

Conference Lectures: The Free Offer of the Gospel
An Examination Professor John Murray’s “The Free Offer of the Gospel”¹
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¹ John Murray, *The Collected Writings of John Murray, Volume 4: Studies in Theology*, Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1982, pp. 113-132. This report was also received as the “majority report” by the Fifteenth General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1948. (See https://opc.org/GA/free_offer.html/)

Lecture # 1

Part 1: Introduction to the Controversy

Part 2: The Kindness of God to all His Creatures: Matthew 5.44-48; Luke 6.27-28; 35-36; Acts 14.17

Part 1: Introduction to the Controversy

1. Among reformed and presbyterian theologians and pastors, there exists a controversy concerning the preaching of the Gospel and the intention, or perhaps desire of God regarding the recipients of Gospel preaching and their response.
 - a. There are some who maintain that God has a desire that is something more than simply the “desire of command” for the salvation even of the reprobate that come under the preaching of the Gospel, even though in His eternal counsel he has not decreed that any of the reprobate should ever be regenerated, and respond in faith to that preaching. They take this from the statements of Scripture where the Lord represents Himself in terms of wanting, or even wishing, (to put it condescendingly) that even the reprobate who come under Gospel preaching would respond positively to that preaching.
 - b. There are others who maintain that God intends, according to His eternal decree, in Gospel preaching to the reprobate, that they should be further hardened in their sin and rebellion, and that the Gospel preaching received by them is not a mercy in *effect*, although it may be a mercy *objectively*, but only serves to heap up wrath for the rebellious who hear of God’s mercy in Christ. They hear those overtures of mercy in Scripture as the Lord’s condescension to our own human expressions, for the purpose of drawing His people to Himself, and of rendering inexcusable those who reject His offer of mercy in Christ.
 - c. This controversy presents itself in the explanation of several different titles:
 - i. The Free Offer of the Gospel
 - ii. The Well-meant Offer of the Gospel
 - iii. The Sincere, Free Offer of the Gospel²
 - iv. God’s Indiscriminate Proposals of Mercy³
2. Definitions are important. Whenever we discuss theology among professing Christians, often clarity is hampered by neglecting to define terms properly at the outset of the discussion. Before we begin, let us set out the meaning of certain terms for the sake of clarity and understanding.
 - a. **Elect Person, or “The Elect:”** These are they whom God has chosen from the foundation of the world to be His. They in time, ordinarily, will hear the Gospel, and the Lord will also quicken or give life, and a new heart to them who were formerly dead in trespasses and sins, and that new life includes repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.⁴ Ordinarily, the elect person will be joined to the visible Church. By God’s eternal decree and almighty power, all the elect will come to Christ and be saved from the wrath to come.
 - b. **Reprobate person, or “The Reprobate:”** These are those who are not only dead in trespasses and sins, but according to God’s decree are “passed by” regarding any saving grace, from any recovery from the natural/carnal condition, and left in their own inability to turn to the Lord, coming instead under His judgment for their sin. In some cases, the Lord is said to “harden their hearts.” They never come to Jesus Christ, for the natural man is at enmity against God.⁵ There may be reprobate members of the visible Church who never truly come to Jesus Christ.⁶

² See <https://reformedbooksonline.com/topics/topics-by-subject/the-sincere-free-offer-of-the-gospel/quotes-on-the-sincere-free-offer-of-the-gospel/> and also <https://reformedbooksonline.com/topics/topics-by-subject/the-sincere-free-offer-of-the-gospel/> for a defense of the

³ See Robert L. Dabney, *Discussions by Robert Lewis Dabney: Theological and Evangelical*, ed. C. R. Vaughan, vol. 1 (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1890), 282–313.

⁴ See Acts 20.21; Ephesians 2.1-10; 1 John 5.1-3

⁵ See Romans 8.6-8; Exodus 4.21; 7.3,13,14,22; 8.15,19,32; 9.7,12,34,35; 10.1,20,27; 11.10; 14.4,8,17.

⁶ See Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 45, 68

- c. **A Believer in Christ:** This term describes a person who has been regenerated by God’s Word and Spirit. Only the elect will become believers in God’s good time, as faith is one of the gifts God gives in regeneration.
 - d. **A Professor of Christ:** This describes a member of the visible Church, one identified with the people of God outwardly, by Church membership, professing faith in Christ. This may refer to one who is, or is not regenerated by the Lord, for only God sees the heart.
 - e. **An Unbeliever:** This refers to one who does not believe in Christ, has not made a profession of faith, and has no outward connection to the Church. This person may be elect or reprobate. If elect, this estate of unbelief will be overcome by the power of God, Who in His appointed time, will give life from the dead. If reprobate, the unbeliever will never come to Christ. There may also be professing unbelievers in the Church. God knows their hearts, and their fellow Church members offer them the judgment of charity until such time as they reveal their estate through sinful, unrepentant, and scandalous behavior.
 - f. **The Revealed Will of God, God’s Will of Command, God’s Preceptive will.** These terms all describe what God commands to men in His Word, along with all the duties that are implied in those commands, and all the means of obedience.⁷ There is a proper expression of the will of God toward all men in that He commands all men to do what His Law reveals as good. According to Acts 17.30, it is God’s will of command, His revealed will, His preceptive will, that all men everywhere repent.
 - g. **The Secret Will of God, God’s Will of Decree, the Decretive Will of God:** This is what the Lord has, from all eternity foreordained to come to pass, that which will infallibly come to pass in time. This is called His “Secret Will” because he has not revealed it to men, to keep us from presumption and sloth. Moses writes in Deuteronomy 29.29 that, *“The secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.”* Here, the Lord clearly distinguishes what He commands from what He holds secret—He may command something He never intends the recipient of the command to perform, as was the case with Abraham, who received a command to slay Isaac as a burnt offering on Mount Moriah. We know the secret will of God, or His will of decree, or sometimes called His providential will, only when something comes to pass, for God works “all things after the counsel of His own will, and He will do all His pleasure.”⁸
3. Whenever we enter into polemical discussions with those with whom we disagree, the temptation is to hear them in our own context and immediately formulate our rejoinder, apart from the effort to understand our brethren. Much division in the Church is perpetuated by this kind of partisanship. Let us remember the promise of the Lord to His church in the after-days, in the days of the preaching of the Gospel to every creature. Isaiah 52.8 declares, *“Thy watchmen shall lift up the voice; with the voice together shall they sing: for they shall see eye to eye, when the LORD shall bring again Zion.”* We must receive this promise, and use godly means for its realization, more and more, in our day, especially as the watchmen of Israel. What follows is an examination of Prof. John Murray’s essay, “The Free Offer of the Gospel.” In this essay, Professor Murray posits the idea that there is in God a desire for that which He has not been pleased to decree, specifically, that when the Gospel is preached that this overture of the Lord’s is a sincere overture for the salvation even of the reprobate. He states,

We have found that God himself expresses an ardent desire for the fulfilment of certain things which he has not decreed in his inscrutable counsel to come to pass. This means that there is a will to the realization of what he has not decretively willed, a pleasure towards that which he has not been pleased to decree. This is indeed mysterious, and why he has not brought to pass, in the exercise of his omnipotent power and grace, what is his ardent pleasure lies hid in the sovereign counsel of his will. We should not entertain, however,

⁷ See Westminster Larger Catechism, Questions 91-98, and especially Question 99, and its 8 part answer.

⁸ See Ephesians 1.11; Isaiah 46.10-11

any prejudice against the notion that God desires or has pleasure in the accomplishment of what he does not decretively will.⁹

The “ardent desire” to which Prof. Murray refers is the desire of God regarding salvation from the wrath to come for all who hear the offer of the Gospel, elect and reprobate alike. As we will see in the examination of Prof. Murray’s labors in this essay, he has what he believes to be competent and biblical exegesis for his claim. The purpose of taking up the polemical exercise from this essay of his is precisely because Prof. Murray is a skilled exegete and theologian, laboring at Westminster Seminary for nearly four decades. The author of this lecture has profited from Prof. Murray’s theological work, and plans to continue to do so. Our aim in this lecture is to let our polemical opponent speak for himself, in a fair hearing, and to give an answer from the Word of the Lord, our only standard, in its proper grammatical, historical, and theological meaning, according to what we call the analogy of faith, or the analogy of Scripture—that is, that what we have in the Bible is a competent, sufficient, consistent and non-contradictory Word from the Lord Himself, that the more obscure passages of Scripture are clarified by the more perspicuous passages.

4. What is the Free Offer of the Gospel? As Westminster Confessing Presbyterians, we acknowledge that the language of a “Free Offer” is ensconced in our secondary standards:
 - a. Westminster Shorter Catechism:
 - i. What is effectual calling?
 - ii. Effectual calling is the work of God’s Spirit, (2 Tim. 1:9, 2 Thess. 2:13–14) whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, (Acts 2:37) enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, (Acts 26:18) and renewing our wills, (Ezek. 36:26–27) he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel. (John 6:44–45, Phil. 2:13)¹⁰
 - b. Westminster Larger Catechism:
 - i. What is effectual calling?
 - ii. Effectual calling is the work of God’s almighty power and grace, (John 5:25, Eph. 1:18–20, 2 Tim. 1:8–9) whereby (out of his free and special love to his elect, and from nothing in them moving him thereunto) (Tit. 3:4–5, Eph. 2:4–5, 7–9, Rom. 9:11) he doth, in his accepted time, invite and draw them to Jesus Christ, by his word and Spirit; (2 Cor. 5:20, 2 Cor. 6:1–2, John 6:44, 2 Thess. 2:13–14) savingly enlightening their minds, (Acts 26:18, 1 Cor. 2:10,12) renewing and powerfully determining their wills, (Ezek. 11:19, Ezek. 36:26–27, John 6:45) so as they (although in themselves dead in sin) are hereby made willing and able freely to answer his call, and to accept and embrace the grace offered and conveyed therein. (Eph. 2:5, Phil. 2:13, Deut. 30:6)¹¹
 - c. Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 10, of Effectual Calling
 - i. (1) All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, He is pleased, in His appointed and accepted time, effectually to call, (Rom. 8:30, Rom. 11:7, Eph. 1:10–11) by His word and Spirit, (2 Thess. 2:13–14, 2 Cor. 3:3,6) out of that state of sin and death, in which they are by nature to grace and salvation, by Jesus Christ; (Rom. 8:2, Eph. 2:1–5, 2 Tim. 1:9–10) enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God, (Acts 26:18, 1 Cor. 2:10,12, Eph. 1:17–18) taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them an heart of flesh; (Ezek. 36:26) renewing their wills, and, by His almighty power, determining them to that which is good, (Ezek. 11:19, Phil. 2:13, Deut. 30:6, Ezek. 36:27) and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ: (Eph. 1:19, John 6:44–45) yet so, as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace. (Cant. 1:4, Ps. 110:3, John 6:37, Rom. 6:16–18)

⁹ John Murray, Vol. 4, *Free Offer of the Gospel*, 131-132 (Conclusion #2)

¹⁰ *The Westminster Shorter Catechism: With Scripture Proofs*, 3rd edition. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996), Question 31

¹¹ *The Westminster Larger Catechism: With Scripture Proofs*. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996), Question 67

- ii. (2) This effectual call is of God’s free and special grace alone, not from any thing at all foreseen in man, (2 Tim. 1:9, Tit. 3:4–5, Eph. 2:4–5, 8–9) who is altogether passive therein, until, being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, (1 Cor. 2:14, Rom. 8:7, Eph. 2:5) he is thereby enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it. (John 6:37, John 5:25)¹²

We note that in these standards the language of a “free offer” is utilized. When Professor Murray uses the term “Free Offer” it is his custom to include other language along with it. For instance, in his introductory section he writes,

The word "desire" has come to be used in the debate, not because it is *necessarily* the most accurate or felicitous word but because it serves to set forth quite sharply a certain implication of the full and free offer of the gospel to all. This implication is that in the free offer there is expressed not simply the bare preceptive will of God but the disposition of lovingkindness on the part of God pointing to the salvation to be gained through compliance with the overtures of gospel grace. In other words, the gospel is not simply an offer or invitation but also implies that God delights that those to whom the offer comes would enjoy what is offered in all its fullness.¹³

So, for Prof. Murray, the term “free offer” must be accompanied by the words “full,” “disposition of lovingkindness,” and God’s “delight” that all who hear, elect and reprobate alike, in the faithful reception of this offer. But there is another point that here must be made. The language of the “free offer,” “coming most freely,” and “freely answering this call” (seen above in our standards) is included in the discussion of the effectual, not the general call. In the Shorter Catechism, we state that Christ is freely offered in the Gospel. We might ask, to whom is Christ offered? He is offered to as many as hear the Gospel preached. But note that in the Confession and Larger Catechism, that the term “free” or “freely” is related not to the Gospel offer, but the response of the hearer. We hear of a newfound liberty—to embrace the grace offered in the preaching of the Gospel. This liberty or freedom is part of the effectual call—that is, the result of God’s regenerating grace, operative in the effectual call, as opposed to the general call. The free offer, in those confessional sections on the effectual call, speaks of the free response of the newly regenerated soul to the Gospel offer of Christ and His righteousness. This is important to remember—the language of the free offer is included for Presbyterians, confessionally speaking, in the effectual, not the general call. The natural man, unlike the regenerated man, has no natural liberty to respond to the call of the Gospel—He is dead in trespasses and sins, and in bondage to sin, under the delusion of the deceivableness of unrighteousness.¹⁴

What then do we mean, speaking from our standards, by the “free offer” of the Gospel? First, we mean that there are no works required to be saved from the wrath to come for all who are sinners and hear the Gospel of Christ. Salvation is not for sale, it cannot be purchased by sinners, there are no negotiations, no deals, no bargaining with God for our souls, no “good outweighing the bad.” To be saved from the wrath to come is, in true Gospel preaching, to offer this salvation freely, without money, without price,¹⁵ informing the sinner that his best and most valuable righteousness to offer the Lord is like filthy rags, menstruous cloths, that will result in his eternal judgment, should he stand before Christ the Judge clothed in those rags.¹⁶ The salvation of God’s people is bought with the precious blood of Christ—it does not come “on the cheap.” But to the sinner, *it is free*. Peter tells us that we were not redeemed with perishable things such a gold or silver from our vain conversation received by tradition from our fathers, but by the precious blood of Christ.¹⁷

¹² *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996), chapter 10, paragraph 1, 2

¹³ John Murray, Vol. 4, *Free Offer of the Gospel*, 114

¹⁴ 2 Thessalonians 2.7-12

¹⁵ Isaiah 55.1-5

¹⁶ Isaiah 64.6

¹⁷ 1 Peter 1.18-19

Second, the term “free offer” means that it is unrestricted in its distribution. There are no fences, geographically, that present a barrier to the call of the Gospel. In these days following Christ’s cross-work, the promise to Abraham is most fully realized, in that the Gospel is to be preached to all nations, and we will one day behold that “great multitude, which no man can number, of all nations, kindreds, and people, and tongues,” who will stand before the throne and before the Lamb, praising Him who lives for ever and ever.¹⁸

Third, we use the term “free offer” to distinguish between the Creator and ourselves, His created servants. The Lord knoweth them that are his.¹⁹ He has determined, by His electing grace, who shall come to Christ by faith, and when they will come, seeing that this faith is His gift. But preachers, other officers, and members in the Church have no such knowledge. This Gospel then is to be offered “freely” to all kinds of men, without distinction of *persons*. To kings and paupers, to men and women, to slaves and masters, to children and aged, to Jews and Greeks, Barbarians, Scythians, bond and free, etc.²⁰ In the free offer of the Gospel, sinners of all kinds are called to believe in Christ, irrespective of their birth, status, or history. Murderers, thieves, adulterers, idolaters, and *all other sinners*, without restriction, are called to believe in Christ, repent of their sins, and call upon the name of the Lord.

Fourth, when we speak of the free offer, we speak of the sinner, now converted by the gracious work of regeneration by the Word and Spirit²¹ coming freely to Jesus Christ, and embracing Him by faith. There is no coercion, no forcing of the sinner to come to Christ to be delivered from the wrath to come--his heart being changed by grace, he comes most willingly. The Gospel does not advance at the point of a sword, and adherents cannot be bought or bribed with promises of health, or wealth. No, true faith in Christ is free—it is something that the new heart gladly and willingly chooses, having been changed from a heart of stone to a heart of flesh.²²

To conclude this introduction, we must speak charitably of our brethren who wonder about the full and promiscuous preaching of the Gospel, obviously commanded in Scripture, and endeavor to understand their differences from ours. We often hear it said that if God does not at least in some sense desire that the reprobate should respond favorably to the Gospel call, that God, who is truth itself, misrepresents Himself in the Gospel call to come to Christ, for these calls in Scripture and issued by faithful ministers under command of Scripture speak of no restriction. Our brethren wrestle with the sincerity of the offer given to those who cannot respond, apart from a prior work of the Lord. They posit that apart from a “sincerity” on God’s part, in the offer itself, there is a disingenuity that is not worthy of Him, who is truth itself. They would say that they have merely taken God at His Word, when he declares, “Look unto me and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth.”²³ In response, please allow the following:

1. The Lord does command things that He never intends to see fulfilled or obeyed. There are several examples of this in Scripture.
 - a. God commanded Abraham to slay Isaac for a burnt offering. (Genesis 22.1-2)
 - b. The Lord commanded Jonah the prophet to prophesy to Nineveh, “Yet 40 days and Nineveh shall be overthrown.” (Jonah 3.4) Yet, by that preaching, the Lord intended repentance and deliverance.
 - c. The Lord uses threatening to save, and uses promises to harden: (Jeremiah 18.6-10) The Lord is free to use threatening to bring repentance, and to leave others to their presumptuous reading of His promises and providence.
2. We may rightly speak of God’s commanding will, and say that in the sense that He commands, and in the sense that he acknowledges obedience to those commands, there is a “desire of approval” in God—that God approves of men taking heed to His commands.

¹⁸ Revelation 7.9-12

¹⁹ 2 Timothy 2.19

²⁰ Galatians 3.28; Ephesians 5.5-10; Colossians 3.11

²¹ 1 Peter 1.22-23

²² Ezekiel 36.25-27

²³ Isaiah 45.22

3. We must resist the temptation to think that God is “altogether like unto ourselves.” (Psalm 50.21) The Lord rightly, for his own purposes, sends out the Gospel proclamation far beyond His intention, or even His decretive willingness to save those who hear. In that God commands all men everywhere to repent, He directs our own wills. That is, our preaching is sincere to all, that not knowing elect from reprobate, we might with hearty desire call upon men to embrace the promises of the Gospel. However, God, who knows the end from the beginning, and reserves liberty to Himself that he denies to His creatures²⁴ having decreed to pass by reprobates, does send the Gospel to them to reveal His holy justice, the hardness and impenitence of sinners, that even in the face of an objective mercy (the preaching of the Gospel) the reprobate through their rebellion turn that mercy in *effect* to a curse. Just as some turn the grace of God into lasciviousness²⁵ revealing that these men were ordained to destruction, they also deny the only Lord God, and His Son Jesus Christ, rejecting the mercy of the Gospel promises.

So, while we desire to hear our brethren charitably, we object to any construction of the offer of mercy in Christ to the reprobate that represents a kind of lovingkindness in the desire or mind of God that is equal to His love and intention to save His elect from the wrath to come. The preaching of the Gospel, competently, by a minister of God is always a sweet savor unto the Lord.²⁶ As for the recipients however, in some it is as a savor of life unto life, and in others, a savor of death unto death.

Further, we object to any construction that would set at odds God’s desires to His decree. The One who said, “Declaring the end from the beginning . . . , saying My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure”²⁷ is not frustrated in any of His desire, but has ordered and foreordained all His pleasure. We believe that if God has desired something and not decreed it, that if “God himself expresses an ardent desire for the fulfilment of certain things which he has not decreed in his inscrutable counsel to come to pass. This means that there is a will to the realization of what he has not decretively willed, a pleasure towards that which he has not been pleased to decree. . . .²⁸” that this is much more than mysterious, for it strikes against our Theology proper, being destructive of the unity and simplicity of God. And although Prof. Murray seeks to mitigate this difficulty, our understanding is that his attempt represents a sad failure. We must not equivocate upon the will or desire of God. Hear Samuel Rutherford:

Now, in scripture such a thing is argued not to be done, because *the scripture must be fulfilled*, and the decree of God and his will fulfilled; as Christ’s bones, upon this ground, could not be broken; and such a thing is done, that the scripture, and so the will and decree of God, might be fulfilled; so that which is never done, is simply God’s will it shall never be done; that which is done, is simply God’s will it must be; I mean either his permissive or approving will. And the will of God revealing what is the duty of reprobates, though it never be done, argues it was not simply the will of God; hence that *voluntas signi*, in which God reveals what is our duty, and what we ought to do, not what is his decree, or what he either will, or ought to do, is not God’s will properly, but by a figure only; for commands, and promises, and threatnings revealed, argue not the will and purpose, decree or intention of God, which are properly his will.²⁹

Part 2: God’s General Kindness to His Creation: Matthew 5.44-48; Luke 6.27-28, 35-36; Acts 14.17

In the remainder of this lecture, we will look at Prof. Murray’s first line of exegetical argumentation, from Matthew 5.44-48; Luke 6.27-28, 35-36; and Acts 14.17, on God’s general kindness to all His creatures.

²⁴ See 2 Chronicles 18.18-22—the Lord in this passage does something He forbids to His creatures, commanded a lying spirit to speak in the mouth of Ahab’s prophets, yet He does so in perfect uprightness.

²⁵ Jude 1.4

²⁶ 2 Corinthians 2.14-17

²⁷ Isaiah 46.10

²⁸ Murray, Fol. 4, *The Free Offer of the Gospel*, 131-132

²⁹ Samuel Rutherford, *Christ Dying, and Drawing Sinners to Himself* (Glasgow: Samuel and Archibald Gardner; Niven, Napier & Khull, 1803), 480.

At the outset of his discussion, Prof. Murray declares that these passages do not speak of the overtures of grace in the Gospel. This is a telling admission, in our opinion, which then must be followed by compelling reasoning to apply the kindness of the Creator over all His works, without discrimination, to the special grace, love, and favor that is extended only to His elect. Sadly, Prof. Murray provides only a line of reasoning which virtually denies the Creator-Creature distinction, even going to far as to say, “*This is just saying that the kindness bestowed in sunshine and rain is the expression of divine love, that back of the bestowal there is an attitude on the part of God, called love, which constrains him to bestow these tokens of his lovingkindness.*”³⁰ We object to the error of reasoning from God’s general kindness to a general “ardent” saving desire in God for all to whom the Gospel comes. In response, several things are in order.

1. While this passage does teach the general kindness of God toward all His creation, it must be placed in its proper context.
 - a. It is universal and general, apart from anything special in it. It is God, rejoicing in His works.³¹
 - b. The corruption of mankind in Adam, his judicial punishment for his sin before a holy God, makes any delay of the just judgment and vengeance of God a mercy. Yet, in considering this, we must also remember that the general mercies of God as a Creator over all His works are not equal, though they are universal. The providence of God toward His creatures certainly can include kindness, but it can also vengeance. Plenty, and poverty, long life, or short, wellness or illness, temporal good, or evil and disaster, these providential actions of God are universal, upon elect and reprobate alike, and are sent with varied purposes in God. Reasoning from God’s goodness to His creatures seems to assume an idyllic idea of creation and providence, rather than some, who more honestly see creation and providence as “nature writ red in fang and claw.” Any universal benefit which God bestows on His creation is accompanied with universal, sickness, want, suffering, deprivation, oppression, and finally, universal death, all witnesses of His judgment, and wrath as well as His goodness.³² The idyllic mountain scene or beach landscape hides the death that is constantly taking place beneath its trees or waves.
 - c. While we acknowledge the general kindness of God to all men exhibited more or less in creation and providence, yet we also must see God’s special purpose, even in His general kindness. This is seen in the Noahic covenant, when, after God smells the sweet savor of Noah’s offering covenants that he will never again destroy the earth. This savor of the offering is the savor of Christ, who is typified in the offering itself, and it is upon receiving that sacrifice and savor that God’s makes his general, providential declaration that he will not ever again destroy the earth as he had recently done in the deluge. The perpetual seasons, (Genesis 8.22) advertise God’s saving purposes, preserving the earth not in some kind of common grace or common love, but according to His special, saving purposes in Christ.
 - d. While God’s kindness as we have seen is more, or less universal, and this acknowledged by all, the preaching of the Gospel is certainly not universal. It is illicit to reason from God’s general kindness to all, to an ardent desire for some to be saved—namely, those who hear the Gospel. A substantial portion of humanity, considered from the creation until now, have never heard the Gospel, nor known the name and title, “The Lord Jesus Christ.” Clearly, the supposition of God’s “lovingkindness” to all is substantially at odds with the facts of history, which included that many have died in their sins apart from ever hearing the Gospel. The comparison is an illicit one.
2. Secondly, when the Lord Jesus declares this command to His disciples in the Sermon on the Mount, He is teaching them their duty, that they may, by their actions testify to following their Creator and Redeemer, who is kind to all. And, although theologians in the past and present have distinguished between various kinds of “love” in God for his creation, and distinguished that from His love for His elect in Christ, for our part, we think that to equivocate

³⁰ John Murray, Vol. 4, *Free Offer of the Gospel* 115-116

³¹ Psalm 145.31

³² Psalm 90.1-11

on the word “love” is unhelpful, and confusing. The Creator-Creature distinction is very much on display in this passage. Note the following parallels, and not-parallels.

- a. It is admitted by all the parallel that Christ draws here—that because our heavenly Father is kind to all His creation, including the “the world and they that dwell therein”³³ that we are to be kind to all men as well, especially our enemies, which come under special mention here, because of the temptation to think or behave ill toward them.
 - b. However, we must ask the questions, “Does the Lord bless those that curse Him?” and “Does the Lord pray for those who spitefully use Him?”
 - i. The answer to these questions is no, He does not. Instead, the Lord sends to them “indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish” (Romans 2.8-9) upon the contentious and evil-doer. But the Lord would reserve this liberty to Himself as Creator, and have His children kind, loving to their enemies instead.
 - ii. The general kindness of God is but for a short while, and the wicked misuse His patience, mistaking it for indifference, or even for God’s favor. Numbers 23.19; Psalm 50.16-23; Matthew 24.48; Luke 12.45; 2 Peter 3.3-7
 - iii. So we see that the passage in Matthew 5.44-48 does not teach an absolute parallel between God and man.
 - c. Further, we must remember that seeing all sin and unrighteousness is against the Lord as the truly offended party, that while the Lord does show great patience for the sake of His elect, (1 Peter 3.9) He reserves vengeance for Himself, and forbids it to us. Romans 12.17-21 teaches us that we are to restrain our own vengeance, loving our enemies and doing them good, and resting in the Lord’s vengeance. This is another element in the understanding of God’s general kindness not mentioned in Matthew 5.44-48, but very clear in Romans 12.
3. Thirdly in answer to God’s goodness to all, we must remember that the good things received by the reprobate are only mercies objectively, and not mercies in *effect*. That is, the misuse of God’s kindness to men increases guilt and judgment, heaping up wrath toward them in this life and the next. God’s general kindness is a true Scripture doctrine, but it would be illicit reasoning to interpret this kindness as some kind of love.
- a. The Lord is pleased to send preachers, with his Word, to many reprobates who will refuse to hear Him. Rather than a sign of God’s love or desire to save, the Scriptures speak of this refusal to hearken as that which draws down His disfavor. See the following passages:
 - i. Jeremiah 7.12-15; 26.2-6; (and other places in that prophet) These passages speaking of the Lord’s diligence in sending prophets, knowing they would not hear, that He might judge even His Old Testament Church.
 - ii. Matthew 23.34-36; Luke 11.49-51; These passages speak to the church of the Jews in Christ’s days, that the Lord would send them prophets to teach them, but they would not hearken, and in just one generation’s time, they would lose their entire city and Church before Him, that it would be taken from them, and given to a nation bringing forth its fruits. (Matthew 21.42-43)
 - iii. Romans 2.3-6 teaches that while it is a goodness, a kindness from God to have repentance preached even to the wicked, note that many of them take that goodness and “treasure up wrath” with it, God’s own wrath.
 - iv. Not every offer of mercy from the Lord is a mercy in effect to its recipient.
 - b. Beloved, even in the good things of this world, while we might be tempted to think of wicked men “blessed by God” in their riches, and temporal wealth, this would not be Biblical thinking. Grace is not truly in things. Even when the Lord keeps good things from His people it is for their good—it is a mercy to them. The temporal things of this world are not in themselves signs of God’s favor or blessing. Heaping riches upon a wicked man only increases his guilt. Note the following passages:

³³ Psalm 24.1-2

- i. James 5.1-3: See here that the riches of the wicked only serve as a witness against them of their wickedness. While it may be an objective mercy, that is, good things the Lord gives, it is not a mercy in effect, for the effect of it seals them in greater judgment.
 - ii. Psalm 37.16 says that the little that the righteous man has is better than the riches of many wicked.
 - iii. 1 Timothy 4.4-5 teaches us that everything we receive must be sanctified by the Word of God, and prayer. In other words, there is a blessing we crave in the receipt of the good things God provides—the things themselves are not the blessings, or signs of God's favor or love.
 - iv. The 28th chapter of Deuteronomy teaches us that if we the Lord's people walk by faith in His commandments, that we can expect the things of this world to be blessed to us in our use. But if we disobey, worship false gods, dishonor His commandments, that all these things will be cursed to us instead.
- c. In other words, the temporal things the Lord gives are not themselves the blessings of God. A rich man, who is a hater of the true God, is not blessed by having riches—riches themselves are not God's blessings. The good that the Lord does to the wicked is turned against them, by their hardness and impenitence, failure to give thanks, spending upon their own lusts, and only gathers up God's just wrath against them.³⁴ The blessing of God is not in the temporal good itself, but in His favor and blessing upon the use of it. See Psalm 52.6-8.
4. Further this passage teaches us that God would, in doing good to all, vindicate His own name, whether by sending plenty, or even want, that His command to repent would be clear, and men left inexcusable.
- a. Hear His Word to His people in the days of the Prophet Amos: 4.6-5.1: See here that the Lord chastised His people, and sent the Prophet to them, yet they refused. He is vindicated, and they are condemned.
 - b. In the passage referenced earlier, 2 Chronicles 18.18ff, the Lord sends a lying spirit in the mouth of Ahab's prophets, and He also sends a true prophet, filled with the Spirit of God, to show what God has done. The Lord vindicates Himself, and condemns Ahab, in so doing.
 - c. In the goodness of God to all men, and especially his people, He reveals His own constancy and kindness, yet the natural man receives this goodness from the Lord sinfully, treasuring up wrath—the Lord is vindicated, and the sinner is convicted and judged.
 - d. The Lord's self-vindication is seen in several passages of Scripture.
 - i. With regard to His people: Micah 6.1-5
 - ii. With regard to all men generally: Psalm 52.1-6; Acts 17.29-31;

In conclusion, we believe that it is a poor use of Matthew 5.44-48, and the other passages mentioned, to insist that because the Lord is good to all, he therefore has a saving intention with ardent desire for those to whom the Gospel comes. The goodness of God toward all has several Scripture uses, as we have shown. To close this first lecture, let us hear the words of Psalm 145.15-21:

The eyes of all wait upon thee; and thou givest them their meat in due season. ¹⁶ Thou openest thine hand, and satisfiest the desire of every living thing. ¹⁷ The LORD *is* righteous in all his ways, and holy in all his works. ¹⁸ The LORD *is* nigh unto all them that call upon him, to all that call upon him in truth. ¹⁹ He will fulfil the desire of them that fear him: he also will hear their cry, and will save them. ²⁰ The LORD preserveth all them that love him: but all the wicked will he destroy. ²¹ My mouth shall speak the praise of the LORD: and let all flesh bless his holy name for ever and ever. ³⁵

Note here that although the Lord does show kindness, sustenance, supply, and a prolonging of life for all, truly He is nigh to them that call upon Him, He hears their cries, He fulfills all their desire and preserves them. But at the same time, and in

³⁴ Psalm 52.6-8

³⁵ *The Holy Bible: King James Version*, electronic ed. of the 1769 edition of the 1611 Authorized Version. (Bellingham WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995), Ps 145:15-21.

that same supply, He will destroy the wicked. It is not good Scripture reason to say that because God is kind, and provides for all His creation, that he entertains a kind of saving intent, ardent desire, or lovingkindness for the wicked who hear the Gospel.

Lecture # 2

God's Condescending Speech toward His Creatures Deuteronomy 5.29; 32.29; Psalm 81.13; Isaiah 48.18 Christ's Weeping over Jerusalem—its meaning and import Matthew 23.37; Luke 13.34

In this second lecture, we progress to another argument from Prof. Murray, based upon Deuteronomy 5.29, 32.29 Psalm 81.13, and Isaiah 48.18. Introducing his exegesis of these passages as it pertains to the free offer of the Gospel, Prof. Murray writes, “*The purpose of adducing these texts is to note the optative force of that which is expressed.*”³⁶ The optative mood, in grammatical study, is defined as the mood of wanting, hoping, or wishing.³⁷ That the Lord expresses Himself in the optative mood here, in the expression of a wish or a longing is a viable and orthodox interpretation of the text. However, it is not the only possible interpretation. As Prof. Murray points out, the literal reading of Deuteronomy 5.29 might be stated, “*O, who is it that might give, that there should be to them a heart to fear me, and to keep all my commandments all the days...*” This literal translation gives the sense not of wishing on God’s part at all, but when viewed from the standpoint of the question “who might give?” it is clear that the Lord declares that His people do not have such a heart. Rather than an optative, it is at least a viable interpretation that this is the Lord expressing a lament, rather than a wish. In either case, whether the Lord is expressing a lament for their hardness of heart, or a wish that they had a different heart, Prof. Murray gives his interpretation of this expression (and of the other texts referenced in this section) by saying, “*Should we make full allowance for doubt as to the exact force of the construction in the case of Deut. 32:29 and Isa. 48:18, there can be no room for question but that the Lord represents himself in some of these passages as earnestly desiring the fulfilment of something which he had not in the exercise of his sovereign will actually decreed to come to pass.*”³⁸

Several lines of argumentation should be brought to bear. Our procedure here will be to present these Scriptures one at a time, looking at the original construction, and present our alternate case. It will become evident as we go forward, Lord willing, that in answering the first set of Scriptures, placing a proper Biblical construction on them, that these answers will also help to untangle the latter texts as well. In the first Scripture text, Deuteronomy 5.29, as we have said, the Lord either presents Himself in an optative wishing, or in a lament, declaring that his people do not have such a heart to keep His commandments of themselves. The statement, “who will give” is indicative of the universal teaching of Scripture that the natural man cannot give himself this heart to know and love the Lord his God and Creator. Even here in this expression concerning the Lord’s covenant people, the same is true—except someone gives them a heart to follow Him, they will not follow, though in covenant with Him. The fathers of this people, to whom the Lord expresses this lament, stood at the base of Sinai and entered into covenant with the Lord,³⁹ yet turned away from Him just a little over a year later at Kadesh Barnea.⁴⁰ Is this expression of the Lord here not the essence of our evangelical religion? Do we not say that the natural man, with his carnal mind, stands at enmity with God and His law, not subject to it, and that neither indeed can he be?⁴¹ The answer to the question, “Who will give to them a heart to fear the Lord?” has only one answer—it is the Lord alone who can give such a heart.

Second, the point at issue in this passage is whether or not the Lord *has* a desire for something He has not decreed or willed to come to pass—not whether or not He has *expressed* that desire. When Prof. Murray writes, “*Here therefore we have an instance of desire on the part of God for the fulfilment of that which he had not decreed; in other words, a will on the part of God to that which he had not decretively willed,*”⁴² we must recognize that he has changed the terms of the argument. There is no disagreement that the Lord *expresses* either a desire or lament that the Israelites have no such heart in them to

³⁶ John Murray, Vol. 4, *Free Offer of the Gospel*, n.d.

³⁷ See the Concise Oxford English Dictionary, 2004: **adjective:** Grammar relating to or denoting a mood of verbs in Greek and certain other languages, expressing a wish, equivalent in meaning to English *let's* or *if only*.

³⁸ John Murray, Vol. 4, *Free Offer of the Gospel*, 119

³⁹ Exodus 24.1-8

⁴⁰ Numbers 14.1-19

⁴¹ Romans 8.5-8

⁴² John Murray, Vol. 4, *Free Offer of the Gospel*, 118

fear Him and follow His commandments. What the Lord intends to *communicate* in that expression is what is at issue. Is the Lord's representation in Deuteronomy 5:29 an indication of His "ardent" desire for something He has not decreed, or can there be other ways to understand this passage, that does not pit God's desire against His decree, his "desire" against His decretive will? Historically, how has this passage been understood by those who share our Reformed, evangelical religion?

Our basic principle of hermeneutics is what we call the analogy of Scripture. Briefly stated, we understand that the Holy Spirit is the divine author of Scripture,⁴³ using various human agents, throughout the approximately 1,500 years of its being penned. Seeing that this one Divine Author stands behind all Scripture, that it is "breathed out" by God,⁴⁴ we expect an internal consistency—that Scripture is its own best interpreter. As the Westminster Confession of Faith clearly states it,

All things in scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all;^p yet those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.^{q45}

Several things are in order here when we come to texts of the Bible that seem to be out of accord with other texts. The trouble is not with Scripture, it is with our understanding. It is the duty of every Bible teacher, under the watch-care of Church authority, to learn how to understand the various words of Scripture, so as not to do violence to the unity and message of Scripture as a whole, and then to teach the people of the Lord these consistent truths that the Lord has revealed. On this topic of God's counsel, purpose, and desire, the Scriptures are abundantly clear. There are many places in Scripture where the Lord explicitly says that He will not be frustrated in His desire.

Isaiah 46:9-10: Remember the former things of old: for *I am* God, and *there is* none else; *I am* God, and *there is* none like me, ¹⁰ Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times *the things* that are not *yet* done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure.

Psalms 33:11: The counsel of the LORD standeth for ever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations.

Psalms 135:5-6: For I know that the LORD *is* great, and *that* our Lord *is* above all gods. ⁶ Whatsoever the LORD pleased, *that* did he in heaven, and in earth, in the seas, and all deep places.

Proverbs 19:21: *There are* many devices in a man's heart; nevertheless the counsel of the LORD, that shall stand.

Ephesians 1:9-11: Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself: ¹⁰ That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; *even* in him: ¹¹ In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will.

Other passages of Scripture speak with the same clarity, explicitly declaring that the Lord is not frustrated in any of His desires, but has purposed and will bring to pass all His holy will. It is inconsistent with such Scripture declarations of the

⁴³ 2 Peter 1:19-21

⁴⁴ 2 Timothy 3:16-17

^p 2 Pet. 3:16. As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction.

^q Psal. 119:105. Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path. Ver. 130. The entrance of thy words giveth light, it giveth understanding unto the simple.

⁴⁵ Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith: Edinburgh Edition* (Philadelphia: William S. Young, 1851), 19.

counsel, will, and purpose of God, that His will can be frustrated, His purpose turned aside, to assert that “*Here therefore we have an instance of desire on the part of God for the fulfilment of that which he had not decreed; in other words, a will on the part of God to that which he had not decretively willed.*”⁴⁶ If the explicit passages are to be of assistance in interpretation of the less clear passages, and if Scripture’s consistency is to be maintained, how shall we interpret Deuteronomy 5.29 correctly? The question we must ask is, “can we understand Deuteronomy 5.29 in a way that does not do violence to the Scripture as a whole when it speaks of God’s purpose, counsel, and will, that it is not ever frustrated? We will answer this question first by hearing from godly reformed commentators, and then by adding some of our own comments.

Commenting on Deuteronomy 5.29, Calvin writes:

God signifies that they would not be so firm and faithful in keeping their promises, as they were ready and willing to make them; and thus that hypocrisy was not altogether banished, or purged from their minds. Moreover, He figuratively (*improprie*) assumes a human feeling, because it would be vain and absurd for Him to desire what it was in His power to confer. Certainly He has the power of bending and directing men’s hearts whithersoever He pleases. Why, then, does He wish that it were given to the people from some other quarter, that they should be always kept in the path of duty, except that, speaking in the character of a man, He shews that it was rather to be wished than hoped that the people would constantly persevere in their fidelity? Wherefore this and similar passages have been ignorantly abused by some, to establish man’s free will.⁴⁷

See here that Calvin understands this as an “improper” mode of expression, for God does not ardently desire, what is in His power to confer. That is, if God can at any time, according to His eternal and unchanging will, and almighty power, confer such a heart to them, why would He express this as if he could not? We will explore several reasons why this is the case after citing other godly commentators. Suffice it here to say that Calvin reasons from God’s almighty power and omniscience, which is unquestioned in Scripture, to a sound interpretation of the Lord’s expression here.

Hear the Scottish theologian and interpreter, Thomas Boston:

The other part of the verdict follows in the text; “O that there were such an heart in them!” By which he discovers their hypocrisy, and precipitancy, their tongues running before their hearts in their engaging themselves to the Lord. The Lord speaks thus after the manner of men, so that they who would hence conclude, that man’s will by nature is such, as that it is of himself flexible, either to spiritual good or evil, while the Lord stands by as an idle spectator, and puts to no hand of power, may as well conclude, that God hath eyes and hands of flesh, and that he who is not the son of Man that he should repent, and with whom there is no variableness, may even with propriety repent as to what he has done. Inefficacious wishing, properly understood, argues imperfection. (Hebrew, who will give their heart to be such in them?) Now, it is certain, God can give such a heart; Ezek. 36:26, “A new heart also will I give you.” And if he will do it, who can hinder him?⁴⁸

Notice what Rev. Boston does in his remarks: First, he shows that God spoke thusly to expose their hypocrisy, and precipitancy. What he means is that they did not have such a heart, although they declared that they did—this is their hypocrisy. As for their “precipitancy,” this means that they spoke rashly, binding themselves with their words to something

⁴⁶ John Murray, Vol. 4, *Free Offer of the Gospel*, 118

⁴⁷ John Calvin and Charles William Bingham, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 337.

⁴⁸ Thomas Boston, *The Whole Works of Thomas Boston: A Series of Sermons and the Christian Life Delineated*, ed. Samuel M’Millan, vol. 10 (Aberdeen: George and Robert King, 1851), 57.

they had not sufficiently considered. They agreed with their lips, before their desire, their “heart” was in it. Second, Boston notes that it is only God who can give such a heart. As Calvin above, Boston cites Ezekiel 36:26. Note what he says here: “*Inefficacious wishing, properly understood, argues imperfection.*” This is a telling remark. Boston understands that if the Lord expresses an ardent desire for something that will not come to pass, if His wishing or desire is inefficacious, which argues imperfection on God’s part—which cannot be tolerated from any Bible believer. He will go on in this portion of his writing to argue that the imperfection was in the people, not in the Lord, and that this is the rationale behind the Lord using such an expression. Finally, he notes that if we take this expression literally in the optative, we may as well, from other Scriptures, accept that God has eyes, ears, or even wings.

The next Pastor-theologian we will examine in the Scottish interpreter Samuel Rutherford. In his excellent book, *Christ Dying and Drawing Sinners to Himself*, he writes:

We reject [the Arminian’s] catholic intentions and decrees, to save and redeem all and everyone, which they vainly fancy to be in God; as repugnant to his will which is irresistible, and cannot miss its end. 2. To his immutability, which cannot be compelled to take a second port, whereas he cannot fail the first. 3. To his omnipotency, who cannot be resisted. 4. To his happiness, who cannot come short of what his soul desires. 5. To his wisdom, who cannot aim at an end, and desire it with his soul, and go about it, by such means, as he seeth shall be utterly uneffectual, and never produce his end; and not use these means, which he knoweth may, and infallibly doth, produce the same end in others. Now this desire of approbation is an abundantly sufficient closing of the mouth of *such as stumble at the gospel, being appointed thereunto*; and an expression of Christ’s good-liking to save sinners expressed in his borrowed wishes, Deut. 5:29. *O that there were such a heart in them, that they would fear me, and keep my commandments!* Psalm 81:13. *O that my people had hearkened unto me, and Israel walked in my ways!* Which wish, as relating to disobeying Israel, is a figure, or metaphor borrowed from men, but otherwise sheweth how acceptable the duty is to God, how obligatory to the creature.⁴⁹

Rutherford gives several reasons why this passage cannot be interpreted according to a will that is frustrated in God. He concludes his comments by saying that this is a “metaphor borrowed from men” which is designed to show the duty of men, which is acceptable to God, to have the heart that is required for obedience, although they by nature do not. His reasons are:

1. God’s will is irresistible
2. God never changes in His design
3. God’s power cannot be resisted
4. God’s happiness cannot come short of his desire
5. God’s wisdom is effectual, not ineffectual

The great Dutch theologian, Wilhelmus A’ Brakel understands Deuteronomy 5:29 in a similar way as we have seen in these other citations, He writes:

When God is said to desire something which does not occur, such as when He states, “O that there were such a heart in them, that they would fear Me, ... that it might be well with them, and with their children for ever!” (Deu. 5:29), or, “O that thou hadst hearkened to My commandments! then had thy peace been as a river” (Isa. 48:18), He is speaking in the manner of men. Strictly speaking, such can never be said concerning the omniscient, omnipotent, immutable, and most perfect God. Rather, it indicates God’s displeasure toward sin and how He delights in holiness. It indicates that sin is the reason why those blessings

⁴⁹ Samuel Rutherford, *Christ Dying, and Drawing Sinners to Himself* (Glasgow: Samuel and Archibald Gardner; Niven, Napier & Khull, 1803), 513.

are withheld from them—blessings which they, according to His promise, would have received as a reward upon godliness.⁵⁰

His explanation is simple and clear. In such expressions, the Lord indicates His displeasure with His creatures, and especially with His covenant people, who have heard all his Words, and committed to keeping them, apart from a heart to do so. Note how he reasons from what the Bible says about God’s omniscience, omnipotence, immutability, and perfection, and from this concludes that God “in the manner of men.” condescends to man’s weakness, revealing what He has commanded—a heart commensurate with the commitment.

There are other statements by theologians which pertain to passages like Deuteronomy 5.29. They are more theological in nature, and help us to search for the right meaning of the Lord’s statements. For the first of these, hear Francis Turretin:

Finally, we may now omit many other things since by this hypothesis wants, and vehement desires (yet fruitless and frustrated) are attributed to God by which he is made to intend and in earnest will that, which willing, he yet knew never would be or could be. Is it easy for anyone to gather whether they are becoming to the majesty of the supreme deity or repugnant to his wisdom and power; whether under the pretext of extolling the divine goodness and grace, they are not too much obscured and lessened while they are made to be vain and inefficacious, and accomplish nothing else than increasing the guilt of man and rendering him inexcusable (*anapologēton*)[?] Nor can this absurdity be taken away by saying that the Scripture seems to impute to God desires and wants of this kind (Ps. 81:13; Is. 48:18). It is evident that these are anthropathical locutions, to be understood in a manner becoming to God (*theoprepōs*), and to be referred to the preceptive will in order to teach what is pleasing to God and what is the duty of man.⁵¹

In this notice Turretin states that there are two ways of understanding such statements under our study: whether such statements of longing or desire are “becoming to the majesty of the supreme deity” or whether they are “repugnant to his wisdom and power.” Calling the former an absurdity, his answer is the latter, and that all such statements of Scripture are to be understood in a manner becoming to God—that is, becoming of his majesty. These, he writes, are anthropathical statements—that is, they are a condescension of expression by which God intends to teach truths, and influence by His Word and Spirit, in ways that are known to Him, the recipients of His Word. He “clothes Himself” in these human expressions of passion to move His own people to repentance.

Richard A. Muller in his work *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*⁵² cites a considerable number of reformation-era theologians and churchmen who understood such anthropathisms in ways consistent with God’s majesty, rather than ways repugnant to His wisdom and power. Citing Peter Martyr Vermigli, John Calvin, John Owen, John Gill, Henry Ainsworth, Edward Leigh, Peterus Von Mastricht, among others, the conclusions drawn are along the same lines as we have heard from Turretin above. Muller cites Owen as especially helpful in understanding such speech:

The words also in the original, in all the places mentioned, express or intimate perturbation of mind, commotion of spirit, corporeal mutation of the parts of the body, and the like distempers of men acting under the power of that passion. The whole difference is about the intendment of the Holy Ghost in these attributions, and whether they are properly spoken of God, asserting this passion to be in him in the proper significancy of the words, or whether these things be not taken ἀνθρωποπαθῶς, (anthropopathically) and to be understood θεοπρεπῶς, (proper to God) in such a sense as may answer the meaning of the figurative

⁵⁰ Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, ed. Joel R. Beeke, trans. Bartel Elshout, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 1992), 117.

⁵¹ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elencitic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, vol. 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992–1997), 404.

⁵² Muller, Richard A. *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy; Volume 3: The Divine Essence and Attributes*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003. See Chapter 6.3.1.2-3 (pages 555-561)

expression, assigning them their truth to the utmost, and yet to be interpreted in a suitableness to divine perfection and blessedness.⁵³

With this research complete, we are now able to make an assessment of Prof. Murray's claim, cited before, that Deuteronomy 5.29, and other similar places of Scripture ought to be characterized as follows: He writes, "*Here therefore we have an instance of desire on the part of God for the fulfilment of that which he had not decreed; in other words, a will on the part of God to that which he had not decretively willed.*"⁵⁴ Our answer is that to characterize a will or desire in God that is contrary to His decretive will is conceptually destructive of his power and divine dignity. Of course, God is not injured by false opinions concerning Himself. But our conception of Him is injured by such statements, as if there could be something other than perfect harmony and simplicity in the Lord God, who sees the end from the beginning, and procures all His purpose and counsel. It behooves us then to give a proper interpretation of this passage, and the others in question. What is the Lord communicating to His people, and to His Church, in this passage? Several of these propositions we have already heard in our research.

First, The Lord would have His people to understand that it is easy to say something, but hard to execute those commitments that go forth from our lips. "*They have well spoken...oh that there were such a heart in them.*" Stated explicitly, we have the Prophet Isaiah speaking: *Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men.*⁵⁵ In English we have a saying, we declare: "Talk is cheap." That is, words roll off of our tongues even when there is no heart to keep that which is committed. The Lord makes this known to his people in the statement of Deuteronomy 5.29, that their words do not match their hearts in this matter of commitment, love, and obedience to Him.

Second, the Lord would reveal what is good and upright in this case—that their hearts matched their words, and he would encourage them to that uprightness by His own expression. The Lord here would discourage from the sin of hypocrisy, and encourage to careful and thoughtful reflection in the use of words—such that whatever comes forth from our mouths is thoughtful, not rash. In keeping with this, several things are included in this direction from the Lord:

- The weightiness of the engagement to obey Him.
- The means necessary to their obedience, and diligence in those means.
- The policing and watching over their own hearts against temptation.
- How they interact with one another, and set a good example, encouraging and correcting one another as necessary.
- These and many other things are godly applications of what the Lord says in Deuteronomy 5.29.

Third, that naturally, of ourselves, we cannot have such a heart toward the Lord and His commandments, that He alone is the author and giver of such a heart and disposition of obedience, as we, according to his grace, receive new hearts. In other words, this declaration strikes the blow to self-righteousness. This is especially seen in the literal rendering of the Hebrew to the effect, "who will give such a heart to them?" They have it not of themselves—it must be received as a gift from the Lord. This interpretation passes the examination of the analogy of faith. Hear the following Scriptures:

Deuteronomy 29.4: And Moses called unto all Israel, and said unto them, Ye have seen all that the LORD did before your eyes in the land of Egypt unto Pharaoh, and unto all his servants, and unto all his land; ³ The great temptations which thine eyes have seen, the signs, and those great miracles: ⁴ Yet the LORD hath not given you an heart to perceive, and eyes to see, and ears to hear, unto this day.

⁵³ John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 12 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, n.d.), 111.

⁵⁴ John Murray, Vol. 4, *Free Offer of the Gospel*, 118

⁵⁵ *The Holy Bible: King James Version*, electronic ed. of the 1769 edition of the 1611 Authorized Version. (Bellingham WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995), Is 29:13.

Isaiah 6.9-13: And he said, Go, and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but understand not; and see ye indeed, but perceive not. ¹⁰ Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed. ¹¹ Then said I, Lord, how long? And he answered, Until the cities be wasted without inhabitant, and the houses without man, and the land be utterly desolate, ¹² And the LORD have removed men far away, and *there be* a great forsaking in the midst of the land. ¹³ But yet in it *shall be* a tenth, and *it shall return*, and shall be eaten: as a teil tree, and as an oak, whose substance *is* in them, when they cast *their leaves*: so the holy seed *shall be* the substance thereof.

Ezekiel 36.25-27: Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. ²⁶ A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do *them*.

These passages make clear that it is the Lord alone who can give that new heart. The people cannot have this heart of themselves, and there is not another besides Him who can provide it. When they speak rashly, and without “heart” they speak as if they were the creators of the new heart themselves, committing themselves without that right-heartedness, and the Lord would correct this understanding, humble them in the sense of their sin, misery, and inability, that they might seek after Him, and plead that heart from Him. He also puts them on notice that they are sinners, that not only can they not obey right-heartedly, but that they must also seek His forgiveness. Thus, they are disabused of all self-righteousness.

Finally it teaches the people of God the acceptability of this duty, to walk after His commandments, and that not in hypocrisy, but with hearts purified by faith. The Lord would show them what He calls good—integrated obedience—that the lips match the heart—that hearts purified by faith serve God in sincerity and truth, worship Him in Spirit and truth, according to His Word and command, as the foundation for all morality and ethics. He would teach them that obedience to Him must be apart from the doctrines and commandments of men. This verse under study teaches them of the great love of God who would condescend to speak to men even as a man, in a figure, to draw them to Himself—not to present Himself as “wholly Other” but familiarly, calling them by His Word and Spirit to Himself. He shows them that the only way to this blessedness is through Him, and no other. The Lord is willing to receive sinners in Christ.

The next passage adduced by Professor Murray is Deuteronomy 32.29, which reads, *O that they were wise, that they understood this, that they would consider their latter end!* The Hebrew construction here differs from the prior verse under consideration, and Prof. Murray declares that it is, “distinctly optative.” He speaks of the conjunction “*lu*” in the Hebrew text, which comprises the first word of the verse. We agree that there are cases in Scripture where *lu* is given to convey the optative mood of wanting or wishing, expressing a strong desire to something. We also agree with Prof. Murray that this conjunction can also have a merely conditional force. All that we have said above applies here if the optative force is preferred. It cannot be taken in a way that is beneath the dignity and propriety of God Himself. When the Lord expresses Himself with the optative force, it does not mean that He has unfulfilled desires, wishes and wanting that never come to pass, for this would speak of weakness and imperfection, as we have seen. We must interpret Scripture as a whole, as well as in its parts, so as to preserve the power, omniscience, honor, and glory of God. If however, this grammatical construction is taken as simply conditional, the Lord often speaks in this way to His people to stir them up to their duty, encourage them in well doing, and to show how He, in His sovereignty, has connected means, and ends, Himself as the ultimate cause, maker, and sustainer of all things, and provider for secondary causation. We are taught by the Lord, in this passage, that ends are connected to courses—the course we run has an end to it. And, while the final disposition of all things is in the hands of the Lord,⁵⁶ He is pleased to connect those ends with paths, ways, and courses. So, the Israelites are counseled in

⁵⁶ Proverbs 16.33

this passage to consider the end of the course of apostasy, as this Song of Moses teaches. A few quotations from godly ministers will suffice here. We will note that these comments do not particularly address the optative force of the expression, but the duty of God’s people in every age to “consider their latter end.”

Hear the Rev. Thomas Boston:

That you are in the way of duty with reference to the other world, Matth. 24:46, “Blessed is that servant, whom his Lord when he cometh shall find so doing.” While others are going on fearlessly, you are looking about you, concerned how it may be with you in the end. It is a piece of wisdom, and hopeful, thus to be exercised in considering your latter end, Deut, 32:29.⁵⁷

The Westminster Divine Jeremiah Burroughs, in his commentary on the Prophecy of Hosea, gives several reasons why the Lord speaks in this way to His people:

1. The Lord would deal reasonably, or rationally with His people.
2. He uses many arguments, after the manner of men.
3. He employs not only reasons, but many persuasions.
4. He answers their objections.
5. He calls them to reason with Him, as in Isaiah 1.18, as a man might reason with his neighbor if they have fallen out one with another.
6. He calls them to consideration, meditation, and a connecting of courses with ends, and it is here that he cites Deuteronomy 32:29: “God earnestly desires that they would but consider of things. In Deut. 32:29, “O that they were wise, that they understood this, that they would consider their latter end!” Now when you have to deal with the froward and passionate, if by the strength of reason you could control your own passion, you would be ready to express yourselves thus, Oh that I could but find such a man exercising his reason, that he were but wise, that he would but weigh things! Thus God saith concerning his people, Oh that they were wise, and considered, and understood!”⁵⁸
7. God pleads with them after the manner of men.
8. The Lord appeals to their own consciences.

Many other citations could be provided. Suffice only these for the sake of time that these are representative of many others, focusing on the duty of the Israelites, and of ourselves, not to muse about God’s frustrated desires, but how the Lord condescends in such statements to call us to duty, gently, as a Father to His children, teaching them to connect courses with ends. We cannot expect to arrive at a good end by following a sinful course—we should expect an evil end from such a course.

The same kind of comments will apply also to Prof. Murray’s citation of Psalm 81.13 (English, v. 14 in the Original), and Isaiah 48.18. These are grammatical constructions similar to Deuteronomy 32.29, using the Hebrew conjunction, *lu*. Hengstenberg interprets both Psalm 81.13 and Isaiah 48.18 as simple conditional statements.⁵⁹ J.A. Alexander says much the same.⁶⁰ Rev. David Dickson understands this as we have seen above:

⁵⁷ Thomas Boston, *The Whole Works of Thomas Boston: A Soliloquy on the Art of Man-Fishing*, ed. Samuel M’Millan, vol. 5 (Aberdeen: George and Robert King, 1849), 455.

⁵⁸ Jeremiah Burroughs, “An Exposition of the Prophecy of Hosea,” in *An Exposition of the Prophecy of Hosea*, ed. James Sherman (Edinburgh; London: James Nichol; James Nisbet & Co., 1863), 471. The entire section is a godly understanding of why the Lord uses such expressions as a means of condescension and care toward His people. See pages 471-473.

⁵⁹ The לָּ, ver. 13, denotes the condition notwithstanding the consciousness that it is not realized: if my people heard, which they do not: comp. Ewald, § 627, Is. 48:18. *The ways of the Lord* form the contrast to their own stupid and ruinous plans... E. W. Hengstenberg, John Thomson, and Patrick Fairbairn, *Commentary on the Psalms*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1869), 27.

⁶⁰ Joseph Addison Alexander, *The Psalms Translated and Explained* (Edinburgh: Andrew Elliot; James Thin, 1864), 348.

This lamenting of God for his people’s misery, is borrowed from the manner of men, lamenting the misery which their disobedient children have brought upon themselves; and is not to be taken so, as if there were in God any passion or perturbation, or miserable lamentation; but this speech is to be conceived, as other like speeches in Scripture, which are borrowed from the affections of men, and are framed to move some holy affection in men, suitable to that affection from which the Lord taketh the similitude; and so, *O that my people had hearkened unto me*, serveth to move his people (who should hear this expression,) to repent and lament their not hearkening unto God; and to study in all time to come to be more obedient unto him, even as they would eschew the curse which came upon misbelieving and disobedient Israel, and as they desired to obtain the blessings whereof carnal Israelites came short, and deprived themselves.⁶¹

We see in these quotations and interpretations several things:

1. This expression must be understood consistently with God’s power and dignity.
2. When God speaks thus, he adopts the speech of men, condescending to our weaknesses, for several reasons:
 - a. To reveal what our affections and mindset should be toward like declension, unbelief, and apostasy, in ourselves and others, especially regarding God’s Covenant administration.
 - b. To reveal the signal advantages of the Covenant relation that God sustains to His people, and the aggravations of the sin of unbelief, and refusal to hear Him in this condescension.
 - c. To couch that Covenant relation in benefits promised, and to remind His people of benefits already received.
 - d. To show Himself a faithful “covenanter” that the failure of the people to receive the blessings and promises of God are only their fault, that there are not weaknesses or short-comings in God.
 - e. To move the Covenant people of God to repentance, showing that His promises are, in the end, made in the context of faithful adherence and loyalty to Him, His Word and ways, commands and counsels.
 - f. In this regard, hear the prophet Jeremiah: (18.1-10) ¹ The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying, ² Arise, and go down to the potter’s house, and there I will cause thee to hear my words. ³ Then I went down to the potter’s house, and, behold, he wrought a work on the wheels. ⁴ And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter: so he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make *it*. ⁵ Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, ⁶ O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the LORD. Behold, as the clay *is* in the potter’s hand, so *are* ye in mine hand, O house of Israel. ⁷ *At what* instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy *it*; ⁸ If that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them. ⁹ And *at what* instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant *it*; ¹⁰ If it do evil in my sight, that it obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good, wherewith I said I would benefit them.
 - i. We see in this passage what we call the “moral interpretation of prophecy,” that the Lord uses prophecies of good, and ill, for His own purposes, to move His own to faith and obedience, and to root out the presumptuous, cursing him in the end.
3. This manner of speech ought not to be understood as representing an actual condition in God, a wishing or wanting something He has not been pleased to decree, or some kind of disturbance of mind. Rather, we ought to see such declarations as the Lord’s condescension to His people, and that in such speeches the “Israel within Israel” might hear and separate themselves from that evil congregation.⁶²

The next set of passages asserted by Prof. Murray speak of Christ and His lament over Jerusalem: Matthew 23.37, and Luke 13.34. As we have come to expect from Prof. Murray, he interprets these passages in a fashion consistent to a wanting in Christ that never comes to pass:

⁶¹ David Dickson, *A Brief Explication of the Psalms*, vol. 2 (Glasgow; Edinburgh; London: John Dow; Waugh and Innes; R. Ogle; James Darling; Richard Baynes, 1834), 57.

⁶² See Romans 9.6-8; 11.7-11; Numbers 16.21

In this passage there should be no dispute that the will of Christ in the direction of a certain benign result is set in contrast with the will of those who are contemplated as the subjects of such blessing. These two stand in opposition to each other—I have willed (or wished), ye have not willed (or wished). Not only so. The will of Christ to a certain end is opposed to that which actually occurred. Jesus says he often wished the occurrence of something which did not come to pass and therefore willed (or wished) the occurrence of that which God had not secretly or decretively willed.⁶³

Prof. Murray goes on to speak of this will of Christ for the salvation of Jerusalem, and their gathering unto Himself as the expression of His will as God-Man, and so he will state, that:

In view of the transcendent, divine function which he says he wished to perform, it would be illegitimate for us to say that here we have simply an example of his human desire or will. It is surely, therefore, a revelation to us of the divine will as well as of the human. Our Lord in the exercise of his most specific and unique function as the God-man gives expression to a yearning will on his part that responsiveness on the part of the people of Jerusalem would have provided the necessary condition for the bestowal of his saving and protecting love, a responsiveness, nevertheless, which it was not the decretive will of God to create in their hearts.⁶⁴

Once again, we must ask if there is a way of understanding this passage that is in keeping with the power and dignity of the God-Man, as revealed in Scripture, rather than descending into the absurdity of positing a contradiction in the Divine will, in the Person of Christ. The first answer to this supposed contradiction and consternation in the divine will is found in remembering that our Lord Jesus, as Mediator and God-Man, has a distinct divine and a human will, and that the human will is subject to the Law, as are all human wills. When our Lord took to Himself a true body and a reasonable soul, this includes a human will, that must, in all points, be subject to the Law of God. The Apostle Paul speaks of this in Galatians 4.4-5: *But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, ⁵ To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.* There is, in Scripture, an instance of this human will acquitting itself in the context of this necessary law-keeping. We see this on full display in the Garden of Gethsemane, that famous passage where our Lord said, *O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.* (Matthew 26.39) What we see here is not an argument between the Father and the Son, but our human Savior obeying the 6th Commandment. Note the Westminster Shorter Catechism, question:

68: *What is required in the sixth commandment? A.* The sixth commandment requireth all lawful endeavours to preserve our own life, and the life of others.

Here, our Lord Jesus does not lightly undertake His impending cross-work, but proceeds to a lawful exercise of His will, that although he has authority from His Father to lay down His life,⁶⁵ He is bound by the 6th Commandment to make all lawful endeavors for the preservation of His own life. He must not cast away His life in cavalier fashion, but is bound to protect and preserve it by the Law. His human will, in this instance, seeks a remedy for His conscience which was found in submitting to His Father, yet also in meeting the requirements of the 6th Commandment and self-preservation. Our Lord Jesus was indeed equipped with authority and power to save His own life, should he so desire, for he will say to Peter in a few moments, *Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.*⁵³ *Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels?*⁵⁴ *But how then shall the scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be?"* (Matthew 26.52-54) Christ has undertaken as God-Man, in a situation unique to Himself, having such power and authority, and yet also, not unique to Himself, but common to all human

⁶³ John Murray, *Free Offer of the Gospel*, 119

⁶⁴ John Murray, *Free Offer of the Gospel*, 120

⁶⁵ See John 10.17-18

beings, having a human will that is bound to submit to the will of God, and bound to exercise all lawful means of self-preservation.

Having thus established the nature of the divine and human will in Christ, let us now consider the passage adduced by Prof. Murray above. Does this passage require that when Christ weeps over Jerusalem that He does so according to His divine will? Such an interpretation requires a frustration in the divine will—that God willed, and did not will, He desired, and did not effectually desire. In the quotation above, sadly, Prof. Murray has posited two wills in God—a “yearning will” for something God has not “decretively willed.” Rather than the monumental problems this creates in our theology proper, let us, with the Apostle in Hebrews 10.7 declare that Christ “came to do “thy” will, O God.” That as God-Man He has a responsibility to shepherd His human will, now under the law, to desire what all men must desire—the good of their neighbor. That in loving His neighbor as he loves Himself, (the second great commandment) His human desire toward fellow human beings who come under Gospel preaching is that they would by faith receive that Word and be gathered to Christ. As we said in lecture # 1, if God commands all men everywhere to repent, He commands our will also, that we ought to desire that all who come under Gospel preaching should repent and be saved from the wrath to come. Christ, as a good minister of the Word, rightly, in His human will, expresses the desire which is exemplary to all ministers of the Word—namely, the good of those who hear the Gospel. Hear the Rev. David Dickson, commenting on Matthew 23.37:

In this lamentation, our Lord is not to shew what power is in men’s wicked nature to convert themselves, or to make use of the means of conversion, nor what power there is in corrupt nature to oppose that power which God putteth forth in conversion of soules: neither is he lamenting their case, as one unable to obtain his own desired end in the salvation of such as he intended to save: for no reason can extract these conclusions necessarily from these speeches; & the true sense of them is obtained without any such inferences; for our Lord, as man, and a kindly Minister of the circumcision, moved with humane compassion of the miseries of his native Countreymen, letteth forth his love in this lamentation and weeping, while he beholdeth the desperate obstinacy of the multitude running to perdition, thereby intending to make the reprobate, who should hear of his tender bowels, inexcusable; and to move the Elect unto repentance by this means.⁶⁶

Finally on this passage, there is another, perhaps even simpler understanding, even hinted at by the Rev. Dickson in separating the hearing of the reprobate from the elect. Note in both passages (Matthew 23.37, and Luke 13.34) that the address is to “Jerusalem” and the desire is toward “thy children.” In other words, it is possible to understand this passage as separating “Jerusalem” from “her children.” Note Calvin here:

And you would not. This may be supposed to refer to the whole nation, as well as to the *scribes*; but I rather interpret it in reference to the latter, by whom the *gathering together* was chiefly prevented. For it was against them that Christ inveighed throughout the whole of the passage; and now, after having addressed *Jerusalem* in the singular number, it appears not without reason that he immediately used the plural number.⁶⁷

This is to say that in addressing Jerusalem, he addresses the religious leadership of the Church in that day, that were nearly unanimously opposed to Him,⁶⁸ and withstood His mild and maternal overtures of mercy. And when He speaks of “thy children” He speaks of those who were prevented, or being prevented, by threat of excommunication⁶⁹ or worse⁷⁰ from

⁶⁶ David Dickson, *A Brief Exposition of the Evangel of Jesus Christ according to Matthew by David Dickson*, Early English Books Online (London: Printed for Ralph Smith .., 1651), 271.

⁶⁷ John Calvin and William Pringle, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 3 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 110.

⁶⁸ We think of Nicodemus, and perhaps a few others. See John 7.50-53; 12.42; 19.39;

⁶⁹ See John 9.22; 12.42; See also Matthew 21.31-32; 23.13; Luke 11.52;

⁷⁰ See John 16.1-2

coming to Him, and being gathered to Him. In other words, Christ addresses the Jews, the religious leaders of the Church because rather than being good ministers, leading the people in the ways of salvation, they prevented those under their authority, as they were able, abusing that ecclesiastical authority, and silencing the godly ministers that came before Christ. Our Savior here considers all the religious leadership that opposed Him in the Old Testament Church as “Jerusalem” which killed the prophets that came before Him, and now will also kill Him, as a force of opposition to the salvation and gathering of the “children of Jerusalem,” that is, the elect under their authority.

To conclude our second lecture then, we see not a break or division in the will of God in Matthew 23.37-39, but have offered two lines of interpretation more in keeping with the analogy of Scripture and its self-consistency, and that which answers to the integrity of Christ, the God-Man and His duties as a “minister of the circumcision.” (Romans 15.8)

Lecture 3:

God's Expressions of Desire regarding Repentance: Ezekiel 18.23, 32; 33.11; Isaiah 45.22; 2 Peter 3.9

Professor Murray, in this last section of the essay, cites these passages to show that God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked might turn from his iniquity and rebellion, and live. The assertion given on these texts is that if God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, He must therefore desire their repentance, which He has not been pleased to decree. He writes,

The sum of the matter may be stated in the following propositions. It is absolutely and universally true that God does not delight in or desire the death of a wicked person. It is likewise absolutely and universally true that he delights in the repentance and life of that wicked person. It would surely be quite unwarranted to apply the latter proposition less universally or more restrictively than the former. The adversative construction and the emphatic form by which the protestation is introduced are surely not compatible with any other conclusion.⁷¹

In the first verses referenced from Ezekiel 18, we must protest that Prof. Murray, usually a very talented and insightful exegete, has here overlooked some helpful indicators in the larger chapter and book itself, and thus has reached an unjust conclusion from this passage. The book of Ezekiel is written during the Babylonian oppression of the southern kingdom, Judah, for her sins. We have not yet come to the fall of Jerusalem, as certain contextual indicators make clear,⁷² but these captives have been taken in one of the incursions of Nebuchadnezzar into Judah. They continue to entertain vain hopes of restoration, like their wicked king Zedekiah, apart from repentance, and presumptuously hold that the Lord will yet be merciful to them, though they have not mourned, or wept, or confessed their sins.⁷³ They have refused the counsel of the prophet Jeremiah, and set their sights on a soon-to-be deliverance, rather than what the Lord has declared through His prophet, that they will serve as captives in Babylon for 70 years.

- At the beginning of the book we see Ezekiel speaking of the captives, their suffering, but most importantly, of their stiff necks and rebellion. He writes of the abominations yet going on in Jerusalem, in the worship of God.
 - They have been led away captive because of this rebellion. It is early on in this captivity, and they have not reconciled the command of the Lord in their minds, and neither, especially, have they come to grips with their own sins, but expect a soon return to their homeland.
 - They have set up idols in their hearts, refused to hear the word of the Lord as it has come through the warning of prophets, or, if they have heard it, they declare that it is a long way off.
 - They will hear of the wickedness of the leaders of the Church, their idolatry, and refusal thus far to repent.
 - They have believed rather those false prophets that have prophesied peace, and have wondered aloud why these prophecies have not come to pass, and why the “vision has failed.”
 - They have heard Ezekiel’s accusation and conviction of themselves for their own sins, and they have heard the Lord’s promised mercy because of His covenant faithfulness, yet they continue to entertain vain hopes of restoration, apart from repentance.

Now we come to chapter 18, and there is another excuse—another reason to blame someone beside themselves, and cast doubt upon the judgment and providence of God. They say, “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” In other words, they are blaming their fathers and their sins for their own suffering in the day they live. It was our fathers, not us that sinned, and so why are we suffering? This is their complaint. The balance of chapter 18 is how the Lord answers this complaint, in His condescension and care to His covenant people. We will remember that the Lord

⁷¹ John Murray, *Free Offer of the Gospel*, 123

⁷² See Ezekiel 12.26-28; 13.10-16, 14.21-22; 33.21-29—there were people and prophets that believed they would yet be restored to their land, and not go into captivity to Babylon.

⁷³ See Jeremiah 21.1-2

has covenanted with Israel, and no matter their faithlessness, He will continue in faithfulness to that visible people, although filled with wicked professors. Let us examine the Lord's response to this proverb of his people.

First, we will note that this is the same complaint the Pharisees had in the days of Christ, see Matthew 23.29-39. They excused themselves and distanced themselves from what they perceived was their fathers' wickedness, in killing the prophets, yet they have also plotted to kill the Prince of the Prophets, the One who sent those prophets, Christ. Christ will say to them, "fill ye up the measure of your fathers." In our passage here, the Lord responds to this wicked use of this proverb, in Ezekiel 18.3 by beginning solemnly, "As I live." That is, by the aseity of God—by His own self existence, He will answer them. This is a weighty statement by the Lord which tells us that if this proverb were true, it would strike against God's own being, for our God is One—He is not composed of parts or passions, and not subject to change. It is as if the Lord said, *"If I am rightly said to punish the children for their fathers' sins, this would strike against the very foundation of who I am. I will bring to nothing your argument against me, by which you would lay injustice and duplicity at my feet."* In this first section, verses 3-9, the Lord declares His thesis statement: "All souls are mine." What does the Lord mean here?

The Lord would declare that all souls are considered individually before Him in His just judgment—they are His to deal with according to His righteousness and faithfulness. Souls do not belong to their fathers to dispose of them as they please—they belong to the Lord. While the Lord may judge a nation, yet He does not punish the children for the sake of their fathers' sins, and in such judgments will remember His own. In this section, the Lord declares that he will take note of a man's faithful obedience by detailing that faithful man's avoidance of the common sins of Israel:

- Note these sins, and the separation from them by the "just" man:
 - He has not eaten upon the mountains—that is, he has not sacrificed in the high places. (Ezekiel 6.3-6)
 - He has not lifted his eyes to the idols of Israel—those pagan deities that had crept into the worship of the people of God. (Ezekiel 16.16ff)
 - He has not defiled his neighbor's wife—a violation of the 7th commandment. (Ezekiel 22.10-11)
 - He has not come near a menstrous woman, also a 7th commandment violation. (Ezekiel 22.10-11)
 - He has not oppressed any, and dealt kindly with the debtor according to the Law of Moses, has not given upon usury, and has not denied his bread to the poor and needy. In sum, he has executed true judgment and justice between man and man. (Ezekiel 22.12-13; 27-29)
 - Verse 9 gives the summary: He has walked in my statutes, kept my judgment, etc. As I live, so shall He live, declares the Lord.

In this section the Lord shows that "all souls are His." That is, he considers everyone, and His judgments are over each one, individually. It is not your fathers' blameworthiness that plagues you, it is your own. This thought is advanced in the next section, verses 10-13. In this passage the man in the foregoing section is posited to have a son, who turns away from all the upright behavior of his father, and instead turns to wickedness, and commits all those sins from which his father was said to keep himself. What will be the outcome of such a case? He will die in His iniquity, his blood shall be upon him.

It is interesting to note how the Lord reverses their initial complaint. The captives said, "Our fathers sinned, and the children suffer." But here, the father does uprightly, and the son turns away from his father's uprightness, and does wickedly instead. His father's uprightness will not help him when he commits iniquity—he will die in his sins, his blood will be upon him. This is to impress further the idea that all souls live before the Lord, to be judged according to His omniscient judgment and watching over them.

The Lord then advances the argument further, by moving on to another, a third generation in His parable. We first had an upright father, who will live, even though his fathers sinned. Now we have a wicked son of that father, who will die. His father's uprightness cannot save him, but he will die in his own iniquity. However, in the third generation spoken of, verses 14-17, this son of the wicked father has not followed his father's ways, but has behaved himself like his father's father. He

has done uprightly, and has not fallen into the iniquity of his father. Note what is said of him—he shall not be blamed and inherit the sins of his father, he shall live instead. The Lord gives the conclusion to the matter in verses 19-20:

Ezekiel 18:19 Yet say ye, Why? doth not the son bear the iniquity of the father? When the son hath done that which is lawful and right, *and* hath kept all my statutes, and hath done them, he shall surely live. ²⁰ The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him.

In giving these multiple and inter-generational examples, the Lord shows that He is the possessor and examiner of all—all souls are His. If from one generation to another there is a change in faith and obedience, from faith to apostasy, and back to faith again, and then back to apostasy, and then back to faith, the Lord declares that everyone shall die in his own sins, or live in his uprightness and obedience. We are not locked in to suffer for the sins of our fathers, as the exiles have said.

But that is not all—note now that in verse 21 there is yet another condition offered. It might be said, if these verses were read in isolation from the rest of Scripture, that we have a kind of merit religion. We must remember that when we come to passages that speak of God’s approval and encouragement to obedience, that these are not the conditions for salvation, but indicators of salvation already possessed. The righteous is righteous by faith, and his works, although imperfect are still “good works.”⁷⁴ This is made even clearer in this next condition the Lord introduces here, the condition of repentance. So in verse 21, the Lord declares that if a wicked man repents (the Hebrew word here is שׁוּב *shuv*, the common word for repentance) if he turns from his sins, and does that which is lawful and right, he will live. Not only are we not punished for our fathers’ sins, but we can escape judgment and death by repentance from our own. It is here that we see the true context of the statement. Does the Lord have any pleasure in the death of the wicked? Who is that wicked one? The wicked one who had turned from his sin and done that which was right and just. It is not the pleasure of the Lord, that the wicked man who turns from his wickedness to that which is upright, that he should die in his former sins, from which he has turned. Not only is it untrue to say that you, children of Judah, are being punished for your fathers’ sins, but more, if you yourselves repent, you will not die in your sins either. Here we see that repentance is preached to the people of God by the prophet, and that to which it is in order, life from the dead. The pleasure of the Lord, for the repenting sinner, is that he live.

The Westminster Divine, William Greenhill said it this way:

This seems contradictory to what is written, Prov. 1:26, “I will laugh at your calamity, I will mock when your fear cometh;” and Ezek. 5:13, “Thus shall mine anger be accomplished, and I will cause my fury to rest upon them, and I will be comforted.” If God have no pleasure in the death of sinners, how can these texts be verified? To clear this difficulty, know that it is not absolutely to be taken, that God hath no pleasure in the death of the wicked, unless you mean it of the wicked who do repent; but respectively, thus, if they could turn from their wicked ways, and keep his statutes, he should have more pleasure in this, than in their death; but when they do not repent, he hath pleasure in their punishment and death, as it is an act of justice, and work of God, for God hath pleasure in all his works: the destruction and ruin of Babylon is called “his pleasure,” Isa. 48:14, “He will do his pleasure on Babylon, and his arm shall be on the Chaldeans.”⁷⁵

See also Patrick Fairbairn, the Scottish Free-Churchman:

Then, what a moving tenderness in the appeal, “Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked? saith the Lord God.” You think of me as if I were a heartless being, indifferent to the calamities that befall my

⁷⁴ See Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 16 Of Good Works.

⁷⁵ William Greenhill, *An Exposition of the Prophet Ezekiel, with Useful Observations Thereupon*, ed. James Sherman (London: Samuel Holdsworth, 1839), 458.

children, and even delighting to inflict chastisement on them for sins they have not committed. So far from this, I have no pleasure in the destruction of those who by their own transgressions have deserved it, but would rather that they turn from their ways and live. Thus he presents himself as a God of holy love,—love yearning over the lost condition of his wayward children, and earnestly desiring their return to peace and safety,—yet still exercising itself in strict accordance with the principles of righteousness, and only, in so far as these might admit, seeking the good of men. For however desirous to secure their salvation, he neither can nor will save them, except in the way of righteousness.⁷⁶

God takes no pleasure in bringing death upon a wicked sinner who repents, but in his repentance and well doing he will live. Rev. Greenhill brings up a good point for discussion which we learned earlier in our lectures. We must consider all of Scripture as a whole, and integrate seemingly disparate statements spoken by the Lord. Note the passages adduced by the quotation: Proverbs 1.26, Ezekiel 5.13, Isaiah 48.14: In these passages we have the Lord laughing, taking comfort, and exacting His pleasure, upon the death or judgment of the wicked. In light of these passages we must conclude that it is a material misrepresentation of Scripture to declare, as Prof. Murray does at the beginning of this section of his essay, “*It does not appear to us in the least justifiable to limit the reference of these passages to any one class of wicked persons.*”⁷⁷ Certainly, speaking of the Scriptures as a whole, this cannot be said, as the three passages adduced by Rev. Greenhill reveal. If the Lord is said to take pleasure upon the judgment of *some* wicked persons, He cannot be said to have no pleasure in the death of *all* wicked persons. We might add more such passages as well:

Isaiah 46.10-11: Here the Lord declares that His counsel shall stand, and He will do all His pleasure—Hebrew פְּדָה *chefets* the same Hebrew word used in Ezekiel 18.23—calling a ravenous bird from the east. What does this ravenous bird represent? It represents Cyrus the Persian, which was a comfort to Israel, but meant the destruction of Babylon—this is why he is called a ravenous bird. So in calling a ravenous bird to deliver Israel from captivity, and to rebuild the temple, the Lord takes pleasure in bringing down Babylon, as we read in Isaiah 48.14, using that same Hebrew word. This same word is used in that famous passage in Ecclesiastes 3.1ff. Note the verse:

To every *thing there is* a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven: ² A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up *that which is* planted; ³ A time to kill, and a time to heal; a time to break down, and a time to build up; ⁴ A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance; ⁵ A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather stones together; a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing; ⁶ A time to get, and a time to lose; a time to keep, and a time to cast away; ⁷ A time to rend, and a time to sew; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; ⁸ A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace.

In verse 1, the word translated as “purpose” is actually the Hebrew word (פְּדָה *chefets*). In everything, therefore, as the Lord works under the heavens, there is something in it upon which the Lord is pleased—for He brings it all to pass. Note the opposites, the extremities, the “pole to pole” work of the Lord, for in everything there is a time of His purpose and pleasure in bringing it to pass. Note also verse 3.17: *I said in mine heart, God shall judge the righteous and the wicked: for there is a time there for every purpose and for every work.*” Again, we have our word for “pleasure” translated as “purpose.” The Lord has purposed it, and takes pleasure in all His works, including the judgment of the wicked. Psalm 104.31 tells us that the Lord will rejoice in all His works, including life and death, blessing and judgment. In the absolute sense then, it cannot be said that the Lord “has no pleasure” in the death of *all* the wicked. Surely, we must look for another interpretation than

⁷⁶ Patrick Fairbairn, *Ezekiel, and the Book of His Prophecy: An Exposition*, Second Edition. (Edinburgh; London; Dublin: T&T Clark; Hamilton, Adams & Co.; John Robertson, and Hodges and Smith, 1855), 198–199.

⁷⁷ John Murray, *Free Offer of the Gospel*, 121

that offered by those who would divide God’s pleasure for His decree and providential will. The imprecations of the Psalms teach us this as we sing, and in them when we ask God’s judgments to rain down upon His and our enemies.⁷⁸

So, studying this first text cited by Prof. Murray contextually, we cannot be convinced that the “wicked” of verse 23 are all the wicked in the world without limitation, or even all the wicked to whom the Gospel comes in the preached Word. The wicked, contextually understood, is that wicked man contemplated by the Lord as one who turned from his wickedness—the Lord has no delight in the death of such a man. This interpretation is confirmed by the verses which follow, where the Lord declares that the righteous man shall *not* live if he turns from his righteousness. He is not re-named as a wicked man, he is simply said to be subject to death if he turns from his righteousness. The chapter closes with the Lord challenging His people, who have sinned and gone astray from Him, that if they return, he will not be pleased that they should die, but they shall live. It is as if the Lord said, *“Just as in the illustration above, so it is with you, my people. I am a God who honors repentance, I will not destroy a repenting people, but they shall live. You are my people, and of all the people upon the face of the earth, I have called you to repentance. When the sinner repents, he will not die in his former sins, even sins he learned from his father, instead he shall live.”* As we have said before, the Lord here speaks covenantally, to His people—that although they have turned from Him, yet if they will return to Him, He will not cast them away, He will not take pleasure in their death, but will rejoice over them with singing.⁷⁹ So far from imputing the sins of their fathers to them is the Lord, that He rather calls them to repent and live with regard to their own sins. Even if they have sinned, if they turn from that sin, the Lord will forgive and give life.

As we have said before, so we reiterate here, the Lord in such expressions condescends to His people, here revealing His mercy and justice, so as to make use of these means to move His people to repentance. He works not mechanistically, but with affectionate condescension draws His people to Himself, as it were “catching them with guile.” See in 2 Corinthians 12.14-16, where the Apostle Paul uses this same kind of language to show the Corinthians that the Lord is merciful, and condescends to His people, wooing them, as it were, to Himself.

The next passage of Scripture introduced by Prof. Murray is Ezekiel 33.11, which is similar to what we have already studied in some way, yet different in another. The conclusion of the passage is the same, but the context is different, not speaking at all about the fathers and their sins. In the beginning of the chapter the Lord sets up an illustration concerning a city and a watchman. When a watchman exercises his watch-care over a city, he does so either acquitting himself of his duty, or not—either, when he sees the danger he warns, or does not warn the city, so it can prepare for the attack or other calamity. If he does warn the people, they have that communication from him so as to know to flee, prepare, take their battle-stations, or whatever their duty is. Some may heed his warning, and some may not. But if he does not warn the city, when the calamity strikes, when the enemy attacks, the city is unprepared and taken. So we have several possible conditions here:

1. There is no watchman at all. In such a case the city will be unprepared for the coming invasion.
2. There is a watchman, who fails to warn the people. In this case as well, the city will succumb to the attack of the enemy, being unprepared. In this case the blood of the slain in the city will fall upon the watchman’s head. That is, he will bear the guilt for their death, because he did not warn the city.
3. There is a watchman, who cries out in warning, blowing his trumpet, but the people do not give heed. In this case the watchman has done his duty, and is free from the blood of the inhabitants of the city. They refused to hear the right warning of the watchman, and he is free of guilt in the matter, but they are not—their blood remains upon their heads.
4. The next condition is that the watchman cries out with warning at the impending attack, the people of the city do hearken to him, and they are delivered. He has done his job as a watchman, and they have hearkened, and delivered themselves from the impending calamity.

⁷⁸ See also Psalm 115.3; 135.6—note that in these text it is emphatically declared that the Lord does all He pleases, רָצוּן *chefets*

⁷⁹ See Zephaniah 3.14-17

5. The final condition is that the watchman warns the city, some hear, and some do not. They are delivered or not, based upon the whether or not they gave heed to the warning, individually.

In order rightly to unpack this section, we note that when the Lord turns to His prophet, He declares to Ezekiel that he is indeed that watchman upon the wall, that judgment is coming, and that he must warn the people of Judah of it. This is not a hypothetical, but a real-world condition. Ezekiel is the watchman, and “Jerusalem” the nation of Judah, its inhabitants, are the city in the Lord’s parable. Verse 7 makes this very plain, when the Lord says to Ezekiel, *So thou, O son of man, I have set thee a watchman unto the house of Israel; therefore thou shalt hear the word at my mouth, and warn them from me.* So, we note that the Lord has a purpose in setting His watchman, Ezekiel, on the wall. It is to preach repentance, for judgment is coming. In the context of our history in this book, we know that while judgment will not be averted, (Judah will go into captivity) that a repenting man may deliver his soul from death—that is, either death considered as temporal, death in his sins, or the “second death, suffering eternal judgment. So we first note that the Lord has not left Israel without a watchman. As we have said earlier, so we say again, that He does not send watchmen, in the Old Testament, everywhere—but only to His people, rising up early and sending them. The Lord is faithful. The other “cities” of the gentile world have no such watchmen. Think of the kindness of God to His people, and even to certain gentiles cities, like Babylon, for instance, that had a prophet of the Lord speaking in their midst, like Daniel did to King Nebuchadnezzar.⁸⁰ Yet we must remember that even today, many places in the world still do not have a watchman.

This first consideration has much to commend itself to our meditation. If the Lord sends a prophet as a watchman, this speaks to His desire at least in some sense. If the Lord had no desire for any in a “city” He simply would send no watchman, which was quite common in the days of the Old Testament.⁸¹ But that He does send His prophet reveals His desire that some, at least, might hear and deliver their souls from death. Others however, who are not inclined to hear, to them the preaching is an aggravation of their sin, and their blood remains upon their own heads. The Apostle Paul will speak of this concerning his own ministry, declaring in Acts 20.26-28 that he is “pure from the blood of all men.” That in declaring all the counsel of God he is acquitted from the blood of any, for he is a faithful watchman. Paul has preached to many, and if they do not turn from their wickedness, they will die in their sins, and their blood shall be upon their own heads.

It is also interesting to note here that Paul speaks to the Ephesian Elders to give heed to the Church of God, because of his own example—that is, they are called as watchman as well, and here Paul declares that this Church was purchased with God’s own blood—that is, with the blood of Christ, who in the hypostatic union is indeed God, and man. But we note that in the church visible there are those who will hear the watchman and repent, and those who do not, God having sent His watchmen to the whole of the visible church.⁸² As to the Church of old, so here, the Lord sends a watchmen to call His people to repentance. That the Lord has sent a watchmen indicates that He has some saving design for the whole, in some sense—for others never receive that same benefit of hearing the Word of the Lord. To explain this even better, we may ask ourselves why the Lord has not destroyed the whole nation of Judah for her sins? She certainly has earned those wages for her sin. The answer is in Isaiah 65.8-9:

Thus saith the LORD, As the new wine is found in the cluster, and *one* saith, Destroy it not; for a blessing *is* in it: so will I do for my servants’ sakes, that I may not destroy them all. ⁹ And I will bring forth a seed out of Jacob, and out of Judah an inheritor of my mountains: and mine elect shall inherit it, and my servants shall dwell there.

⁸⁰ See Daniel 4.27

⁸¹ See Acts 17.30

⁸² See Ephesians 5.5-7

There is a saving, or preserving desire toward the entire cluster—because “new wine” is found in the midst of it, and so the Lord will not destroy the whole, but for the sake of His elect, he will send His watchman to warn, and to call to repentance.⁸³

Returning to our passage, Ezekiel 33.10 and forward, note that the people of God have stopped blaming others, and now place the blame upon themselves. They say, “*If our transgressions and our sins be upon us, and we pine away in them, how should we then live?*” The prophet is instructed as to how to answer them: “*Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?*”

Does this express a universal desire in God that none who are wicked should perish? Rather than accepting Prof. Murray’s statement, “*Again, the emphatic negative of the first part of verse 11—“I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked”—admits of no limitation or qualification; it applies to the wicked who actually die in their iniquity. Why then should there be the least disposition to limit those spoken of in the text to any class of wicked persons?*”⁸⁴ We must allow the rest of the context to speak, which is clear from verses 12 and following. Note the Word of the Lord to the prophet, and people of Judah:

Ezekiel 33.12-16: Therefore, thou son of man, say unto the children of thy people, The righteousness of the righteous shall not deliver him in the day of his transgression: as for the wickedness of the wicked, he shall not fall thereby in the day that he turneth from his wickedness; neither shall the righteous be able to live for his *righteousness* in the day that he sinneth.¹³ When I shall say to the righteous, *that* he shall surely live; if he trust to his own righteousness, and commit iniquity, all his righteousnesses shall not be remembered; but for his iniquity that he hath committed, he shall die for it.¹⁴ Again, when I say unto the wicked, Thou shalt surely die; if he turn from his sin, and do that which is lawful and right;¹⁵ *If* the wicked restore the pledge, give again that he had robbed, walk in the statutes of life, without committing iniquity; he shall surely live, he shall not die.¹⁶ None of his sins that he hath committed shall be mentioned unto him: he hath done that which is lawful and right; he shall surely live.

Note that verse 12 and following offers the explanation of verse 11. It is introduced with “*Therefore...say unto the children of thy people...*” There is a drawing together of ideas—a connection or explanation that prevents us from isolating verse 11 from what follows. If we are going to be consistent, and understand the rest of this passage in the same way as Prof. Murray understands verse 11, we must say that God has no pleasure in the life of the righteous, as he has no pleasure in the death of the wicked. As in chapter 18, so also here. The righteous man, having that title of “righteous,” if he turns from that righteousness, will die in his sin. Yet he is not re-styled a wicked man. The Lord takes no pleasure in the death of a wicked man, if he turns from his wickedness, and does that which is lawful and upright—see verse 15: if he (The Wicked Man) restore the pledge, make restitution, walk in the statutes of life, etc. in other words, if he repents of his wickedness, the Lord takes no pleasure in His death—He will not die but live, by the Word and promise of the Lord. The wicked is not re-named “The Righteous man” and the righteous man is not renamed “The Wicked man.”

In chapter 18 the lament of the people was that their fathers’ guilt had become theirs, and there was no hope for them. The Lord responds by saying that all souls are His—the soul that sins, it shall die. We are responsible for our own sins, and the Lord holds out repentance by His prophets in His faithfulness. In this passage of Scripture the lament of the people is that they will die because they have sinned in the past—there is no hope, they are consigned to death. The Lord sends His watchman to them, (and in the example of the Apostle Paul He sends other ministers in the days of the New Testament as well) declaring to them that repentance is a viable option, that they must repent of their sins, and in their repentance, they

⁸³ We see this same principle at work in Abraham’s intercession for Lot when the Lord would destroy Sodom in Genesis 18.23-33, in that seeing there were not 10 righteous in the city, the Lord sent His angels to draw out the “less than ten.”

⁸⁴ John Murray, *Free Offer of the Gospel*, 122

will have life, and not death. Sinners are called to repentance in the OT and in the NT, and in both cases are encouraged to know and believe that God takes no pleasure in the death of the [repenting] wicked man, but he will have life.

We conclude that the declaration of Prof. Murray, that the term “The Wicked” should not be limited to any one class of wicked persons is in error, and cannot be sustained from the analogy of Scripture, and from a careful exegesis of the text. The wicked contemplated in Ezekiel 18 and 33 are wicked who, upon hearing the preaching of the Word of the prophet, repent of their wickedness, and learn to do well, where they have done ill. The Lord takes no pleasure in the death of such wicked ones, but that they should hear and live.

The next passage of Scripture adduced by Prof. Murray is Isaiah 45:22 which reads: *Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else.* From this verse, Prof. Murray declares:

While, on the one hand, he has not decretively willed that all be saved, yet he declares unequivocally that it is his will and, impliedly, his pleasure that all turn and be saved. We are again faced with the mystery and adorable richness of the divine will. It might seem to us that the one rules out the other. But it is not so. There is a multiformity to the divine will that is consonant with the fulness and richness of his divine character, and it is no wonder that we are constrained to bow in humble yet exultant amazement before his ineffable greatness and unsearchable judgments. To deny the reality of the divine pleasure directed to the repentance and salvation of all is to fail to accept the witness borne by such a text as this to the manifoldness of God's will and the riches of his grace.⁸⁵

As our lectures have already stated, there is indeed a distinction to be made between God's will of command, and God's will of decree. God does indeed command all the earth to turn to Him and live—this is what we call His will of precept, preceptive will, will of command, etc. However, as we saw in our prior lectures, there are times when God commands, yet does not intend to draw forth obedience from His creatures to that command. It seems to us that Prof. Murray has equivocated on the word desire, as if to say that when God commands something, He certainly “desires” it, when Scripturally this is not true.

There are a number of important truths indeed taught by this one verse, that are helpful, encouraging, and instructive:

1. God is the only God—He is the only Savior, and there is none besides Him that can save.
 - a. But from what, must we ask, is a person saved when he looks to God? He is saved from the wrath of God, from God's own vindicatory justice. This justice will certainly come by way of what we would call God's will, desire, decree—He is not “forced” into the judgment of sinners. Certainly, some are appointed to wrath by God's “decretive will.” Romans 9:22; 1 Peter 2:8; 2 Peter 2:3; Jude 1:4.
 - b. It is not a third party that brings wrath and judgment, it is God Himself.
2. All ends of the earth: Yes, indeed, the covenant promise to Abraham is that “in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed.”⁸⁶ The salvation of our God is wider than the just the Jews of old, and includes the gentiles as well, throughout the whole earth. This is the commitment of God the Father to God the Son in Isaiah 49:1-6.
 - a. But the phrase, *all the ends of the earth* simply shows the extent of the Lord's salvation, not that the Lord desires that each one in every part of the earth be saved from His own wrath to come, as it also does not teach that the Gospel has come to every person that ever lived.
3. Look unto me! Yes, this too is necessary. Look unto me is tantamount to “have faith in me.” As God commands all men everywhere to repent, so he commands all men everywhere to believe.
 - a. But let us remember that some never do actually receive that command. This is not spoken to every individual per se in all of history, but to those to whom the Gospel comes, who are thereby commanded to

⁸⁵ John Murray, *Free Offer of the Gospel*, 126

⁸⁶ See Genesis 12:3; 28:14

repent and believe. The Lord is speaking here about geographical distribution, not personal distribution and desire to all human beings that ever lived.

- b. Yet, everywhere the command to repent and believe goes, it is a true, a clear command and the ones who hear it are obligated by it, to repent and to believe.

However, when Prof. Murray declares that “*There is a multiformity to the divine will that is consonant with the fulness and richness of his divine character, and it is no wonder that we are constrained to bow in humble yet exultant amazement before his ineffable greatness and unsearchable judgments.*” we must here pause. Our wonder is not only directed toward God and His majesty, but also how such an accomplished theologian as Professor Murray can present multiformity in the divine will. Putting the exuberant language aside, we cannot posit a willing, and not willing in God’s will concerning the same object—this would be to introduce a conflict in the divine will that we have before said is not Scriptural—it does not comport with how the Lord has revealed Himself to men, in the whole of Scripture. Our humble yet exultant amazement is not toward God as willing and not willing concerning the same object—that any person might at one instance be loved and hated by Him, or that God might desire their salvation and destruction at the same time, but that God, in His great love, has called sinners to Himself, by His will of command, and that when they repent, He can truly say He desires their salvation from his own wrath, which will come upon all the impenitent, who hear the Gospel, and who do not hear it. This is the proper object of our exultant amazement—the God who is, who receives repentant sinners.

So, while the Gospel is preached to all distributively, not all absolutely, if any will be saved from God’s wrath, it will be by God’s mercy in Christ, through faith and repentance which are His gifts.⁸⁷ That God commands this as the way of salvation to all kinds of men throughout the world is a far cry from saying that desires the salvation of all, except to say that there is a “will of command” such that it is proper to say that God wills, which is to say God commands, all men everywhere to repent. There is an obligation that is announced to all in this verse. If we will rightly say that God desires the salvation of all men, we must qualify that statement by instructing our hearers that we speak of God’s will of command, that which is revealed. What God has decreed is secret, and we must not venture to peel back that veil.

The last Scripture cited by Prof. Murray is 2 Peter 3.9, which reads, *The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.*

This section begins with this statement:

In view of what we have found already there is no reason in *the analogy of Scripture* why we should not regard this passage as teaching that God in the exercise of his benevolent longsuffering and lovingkindness wills that none should perish but that all should come to repentance. An *a priori* assumption that this text cannot teach that God wills the repentance and salvation of all is a gravely unsound assumption, for it is not an assumption derived from the analogy of Scripture.⁸⁸

This is a common rhetorical device. A rhetorician writes for a few pages, asserts some dubious points, claims victory over his opponents in them, and then stands upon those dubious points as proof for further assertions. Our objection is that Prof. Murray has not, in any of the cases examined above, proved his assumptions from the analogy of Scripture. Rather, we have seen that the analogy of Scripture **does not** support his conclusions. The opening argument concerning 2 Peter 3.9 from the analogy of Scripture is a non-starter. We agree with his following statement that the text must be interpreted according to the grammatico-historical method, and we would add, the context of the book and passage itself.

⁸⁷ See Ephesians 2.8-10; 2 Timothy 2.25

⁸⁸ John Murray, *Free Offer of the Gospel*, 127

The essay then focuses on the word, μακροθυμία, *makrothumia* and introduces an assumption about the word itself that promotes misunderstanding. In the end, Prof. Murray describes it as “a constraining influence flowing from the goodness of God which is calculated to bring men to repentance.”⁸⁹ But is that truly the meaning of this word?

Note Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Ginrich:

1. State of remaining tranquil while awaiting an outcome, *patience, steadfastness, endurance*.
2. State of being able to bear up under provocation, *forbearance, patience* toward others.⁹⁰

In this standard lexicon of the Greek language, not one word is said about μακροθυμία, *makrothumia* being “calculated to bring men to repentance.” This word simply speaks of God pursuing His purposes in history with patience. And, while there are times when this patience does lead His people to repentance, it is only in the sense that He has waited long, and His people have come in that lengthy time frame to Him. There is not in this word the indication of something “flowing from the goodness of God” any further than God’s general kindness to all, which we have discussed in the first lecture. When Prof. Murray writes, “*The longsuffering is, then, a positive favor of God towards sinners which is directed to their salvation.*”⁹¹ we are inclined to agree with one modification—that it is toward *elect sinners* that God exercises this goodness. It cannot rightly be said that this positive favor is toward reprobates, for they, as we have said, treasure up wrath to themselves. They take the time God extends in his patience, and they use it for complacency and presumption, instead of repentance.

Further, when Prof. Murray enters into his textual criticism of the passage, he shows himself highly selective in regard to his labor on that account. Without descending into these particulars, several things ought to be said:

1. First, whether the address is to “us” which is supported by the vast majority of extant manuscripts, or “you” (pl.) the meaning is not much changed.
2. Second, whether the preposition is *eis*, or *dia*, still, the meaning is not much changed.

The real questions is, who is being addressed in the phrase, “God is longsuffering to “us-ward” or “you-ward.” For Prof. Murray’s part, he would have this to refer to every man in the world, in all of history. For our author, he depicts God as not willing that any man in history, any human being that ever lived on this earth would perish. But if that is the case, why would not the Apostle use a word like “all” or “all men?” Further, what of those Scripture texts we have discussed above, pertaining to God’s pleasure, laughing, or taking comfort, in the death of the wicked? Note this passage from Jeremiah 15.1-6:

¹ Then said the LORD unto me, Though Moses and Samuel stood before me, *yet* my mind *could* not be toward this people: cast *them* out of my sight, and let them go forth. ² And it shall come to pass, if they say unto thee, Whither shall we go forth? then thou shalt tell them, Thus saith the LORD; Such as *are* for death, to death; and such as *are* for the sword, to the sword; and such as *are* for the famine, to the famine; and such as *are* for the captivity, to the captivity. ³ And I will appoint over them four kinds, saith the LORD: the sword to slay, and the dogs to tear, and the fowls of the heaven, and the beasts of the earth, to devour and destroy. ⁴ And I will cause them to be removed into all kingdoms of the earth, because of Manasseh the son of Hezekiah king of Judah, for *that* which he did in Jerusalem. ⁵ For who shall have pity upon thee, O Jerusalem? or who shall bemoan thee? or who shall go aside to ask how thou doest? ⁶ Thou hast forsaken me, saith the LORD, thou art gone backward: therefore will I stretch out my hand against thee, and destroy thee; I am weary with repenting.

⁸⁹ John Murray, *Free Offer of the Gospel*, 128

⁹⁰ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 612. See also Liddel and Scott, Louw and Nida, Abbott, and others.

⁹¹ John Murray, *Free Offer of the Gospel*, 128

See in this passage the absence of any wanting or wishing on God's part that "all" should come to repentance. There are those contemplated as for death, for the sword, for pestilence, etc. There is a determination made concerning them. The Lord declares that although some of redemptive history's best intercessors stood before Him, (Moses and Samuel) His mind (literally in the original, His Soul) could not be toward this people.

Instead of Prof. Murray's creeping universalism, instead of "God is longsuffering toward all" Peter says that it is to *us*. Why would this be so? The Apostle declares *to us-ward* to limit, not to expand his statement. Rather than a universal longsuffering, the Apostle limits the objects of God's favor, who will receive the grace of repentance, with this identification, "to us-ward" (Gr. εἰς ἡμᾶς). We must ask the questions, what is the context of the book? Who is Peter addressing? These are pertinent questions, necessary to understand properly Peter's meaning. Let us examine the book itself:

- 2 Peter 1.1: To those who have obtained like precious faith with us, through the righteousness of God, and our Savior Jesus Christ.
- 2 Peter 1.4: There are given to us exceeding great and precious promises.
- 2 Peter 1.12-15: Here Peter speaks to those whom he would put in remembrance of the things he has already taught them.
- In 2 Peter chapter 2 he separates out those who are "false prophets among the people of God," who are like dogs that return to vomit, and sows to wallowing in the mire. This entire chapter is discriminatory, speaking of these false teachers, who lead astray the people of God, as spots, blemishes, whose damnation does not slumber. Verse 9 reveals that God reserves them unto *judgment*, not to repentance.
- In 2 Peter 3.1ff he speaks to those who he mentioned earlier, who must be stirred up by way of remembrance.
 - He will speak of mockers who walk after their own lusts.
 - They will cast doubt upon the Lord and His coming for judgment.
 - Note that Peter speaks of them in the third person plural, not in the first or second person—they are being separated, grammatically, from the ones to whom Peter writes.
 - They walk after their own lusts.
 - They say, "where is the promise of his (God's) coming?"
 - They are willingly ignorant that God judged the old world once before.
- Then, in verse 9, Peter changes his address.
 - No longer speaking about "them" the scoffers, he speaks about us, the objects of God's favor.
 - It is inconceivable that Peter includes the scoffers in this portion of his comfort to the people of God, seeing that he has grammatically excluded them by using the third person.

The reason we show these things is to reveal that this is a discriminating book, judging between those who are the Lord's, and those who are not. It is not viable, in light of this, to declare an incipient universalism in 2 Peter 3.9, when the Apostle has discriminated all though the Epistle, and that in that verse he would include the class of people he has contemplated as "scoffers," or those of whom he spoke in chapter 2 as false prophets who are reserved for judgment. The Lord will identify the vessels of wrath, fitted for destruction⁹² as those separate from His own. Further, when Peter references the old world and the flood of Noah, once again this is discriminating between the wicked and righteous. In 1 Peter 3.20, Peter will use this word "longsuffering" again. In that verse, we see that the patience of God waited until the Ark was completed, and none but Noah and his family were spared. That preacher of righteousness by faith alone⁹³ continued his preaching with every word and hammer-blow. But the men of that age remained obstinate—they were not turned by the "longsuffering of God." Peter now returns to that same example, showing that this patience of God does not have a saving design for all men, but for those who call upon Him.

⁹² See Romans 9.22-23: Note in this passage that the longsuffering of God has a two-fold application: For the one, this patience, or longsuffering of God results in His enduring those who are "vessels of wrath, fitted to destruction." For the other, this longsuffering is that He might make known the riches of His glory, upon the "vessels of mercy, afore prepared unto glory."

⁹³ See Hebrews 11.7

Prof. Murray concludes this portion in 4 points:⁹⁴

1. Prof. Murray: Peter teaches that the delay of the coming of judgment should be acknowledged as a manifestation of the longsuffering or patience of God with sinners
 - a. We have no objection to this statement. The longsuffering of God is manifested toward all men. However, we must not understand “longsuffering” in this context as having a saving design in itself. It is merely a word that teaches that the Lord is patient with sinners—that He does not strike down any precipitously.
2. Prof. Murray: Peter says that God is longsuffering *on your account*. It is not because of any slackness in God himself, but because of the consideration of the well-being of men. The pronoun “you” cannot be restricted to the elect. It would certainly include the members of the Christian community as possible benefactors of the longsuffering of God, but in view of considerations adduced above may not fairly be restricted to believers.
 - a. With this we have strong disagreement, for the contextual markers we have already shown. The “you” (or more properly, “us-ward”) must be restricted to the elect, for this is how the Apostle speaks throughout this letter, discriminating between the false prophets and scoffers on the one hand, and those who call upon the Name of the Lord on the other. Further, we would disagree with Prof. Murray’s casting doubt on the traditional text of Scripture. His argument is not the least improved by it, and it brings God’s Word under judgment, rather than God’s Word being itself the judge of all men.
3. Prof. Murray: If the reading “to you-ward” is adopted, the thrust of the passage is not essentially altered. The delay is not due to slackness in God, but is to be regarded as an expression of longsuffering towards men, including very specifically those addressed in the Epistle.
 - a. With this we have little disagreement. But we would also note that Prof. Murray has erred in teaching that those addressed in this epistle are all men indiscriminately, as we have shown.
4. Prof. Murray: The reason or ground for the longsuffering of God until the day of judgment is given in what is said concerning his “willing.” He is longsuffering in that, or because, he does not wish that any men should perish, but rather because he wills or wishes that all should come to repentance. Repentance is the condition of life, without repentance men must perish. But the will of God that men be saved expressed here is not conditional. It is not: I will your salvation if you repent, but: I will that you repent and thus be saved. The two clauses then go far beyond defining the longsuffering of God, for they intimate what is back of his longsuffering. This favour is grounded in God himself; it is an expression of his will with regard to sinners, his will being nothing short of their salvation.
 - a. With this conclusion we also have strong disagreement, for, as we have previously shown, it pits God’s will against God’s will—His favor, which is grounded in God Himself, and His judgment, which excludes his favor. Our Lord is not anywhere presented in Scripture, there is no analogy of Scripture, that would reveal such duplicity in God.
 - b. In addition, the citation from Calvin in this section of the essay proves little to Prof. Murray’s argument. The Master from Geneva says, “*But it may be asked, If God wishes none to perish, why is it that so many do perish? To this my answer is, that no mention is here made of the hidden purpose of God, according to which the reprobate are doomed to their own ruin, but only of his will as made known to us in the gospel. For God there stretches forth his hand without a difference to all, but lays hold only of those, to lead them to himself, whom he has chosen before the foundation of the world.*”⁹⁵
 - c. Professor Murray quotes this portion, but does not seem at all to understand that Calvin here shows the difference between God’s will of command and His will of decree. And, while we would disagree that Peter here speaks in regard of all men indiscriminately, if one was to speak of all men, one must qualify it as Calvin has. Certainly Prof. Murray fails to do this in his exegesis of 2 Peter 3.9, but asserts rather that this longsuffering expresses a wishing on God’s part for the repentance of all, which is not supported, and not necessary, in this passage.

⁹⁴ John Murray, *Free Offer of the Gospel*, 130

⁹⁵ John Calvin and John Owen, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 419–420.

This concludes our examination of Prof. Murray's essay, "The Free Offer of the Gospel." It has not been our intention in this examination to insult, belittle, or marginalize our brother, now gone to glory, nor any others that would take his part in this disagreement. Our efforts here are simply to assist the people of God in understanding the zoomorphic, anthropomorphic, and anthropopathic statements of Scripture in ways that are consistent with God's power, dignity, glory, simplicity, and all His other attributes. These are certainly challenging passages of Scripture for the exegete rightly to cut straight.

May the Lord use this work, as well as many others, to the advancement of His people's knowledge of Himself. It is the prayer of the author of this essay, following the example of his elder brother, the Apostle Paul, that the readers of it might grow in grace, and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, that they might be filled with all spiritual wisdom and understanding, that they would be inoculated against those errors by which many lay in wait to deceive, and that together we would learn to speak the truth in love one to another.

May God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost receive all glory for any profit to any of God's people in reading this essay.

I remain your humble servant, for Christ's sake,

Pastor Todd