. Scripture dares to rearrange the syntax. Your believing appears, but not as first link. To live under that grammar is to become gloriously small. You

still act, choose, and persevere, but the music beneath your days changes key.

Anxiety loses its favorite argument—that everything hangs on you. Pride loses its favorite story—that you hung yourself upon God by exceptional will. What remains is a quieter confession: I am not of him that willeth. I am of God who shows mercy.

Chapter 9
Not of the Will of Man

The words of John 1:12–13 stand like a thunderclap over all human pretension: “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” Here the apostle overturns the oldest lie in the world—the lie first whispered in Eden, then endlessly retweeted by every age—that man can ascend to God by his own wisdom, lineage, passion, or resolve. The gospel does not polish this lie; it kills it. In its place it offers something stranger and more beautiful: a birth that does not begin with us at all.

John has already declared that those who receive Christ and believe in his name become children of God. That sounds, at first, like something we do. We receive, we believe, we come, we cling. Yet, as if to pull up the very floorboards of self-trust, John explains that these believers “were born” in a way that

excludes every human source. Faith is not the root but the flower; not the generator, but the evidence that a deeper, divine work has already taken place. New birth explains believing; man's autonomous will does not produce new birth.

The sequence is vital. We often imagine it reversed: we believe, therefore we are born again. John says the opposite. We were born, therefore we believed. Behind every act of genuine receiving lies a prior, hidden act of God, like unseen lightning before thunder. We hear the thunder of our faith and think it is the beginning; in reality, grace flashed long before in the secret chambers of the heart.

John lists three denials—"not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man"—before he utters the single affirmation, "but of God." Each denial removes one more refuge for human boasting, one more place the old lie might hide. "Not of blood" means spiritual life is not transmitted by ancestry, ethnicity, or family heritage. The Jews of Jesus's day often rested on being children of Abraham. The

modern church may rest on being the child of Christian parents, the heir of a religious tradition. John ends such confidence. You may inherit eye color and surname through blood, but you cannot inherit the life of God that way. The divine life is not in your DNA.

"Nor of the will of the flesh" speaks of the self driven by natural desires and impulses. Flesh wants, reaches, craves, resolves; it can be very religious in doing so. We imagine that if we want God strongly enough, feel deeply enough, resolve firmly enough, we will pry open heaven. John says, no. However sincere or intense, the will of the flesh cannot generate the new birth. The flesh can imitate life, but not create it. It can stir emotion, but it cannot make the dead heart beat.

Then John removes the last high altar of human pride: "nor of the will of man." Here he addresses the idea of autonomous choice, the assumption that the decisive difference between believer and unbeliever lies in one person using his will better than another. The lie of the serpent in Eden was this: "You shall

be as God." To be as God is to be ultimate, self-originating, answerable to no one but oneself. The modern heart baptizes this ancient arrogance by calling it "free will," not in the modest sense of responsibility, but in the arrogant sense of self-sufficient causality. John will not allow it. The children of God are not born of the unaided will of man, however nobly dressed.

We must be careful here. Scripture does not deny that we will, choose, repent, and believe. Those who receive Christ truly receive him. Their faith is not a puppet's motion but a living embrace. Yet the question remains: why does one sinner repent and another refuse? If the final answer is "because one used his autonomous will better," then salvation is, at the root, a human achievement. Grace becomes an offer on a table, and the decisive glory belongs to the one who reached out. John 1:13 explodes this subtle idolatry. If you are God's child, it is not because your will crowned the invitation, but because God's will awakened your dead heart.

This chapter connects directly to our earlier reflections on the Word's initiative in creation and revelation. There we saw that the Word spoke light into darkness and life into nothingness. Here we see that the same Word, made flesh, speaks new life into spiritually dead sinners. Just as the first creation did not wait for chaos to decide to become cosmos, the new creation in the soul does not wait for the sinner to manufacture a willing heart. Light does not negotiate with darkness; it simply shines, and darkness yields.

Yet this does not render faith unnecessary; it explains it. The new birth is the cause, faith the effect. Imagine a newborn child gasping its first breath. The gasp is real and necessary, but it does not cause the birth. It reveals that life has arrived. In the same way, your believing is the first gasp of a newly made heart. It is not the price that bought you life; it is the sound that proves life has been freely given. When we read "to all who did receive him…he gave the right to become children of God," we must not invert the order. The giving precedes the

receiving; grace creates the very hands that grasp it.

This truth did not start with John. Jesus will tell Nicodemus in John 3 that he must be born again and that the Spirit is like the wind—sovereign, untraceable, untamable. Paul will say in Romans that "it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy," and in Ephesians that God "made us alive together with Christ" while we were dead. These texts sing the same melody as John 1:13: the new birth is an act of God, from God, unto God. Our will is not erased; it is liberated. We do not stop choosing; we start choosing rightly, because the heart has been remade.

Notice how John uses the language of "right" or "authority." Those who believe are given the right to become children of God. This right is not claimed by self-assertion; it is bestowed by divine adoption. The child of God stands firm not because he clings more tightly than others, but because the Father has signed his name over the soul. Here assurance finds its anchor. If your new life rests finally on your

will, it rests on shifting sand. The heart that chose today may un-choose tomorrow. But if your new birth rests on God's will, then your security rests where storms cannot reach.

At this point, the old lie of autonomy protests. "If new birth is God's doing, why call anyone to believe? Why preach, persuade, plead?" Scripture answers not by softening God's sovereignty but by binding it to human responsibility. We preach because God uses the gospel as the instrument by which he gives life. We call people to receive Christ because, through that call, the Spirit awakens the dead. The command, "Believe," is the very voice that creates believing ears. When Lazarus heard Jesus say, "Come out," the word that summoned him also enlivened him. So it is with every sinner summoned by the living Word.

This vision also shapes how we view other people. If new birth is "not of blood," then no ethnicity, class, or culture holds an advantage before the cross. The most religious moralist and the most brazen rebel stand equally dead

until God speaks life. Pride has no safe corner in the miracle of new birth. You cannot look at your faith and see a mirror of your superiority; you must see a window into God's sheer mercy.

Finally, John's words prepare us for the unfolding story of the Gospel, where again and again Christ will confront the claim of human self-sufficiency. The crowds will seek signs on their own terms; the leaders will trust tradition and law; the disciples will vie for greatness. In each case, Jesus will strip away the illusion that life originates in human will. John 1:12–13 stands as a heading over the whole narrative: those who receive him do so because they have been born of God. Every true response to Christ is a living echo of God's prior, sovereign "Yes."

The old lie says, "You can make yourself alive." The gospel replies, "You were dead, and God made you alive." To cling to autonomy is to clutch a corpse. To bow before the God who gives new birth is to find that,

even in your bowing, another hand has already lifted your head.

Chapter 10
Of His Own Will Begat He Us

Before you ever said, “Let there be Christ in my heart,” God had already said, “Let there be life.” And live was.

The same God whose holiness exposes our sin now takes the initiative to create a new people out of spiritual nothingness.

Notice how carefully the apostle speaks. He does not say merely that God allowed us to be born again, or that he consented to a plan we initiated. He says that the begetting traces back to God’s own will. Before there was your awakening, there was his determination. Before there was your faith, there was his choice. Before there was your cry for mercy, there was his resolve to make you alive. The river of salvation does not flow upward from the shallow springs of human preference; it

pours downward from the high country of God's eternal purpose.

Many would rather John had written, "born of the will of man and the will of God together," a kind of negotiated birth. But he did not. He cut away the illusion that spiritual life can be jointly authored. Life has one source. The first creation did not arise because chaos finally decided it was ready to become a world; God spoke, and it was so. The new creation, likewise, does not blossom because sinners coax life out of death. God speaks again—this time through the gospel—and there is light in the heart where there was only night.

We have seen in earlier chapters that our natural birth gives us everything except what we most need. It gives us a name, a culture, a history of triumphs and wounds, but it cannot give us life with God. There we first learned that our wills, far from being neutral, are tilted away from the light, preferring the comfortable slavery of self.

You did not negotiate your first birth; you were the result of another's decision. So it is with the second birth. We are the outcome of a prior, deeper choosing. "Of his own will." Not of our pedigree. Not of our spiritual promise. Not of our moral potential. Of his will, his pleasure, his Fatherly delight.

Such a doctrine humbles us to the dust. It silences the subtle boast that says, "In the end, I was wiser, softer, better than those who did not believe."

If salvation began in you, it could end in you. If it started with a human decision, it could be reversed by a human decision. A faith born of your will alone could die of your will alone. But a life begotten by God's will rests on a foundation that cannot crack. The same will that called worlds into being has called your soul into union with Christ. The same will that raised Jesus from the dead has raised you from spiritual death. This is why, when doubts clamor and temptations rage, the believer can whisper, "I did not invent this life. I did not

summon it. I cannot extinguish what God has kindled.

We really repent, we truly believe, but beneath our turning runs the deeper current of His choosing. Our yes rides upon his prior yes.

The modern slogans—"reinvent yourself," "be your own savior," "follow your heart"—are that first deception in new clothes. To say that we are begotten of our own will is to share the serpent's post, to amplify his boast that the creature can ascend by its own desire.

You are not self-made; you are God-made. Not upgraded clay, but new creation.

Let this truth do its double work in you. Let it strip you of pride, so you can no longer look down on those still wandering in the dark and say, "If only they would be like me." And let it clothe you with assurance, so that when you see your weakness and tremble at your failures, you remember: the life in me did not begin with me. It began in the eternal,

unwavering will of God. What he has begotten, he will bring to maturity.

In the chapters to come, we will examine the fruit of this new birth—how those begotten by the Word of truth become doers of that same Word. For now, let this be settled in your soul: every flicker of saving light in you is traceable, not to your will, but to his. Your story of salvation does not start with your decision; it starts with his decision.

Chapter 11
Repentance
Must Be Granted

When the Jerusalem believers hear how Gentiles have been converted, they do not praise the Gentiles for their wise decision. Instead, they said: “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life”. (Acts 11:18).

Many assume repentance is simply what we give to God. We sin, we feel bad, we change our ways, and God, seeing our sincerity, responds with mercy. It sounds reasonable. It protects our sense of agency.

Repentance, in other words, is not the coin we pay toward salvation; it is part of the treasure Christ purchased and the Spirit delivers. In earlier chapters we have seen how faith, election, calling, and justification refuse to bow to human boasting. This chapter presses that same truth into one of the most intimate

corners of our experience: the painful, beautiful turning of the heart from sin to God. To understand why repentance must be granted, we need to see how the New Testament speaks of it as a divine gift, how that gift is delivered in time, and what this means for our assurance, our humility, and our hope for others.

The gospel does not erase responsibility; it reassigns credit. You truly repent; God truly grants repentance. You truly turn; grace truly moves. The mystery is not meant to paralyze us, but to free us from the fantasy that, at the decisive point, salvation finally depends on the native strength of the sinner. The same Savior who, in earlier chapters, we saw as the Author of faith is also, as Acts 5:31 declares: Exalted "to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins."

Repentance stands beside forgiveness as something Christ gives, not something we manufacture.

The phrase in Acts 11:18 is worth lingering over: “repentance unto life.” That “unto” is not a mere preposition; it is an arrow. Repentance is not life itself, but the God-ordained pathway that opens into it. The image is not of a man standing on his own two moral feet, marching bravely into the kingdom. It is of a man being turned, redirected from death’s road to life’s highway. Even the turning is mercy. The early believers are stunned because they realize that what has happened among the Gentiles is not a lucky accident of openness or a superior spiritual sensitivity. It is a sovereign act: God has granted repentance. The connection with God’s effectual call, in earlier chapters should be clear.

The internal call does not merely offer a road; it bends the heart toward it. Repentance is the visible bend.

The link between repentance and Christ’s exaltation in Acts 5:31 pushes the matter deeper. Peter says that God exalted Jesus “as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.” Repentance is bound

to the throne of Christ. It flows from His kingship as much as from His kindness. He is "Leader," the Prince who commands our turning, and "Savior," the Lamb who provides the ground for our forgiveness. Both roles converge in the same act: He gives repentance. The One who was lifted up on the cross is now lifted up in glory, and from that height He sends not only the Spirit and faith but also the very change of mind and heart that brings sinners home. This keeps us from treating repentance as the one surviving island of human self-sufficiency in a sea of grace. The cross does not purchase ninety percent of salvation, leaving the final ten percent to be paid from our moral pockets. It secures the whole package, including the sorrow that hates sin and the resolve that forsakes it.

Paul's instructions in 2 Timothy 2:25 show what this looks like in the slow grind of ministry. He tells Timothy to correct opponents "with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth." Notice the grammar of hope: "may perhaps grant." Timothy must speak and

reason. The opponents must repent. Yet, above both teacher and hearer stands the God who may grant, or withhold, the decisive inward turn. As we saw in the chapter on effectual calling, human words are real means, but their success depends on God's inward work. The servant sows correction; God alone awakens repentance. Far from making correction pointless, this truth makes gentleness possible. You do not have to coerce what only God can give or manipulate what only the Spirit can create. You can labor urgently and rest deeply because the miracle is not in your power.

The objection rises: if repentance must be granted, does that not excuse the sinner who does not repent? Does the doctrine turn our responsibility into a tragic misfortune, like being born without sight? Scripture refuses that escape. God grants repentance and also commands all people everywhere to repent. Our inability is moral, not mechanical. We love the darkness, as another chapter noted, and that love is itself blameworthy. Grace does not meet neutral creatures; it overcomes rebels. The fact that God must grant

repentance does not cancel our guilt; it explains why any of us ever stop treasuring the sins that destroy us. Instead of making repentance less serious, this truth shows its impossibility apart from divine mercy. Your tears over sin were not the one thing you added to Christ's finished work; they were part of what His work purchased.

Seen from another angle, the gift-nature of repentance is profoundly comforting. Many believers fear that their repentance was too shallow, too imperfect, too compromised by self-interest to be acceptable to God. They imagine repentance as a threshold height they must reach before Christ will forgive.

But if repentance is granted, its validity does not rest on its emotional intensity. It rests on the faithfulness of the Giver. Imperfect repentance that looks away from itself to Christ is better than flawless self-examination that never does. In a previous chapter we considered how justification rests on an alien righteousness. Now we must see that the turning which clings to that righteousness is

also sustained by grace. You can stop staring at the purity of your tears and start staring at the worth of the blood that makes those tears meaningful.

Treating repentance as a divine gift also preserves the unity of salvation. In earlier chapters we followed the golden chain from foreknowledge to glorification. None of those links is self-generated. To splice into that chain a purely human repentance would introduce rust into what Paul depicts as an unbreakable sequence. Instead, repentance stands as one of the experiential faces of conversion, along with faith. Both are willed acts of the renewed heart; neither is self-caused. The Spirit does not believe or repent instead of us, as if we were puppets. He renews us so that we truly believe and truly repent, but the root of that renewal is not in us. When we look back over our story, we do not find a decisive step that finally belongs to us. Grace is not an initial push followed by human completion; it is the quiet, persistent river beneath every stroke of our swimming.

This view reshapes how we pray for others. If repentance is a gift, then evangelism and intercession must be married. You do not argue people into the kingdom; you plead them in before the throne that gives repentance.

The most eloquent presentation of the gospel cannot resurrect a will that clings to idols. Only the exalted Christ can loosen that grasp. So you speak boldly and you weep secretly. You persuade with reasons and you wrestle in prayer, asking God to do what only He can: grant repentance leading to life. The doctrine of granted repentance thus fuels hope rather than fatalism. No heart is too hard for the Giver. If He chooses, He can in a moment make the most stubborn rebel say, “What have I done?” and mean it.

Finally, this truth safeguards worship from subtle, respectable pride. There is a kind of testimony that sounds orthodox but smells of self-congratulation: “I hit bottom, and then I decided it was time to turn my life around.” In the light of Scripture, the true story sounds different: “I hit bottom—and God turned me.” You remember the night your excuses ran out,

the day your sin suddenly tasted bitter, the moment the gospel, heard a hundred times, pierced you like a sword. You could express that as your wise choice, but you know better now. Another hand was on the wheel of your heart. Repentance was not the one unpurchased piece you added to salvation's puzzle; it was part of the picture already drawn in the wounds of Christ. To say that repentance must be granted is to say that from first awakening to final glory, salvation belongs to the Lord. And that, in the end, is the only story safe for the human soul to tell.

Chapter 12
Faith:
The Fruit, Not the Root

Faith is one of the most misread words in the Christian vocabulary. We treat it like spiritual electricity: a power that, if we can only generate enough of it, will switch on God's blessings. We measure it, compare it, dramatize it. We envy those who seem to possess more and condemn ourselves for never having enough. Yet Scripture refuses to present faith as a heroic human performance. It speaks of faith as response, not initiation; reception, not production; fruit, not root. Nowhere is this clearer than in the simplicity of Acts 13:48: "As many as were ordained to eternal life believed." Luke does not say that as many as believed were then ordained, but that ordination—God's saving decision—stands logically prior, and believing flows from it like water from a hidden spring.

To grasp this, we must strip faith of the flattery we have wrapped around it. Faith is real, necessary, commanded. Yet the moment we treat it as the independent cause that makes grace effective, we smuggle works back into the heart of the gospel under a more religious name. We make the cross an offer on the table, waiting for our signature, instead of the decisive act by which God secures a people and, in time, awakens them to trust what has already been won. Faith is not the pen that authorizes the transaction; it is the opened eye that finally sees the ink that was spilled long before.

Acts 13:48 does not blush to place God's action before human believing. Paul preaches, the Gentiles hear, and Luke explains: "as many as were ordained to eternal life believed." He does not fear that this wording will dull evangelistic zeal or soften its edge for human pride. He pulls back the curtain to show that behind the fragile act of trusting Christ lies an eternal purpose—God's ordination to life.

The sequence is crucial. God does not look down the corridors of time, see who will believe, and then inscribe their names in His book. Rather, those whose names are inscribed will, at the appointed hour, believe. Their faith is not the cause of their ordination; their ordination is the cause of their faith.

Yet to place God's saving action first is not to deny the reality of human response. Scripture never treats people as puppets. When you believe, you truly believe; you are not moved like a marionette, but persuaded, drawn, won. Your mind engages, your will yields, your heart cleaves to Christ. There is no coercion, only a conquered resistance. But the decisive difference between the one who believes and the one who does not is not superior insight or softness; it is that the Spirit has breathed life where there was death. Faith is the living gasp of a soul raised from spiritual graveclothes. The gasp is real. The breath is borrowed.

This is why faith cannot sit in the place of honor that belongs to grace alone. Whenever we treat faith as the autonomous cause that

activates grace, we reverse the order of Acts 13:48. We begin to think, “As many as believed were ordained to eternal life.” The focus turns from the generosity of God to the quality of our response. Assurance becomes a mirror in which we examine the vigor of our believing, rather than a window through which we behold the sufficiency of Christ. We turn “Believe and you will be saved” into “Believe enough and you will have made salvation possible for yourself.” Grace tilts back toward self-reliance.

Earlier in this book we saw how grace, to be truly grace, must be free, unconditioned, originating in God’s will rather than in human performance. That theme continues here. Faith is the hand that receives; it is not the mint that prints the coin. When we discussed repentance, we noted that turning from sin is the fruit of seeing Christ’s beauty, not the precondition that makes Him beautiful. In the same way, faith follows the unveiling of grace. It is the echo of God’s prior “Yes” to us in Christ, not the shout that finally persuades Him to be kind. Connection to other chapters:

just as we argued earlier that grace is the uncaused cause of our new birth, here we trace how faith fits within that same movement of divine initiative.

There is a poetic humility in this. Faith is a blush on the face of the soul, not the spotlight in the theater. It is like the dawn: glorious in its colors, yet caused by a sun that rises with or without our watching. The believer does not boast, “I believed while others refused.” Instead, he whispers, “Why was I made to hear Your voice, and enter while there’s room, when thousands make a wretched choice, and rather starve than come?” Faith sings, but its song is gratitude, not self-congratulation.

Still, someone asks, if God ordains who will believe, does that not make faith unnecessary? Why command what God has already decreed? Scripture’s answer is that God ordains both the end and the means. He does not simply determine that certain people will live; He determines that they will live by believing. The call to faith is the appointed pathway by which His decree moves from

eternity into time, from hidden counsel into human consciousness. No one is saved apart from faith, because God has woven faith into the fabric of salvation. To remove faith would not exalt grace but deny the way grace has chosen to work.

Consider again: “As many as were ordained to eternal life believed.” The ordination is not naked fate; it is ordination “to eternal life,” and that life is always life in union with Christ. To be ordained to eternal life is to be ordained to be joined to Christ, to be given His righteousness, His Spirit, His future. Faith is the Spirit-given act by which the soul says “Amen” to that union. It does not create the union; it receives it. It is like the ring on a wedding day: a visible, conscious consent to a covenant already spoken into existence by the vows of Another. The power lies not in the metal, but in the promise.

This understanding protects both the necessity of faith and the primacy of grace. If we deny the necessity of faith, we drift into determinism where human response is

irrelevant, evangelism a charade, commands hollow. If we deny the primacy of grace, we drift into a spiritual meritocracy where salvation hinges, at last, on the moral or psychological quality of our believing. The biblical path is narrower and more beautiful. God truly commands all people everywhere to repent and believe. Those commands land on responsible creatures, not on robots. Yet wherever faith appears, it is the blossom of a root sunk deep in God's eternal kindness.

Connection to other chapters: earlier we confronted the lie that human choice is the original engine of salvation, showing how that story re-centers the self. Here we expose a subtler rebranding of the same lie in theological language—turning "faith" into the decisive human ingredient that makes the gospel work. Whether the label is "free will," "decision," or "faith," the error is the same: the creature seizes the root and claims that from this soil grace must grow.

To keep faith in its proper place, imagine a drowning person dragged to shore by a

rescuer. As the victim sputters awake, he clings to the outstretched hand that steadies him. That grasp is faith. It is real, it matters, it is even commanded—"Take my hand!" But no one sane tells the story as, "By my gripping, I saved myself." The gripping is the fruit of having already been drawn from the depths. Likewise, our believing is the conscious clinging of a heart already seized by mercy.

When a sinner hears the gospel and believes, heaven is not amazed at the cleverness of human trust. Heaven marvels at the Lamb who was slain, whose blood ransomed people from every tribe and tongue, and whose Spirit invaded that particular heart, turning hostility into hope. Faith is the first clear note in the sinner's new song, but the melody, the instruments, the capacity to sing—these are all gifts of God. "By grace are you saved through faith," Paul writes, "and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God." Faith is the conduit, not the cause; the branch, not the root; the fruit, not the tree.

Therefore, when you examine yourself, do not ask, "Is my faith strong enough to make grace

effective?” Ask instead, “Is Christ strong enough to save those with little faith?” The answer is unshaken: yes. Even a trembling trust, if given by God, is anchored in an unshakable Savior. The security of your salvation lies not in the intensity of your believing, but in the invincibility of the One believed. To make faith the root is to plant your hope in the shifting soil of your own inner state. To receive it as fruit is to rest in the deep, unseen faithfulness of God, who ordains to eternal life—and therefore, in time, brings His people to believe.

Chapter 13
Grace Conquers the Will

There is a stubborn place in us where arguments bounce off and experiences evaporate. We hear the summons of God, feel a stirring, perhaps even taste conviction, and yet something inside says, “No.” Scripture calls that inner citadel the heart, guarded by the will—the faculty that chooses, resists, clings, and refuses. The story of grace is not simply that God offers new ideas to that will or places better alternatives on its table. The story of grace is that God walks into the throne room of the rebel’s will and, without destroying it, changes its allegiance. He does not drag the prisoner in chains; he makes the prisoner rise gladly and walk free. “Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power” is not slogan but surgery.

Grace, then, is not a timid knock; it is the quiet sunrise that makes refusal impossible not by force, but by beauty. When the Bible speaks of salvation, it never imagines God saving

someone who remains unwilling, unbelieving, and unrepentant. Grace saves precisely by transforming that unwilling soul into one that wants, trusts, mourns, and obeys. The miracle is not that God overrides the will, but that he conquers it from within.

To understand this conquest, we must face the firmness of the will's resistance. Apart from grace, the human will is not a neutral jury waiting for evidence. It is already bent, already pledged to another kingdom. Earlier chapters traced how the mind is darkened, how affections are disordered, how sin rewrites our stories with flattering ink. The will stands at the crossing of these currents. It chooses what the darkened mind presents as plausible and what the disordered heart presents as desirable. The will is free in the sense that it chooses what it wants; it is not free in the sense that it can want whatever it pleases. Its wants are not self-generated. They flow from the fallen nature.

Here lies the scandal of our vanity. We like to imagine ourselves as sovereign choosers, lords

of our own desire. Yet deep down we know that our choices trail after our loves. If you love praise more than truth, you will choose flattery over honesty. If you love control more than communion, you will choose distance over vulnerability. The will follows the strongest pull of the heart, as a river follows gravity. You may rearrange the stones on the bank, but until something shifts in the height of land, the water runs the same way.

Scripture does not flatter this self. It says we are "slaves of sin," that "*no one seeks for God,*" "*Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be*." These are not poetic exaggerations, neither indeed can be. they are moral diagnostics. A will that is enmity cannot choose peace. A will that is slavery cannot choose emancipation as an act of native strength. This is why appeals alone cannot save. Law can command, reason can persuade, fear can threaten, promise can entice, and yet the will remains curled in on itself. It might modify behaviors, sign creeds,

attend meetings, but its center of gravity has not moved.

What, then, does grace do? It does not merely add new information; it creates new inclination. It does not only illuminate the path; it bends the traveler toward it. This is the sense of Psalm 110:3: "*Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power*." The psalm pictures Messiah reigning in the midst of his enemies. His people are not dragged to his banner; they "offer themselves freely" in holy garments.

There is power and there is willingness, joined in a single event. The day of his power is the birth of their willingness.
Notice the order: power, then willingness—not willingness that finally attracts power, but power that awakens willingness. The same pattern has been unfolding across this book. When we spoke of new birth, we described a life bestowed, not self-manufactured. When we explored repentance, we saw it as gift, not native virtue. When we traced faith, we followed it back to God's initiating mercy.

Now we gather these threads at the level of the will. New birth is God giving a new nature; repentance is the new will turning from sin; faith is the new will cleaving to Christ; obedience is the new will walking out that cleaving in time. Grace does not bypass the will; it re-creates it.

Yet a protest rises: if grace conquers the will, is the will still real? Are these genuine choices, or divine puppetry dressed in religious language? Here precision matters. God does not make people believe against what they want; he makes them want differently. The will never ceases to choose; what changes is the fountain from which its choices spring. Before grace, the sinner looks at Christ and sees burden, threat, boredom. After grace, that same sinner looks again and sees beauty, refuge, treasure. The object has not changed; the perception has. From that new perception new willingness flows.

Imagine a man in a dark room presented with a diamond and a stone. In darkness, both feel cold and hard. He chooses the stone for a

doorstop; the diamond holds no charm. Turn on the light, and he gasps. The diamond blazes; the stone remains dull. Has his capacity to choose been violated? No, it has been awakened by what is now evident. Light has conquered his previous preference, not by shackling his hand but by opening his eyes. So the grace of God shines "*in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ*." In that light, the will moves.

This is why Scripture can speak in one breath of God's sovereignty and in the next of human responsibility. "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling," Paul says, and then adds, "for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." God works in us to will; we work out what he has worked in. The divine operation does not cancel the human action; it originates it. The will is conquered and thereby truly enlisted.

From this vantage point, repentance is no longer a grim achievement but a glad discovery. The once-stubborn will now sees

sin as poison rather than pleasure. It turns because it must, but the “must” is now the necessity of delight. The redeemed will cannot comfortably stay where it once lounged. It flinches at old comforts, feels out of place in former haunts. Its “no” to sin is the echo of God’s prior “yes” to life.

Likewise, faith becomes more than assent to claims; it is the will’s embrace of a Person. The willing soul leans its weight on Christ, not as a reluctant concession to facts, but as the only restful option it can imagine. There is struggle and trembling but underneath lies a new bias toward trust. The ground has tilted toward God.

Obedience, then, is the long story of this conquered will learning to walk. It stumbles, resists, wanders, but the new direction remains. The one who has been made willing may still say with trembling, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief,” yet beneath that prayer is a miracle: unbelief is now the intruder, not the master. The old tyrant still shouts, but it no longer holds the keys.

This has profound pastoral implication. When you see someone willing—however faintly—to turn from sin and come to Christ, you are witnessing the day of His power. Do not despise small willingness. A half-formed "yes" against decades of practiced "no" is itself a monument to grace. Encourage it, nourish it, point it back to the God who began the work and will complete it.

At the same time, this truth humbles our spiritual pride. If our willing is the fruit of God's power, then we cannot boast as though we stood while others remained seated out of superior insight. The only difference between the heart that bows and the heart that bolts is the hidden operation of mercy. We were no softer clay, no more reasonable rebels. Grace did not find us pliable; it made us so.

In future chapters we will explore how this conquered will perseveres, how grace keeps bending it Godward through trial and temptation. For now, know that grace is not content merely to inform, inspire, or invite.

Grace goes all the way down. It conquers the will so that worship is possible, obedience desirable, and holiness not a costume for Sundays but the clothing of a people made willing in the day of his power.

There is a strange comfort in the idea that my will is my own. It feels solid, like a chair I can see and touch. I decide, I choose, I act: this is the basic grammar of modern life. Yet Scripture quietly rearranges the sentence. It tells us that underneath every holy decision, every sincere “yes” to God, there is a deeper Yes speaking first. Philippians 2:13 names that Yes: “For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure.” The very willing that feels so personal, so interior, is already the echo of a prior work of God. Christian willing is not erased; it is awakened, repaired, and woven into a larger music.

Chapter 14
God Works the Will

This chapter completes the progression we have been tracing. Earlier, we saw that the human will is not a neutral umpire but fallen and biased, curved in on itself. Then we explored how God overcomes this bondage, not by forcing puppets, but by freeing persons. Now we move to the heart of the mystery: God not only grants power to act; he works in the place where our desires are born. He works the will. If previous chapters uncovered the chains, this one shows the divine locksmith turning the tumblers from the inside.

Christian obedience often feels like standing on a narrow bridge between two errors. On one side lies passivity: “If God does everything, I do nothing.” On the other side lies self-salvation: “If God commands, I must produce what he demands from my own resources.” Philippians 2:12–13 ties a rope to both rails:

“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God which worketh in you…” We tremble because the work is ours; we rest because the power is His. You act; God acts in your acting. You choose; God is already at work in your choosing.

Notice the order. Paul does not say that God merely observes what we want and then assists us, like a divine personal trainer cheering from the sidelines. He says God works “to will and to do.” First the willing, then the doing. The spring is touched before the stream flows. This does not cancel your responsibility; it explains your possibility. Every true desire for God is not you flattering yourself; it is you being visited. When your heart whispers, however haltingly, “I want to want you,” God has already laid a hand on the keys of your inner piano.

To understand this, we must return to the earlier truth that we do not begin as blank

slates. Left to ourselves, we retweet the original lie of Eden: “You shall be as gods.” We dress it up—“be true to yourself,” “follow your heart,” “your truth is your north star”—but the script is old. The fall did not erase our ability to choose; it re-scripted our loves. We still will; we simply will wrongly. We are not will-less; we are mis-willed. That is why a merely external command cannot save us. Tell a crooked heart to walk straight and you only increase its frustration or hypocrisy.

God, then, must work deeper than instruction. Law can clarify duty, but only grace can kindle desire. That is the meaning of “worketh in you both to will.” God does not merely lay out a moral landscape and then step back. He enters the furnace room of affection, loosening bolts rusted by centuries of self-adoration. When you find yourself strangely warmed toward what once bored you—Scripture, prayer, service, holiness—you are watching Philippians 2:13 take place in real time. The

will you exercise is truly yours, but its new song has been taught by another.

This inward work does not turn us into spectators of our own lives. The verse sits immediately after the command, “Work out your own salvation.” Not work for—Christ has already secured that—but work out what God is working in. Imagine a sculptor and a block of marble, as we discussed in the chapter on God’s effectual call. The form is already in the artist’s mind. His chisel brings it forth. Yet the marble really changes. Chips fall, contours sharpen. So too, God’s prior willing does not make your effort fake; it makes it fruitful. You swing the hammer of discipline, repentance, and obedience, but the design and driving energy are His.

Some fear that this doctrine erases personality, as though God’s work in the will produced clones. The opposite is true. Sin homogenizes; it makes every story a monotonous hymn to the self. Grace particularizes; it frees you to

become the distinct saint God dreamed before the foundations of the world. When God works the will, he is not deleting your identity but liberating it from parasitic idols. Your renewed choices are not less you; they are finally you in tune with reality.

Others worry that if God must first work the will, then our exhortations, warnings, and appeals are pointless. But consider how God regularly works: he ordains both ends and means. The God who works in the will also works through words, examples, songs, and sermons to awaken that will. In earlier chapters we saw how the gospel call goes out to all, yet is embraced by some. Here we see why: the outward call meets an inward stirring. When you urge a friend to repent, you may be the human voice carrying God's interior persuasion. Your pleading does not compete with God's sovereignty; it may be its instrument.

There is also comfort here for the trembling believer who feels the thinness of their resolve. You look at your heart and see a fickle weather vane, spinning with every gust of fear, lust, or weariness. You read commands to persevere, to mortify sin, to love enemies, and you know your resources are small. Philippians 2:13 speaks tenderly into that poverty: the God who commands your willing also supplies it. You are not asked to mint courage out of nothing. You are invited to depend on the One who bends even your wavering desire toward his pleasure.

This dependence is not passive resignation. It is active asking. When you pray, “Incline my heart to your testimonies,” as the psalmist does, you are taking this doctrine seriously. You are admitting that, left alone, your heart inclines elsewhere. You are treating desire itself as something to be given, not presumed. Every such prayer lines up with the reality this chapter unfolds: God delights to answer by working in you both to will and to do. Your petitions become the doorway through which his reshaping grace enters.

In the previous chapter we considered how God enables the doing—how his grace empowers obedience in the grind of everyday life. Here we stand one step earlier, at the threshold where desire is born. The connection matters. If we separated them, we might imagine God as a coach who shouts, "Run!" and then supplies strength to tired legs while leaving the heart uninterested. Scripture paints a more intimate picture. God writes new preferences, new hungers, new griefs over sin onto the tablet of the heart, and then sustains the actions that flow from them.

He is author and finisher, not merely finisher.

To say that God works the will is finally to confess that salvation is a miracle of love, not a project of self-improvement. A self-help gospel tells you to rearrange the furniture of your habits while leaving the architecture of your desires intact. The biblical gospel tears down and rebuilds. It does not simply say, "Do

what you will, but more efficiently." It says, "Be given a new will, and walk in it." When that new will surfaces—even in small, fragile ways—give thanks, for you are glimpsing the quiet, sovereign craftsmanship of God in the secret places of your soul.

Chapter 15
The Altar Call and the Decisive Moment

Most of us can remember where we were when the gospel first became more than noise. A living room, a youth camp, a revival meeting, a quiet car ride. The air thickened; Scripture felt aimed, not scattered. Hearts pounded, minds raced, excuses assembled and fell apart. Everything narrowed to a single question: Will you trust Christ? That moment is weighty, decisive, inescapably personal. Yet over time, the church has often confused that inward crisis of faith with outward motions: walking an aisle, raising a hand, signing a card, repeating a formula. We have turned a spiritual birth into a tally, a living encounter into a line to the front.

Earlier in this book we exposed how the retweet of the original lie—"You shall be like God"—has infiltrated our spirituality in

subtler forms. In Chapter 5 we saw it in our craving to manage God by performance; in Chapter 11 we traced it in the way we count "results" as if they proved our power. Here, in the altar call and the decisive moment, the same lie appears in religious clothes: salvation as something I trigger and certify by a visible action, so I can say, "I did it."

The New Testament paints a different picture. The fundamental call is not, "Come to the front," but, "believe the gospel." Jesus's first recorded words of public ministry are exactly that: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The apostles echo Him after the resurrection: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved." The command is relational and responsive. It is not about relocating your body in a building but entrusting your whole self to a crucified and risen Savior.

This inward, Godward call is continuous. Scripture never treats it as a magic sentence or

a ceremony that guarantees everything forever, independent of the heart. Faith may begin in a moment, but it stretches out over a lifetime. There is a first breath, then a rhythm of breathing.

So how did we come to equate being born again with walking an aisle? The roots of the altar call are relatively recent, growing out of nineteenth-century revivalism. Evangelists like Charles Finney and his descendants' preachers believed that if the right methods were employed—the right music, the right pressure, the right public response—people could be moved into the kingdom. The "anxious bench" at the front of the meeting hall invited those under conviction to come forward. The intention was often sincere: to clarify the call, to identify seekers for counsel and prayer. But over time, the visible response became fused with the invisible work. "Coming forward" slipped from being an opportunity to being an unofficial sacrament.

From there, a family of related practices emerged. In some settings the bench became a center aisle and the invitation a ritual climax to every gathering. Elsewhere, raising a hand while heads were bowed served the same role. Later, “repeat after me” prayers, decision cards, and electronic checkboxes joined the list. In each case the pattern was similar: the preacher proclaimed the gospel, then asked for a quantifiable response, which was then used as the marker of salvation. They said, “Today, ten souls were saved,” meaning ten people walked, raised, signed, or repeated.

Notice what quietly shifted. The biblical call to believe was still present in language, but trust itself began to be anchored to the memory of a human action. Assurance was often framed this way: “Do you remember the night you went forward? Do you remember the words you prayed? Then you are saved, no matter what.” The center of gravity moved from Christ’s ongoing faithfulness to my past decisiveness. The altar became the focus. The

aisle became the battleground. The card became the proof.

This is not an argument against public confession. Scripture is clear: belief in the heart and confession with the mouth belong together. Baptism itself is a public, bodily declaration that Jesus is Lord. A person who trusts Christ will, in time, confess Christ. The church must not hide the gospel in private corners or treat faith as a secret hobby. The problem is not that we invite people to respond openly, but that we begin to treat a particular scripted action as the saving act, or the guarantee of it.

Here the original lie whispers again: Make a decision, it's an act of the will". If you can generate a decision, you can generate conversion. If you can count cards, you can count new births. The lie flatters the preacher, who now appears powerful, and it flatters the hearer, who now appears decisive. Instead of

falling helpless on grace, we congratulate ourselves on our boldness, our sincerity, our memory of that night at camp. Salvation becomes a story about our choice rather than Christ's cross. Not to deny that many did believe and were saved. God saves His elects even from a gospel preached backwards.

Those who believed are described as those whom the Father draws, whom the Spirit quickens, whose eyes are opened. The decisive moment is real, but it is God's decision to give life that makes it decisive. The sinner's "Yes" is the echo of a prior, deeper Yes spoken in eternity. When we equate salvation to the moment we raised a hand, instead of the moment when the Lord cried: "It is Finished" We move from Rock to sand, from grace to technique.

This confusion has pastoral consequences. Some tender souls endlessly replay the tape of their first "decision," worrying that they used

the wrong words, or that they were too young, or that they went forward because their friends did. Their eyes are glued to a memory rather than to a Savior. Others, hardened by years of rebellion, cling to a childhood aisle-walk as evidence of safety. “I already did that,” they say, as if the Christian life were a form whose box they checked long ago. In both cases, the focus on a single human action blurs the ongoing call of Christ: “Follow Me.”

So what do we do with the decisive moment? We do not erase it; we reframe it. A moment of clear turning to Christ is a gift. It may be sudden or slow, dramatic or quiet, at an altar call or alone on a bedroom floor. The external circumstances are secondary. What makes the moment decisive is the internal reality: sin seen as ruin, Christ seen as sufficient, the heart bending from independence to dependence.

Practically, this means we present the gospel with urgency, but without manipulation. We call people to believe now, yet we refuse to trust our methods more than the message.

We anchor assurance not in a past ritual but in a present relationship. When someone wonders whether they are truly Christ's, we do not simply ask, "Did you make a decision?" We ask, "Do you now trust Him? Do you see His kindness in your life?"

Finally, this chapter draws together themes we have traced throughout the book.

Here, in altar call culture, the same impulse surfaces in our evangelism. We want to say, "I know I am saved because I did X." God's answer is to lift our eyes from X to Christ Himself. The decisive moment is not when you walked the aisle; it is when the Son of God walked to Calvary. Your response matters—but it is a response, not the origin.

The gospel call is not an invitation to perform for God but a summons to collapse upon Him. Whether your knees first bent at an altar rail, in a pew, or in the privacy of your heart, the substance is the same: turning from self-trust to Christ-trust. The church may wisely use moments, meetings, and markers, but it must

never trade the living call of the Savior for the measurable success of a method. The true decisive moment is whenever you hear His voice and answer, again and again, “I believe; help my unbelief.”

Chapter 16
“Make a Decision”
The Religious Re-Tweet.

Some phrases are so familiar in church life that they slip past our discernment like spam that looks almost legitimate. “Make a decision for Christ” is one of those phrases. It sounds earnest, urgent, even biblical. It has been repeated so often that many instinctively accept it as the essence of the gospel’s demand. But underneath lies a subtle shift of weight, a transfer of glory from God to man, from grace to will, from divine initiative to human autonomy. It is a religious re-tweet of the oldest lie the serpent ever whispered: “You will be like God.”

When we tell sinners that the decisive hinge of salvation is an autonomous act of their will, we have not merely chosen unfortunate wording. We have re-framed the drama of redemption. The spotlight moves. The microphone lands in the sinner’s hand while God waits offstage for

the final vote. The language of “decision” becomes a courtroom where God and the devil present their arguments, and the sinner sits as judges. However pious the tone, the architecture of that scene is blasphemously inverted.

Scripture recognizes the will. It does not erase human choosing or responsibility. Yet Scripture consistently refuses to enthrone the will as the decisive cause of salvation. “So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.” That sentence detonates the illusion that there exists inside each person a neutral island of agency, ready to make a self-generated decision for or against Christ. The apostolic witness announces something far more humbling: the will itself needs saving.

Imagine the human will as a weather vane atop a ruined cathedral. It turns, yes, but it turns with the wind. The fallen will is not a still, sovereign center choosing between equal options. It is curved inward, bent toward self, responsive to gusts of desire, fear, pride, and

blindness. When the preacher stands before such a congregation and proclaims, “The final difference between heaven and hell is what you decide tonight,” he is not empowering them; he is burdening them with a weight their ruined spires can never bear.

This is why the phrase “make a decision—it’s an act of the will” is not harmless shorthand but a theological earthquake. It assumes there is a decisive sliver of self, untouched by corruption, capable of rising above sin to choose God. That assumption is the reappearance, in evangelical dress, of autonomous agency. The very thing we exposed in earlier chapters as the original rebellion now walks back into the sanctuary disguised as an appeal for conversions.

In previous chapters, especially when we examined the garden and the tower, we traced how the desire for autonomy always masquerades as wisdom and maturity. There, the lie said, “You will know good and evil; you will rise above dependence.” Here, the lie says, “God has done all He can; the rest is up

to you." Different vocabulary, same poison. A re-tweet of Eden, sent from the pulpit instead of the serpent.

Consider the logic of the familiar conversion script. God has "done His part." Christ has died, the Spirit has been poured out, the gospel preached. Now the spotlight swivels: it is your turn. Perhaps the preacher adds, "God is a gentleman; He will not force Himself on you. He has voted for you, Satan has voted against you, and your vote breaks the tie." This is presented as honoring human dignity. In reality, it strips God of His royal prerogative to have mercy on whom He will and seats the sinner in God's chair.

Notice also the emotional load this places on both preacher and hearer. The preacher must engineer the mood, tell the most moving story, raise the temperature until the wills of his listeners are pliable enough to tip toward the desired decision. The hearer feels the pressure of an ultimatum: within the next verses of the song, I must summon from within myself the decisive act that will determine my eternal

destiny. Fear and manipulation masquerade as urgency, and the sovereign freedom of God is quietly sidelined.

The New Testament paints a very different picture. The call is not, “Decide with your autonomous will,” but, “believe,” command addressed to people whose wills are in bondage and whose hearts are stone. The miracle of salvation, as we explored in the chapter on new birth, is that God Himself grants what He commands. He does not stand at a distance, hoping His offer will be compelling enough for some independent wills. He invades. He resurrects. He unchains the will from its idolatries, turns the weather vane by changing the wind, and brings about a genuine, willing response.

Here language matters immensely. When we say, “Your decision is the final factor,” we recast grace as an offer waiting on human ratification. Grace becomes stage furniture; the will becomes the spotlighted actor delivering the climactic line. But biblically, grace is not merely a proposal; it is power. It

does not merely create the possibility of salvation; it accomplishes salvation. The sinner's response is real and conscious—but it is the echo, not the first sound; the reflection, not the sun.

Some will object, "Are you saying we should not call people to respond?" Far from it. The gospel demands response. Yet the way we frame that response either magnifies God or exalts the self. We can say, "Turn to Christ; if you find within you the faintest desire for Him, that desire is already His work—yield to it." Or we can say, "The universe now waits to see what you will do." One call bows before the mystery of divine initiative. The other enthrones the creature as decisive partner in salvation.

Here the connection to our earlier discussion of faith versus self-trust becomes unavoidable. When faith is mis defined as a heroic leap of the will it becomes just another work. We saw in the chapter on counterfeit faith that believing becomes something you muster rather than receive. The altar-call culture that

centers on “making your decision” is the practical expression of that distortion. It trains people to look inward for the decisive cause of salvation, to search for a past moment of willpower and cling to it as proof that they are rescued.

The tragedy deepens when assurance rests on that moment. “I know I’m saved,” someone says, “because I made a decision at camp when I was fifteen.” Not “because Christ died and rose,” or “because the Spirit bears witness,” but “because I did something.” The original lie promised that we could secure our own godlike status through an act of grasping. The re-tweeted version promises that we can secure eternal safety through an act of deciding. Both fix the gaze on the self.

If the will is not the decisive hinge, what, then, is its role? It is real, but responsive. It is commanded, but not sovereign. When God regenerates the heart, He does not bypass the will; He liberates it. He does not drag a protesting soul into heaven. He makes Christ so compelling that the renewed will freely

yields to Him. The decision is there, but as fruit, not root; as evidence, not cause. The weight shifts from "I chose well" to "He rescued me."

Pastorally, this re-centering changes everything. The preacher no longer imagines himself as a salesman closing a deal with reluctant customers. He stands as a herald of a conquering King, confident that the King's voice will awaken His sheep. The counseling room is no longer where we interrogate someone about whether they really made the right decision, but where we ask, "Do you see Christ? Do you love Him? This love is the fingerprint of God's mercy upon you."

In the chapters ahead, we will explore how this God-centered view of salvation reshapes worship, mission, and daily obedience. For now, it is enough to unmask the flattering illusion that our independent decision is the linchpin of redemption. The gospel does not say, "You are almost there—finish the job with a choice." It says, "You were dead, and God made you alive." To repeat the lie of

autonomy in religious language is still to repeat the lie. However, many times it is shared, liked, and re-tweeted -it remains false. Only when we silence that echo and let the thunder of sovereign grace be heard again will sinners be truly comforted and God be truly glorified.

Chapter 17
The Altar Call from Hell

The first time you hear it, it sounds so right. The music swells, the lights dim, the preacher's voice softens. "Every head bowed, every eye closed. If you want to accept Jesus, raise your hand. Take this step. Make this decision. Secure your eternity tonight." The crowd shifts, hearts pound, and yes, somewhere in the room a soul is genuinely awakened by the Spirit of God. But woven around that miracle is something far more sinister: the assumption that the decisive cause of salvation is not the living God, but the trembling human will. This is the altar call from hell—not because invitations are evil, but because idolatry can dress itself in gospel clothes and stand at the front of a church.

We need to tread carefully. The New Testament is filled with imperatives: repent, believe, come, call upon the name of the Lord. Jesus cries, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden." Paul begs, "We implore you on

behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." The church must never grow embarrassed by such appeals. Evangelical reticence, draped in the robes of "high theology," can be as faithless as manipulative emotionalism. Connection to other chapters: earlier we saw how preaching that exalts God's sovereignty still presses hard on human responsibility; that tension must remain alive here as well.

The problem is not the call itself, but the engine we imagine behind the response. In some circles the logic runs like this: God has done all he can; Christ has died for all equally; the Spirit now waits, powerless, hovering near every seat. Salvation hangs in the air like an unclaimed gift card, and the determining factor is the sinner's choice. It sounds empowering, democratic, almost romantic. But it is blasphemous. It dethrones the King of glory and enthrones the "customer". It makes the will of the spiritually dead sinner the spark that ignites divine life.

Scripture paints a darker and more hopeful picture. Darker, because sinners are not sick but dead; not merely misinformed but hostile; not weak but enslaved. Hopeful, because God is not a frustrated suitor but a resurrecting Creator. “You were dead in the trespasses and sins… but God… made us alive together with Christ.” The human need to believe is real and necessary. Yet it is not the causal mechanism of regeneration; it is the first conscious breath of a heart already made alive by sovereign grace. The call to come is the bell that wakes the sleeper, but the power that rouses from death lies not in the bell, nor in the sleeper’s groan, but in the God who speaks light into darkness.

To confuse this order is to poison the well of assurance. If my decisive contribution brought me into Christ, then my decisive withdrawal can cast me out. If my will, in its native power, leapt the final gap between death and life, then my will may yet leap back. The altar becomes a revolving door: saved tonight, lost tomorrow, re-saved next youth camp. The altar call from

hell severs that anchor and casts the soul back onto the storm of its own moods.

This poisoned theology also reshapes the way we craft the invitation. If human decision is the cause of new birth, then my task as preacher is to engineer decisions. I must shorten the sermon, lengthen the music, dim the lights, raise the volume, repeat the chorus, tell the tear-jerking story, promise relief, avoid offense. I'll sell the product. I offer Jesus as painkiller, life coach, romantic matchmaker, business partner, self-esteem enhancer—whatever will close the deal. The altar becomes a sales counter, the prayer a transaction, the penitent a consumer.

Yet the New Testament altar—if we dare use that word—is drenched in blood not of our own offering but of the Lamb. In earlier chapters we looked at the cross as the God-centered substitutionary work that actually saves, not merely makes salvation possible. If Christ has truly purchased people, not probabilities, then evangelism is not a desperate attempt to complete an unfinished

atonement; it is the royal proclamation that the price has been fully paid for a particular people who will certainly come. The invitation is not, "Make the cross effective by your choice," but, "Flee to the cross whose power has already secured the salvation of all who believe."

So what does a faithful call look like? It is robustly biblical in content, fiercely urgent in tone, and utterly dependent in spirit. It names sin as cosmic treason, not a minor character flaw. It portrays Christ crucified and risen as the only refuge, not one option among many lifestyle upgrades.

There is nothing inherently unbiblical about asking people to come forward, stand, raise a hand, or speak with a counselor, so long as we never confuse the gesture with the grace. The danger is subtle: the moment we say or imply, "If you walked this aisle, you are now saved," we have carved a golden calf out of carpet and courage.

When we count “decisions for Christ” as our metric of success, we inevitably fill the rolls with unregenerate names. We congratulate ourselves on “harvest”.

The very God who must grant repentance also commands it; the very Christ who says, “No one can come to me unless the Father draws him,” also cries, “Whoever comes to me I will never cast out.” The call from heaven does not silence the call from the pulpit; it guarantees that the call will not be in vain.

So let the music play. Let the preacher plead. Let the church pray. But let every heart know what hangs in the balance is not whether a hand is raised or a card signed, but rather that the living God will, in his mercy, breathe life into the valley of dry bones before us. Our task is to prophesy to the bones, not to animate them with theatrics. The altar is safe from hell only when the God of heaven is seen as the first mover, the decisive cause, the sovereign Savior—and when every tear that falls at the

front of the room is attributed not to the genius of our methods, but to the miracle of his grace.

Chapter 18
The Gospel with Handles and fees.

Every lie needs a sequel. The serpent's original whisper—"You will be like God"—never retires; it learns new dialects. In our day, it dresses itself as pious language about "doing your part," about "activating grace," about "taking hold" of what Christ purchased. The words sound reverent, urgent, practical. Yet beneath them, the old ambition breathes: let man keep the decisive handle. Let him stay, however subtly, at the center.

The gospel of free grace becomes the loudest contradiction of that lie. It thunders that God saves by Himself, for Himself, through His Son, applied by His Spirit, so that no flesh may boast. But even when grace is verbally affirmed as "free," a quiet modification sneaks in. Christ has done His part; but, you must do yours. The price is paid, but, the merchandise supposedly sits on the counter until a human

hand grips the handle and pulls it home. Heaven is stocked, but locked, awaiting man's key.

In earlier chapters, we watched this lie establish its empire. We saw how conditional language smuggled human ability back into the story, and how it traced the psychology of a heart needing one small island of self-congratulation. Now we look at one of the slickest forms this lie takes: the gospel with handles and fees, the cross followed by the checkout line.

The Language of Handles

Listen closely to common phrases in religious speech. They rarely deny grace. Instead, they introduce the fees. Christ has done everything necessary, we are told, but now you must "activate" it by your decision. Salvation is pictured like dormant electricity, humming helplessly in the walls until you flip the switch. God has written the check, but your signature must be added on the back.

Notice the structure: God acts first, man acts last. God provides the content, man supplies the conclusion. God builds the bridge, man takes the final step. One might still affirm that God's part is greater in size and glory. Yet the crucial question is not whose part is bigger; it is whose part is decisive. Which act finally separates the saved from the lost?

A gospel with handles insists that Christ has purchased a general possibility, and man must attach it to himself. The cross, then, becomes a divine offer, not a divine accomplishment. It creates a world in which no one is actually saved, only savable, until man's hand reaches out. Grace is redefined as something waiting, needy, pending. God, in effect, waits in line behind man.

Apparent Humility, Hidden Pride

At first hearing, this arrangement sounds humble. We admit our sin and confess we cannot save ourselves. We recognize the

enormity of Christ's work. All we say, the argument goes, is that man must not be treated as a rock or a robot. Surely he must respond, must do something. Surely it is only right to respect his freedom and give him a genuine role.

Yet human pride is adept at hiding under pious clothing. Here, it wraps itself in the humility of "responsibility." But examine the emotional weight of this scheme. Whom do we quietly thank when we consider why we are saved and another is not? We may say the correct theological words: all glory to God. Yet the inner narrative often runs differently. I used my free will correctly (I chose to follow Christ). I was wise enough, soft enough, responsive enough. I took the step someone else refused to take.

The decisive difference, under this model, lies not in Christ but in you. His cross is equal toward all; your action makes the final distinction. You and your neighbor both receive grace as possibility; one of you increases its power by handling it, the other

does not. So whatever we may say about God doing “ninety-nine percent,” the last percent rules the story. The final cause of salvation, the differentiating factor between heaven and hell, sits in human hands.
That is not humility. It is the old lie kneeling at a new altar.

The Decisive Cause Question

The central issue in this chapter is not whether humans respond. Scripture portrays faith, repentance, love, obedience, surrender. The question is more surgical: Is the human response the decisive cause of salvation, or is it the effect of God’s decisive act? When grace is said to be free, but only as material waiting for man’s activation, then the answer is already given: grace is subordinate; man’s choice is sovereign.

Imagine two drowning swimmers, equally unable to save themselves. A rescuer throws life preservers toward each. In one story, the rescuer jumps in, fastens the ring around one swimmer, and drags him to shore, while

leaving the other to his chosen fate. In another story, the rescuer tosses the rings near both and shouts, “Grab hold!” One clutches the ring, the other floats away. If you are the rescued one, where do you place the final praise? In story two, the difference is not in the rescuer’s action, but in your response. Your hand becomes the hinge on which salvation turns.

Many modern presentations of the gospel function as story two. Christ becomes the thrower of equal opportunities rather than the bringer of definite redemption. Faith becomes the one human motion that history cannot trace back to God’s prior, effectual work. It becomes the autonomous contribution that crowns divine initiative. And wherever that structure stands, the decisive cause of salvation is man.

Such thinking reshapes prayer and assurance. If our faith is self-generated, then we must thank ourselves at least a little and fear ourselves endlessly. For what we birthed, we can always un-birth. If my hand put me into Christ, my failing hand might one day let go.

Grace as Free Power, Not Passive Potential

Biblical grace is not raw spiritual material lying passively on a table, waiting for a user. It is living power, royal action. It does not beg to be activated; it activates the dead. It does not hover over corpses, whispering for them to move; it speaks, and corpses rise. Grace is not a voucher; it is a resurrection.

When Christ cried, “It is finished,” He did not announce a half-payment, pending customer response. He declared the complete securing of His people. The cross did not manufacture a warehouse of unused salvations; it purchased actual souls, to be actually brought home. The Spirit is not a delivery boy wandering the streets, hoping someone will open a door; He is the Lord and Giver of life, opening blind eyes, softening stone hearts, granting the repentance He commands.

In that light, the idea of “man’s handle” withers. What can a spiritually dead man add to his own resurrection? How does a blind man provide the final spark for his sight? To call

grace “free” and then wait for human activation is to redefine freedom. It suggests a king who offers pardon but cannot open the prison, a husband who pledges love but cannot win the bride’s heart, a shepherd who calls but cannot make the sheep hear. In the name of exalting human dignity, it quietly dethrones God.

The Emotional Logic of Handles and Fees

The gospel with handles and fees also creates a specific emotional landscape. It fills the church with anxiety and transaction. The believer is told, “God has done His part; have you really done yours?” The focus shifts from the finished work of Christ to the fluctuating sincerity of the human response. Did I truly believe? Did I properly repent? Did I handle grace correctly?

Soon, the Christian life becomes one long checkout counter. There is always another small fee, another add-on, another condition wrapped in the language of responsibility. Assurance is no longer anchored in an

unshakeable decree but in a memory, a feeling, a decision card signed years ago. People replay their conversion scene, looking for evidence that their handle was tight enough, their activation authentic enough.

Once you make man's moment the decisive cause, you must build systems to monitor, measure, and maintain that moment. Churches become spiritual subscription services, always warning that if you stop paying the fee of sufficient sincerity, your grace account might be suspended.

Where the Glory Falls

The decisive cause question is, finally, a glory question. When we stand in the New Creation, looking across a redeemed humanity, what story will they tell? If they say, "We are here because we handled grace rightly," the song will have more than one name in its credits. If they say, "We are here because God had done His part and we did ours," they will divide the honor, however politely.

But Scripture insists on a different song: “Salvation belongs to the Lord.” Not partly, not conditionally, not waiting on a final payment at the counter of human will. It belongs to Him in source, in process, in completion. He chose, He purchased, He called, He kept. We believed, yes; but even that believing was His gift, not our fee.

A gospel without handles does not erase human response; it explains it. It says, “You came because He drew you. You repented because He granted it. You believed because He shone light into your darkness.” So when asked why you are saved and another is not, you do not point to your wiser choice. You point only to mercy. You do not boast in a more skillful hand; you boast in a stronger Savior.

The original lie promised man the decisive seat. The gospel of handles and fees merely updates the upholstery. But the true gospel overturns the throne, leaves man on his face, and lifts his eyes to a God who saves by Himself. There, and only there, is grace both truly free and truly glorious.

Chapter 19
It Is Finished

This chapter is a deliberate swing of the beam back to Calvary, back to the One who cried, “It is finished.” Earlier, in the chapters on calling and regeneration, we traced salvation from God’s side—His eternal purpose, His summons, His power to raise the dead heart. Now, we stand at the foot of the cross and hear what that purpose sounds like in the dying breath of the Son.

At Golgotha, the Son of God does not cry, “I have done My part; now do yours.” He does not say, “I have opened the possibility; complete it with your decision.” Instead, with a voice strained by agony yet clear with authority, He announces, “It is finished.” This is not the sigh of a defeated martyr but the declaration of a victorious Redeemer. The verb is perfect, not tentative; accomplished, not pending. All that the law demanded, He fulfilled. All that justice required, He bore. All that the Father gave Him to save, He

purchased. The cross is not a half-built bridge awaiting the planks of human will; it is a finished road from the city of wrath to the fields of mercy, and Christ Himself carries His people across.

Salvation, then, rests on Christ's accomplished work. Not on the sharpness of your repentance or the clarity of your understanding. Not even on the stability of your current emotional assurance.

The ground of your standing is outside of you, fixed in history yet reaching into eternity. The blood has been shed; the ransom paid; the curse borne. Earlier chapters spoke of election and calling as the backstage of redemption, the eternal script written before time. Here, at the cross, we see that script enacted in flesh and streaming blood. "It is finished" means there is nothing left to add and nothing left to fear that God might change His mind.

Yet if salvation rests on Christ's work, how does that finished work come to you, a particular sinner in a particular story? The

answer is mercy—God's mercy, not your management of your spiritual life. Mercy is love bending down to the undeserving, kindness poured on the guilty. It is not God finding something promising in you; it is God choosing to love you when there was nothing in you but resistance and ruin. When you look within and see only inconsistency, mercy looks outward and upward to a Father whose heart was set on you before you knew His name. This is why the gospel must begin with God's character rather than human potential.

A finished work in the hands of a merciful God is a secure salvation; a finished work in the hands of a reluctant or changeable deity would still leave us trembling. But the same Christ who cried "It is finished" is the One who embodied the Father's compassion: He finished the work because the Father's mercy willed it so. God's summons makes the finished work effective in a human life.

Those whom He predestined, He also called; those He called, He justified; those He justified, He glorified. The golden chain does

not have a human link. The difference is the call itself, God's sovereign decision to turn the finished work of Christ into a living word in your soul. Calling is not God applauding your choice; it is God creating the very willingness by which you cling to Christ.

How does God create that willingness? Through regeneration, His act of giving new life to a dead heart, not the polishing of an old nature but the arrival of a new one. Here we underscore the connection to "It is finished."

The same Christ who died and rose in history now, by His Spirit, brings that death and resurrection into the inner life of the believer. Regeneration does not complete what the cross left undone; it is the Spirit applying what the cross secured for all whom the Father gave the Son. If "You must make the difference" is true, then the new birth is at best a divine assist, a jumpstart that still waits to see what you will do. But if "It is finished" is the banner over salvation, then regeneration is the inevitable fruit of a purchase paid in full. The cross does

not merely make people savable; it guarantees that the spiritually dead will be raised.

Still, the Bible speaks of salvation as a gift received by faith. Here many subtly smuggle human boasting back into the picture. “Yes, Christ did everything,” they say, “but you must at least contribute your faith.” Yet Scripture quietly dismantles even this tiny pedestal of pride: “It is the gift of God… not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” Faith itself is given. The hand that reaches for Christ is a hand formed by grace. The eye that sees His beauty is an eye opened by mercy. The heart that trusts His promise is a heart He has made new. When we connect this truth back to “It is finished,” the logic is luminous: if the saving work is complete, then even the means by which we come to share in it must be a donation, not a negotiation. God is not haggling for your cooperation; He is bestowing the very trust that unites you to His Son.

This does not erase human responsibility; it restores it to its proper place. You really do

believe. You really do repent. You really do cling to Christ, cry out to Him, walk with Him, and fight sin by His Spirit. Yet you do so as one carried, not as one carrying the weight of redemption on your shoulders. “It is finished” is the foundation of walking the walk and talking the talk. When doubts multiply and your memory of any decisive moment of conversion grows dim, the question is not “Was my decision good enough?” but “Is His work finished enough?” The answer, resounding from the cross, is yes.

In the end, the gospel is not a story of potential but of accomplishment. Against the restless drumbeat of “You must make the difference,” Christ raises His pierced hands and proclaims a different rhythm: done. Salvation rests on His finished work, rooted in God’s mercy, carried to you by God’s calling, created in you by God’s regenerating power, received through God’s gift of faith. Stand, then, not on the shaky ground of your past choices, but on the solid rock of a Savior who has borne the full weight of your salvation and whispered

over your soul, once and for all, “It is finished.”

Chapter 20
The Sovereignty of God

There is a reason our age trembles before the idea of a truly sovereign God. A God who merely advises, suggests, or pleads can be safely ignored; a God whose will finally determines all things cannot. The human heart has been catechized in the liturgy of autonomy: "I am my own, I belong to myself, my choices are ultimate." Yet Scripture speaks with an entirely different voice. It declares that the Lord sits in the heavens and does whatever pleases Him, that His counsel stands forever, that none can stay His hand or say to Him, "What have You done?" This chapter is an attempt, not to defend God, but to declare Him as He has revealed Himself: sovereign, unchallenged, and absolutely free in His own will.

The sovereignty of God means there can only be one will that is finally decisive. Many wills exist—angelic, human, demonic—but none are ultimate. If there could be two sovereign

wills, neither would be sovereign; they would collide, negotiate, or destroy one another. The universe would dissolve into an eternal power struggle. Sovereignty is indivisible. It is not a shared throne, but a single, undivided scepter. Every other will may resist for a season, but it cannot overturn what God has decreed from eternity. The question, then, is not whether your will is real, but whether it is ultimate. Scripture answers with stark clarity: your will is real and responsible, but God's will overrules every other will, without apology and without failure.

This is precisely what the Enemy hates. From the beginning, his lie has been the same: "You will be like God." The promise of autonomy is the promise of sovereignty stolen from the throne of the Lord and offered to dust. Satan's revivalists, in every generation, redress the same blasphemy in modern robes. They preach self-determination as salvation, and self-expression as the highest good. Even in the church, the language has shifted: God is presented as One who waits helplessly for man's permission, whose purposes hang on

man's consent. In such a scheme, heaven's counsel must pause before the locked door of the human will, hoping that love letters and soft music will coax the sinner into agreement. Where this doctrine flourishes, the fear of the Lord dies. If God's will may be thwarted by mine, He is no longer the Judge before whom I must bow, but a partner with whom I negotiate. The heavens cease to thunder, "Holy, holy, holy," and instead whisper, "Flexible, patient, accommodating." When man's autonomy is enthroned, reverence withers. Sin becomes a lifestyle choice, not cosmic treason. Judgment becomes an empty threat, not a certain appointment. The loss of the fear of the Lord is not a minor doctrinal adjustment; it is the unraveling of wisdom, worship, and of creation's very sanity.

The church must hear again what Scripture never stopped saying: the Lord can and does rule the human heart. He is not a mere observer of its movements; He is its Maker, Owner, and Sovereign Potter. He can soften a heart of stone, preparing it for the rain of grace. He can breathe on the valley of dry bones and raise a

people who were dead in trespasses and sins. He can take the rebel who gnashes his teeth at heaven and, in irresistible kindness, cause him to see the beauty of Christ and repent. This is not flattery of human openness; it is the miracle of divine intervention.

Yet the same Lord who softens can also harden. Scripture dares to say that He raised up Pharaoh "for this very purpose," that His power might be displayed in him. God did not merely foresee Pharaoh's stubbornness; He judicially confirmed it, so that the king's sin would ripen for judgment. Hardening does not create evil in an innocent heart; it withdraws restraining mercy from a guilty one. Left to itself, the heart displays what it loves—its hatred of God, its preference for idols, its determination to be its own master. God's hardening is a sovereign handing over, a severe verdict in time so that the ugliness of sin is exposed and condemned.

Both softening and hardening are expressions of the same sovereign will. In one, mercy triumphs over judgment; in the other,

judgment reveals the justice of God. Human autonomy cannot explain either reality. If God only begged and waited, the decisive factor in salvation would be man's will, not God's grace. If God only warned and threatened, yet never enacted judgment, wickedness would reign unopposed. But the God of Scripture is not so impotent. He chooses, calls, converts, endures, gives over, judges. His freedom is the furnace in which both salvation and condemnation are forged.

Therefore the church must remember that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Wisdom does not start with self-awareness, therapeutic insight, or pragmatic skill. It begins with trembling before a God whose will cannot be evaded. To fear the Lord is to know that you are not sovereign, not the author of your own story. It is to stand under the weight of His holiness and admit that every breath is borrowed, every plan fragile, every boast foolish. Such fear is not a cringing terror that flees from God, but a humbled awe that dares not trifle with Him. The wise know there are

no safe negotiations with the Almighty, only surrender and trust.

Remember also that God is a consuming fire. This is not a primitive metaphor to be explained away by modern sensitivity; it is a warning spoken to the church. Fire does not ask permission to burn; it simply is what it is. To draw near to God while clinging to autonomy is to step into the furnace with dry straw wrapped around the soul. The same presence that comforts the brokenhearted also devours hypocrisy and pride. When God walks among His people, He burns away illusions of control. He exposes the lie that we can manage Him, use Him, or fit Him into our plans. Sovereignty means He is not a tame companion but a blazing center around which all things must orbit.

This is why election, if not sovereign, is meaningless. To speak of God “choosing” while insisting that His choice never decides anything is to empty the word of power. A conditional election that waits passively on man’s autonomous decision is not election at

all; it is a prediction, a divine forecast of what man will do if left untouched. But Scripture presents election as the free, gracious, effective choice of God, before the foundation of the world, determining who will be called, justified, and glorified. This is not a cold doctrine for debate; it is the heartbeat of assurance. If salvation rests on the unsteady ground of my will, I am lost. If it rests on the unchanging will of a sovereign God, I am secure.

To affirm the sovereignty of divine election is to confess that grace is not a polite offer but a rescuing act. God does not stand on the shore of human ruin and shout advice to drowning men, hoping some will mimic the stroke He recommends. He dives into the chaos, lays hold of those He has loved and brings them out alive. The hand that saves is not tentative; it is omnipotent. Those whom He foreknew, He predestined; those He predestined, He called; those He called, He justified; those He justified, He glorified. Not one link in this golden chain depends on autonomous man;

every link is forged in the fire of God's sovereign will.

When the church returns to this vision, humility and boldness grow together. Humility, because no one can boast in himself; all is of mercy. Boldness, because no force—angelic, human, or demonic—can finally stand against the purpose of God. The Enemy may deceive, nations may rage, hearts may resist, but the decree of the Lord remains. He softens whom He will, He hardens whom He will, and in all of it His justice and mercy shine. To live in the light of this truth is to abandon the fragile idol of autonomy and to rest in the hands of the one true Sovereign.

Chapter 21
The Sovereignty of Mercy

Mercy is a soft word with a hard edge. We hear it and think of tenderness, of a judge leaning forward with moist eyes and a trembling voice. Scripture will not let us stop there. It presses us to a greater, more unsettling confession: mercy is sovereign. Before mercy becomes sweet, it must become weighty. Before it becomes our comfort, it must confront our pride. For the mercy of God is not a gentle correction of our story; it is the sovereign Author writing life where death has already been deserved.

Grace and mercy are inseparable, but they are not identical. Grace gives what we do not deserve; mercy withholds what we do deserve. Grace looks upon the empty-handed sinner and gives. Mercy looks upon the guilty sinner and spares. Grace bestows favor upon the undeserving; mercy withholds judgment from the condemned. And both have their origin in the sovereign will of God. They do not arise

from the soil of human virtue, but from the depths of the divine “I will.”

This distinction matters because we cannot understand the sovereignty of mercy until we understand the condition of the one receiving it. God does not look down upon innocent men and arbitrarily decide whom He will condemn. Scripture begins elsewhere: “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” Humanity does not stand before God divided between innocent and guilty. It stands before Him guilty. Therefore, the mystery is not why God judges. Judgment is the right response of holiness to sin. The mystery is why God has mercy at all. And God’s answer is breathtaking: “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy.”

We instinctively want mercy to operate according to some principle within man: willingness, sincerity, faith, humility, repentance, decision. Something must distinguish one man from another. But if the distinguishing cause originates in the man, mercy is no longer entirely mercy. The man

has supplied the reason. Paul takes that reason away. Quoting Exodus, he writes, “For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.” The determining “I will” belongs to God. Then Paul concludes: “So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy.”

We should not hurry past those words. “Not of him that willeth.” “Not of him that runneth.” “But of God.” Paul removes both human determination and exertion as the decisive cause. The will is real. The running is real. But neither stands at the throne as the final explanation. Mercy does. And the One who shows mercy is God.

These words in Romans 9 do not float in isolation. Paul has just set before us two sons: Jacob and Esau. Same father, same mother, same pregnancy. Yet before either child had done anything good or evil, Scripture says this was done “that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of

him that calleth." He takes us back before their works, achievements, or failures, before any conduct could be presented as the cause, so the believer sees the dividing line: "Not of works, but of him that calleth." Man's works stand on one side; God's calling on the other. The purpose is God's. The election is God's. The calling is God's. The mercy is God's.

At this point Paul hears the objection: "What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God?" No one would ask this if Paul were merely saying that God foresees who will choose Him and then elects them. That feels fair: God chose him because he chose God. But Paul's doctrine provokes, "Is there unrighteousness with God?" He does not retreat or soften his teaching with foreseen faith. He replies, "God forbid," and proves God's righteousness by quoting God's sovereign declaration: "For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy." The answer to the accusation against divine sovereignty is not less sovereignty, but more. God is righteous. God is sovereign. God has

mercy according to His own will. All three stand together.

Here our reasoning goes astray. We begin to think of mercy as though God owes it. But the instant mercy becomes an obligation, it ceases to be mercy. Imagine ten guilty men standing condemned. If the judge imposes the lawful sentence upon all ten, he has done no wrong. If, possessing lawful authority to pardon, he extends mercy to one, the other nine cannot protest, “You wronged us because you did not give us what you gave him.” They were not denied justice; they were denied mercy. And mercy was never their debt. Human illustrations falter because every earthly judge is bound to a law above himself. God is not. God Himself is the righteous Judge. “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” Yes, always. God never condemns the innocent. God never perverts judgment. Yet neither is He obligated to extend mercy to every guilty man simply because He extends mercy to another.

The sovereignty of mercy offends something deep within us. We want justice for others and mercy for ourselves. When God declares Himself sovereign over mercy, we suddenly become defenders of universal entitlement. “Why him and not another?” we ask, assuming God owes mercy. He does not.

The astonishing thing about Noah’s generation is not that the flood came, but that “Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD.” The astonishing thing about Sodom is not that fire fell, but that Lot was brought out. The astonishing thing about Egypt is not that Pharaoh was judged, but that God redeemed a people. The astonishing thing about the two thieves is not that one died condemned; both were guilty. The astonishing thing is that the other heard, “Today shalt thou be with me in paradise.” Mercy is only astonishing when guilt is taken seriously. The less we grasp sin, the more sovereign mercy seems unfair. The more we grasp its horror, the more sovereign mercy becomes breathtaking.

After declaring, “Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth,” Paul anticipates another protest: “Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will?” Again, the objection arises precisely because Paul teaches a sovereign divine will. He does not apologize or fold God’s sovereignty into the small box of human autonomy. He answers with a rebuke of human presumption: “Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God?” Those words reorder the universe: you are man. He is God. The problem is not that God has failed to give a satisfying explanation, but that the creature has tried to summon the Creator before the bar of human reason.

There comes a point where theology must yield to worship. We can trace revelation as far as God has drawn it. We can compare Scripture with Scripture and confess what God has spoken. But we cannot cross the boundary between creature and Creator. There the mind must bow. God does not fit inside our systems. His eternal purpose cannot be reduced until

every mystery evaporates. As Paul moves from Romans 9 through Romans 11, unfolding election, calling, Israel, the Gentiles, hardening, and mercy, he does not end with, "Now all is made plain." He erupts: "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!" We know truly, because God has spoken. We do not know exhaustively, because we are not God.

Paul reaches for an image as old as clay: "Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay…?" Modern instinct sides with the clay; Scripture directs our gaze to the Potter. The clay does not create, counsel, or authorize the Potter. It exists because the Potter wills that it exist. Fallen man asks, "What does God owe me?" Scripture answers, "Who are you, O man?" This is not the crushing of human worth, but the restoration of the Creator-creature distinction. God is God. We are not.

To prove this, Paul cites Pharaoh: “Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee.” Pharaoh imagined himself sovereign, yet plague by plague he learned there was a throne above his throne. He hardened his heart and sinned willingly, yet above Pharaoh’s willing stood another will: the will of God. And God’s will prevailed. Thus Paul concludes: “Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth.” We are tempted to rewrite this, to qualify it until the offense disappears. Scripture instead invites us to let the words stand. “He hath mercy on whom he will.”

Mercy belongs to God. The decision belongs to God. The glory belongs to God. The recipient has one posture: gratitude.

Listen to Paul’s own testimony: “Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy.” He was an enemy. Then, “I obtained mercy.” Why is he an apostle and not still a persecutor? Mercy. Why does he proclaim the Christ he once opposed? Mercy. Sovereign mercy, rightly

understood, destroys arrogance. The man who thinks his own decision ultimately distinguished him may look upon the unbeliever and ask, “Why don’t you do what I did?” The man who understands mercy looks and says, “I was there—blind, rebellious, dead—and if I now see, stand, believe, and love Christ, it is because mercy came first.”

Nor does mercy end at conversion. Peter writes that God “according to his abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope.” Paul adds, “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us.” From first awakening to final glory, the pattern is the same: His purpose, His calling, His grace, His mercy. When the redeemed stand in glory, no one will discover that God owed him anything.

Every crown will testify to grace. Every voice will confess that salvation belongs to the Lord. There is something wonderfully personal in the divine words, “I will have mercy.” The sovereign God does not possess mercy as an abstract quality. He moves toward sinners,

saves the guilty, raises the dead, adopts enemies as sons. He does it because He wills to be merciful. Once we see what sin deserves, our questions change. We cease asking, “Why does God not have mercy on everyone?” and begin whispering, “Why did He have mercy on me?” There is no answer in us—not our works, intelligence, foresight, sensitivity, running, or willing. Scripture closes that door: “So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy.”

Go behind every act of faith, every tear of repentance, every coming to Christ, and you will find, at last, a throne and a voice: “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy.” When the sinner stands there with every human claim stripped away, only one confession remains: He had mercy on me.

Chapter 22
The Sovereignty of Election

Election is a word that pulls us backward, away from the noise of human activity and the clamor of religious effort, into a silence older than history. We are accustomed to beginning our story with our own awakening: the day we felt conviction, the evening we wept over sin, the moment we finally bowed to Christ. Scripture does not disrespect those moments, but it refuses to let them be the starting point. When Paul writes about salvation, he opens a door not merely into our past, but into God's eternity, and bids us look where no human voice is heard and no human hand is raised. There, before the first mote of dust hung in the beam of created light, God purposed. There, the sovereignty of election stands.

Election did not begin with sin. It did not begin with man's fall, as though God were caught off guard and forced to improvise. It did not begin when the gospel was first proclaimed in the garden, or when a preacher lifted his voice in

your hearing. It did not begin when you felt the first stirrings of concern for your soul, nor when you trusted Christ. It did not even begin when the eternal Son was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger at Bethlehem. Election takes us beyond all these scenes. Paul carries us back beyond Abraham under the stars, beyond Noah before the ark, beyond Adam formed from the dust, beyond creation itself. He takes us where no human will existed, no human choice was offered, no human deed had been done, and no human breath had yet filled any lungs: "According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world."

Before the foundation of the world: the phrase strips away all illusions that we contributed to the first movement of salvation. There was no preacher, no altar, no invitation song, no aisle to walk, no hand to lift, no prayer to frame, no decision to register. There was, quite simply, no man at all. There was God. And God chose. If we are to think rightly about election, we must begin here—not with man's response in

time, but with God's uncaused purpose in eternity.

Paul does not write, "We chose Him before the foundation of the world." He writes, "He hath chosen us." The subject of the choosing is God alone; the objects are His people; the sphere is Christ: "He hath chosen us in him." Election, therefore, is not first a doctrine about man and his destiny. It is a revelation of God's eternal purpose in His Son. Before there was a world sunk in guilt, the purpose was in Christ. Before there was a sinner to summon, a believer to justify, or a saint to glorify, the purpose stood complete in Christ. The Son was not God's emergency answer to an unforeseen disaster in Eden. The cross was no divine repair job. Peter says that Christ was "foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you." History sees the cross erected; eternity knew the Lamb slain.

Paul presses deeper: "Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will." Again, the spotlight falls on His will.

Why adoption? His will. Why predestination? His will. Why this eternal purpose centered in Christ? “According to the good pleasure of his will.” Paul does not ask us to search man for the originating cause; he leads us into God and stops. We want to push past that boundary. Yes, but why did God choose? Scripture answers, and then falls reverently silent: the good pleasure of His will. We long to discover some trait in the creature that explains the choice of the Creator. Scripture repeatedly refuses us such ground. The root lies not in man but in God—His purpose, His pleasure, His counsel, His will.

For that reason election cannot be reduced to God looking down the corridors of time and ratifying beforehand a decision that arises independently in man. If God’s choice is ultimately caused by man’s future choice, then man’s choice stands first. God elects because man will eventually elect. God becomes the responder; man, the initiator. The eternal decree would rest upon the shifting sand of the creature’s will. Paul deliberately overturns that order in Romans 9. Speaking of Jacob and

Esau, he chooses a moment when neither had acted: “For the children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil… that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth.” Before either son had done good or evil, before either had run a step in obedience or rebellion, God fixed the difference in His own purpose. Election stands because God’s purpose stands. Yet this sovereign election is never detached from Christ. Paul does not merely say “He hath chosen us”; he insists, “He hath chosen us in Him.”

Election is not a cold, impersonal decree hovering somewhere in eternity. It is God’s eternal delight in His Son, and our inclusion in that delight. Chosen in Him. Predestinated unto adoption by Jesus Christ. Accepted in the Beloved. Redeemed through His blood. Forgiven according to the riches of His grace. Ephesians 1 is a cascade of Christ-centered phrases. Strip Christ from election and you are left with abstraction. Keep election where Scripture keeps it—in the blazing center of Christ—and it becomes worship. God did not

simply purpose to save; He purposed to save in His Son. Therefore, the glory of election does not belong to a system; it belongs to Christ.

Romans 8 unfolds this same eternal purpose in the form of a golden chain. “All things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.” Again, His purpose stands at the headwaters. “For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son.” Then the links appear: “Whom he did predestinate, them he also called; and whom he called, them he also justified; and whom he justified, them he also glorified.” Foreknown. Predestinated. Called. Justified. Glorified.

The same people pass unbroken through the entire sequence. Those predestinated are the ones called; those called are the ones justified; those justified are the ones glorified. Paul does not begin with man’s decision and end with uncertainty. He begins with God’s purpose and ends with glorification so certain that he

speaks of it in the past tense. The believer's final glory rests not upon the flicker of human determination, but upon the unchanging counsel of God.

This is why "The Sovereignty of the Call" will show more fully, Scripture distinguishes between the universal proclamation of the gospel and the effectual call of God. The command goes out to all: repent, believe, come to Christ. This outward call is real and binding upon every hearer. Yet those whom Romans 8 calls "the called according to his purpose" experience something more: the eternal purpose enters history with irresistible power. The ones predestinated are called in such a way that they certainly come; the ones thus called are justified. Eternity touches time; purpose becomes calling; calling yields faith; faith lays hold of Christ.

Jesus Himself speaks in this order. "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me." The Father gives; they come. He does not say, All who come will then be given. He says, "All that the Father giveth me shall come." The

giving precedes the coming, and the coming is sure. Election does not narrow the door; it guarantees that many will pass through it. The Father gives; the sinner comes; the Son receives. There is harmony, not contradiction. But why will any sinner come at all? Jesus answers again: “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him.” The problem is not merely that men do not happen to come; it is that they cannot. Spiritual inability is met by sovereign drawing. Later He adds, “No man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father.” Coming is a gift. The Father has a people whom He gives to the Son; He draws them; He grants the very coming He commands. They come, and Christ raises them up at the last day. From the eternal counsel to the final resurrection, salvation moves from divine purpose to divine accomplishment.

Acts provides a striking historical illustration. When Paul and Barnabas preached to the Gentiles, some resisted and others believed. Luke explains the difference in a single sentence: “As many as were ordained to

eternal life believed." Not, as many as believed were then ordained, but, As many as were ordained believed. Ordination to life did not render faith unnecessary; it produced faith. Election does not bypass believing; it creates believers. The eternal choice does not depend upon the sinner's faith; rather, faith is the fruit of God's eternal choice. As Paul tells the Thessalonians, "God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth." Chosen to salvation, yet salvation comes through the Spirit's sanctifying work and through believing the truth of the gospel. Election secures both the end and the means.

For that reason, election never makes the gospel unnecessary. The God who ordains the destination ordains the road. Paul could say, "I endure all things for the elect's sakes, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory." Because God had a people, Paul preached, suffered, traveled, reasoned, pleaded. In Corinth, when fear might have silenced him, the Lord said, "Be not afraid, but speak… for I have much

people in this city." They were not yet converted, yet they were already His. That promise did not lead Paul to pack his bags; it led him to stay and proclaim Christ with confidence that his labor would not be in vain.

In the end, the doctrine of election does what every true doctrine must do: it empties human boasting and fills the heart with worship. "Of him are ye in Christ Jesus." Not of yourself. Not of your wisdom, your spirituality, your superior will. Of Him. He that glories, therefore, must glory in the Lord. Election is not a reward for the worthy but mercy for the unworthy. It tells every saved sinner, You were not chosen because you were better, but because God was gracious. And when, at last, the believer stands in glory and looks back over the whole journey of redemption, he will not trace the origin of his salvation to the day he "chose Christ", but to the day—before days existed—when God chose him in Christ, according to the counsel of His own will.

Epilogue

“Ye Shall be as God” “Thy Will Shall Make Thee Sovereign”
The Original Lie and the Retweet

The Original lie was never about fruit.
It was about sovereignty.
“Ye shall be as gods.”
From the beginning, man has wanted the final word over his own destiny. He has wanted a will independent of God, a righteousness independent of God, and ultimately a salvation in which he could still point to something within himself and say:
I made the difference.
The language has changed.
The lie has not.
It may now sound religious:
“Make a decision.”
“Choose Christ.”
“It is an act of your will.”

But after everything Scripture has shown us, one declaration still stands:

“So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy.”
—Romans 9:16

Salvation does not begin with man's will.
It begins with God.
He purposed.
He chose.
He called.
He gave life.
He granted repentance.
He opened the heart.
He drew the sinner.
He worked in him **both to will and to do of His good pleasure**.
And the sinner came.
He believed.
He repented.
He followed Christ.
Not unwillingly—but willingly, because grace had conquered the rebellion of his will.

That is the difference between the original lie and the everlasting gospel.
The Retweet says:

Your will shall make you sovereign.
The gospel declares:
Salvation is of the LORD.
So let man surrender his final boast.
Let every claim of human sovereignty fall before the throne.

Let the redeemed confess:
I believed—but grace brought me to faith.
I came—but the Father drew me.
I chose Christ—but only after grace conquered the heart that once rejected Him.
I live—but because God gave me life.
There is only one conclusion left:
"Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory."
—Psalm 115:1
The original lie exalted the will of man.
Decisionism retweets.
The gospel exalts the sovereign grace of God.
And in the end, only one boast remains:
Christ alone.