

Nature of Christ's Sacrifice From Lecture 43

by [R. L. Dabney](#)

Robert Lewis Dabney was a native of Virginia, educated at Hampden Sydney College, Virginia, the University of Virginia, and Union Theological Seminary at Hampden Sydney. He was ordained to the ministry of the Presbyterian Church in 1847 and spent his first six years of ministerial life pastoring a church. In 1853 he was called to the Chair of Ecclesiastical History and Polity at Union Seminary. In 1859 he transferred to the department of Systematic Theology. Following the Civil War, during which he was a chaplain and also served as Chief of Staff to General T.J. (Stonewall) Jackson, with the rank of Major, he returned to Union Seminary and continued to teach in the field of Systematic Theology until 1883, when he moved to the University of Texas in the Chair of Mental and Moral Philosophy and Political Economy where he taught until 1894. His biographer said that he was entitled to "the first place among the theological thinkers and writers of his century."

There is no safer clue for the student through this perplexed subject, than to take this proposition; which, to every Calvinist, is nearly as indisputable as a truism; Christ's design in His vicarious work was to effectuate exactly what it does effectuate, and all that it effectuates, in its subsequent proclamation. This is but saying that Christ's purpose is unchangeable and omnipotent. Now, what does it actually effectuate? "We know only in part;" but so much is certain:

- (a.) The purchase of the full and assured redemption of all the elect, or of all believers.
- (b.) A reprieve of doom for every sinner of Adam's race who does not die at his birth. (For these we believe it has purchased heaven). And this reprieve gains for all, many substantial, though temporal benefits, such as unbelievers, of all men, will be the last to account no benefits. Among these are postponement of death and perdition, secular well-being, and the bounties of life.
- (c.) A manifestation of God's mercy to many of the non-elect, to all those, namely, who live under the Gospel, in sincere offers of a salvation on terms of faith. And a sincere offer is a real and not a delusive benefaction; because it is only the recipient's contumacy which disappoints it.
- (d.) A justly enhanced condemnation of those who reject the Gospel, and thereby a clearer display of God's righteousness and reasonableness in condemning, to all the worlds.
- (e.) A disclosure of the infinite tenderness and glory of God's compassion, with purity, truth and justice, to all rational creatures.

Had there been no mediation of Christ, we have not a particle of reason to suppose that the doom of our sinning race would have been delayed one hour longer than that of the fallen angels. Hence, it follows, that it is Christ who procures for non-elect sinners all that they temporarily enjoy, which is more than their personal deserts, including the sincere offer of mercy.

In view of this fact, the scorn which Dr. William Cunningham heaps on the distinction of a special, and general design in Christ's satisfaction, is thoroughly shortsighted. All wise beings (unless God be the exception), at times frame their plans so as to secure a combination of results from the same means. This is the very way they display their ability and wisdom. Why should God be supposed incapable of this wise and fruitful acting? I repeat; the design of Christ's sacrifice must have been to effectuate just what it does effectuate. And we see, that, along with the actual redemption of the elect, it works out several other subordinate ends. There is then a sense, in which Christ "died for" all those ends, and for the persons affected by them.

The manner in which a volition which dates from eternity, subsists in the Infinite mind, is doubtless, in many respects, inscrutable to us. But since God has told us that we are made in His image, we may safely follow the Scriptural representations, which describe God's volitions as having their rational relation to subjective motive; somewhat as in man, when he wills aright. For, a motiveless volition cannot but appear to us as devoid both of character and of wisdom. We add, that while God "has no parts nor passions," He has told us that He has active principles, which, while free from all agitation, ebb and flow, and mutation, are related in their superior measure to man's rational affections. These active principles in God, or passionless affections, are all absolutely holy and good. Last: God's will is also regulated by infinite wisdom. Now, in man, every rational volition is prompted by a motive, which is in every case, complex to this degree, at least that it involves some active appetency of the will and some prevalent judgment of the intelligence. And every wise volition is the result of virtual or formal deliberation, in which one element of motive is weighed in relation to another, and the elements which appear superior in the judgment of the intelligence, preponderate and regulate the volition. Hence, the wise man's volition is often far from being the expression of every conception and affection present in his consciousness at the time; but it is often reached by holding one of these elements of possible motive in check, at the dictate of a more controlling one. For instance a philanthropic man meets a distressed and destitute person. The good man is distinctly conscious in himself of a movement of sympathy tending towards a volition to give the sufferer money. But he remembers that he has expressly promised all the money now in his possession, to be paid this very day to a just creditor. The good man bethinks himself, that he "ought to be just before he is generous," and conscience and wisdom counterpoise the impulse of sympathy; so that it does not form the deliberate volition to give alms. But the sympathy exists, and it is not inconsistent to give other expression to it. We must not ascribe to that God whose omniscience is, from eternity, one infinite, all-

embracing intuition, and whose volition is as eternal as His being, any expenditure of time in any process of deliberation, nor any temporary hesitancy or uncertainty, nor any agitating struggle of feeling against feeling. But there must be a residuum of meaning in the Scripture representations of His affections, after we have guarded ourselves duly against the anthropopathic forms of their expression. Hence, we ought to believe, that in some ineffable way, God's volitions, seeing they are supremely wise, and profound, and right, do have that relation to all His subjective motives, digested by wisdom and holiness into the consistent combination, the finite counterpart of which constitutes the rightness and wisdom of human volitions. I claim, while exercising the diffidence proper to so sacred a matter, that this conclusion bears us out at least so far: That, as in a wise man, so much more in a wise God, His volition, or express purpose, is the result of a digest, not of one, but of all the principles and considerations bearing on the case. Hence it follows, that there may be in God an active principle felt by Him, and yet not expressed in His executive volition in a given case, because counterpoised by other elements of motive, which His holy omniscience judges ought to be prevalent; Now, I urge the practical question: Why may not God consistently give some other expression to this active principle, really and sincerely felt towards the object, though His sovereign wisdom judges it not proper to express it in volition? To return to the instance from which we set out: I assert that it is entirely natural and reasonable for the benevolent man to say to the destitute person: " I am sorry for you, though I give you no alms." The ready objection will be: "that my parallel does not hold, because the kind man is not omnipotent, while God is. God could not consistently speak thus, while withholding alms, because he could create the additional money at will." This is more ready than solid. It assumes that God's omniscience cannot see any ground, save the lack of physical ability or power, why it may not be best to refrain from creating the additional money. Let the student search and see; he will find that this preposterous and presumptuous assumption is the implied premise of the objection. In fact, my parallel is a fair one in the main point. This benevolent man is not prevented from giving the alms, by any physical compulsion. If he diverts a part of the money in hand from the creditor, to the destitute man, the creditor will visit no penalty on him. He simply feels bound by his conscience. That is, the superior principles of reason and morality are regulative of his action, counterpoising the amiable but less imperative principle of sympathy, in this case. Yet the verbal expression of sympathy in this case may be natural, sincere, and proper. God is not restrained by lack of physical omnipotence from creating on the spot the additional money for the alms; but He may be actually restrained by some consideration known to His omniscience, which shows that it is not on the whole best to resort to the expedient of creating the money for the alms, and that rational consideration may be just as decisive in an all-wise mind, and properly as decisive, as a conscious impotency to create money in a man's.

This view is so important here, and will be found so valuable in another place, that I beg leave to give it farther illustration. It is related that the great

Washington, when he signed the death-warrant of the amiable but misguided Andre, declared his profound grief and sympathy. Let us suppose a captious invader present, and criticizing Washington's declaration thus: "You are by law of the rebel congress, commander-in-chief. You have absolute power here. If you felt any of the generous sorrow you pretend, you would have thrown that pen into the fire, instead of using it to write the fatal words. The fact you do the latter proves that you have not a shade of sympathy, and those declarations are sheer hypocrisy." It is easy to see how impudent and absurd this charge would be. Physically, Washington had full license, and muscular power, to throw the pen into the fire. But he was rationally restrained from doing so, by motives of righteousness and patriotism, which were properly as decisive as any physical cause. Now, will the objector still urge, that with God it would have been different, in this case; because His omnipotence might have enabled Him to overrule, in all souls, British and Americans, all inconvenient results that could flow from the impunity of a spy caught in *flagrante delicto*; and that so, God could not give any expression to the infinite benevolence of His nature, and yet sign the death-warrant, without hypocrisy? The audacity of this sophism is little less than the other. How obvious is the reply: That as in the one case, though Washington was in possession of the muscular ability, and also of an absolute license, to burn the death-warrant, if he chose; and yet his wisdom and virtue showed him decisive motives which rationally restrained him from it; so God may have full sovereignty and omnipotence to change the heart of the sinner whose ruin He compassionates, and yet be rationally restrained from doing it, by some decisive motives seen in His omniscience. What is it, but logical arrogance run mad, for a puny creature to assume to say, that the infinite intelligence of God may not see, amidst the innumerable affairs and relations of a universal government stretching from creation to eternity, such decisive considerations?

The great advantage of this view is, that it enables us to receive, in their obvious sense, those precious declarations of Scripture, which declare the pity of God towards even lost sinners. The glory of these representations is, that they show us God's benevolence as an infinite attribute, like all His other perfections. Even where it is rationally restrained, it exists. The fact that there is a lost order of angels, and that there are persons in our guilty race, who are objects of God's decree of preterition, does not arise from any stint or failure of this infinite benevolence. It is as infinite, viewed as it qualifies God's nature only, as though He had given expression to it in the salvation of all the devils and lost men. We can now receive, without any abatement, such blessed declarations as Ps. 1xxxix: 13; Ezek. xviii: 32; Luke xix: 41, 42. We have no occasion for such questionable, and even perilous exegesis, as even Calvin and Turretin feel themselves constrained to apply to the last. Afraid lest God's principle of compassion (not purpose of rescue), towards sinners non-elect, should find any expression, and thus mar the symmetry of their logic, they say that it was not Messiah the God-man and Mediator, who wept over reprobate Jerusalem; but only the humanity of Jesus, our pattern. I ask: Is it competent to a mere humanity to say: "How often would I have gathered your children?" And to pronounce a final doom, "Your

house is left unto you desolate?" The Calvinist should have paused, when he found himself wresting these Scriptures from the same point of view adopted by the ultra-Arminian. But this is not the first time we have seen "extremes meet." Thus argues the Arminian: " Since God is sovereign and omnipotent, if He has a propension, He indulges it, of course, in volition and action. Therefore, as He declares He had a propension of pity towards contumacious Israel, I conclude that He also had a volition to redeem them, and that He did whatever omnipotence could do, against the obstinate contingency of their wills. Here then, I find the bulwark of my doctrine, that even omnipotence cannot certainly determine a free will." And thus argues the ultra-Calvinist: "Since God is sovereign and omnipotent, if He has any propension, He indulges it, of course, in volition and action. But if He had willed to convert reprobate Israel, He would infallibly have succeeded. Therefore He never had any propension of pity at all towards them." And so this reasoner sets himself to explain away, by unscrupulous exegesis, the most precious revelations of God's nature! Should not this fact, that two opposite conclusions are thus drawn from the same premises, have suggested error in the premises? And the error of both extremists is just here. It is not true that if God has an active principle looking towards a given object, He will always express it in volition and action. This, as I have shown, is no more true of God, than of a righteous and wise man. And as the good man, who was touched with a case of destitution, and yet determined that it was his duty not to use the money he had in giving alms, might consistently express what he truly felt of pity, by a kind word; so God consistently reveals the principle of compassion as to those whom, for wise reasons, He is determined not to save. We know that God's omnipotence surely accomplishes every purpose of His grace. Hence, we know that He did not purposely design Christ's sacrifice to effect the redemption of any others than the elect. But we hold it perfectly consistent with this truth, that the expiation of Christ for sin — expiation of infinite value and universal fitness — should be held forth to the whole world, elect and non-elect, as a manifestation of the benevolence of God's nature. God here exhibits a provision, which is so related to the sin of the race, that by it, all those obstacles to every sinner's return to his love, which his guilt and the law presents, are ready to be taken out of the way. But in every sinner, another class of obstacles exists; those, namely, arising out of the sinner's own depraved will. As to the elect, God takes these obstacles also out of the way, by His omnipotent calling, in pursuance of the covenant of redemption made with, and fulfilled for them by, their Mediator. As to the non-elect, God has judged it best not to take this class of obstacles out of the way; the men therefore go on to indulge their own will in neglecting or rejecting Christ.

But it will be objected: If God foreknew that non-elect men would do this; and also knew that their neglect of gospel-mercy would infallibly aggravate their doom in the end, (all of which I admit), then that gospel was no expression of benevolence to them at all. I reply, first; the offer was a blessing in itself; these sinners felt it so in their serious moments; and surely its nature as a kindness is not reversed by the circumstance that they pervert it; though that be foreseen.

Second; God accompanies the offer with hearty entreaties to them not thus to abuse it. Third; His benevolence is cleared in the view of all other beings, though the perverse objects do rob themselves of the permanent benefit. And this introduces the other cavil: That such a dispensation towards non-elect sinners is utterly futile, and so, unworthy of God's wisdom. I reply: It is not futile; because it secures actual results both to non-elect men, to God and to the saved. To the first, it secures many temporal restraints and blessings in this life, the secular ones of which, at least, the sinner esteems as very solid benefits; and also a sincere offer of eternal life, which he, and not God, disappoints. To God, this dispensation secures great revenue of glory, both for His kindness towards contumacious enemies, and His clear justice in the final punishment. To other holy creatures it brings not only this new revelation of God's glory, but a new apprehension of the obstinacy and malignity of sin as a spiritual evil.

Some seem to recoil from the natural view which presents God, like other wise Agents, as planning to gain several ends, one primary and others subordinate, by the same set of actions. They fear that if they admit this, they will be entrapped into an ascription of uncertainty, vacillation and change to God's purpose. This consequence does not at all follow, as to Him. It might follow as to a finite man pursuing alternative purposes. For instance, a general might order his subordinate to make a seeming attack in force on a given point of his enemy's position. The general might say to himself: " I will make this attack either a feint, (while I make my real attack elsewhere), or, if the enemy seem weak there, my real, main attack." This, of course, implies some uncertainty in his foreknowledge; and if the feint is turned into his main attack, the last purpose must date in his mind from some moment after the feint began. Such doubt and mutation must not be imputed to God. Hence I do not employ the phrase "alternative objects" of His planning; as it might be misunderstood. We "cannot find out the Almighty unto perfection." But it is certain, that He, when acting on finite creatures, and for the instruction of finite minds, may and does pursue, in one train of His dealings, a plurality of ends, of which one is subordinated to another. Thus God consistently makes the same dispensation first a manifestation of the glory of His goodness, and then, when the sinner has perverted it, of the glory of His justice. He is not disappointed, nor does He change His secret purpose. The mutation is in the relation of the creature to His providence. His glory is, that seeing the end from the beginning, He brings good even out of the perverse sinner's evil.

There is, perhaps, no Scripture which gives so thorough and comprehensive an explanation of the design and results of Christ's sacrifice, as Jno. iii: 16-19. It may receive important illustration from Matt, xxii: 4. In this last parable, the king sends this message to invited guests who, he foresees, would reject and never partake the feast. " My oxen and my fatlings are killed: come, for all things are now ready." They alone were unready. I have already stated one ground for rejecting that interpretation of Jno. iii: 16, which makes "the world" which God so loved, the elect world, I would now, in conclusion, simply indicate, in the form of a

free paraphrase, the line of thought developed by our Redeemer, trusting that the ideas already expounded will suffice, with the coherency and consistency of the exposition, to prove its correctness.

Verse 16: Christ's mission to make expiation for sin is a manifestation of unspeakable benevolence to the whole world, to man as man and a sinner, yet designed specifically to result in the actual salvation of believers. Does not this imply that this very mission, rejected by others, will become the occasion (not cause) of perishing even more surely to them? It does. Yet, (verse 17,) it is denied that this vindictory result was the primary design of Christ's mission: and the initial assertion is again repeated, that this primary design was to manifest God, in Christ's sacrifice, as compassionate to all. How then is the seeming paradox to be reconciled? Not by retracting either statement. The solution, (verse 18,) is in the fact, that men, in the exercise of their free agency, give opposite receptions to this mission. To those who accept it as it is offered, it brings life. To those who choose to reject it, it is the occasion (not cause) of condemnation. For, (verse 19,) the true cause of this perverted result is the evil choice of the unbelievers, who reject the provision offered in the divine benevolence, from a wicked motive; unwillingness to confess and forsake their sins. The sum of the matter is then: That Christ's mission is, to the whole race, a manifestation of God's mercy. To believers it is means of salvation, by reason of that effectual calling which Christ had expounded in the previous verses. To unbelievers it becomes a subsequent and secondary occasion of aggravated doom. This melancholy perversion, while embraced in God's permissive decree, is caused by their own contumacy. The efficient in the happy result is effectual calling: the efficient in the unhappy result is man's own evil will. Yet God's benevolence is cleared, in both results. Both were, of course, foreseen by Him, and included in His purpose.

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