The Purpose of GOD



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God has a purpose. Of this any student of the Scriptures must be well aware, but are we also aware of how few times it is mentioned in the Scriptures?

It may come as a shock when we learn that, in the whole of God's Word, one writer, and one only, speaks of the purpose of God. In our ignorance we may have imagined that all Scripture was proclaiming it—that it was being unfolded from cover to cover, from Genesis to Revelation. But we can go right through the Old Testament, right through the four accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John (which contain the sayings of Jesus while He was on earth), right through the book of Acts and halfway through Romans, before we find the first occurrence of the noun "purpose" in connection with God.

It is true that in the Authorized Version of the Old Testament, there are references to a "purpose," or "purposes," of God such as Jeremiah 51:29, "Every purpose of the Lord shall be performed." We have examined all these occurrences of the word "purpose" and are satisfied that in no case is it a correct translation. In fact, there is no consistency about this term, for not only are some eight or nine different Hebrew words all translated "purpose," but invariably they are all translated far more frequently by other words, such as "thought" and "device." Our Concordant Version of Isaiah serves to emphasize this, by seven times using the word "counsel" where "purpose" appears in the Authorized Version.

As we penetrate more deeply into our subject, we will see that only one writer, the apostle Paul, could speak of the purpose of God, and then only when he had reached a certain point in his ministry. But to clarify the position from the start, we must be careful to distinguish between things that differ. For instance, we must not confuse the purpose of God with the will of God. Others besides Paul speak of the will of God, David in the Psalms, Peter and John in their epistles, Jesus many times. Paul himself speaks of the will of God far more often than he speaks of the purpose of God. He refers to the will of God in his early Thessalonian letters before ever he proclaims the purpose of God.

What, then, is the difference between the will of God and the purpose of God? Quite simply, it is this: The will of God is the expression of His desire concerning any particular person or circumstance at any particular time. But God's purpose always looks forward to a consummation; it always has a final aim or an ultimate result in view. If we may be permitted to use a contemporary illustration, the will of a player on a football field is to gain possession of the ball; his purpose is to get it into the goal at his opponents' end of the field. And so we suggest that we follow the example of Paul, and only speak of the purpose of God when we have the final issue, the ultimate result of God's will, in view.

Let us, then, examine the purpose of God as Paul presents it to us. We shall find that even he is very sparing in his usage of this term. Out of his thirteen letters, it only occurs in three, yet these occurrences are extremely significant. It is mentioned two times in his great doctrinal letter to the Romans, twice in the doctrinal part of Ephesians, and once in his last letter, Second Timothy. Five occurrences of the noun "purpose" (prothesis) in all; five direct references in the whole of God's Word to His wonderful purpose, and all in the writings of one apostle! (In addition, there are

two occurrences of the verb *protithêmi* with reference to what God *purposed*—Rom. 3:25; Eph. 1:9.) Hence we attach much importance to the letters of Paul.

But this is not to say the rest of Scripture is unimportant, or is not relevant to God's purpose. In that same second letter to Timothy, Paul himself says, "All Scripture is inspired by God, and is beneficial for teaching, for exposure, for correction, for discipline in right-eousness, that the man of God may be equipped, fitted out for every good act" (2 Tim. 3:16, 17).

The truth is that everything in Scripture has its place in the outworking of God's purpose, but what that place is can only be seen when viewed through the lens of the Pauline writings. Without this lens, all is blurred and muddled. But with the aid of this lens, which Paul supplies, all Scripture is brought into focus and becomes clear and distinct. Paul completes the Word of God (Col. 1:25).

Now, as we consider the purpose of God, as revealed through Paul, one fact stands out beyond everything else, and that is that all is of God. There is no room for human wisdom or human endeavor in the development of God's ultimate design. God does not require one iota of your assistance or of mine in effecting His intention. If He chooses to make use of any of us to further His design in any way, it is as instruments—as tools—fashioned by Himself for that particular work, and not because of anything that we can contribute of our own. In every mention of the purpose of God, this fact is strongly emphasized, and nowhere more so than in the first occurrence of the verb (Rom. 3:25):

"Being justified gratuitously in His grace, through the deliverance which is in Christ Jesus (Whom God purposed for a Propitiatory shelter, through faith in His blood, for a display of His righteousness because of the passing over of the penalties of sins which occurred before in the forbearance of God), toward the display of His righteousness in the current era, for Him to be just and a Justifier of the one who is of the faith of Jesus. Where, then, is boasting? It is debarred!"

Notice here the succession of terms indicative of human helplessness:

Being justified—requiring to be made right with God gratuitously—without a cause, without anything in one-self that would give God reason for doing this in His grace—purely as a favor, unearned, undeserved through the deliverance—requiring a rescue act which is in Christ Jesus, Whom God purposed—not in oneself, but in the One Whom God appointed.

This is the first occasion in Scripture that any act of God is referenced to His purpose, and the next outstanding fact that we must note is that it is centered in *Christ Jesus*—not in Jesus Christ as He was on earth, but in Christ Jesus, the risen Lord, the One Who, by His victory over death and His resurrection from the tomb, has proved that He has settled once and for all time the problem of sin, and thereby paved the way for deliverance.

It is in that great fifteenth chapter of First Corinthians, which deals with vivification, that the first intimation is given of the ultimate goal of God's operations. Only when Paul has stated, "Yet now Christ has been roused from among the dead, the Firstfruit of those who are reposing," can he come to the conclusion that "God may be All in all." If some should remain in death forever, the last statement could not be true. Therefore again God's purpose is centered in Christ Jesus, the risen Lord Who has conquered death.

In the verses of Romans 3 previous to this first reference to God's purposing, Paul had brought the whole of humanity, including the privileged Jew, to the same helpless and hopeless position. "Not one is just, not even one. Not one is understanding. Not one is seek-

ing out God." And even those who were under the law were no better off than the rest in this respect, because, the apostle adds, "by works of law, no flesh at all shall be justified in His sight." "There is no distinction, for all sinned and are wanting of the glory of God" (vss 10, 11, 20, 23).

"All sinned and are wanting—", and that deficiency, try as it will, humanity can never make up. It is in the face of this admission of human failure and human impotence that God, through the apostle Paul, first reveals His great purpose: He purposed Christ Jesus for a Propitiatory shelter, that through His sacrifice God might look propitiously—favorably—upon humanity, and that through the deliverance which is in Christ Jesus, He might gratuitously justify the one who is believing. Thus the purpose of God is securely tied to the great doctrine of justification by the faith of Christ Jesus, and conversely, this doctrine of justification, as proclaimed by Paul, is the first great principle to be linked with the purpose of God.

God's purpose demands that all humanity be constituted righteous, and Paul goes to great lengths in the fifth chapter of Romans to point this out, showing that one gift of grace is sufficient to cover many offenses, and that however much sin increases, grace superexceeds. For the basic principle is truly laid, "As it was through one offense for all mankind for condemnation, thus also it is through one just award for all mankind for life's justifying. For even as, through the disobedience of one man, the many [descendants] were constituted sinners, thus also, through the obedience of the One, the [same] many shall be constituted just." Not through their own obedience, but through the obedience of the One, and that without any human's contribution.

Justification by the faith of Christ (Gal. 2:16) is the first subject dealt with in connection with the purpose of God; the second is *Conciliation*. It is one thing to be

justified—declared righteous—in God's sight; it is another thing to be drawn into family relationship with Him. This is the theme of chapters 5 through 8 of Romans, where we are declared to be sons of God if indeed we are being led by His Spirit (Rom. 8:14). Hence Paul says in verse 15, "You did not get slavery's spirit to fear again, but you got the spirit of sonship, in which we are crying, 'Abba, Father!' The spirit itself is testifying together with our spirit that we are children of God. Yet if children, enjoyers also of an allotment, enjoyers, indeed, of an allotment from God, yet joint enjoyers of Christ's allotment, if so be that we are suffering together, that we should be glorified together also."

And then, moving on to verse 28 of the same chapter, we have a passage which begins by pressing home the fact that God is working all together for the good of those who are loving Him; and culminates with an emphatic declaration (vss 35-39) that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. This is the result of the conciliation; all the intervening verses exude the fragrance of God's friendship, and we notice that this also is securely attached to His purpose. For Romans 8:28 reads: "Now we are aware that God is working all together for the good of those who are loving God, who are called according to the purpose that, whom He foreknew, He designates beforehand, also, to be conformed to the image of His Son, for Him to be Firstborn among many brethren."

In the sphere of Creation, Christ is Firstborn of every creation (Col. 1:15).

In the sphere of Justification, Christ is Firstborn from among the dead (Col. 1:18). He was given up because of our offenses, and was roused because of our justifying (Rom. 4:25).

In the sphere of Conciliation, Christ is the Firstborn among many brethren (Rom. 8:29). We know from

later Scriptures that conciliation on God's side proceeds inexorably to awaken a responsive spirit of conciliation on the part of all His creation until eventually all on the earth and in the heavens are reconciled to Him (Col. 1:20).

"Now we are aware that God is working." The Authorized Version omits the title "God" from this phrase, but it is most assuredly in the extant Greek texts. Indeed, it is God Who is working all together for the good of those who are loving Him. It is God Who foreknew. It is God Who designates beforehand those who are to be conformed to the image of His Son. It is God Who calls, Who justifies, Who glorifies. Notice again how completely all is of God. There is no room for self-calling or self-justification or self-glorification.

But now a serious question arises. If we are called by God, upon what basis are we called? Immediately must come the question of choice, although choice is not mentioned in Romans 8.* It is, however, freely mentioned in First Corinthians 1, from verse 26, "For you are observing your calling, brethren, that there are not many wise according to the flesh; not many powerful, not many noble, but the stupidity of the world God chooses, that He may be disgracing the wise, and the weakness of the world God chooses, that He may be disgracing the strong, and the ignoble and the contemptible things of the world God chooses, and that which is not, that He should be discarding that which is, so that no flesh at all should be boasting in God's sight. Yet you, of Him, are in Christ Jesus..."

Consequently there is a choice, but the choice is clearly God's. He chooses us; we do not choose Him. He knows those who are His. We cannot choose for Him, but once He has chosen us, He never lets us go. But

^{*} Except by implication, e.g. verse 28.

what is the basic principle upon which God makes this choice?

We pass on from Romans 8 to Romans 9. Picking up at verse 9, we read, "For the word of the promise is this: At this season I shall come and there will be for Sarah a son. Yet, not only so, but Rebecca also is having her bed of one, Isaac, our father. For, not as yet being born, nor putting into practice anything good or bad, that the purpose of God may be remaining as a choice, not out of acts, but of Him Who is calling, it was declared to her that "The greater shall be slaving for the inferior" according as it is written, "Jacob I love, yet Esau I hate"."

The truth of these verses is so profound and so fundamental to our correct understanding of the Scriptures that they should be read over and over again until they are thoroughly assimilated.

"Not out of acts, but of Him Who is calling." This is the principle upon which God chooses, and it is the choice of the Potter and not the choice of the clay; the choice of the Creator and not the choice of the creature; the choice of the Disposer and not the choice of the one disposed of. The purpose of God viewed as a choice ties it securely to this principle—that this choice is not based on our acts but on His calling.

Let us pursue this point a little further. To prove it, Paul recalls a Scripture in Genesis 25. He relates how Rebecca, the wife of Isaac, having no children, entreated of the Lord. When she conceived, God revealed to her that she should have twins, who would be the progenitors of two streams of people. One should be more resolute than the other, but the greater would serve the inferior.

Doubtless you remember the subsequent events how Esau was born first, and was the stronger. By all natural laws he should have had the birthright, but he sold it to Jacob for something to eat and drink.

The account in Genesis reads as though Esau and

Jacob were free agents in this matter. But were they? In the light of Paul's statement in Romans 9, it is clear that they were not. This matter was decided before they were born. The purpose of God must remain as His choice, and God had already decided that the birthright, and all that went with it, should be Jacob's. Was God unfair? Has not the potter the right over the clay, out of the same kneading to make one vessel, indeed, for honor, yet one for dishonor? That which is molded will not protest to the molder, "Why do you make me thus?"

The future of Esau and Jacob was decided before they were born. Was their case unique? Did He not decide His choice of us before we were born? "According as He chooses us in Him before the disruption of the world" (Eph. 1:4). Or, if we want an earlier illustration, what about Cyrus, king of Persia, whose name and future work were foretold by Isaiah more than a hundred years before he was born? (See 2 Chron. 36:22, 23; Isa. 44:28; Jer. 1:5; Gal. 1:15).

"That the purpose of God may be remaining as a choice, not out of acts, but of Him Who is calling." Paul is here enunciating a principle which appears nowhere except in his writings. Elsewhere, acts are the deciding factor. People are judged according to what they do. In the final judgment of the dead before the great white throne, they are judged by that which is written in the scrolls, in accord with their acts, and are condemned, each in accord with his acts (Rev. 20:12, 13).

If acts were the only measuring rod by which salvation could be attained, then all would be condemned, as all have sinned and are lacking of the glory of God. But Paul, as we have already seen, has linked God's purpose with salvation, resulting from gratuitous justification in His grace. This is a justification in which acts have no part at all, but only believing in Christ Jesus is

required (Gal. 2:16). This was in Romans 3. Now, in Romans 9, Paul applies the principle still further by declaring that God's purpose operates on it, and that acts of individuals cannot affect God's choice. The sovereignty of God, with all that it implies, must be recognized if His purpose is to be understood and appreciated.

Paul, in Romans, speaks of One Who is working all together for the good of those who are loving Him and who are, in fact, called according to His purpose. Thus he is preparing the way for the position which he will take up in his Ephesian epistle, when he will be speaking of the "purpose of the One Who is operating all in accord with the counsel of His will." His purpose must remain as a choice. If He has chosen us for a part in that purpose, who are we to question it? If the ultimate aim of His purpose is to reconcile all on the earth and in the heavens to Himself, it is again because He has chosen it to be so, and who are we, His creatures, to gainsay it?

To those who would challenge the truth of the reconciliation of all, I would reply, "It is God's choice, and praise be to Him that He has chosen it to be so. Let no one deny God the right to choose as He wills."

If He chooses to save all in grace, rather than by their own merits, which is the way many believers would have it, again it is His choice. Praise to Him indeed that He has chosen thus!

If, then, we have grasped the three points that we have so far been discussing, namely, that the purpose of God is indissolubly linked with (1) justification by faith, in grace and not by acts, (2) conciliation on His part, leading to the ultimate reconciliation of all, and (3) His own absolute right of choice in all steps necessary to achieve this goal, which is that He shall be All in all, then we are ready to pass on to the glorious por-

trayal of that purpose in the Ephesian epistle. In this epistle, God's purpose is illuminated with a glory that is to be found in no other part of the Scriptures.

May we suggest that, at this point, we read the first chapter of the Ephesian letter, and notice how we, as members of the ecclesia which is Christ's body, are associated with Him in the purpose of our God and Father. We quote here from verses 3 to 12.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who blesses us with every spiritual blessing among the celestials, in Christ, according as He chooses us in Him before the disruption of the world, we to be holy and flawless in His sight, in love designating us beforehand for the place of a son for Him through Christ Jesus: in accord with the delight of His will, for the laud of the glory of His grace, which graces us in the Beloved: in Whom we are having the deliverance through His blood, the forgiveness of offenses in accord with the riches of His grace, which He lavishes on us; in all wisdom and prudence making known to us the secret of His will (in accord with His delight, which He purposed in Him) to have an administration of the complement of the eras, to head up all in the Christboth that in the heavens and that on the earth—in Him in Whom our lot was cast also, being designated beforehand according to the purpose of the One Who is operating all in accord with the counsel of His will, that we should be for the laud of His glory, who are pre-expectant in the Christ."

Where in Scripture is there language more majestic than this? The purpose of God is to embrace all, but the ecclesia has a very special part in it. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that God's purpose is built around the relationship which exists between His Son and the ecclesia, which is Christ's body, and of which we are chosen to be members. Chosen in Him before the disruption of the world—chosen before we were born

—before any of our acts could have the slightest influence on His choice. If we examine the Scriptures carefully, we find that acts, which come into judgment at the great white throne, date from the disruption of the world (cf Rev. 17:8 with 20:12). The recording of their acts does not predate that event, but rather the calling with which we have been called predates it. It is a calling in grace, with the object of displaying grace throughout the universe, as Paul tells us in Ephesians 2:5-7, where he speaks of our being vivified together in Christ, and roused together and seated together among the celestials, in Christ Jesus, in order that "in the oncoming eons, He should be displaying the transcendent riches of His grace in His kindness to us in Christ Jesus."

Lest at this point we should be exalted beyond measure at the transcendence of the glory that this prospect puts before us, the apostle reiterates what he had already stressed in Romans, that "in grace, through faith, are you saved, and this is not out of you; it is God's approach present, not of works, lest anyone should be boasting. For His achievement are we, being created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God makes ready beforehand, that we should be walking in them" (Eph. 2:8-10).

In grace are we saved! For the laud of the glory of His grace are we chosen! For a display of God's grace in the eons to come are we given an allotment in Christ! All this is in accord with His purpose to have a special administration of the complement of the eras, to head up all in the Christ, both in the heavens as well as on the earth.

Once more this administration is brought to our notice in the third chapter of Ephesians, and again it is linked up with the purpose of God. Beginning at verse 8, Paul says, "To me, less than the least of all saints, was granted this grace: to bring the evangel of the untraceable riches of Christ to the nations, and to enlighten all as to what is the administration of the secret, which has been concealed from the eons in God, Who creates all, that now may be made known to the sovereignties and the authorities among the celestials, through the ecclesia, the multifarious wisdom of God, in accord with the purpose of the eons, which He makes in Christ Jesus, our Lord."

Paul's last reference to the purpose of God occurs in the first chapter of Second Timothy—the last letter that he wrote, and his last charge to the one whom he had appointed to carry on the proclamation of the evangel. This important statement begins with verse 8.

"You may not be ashamed, then, of the testimony of our Lord, nor yet of me, His prisoner, but suffer evil with the evangel in accord with the power of God, Who saves us and calls us with a holy calling, not in accord with our acts, but in accord with His own purpose and the grace which is given to us in Christ Jesus before times eonian."

Notice again how acts are discounted. We are not saved and called in accord with our acts—this we never could be! We are saved and called in accord with God's own purpose, God's own grace, given us in Christ Jesus.

When? Before times eonian! Before the ages began! Before anything else happened or came into being! The gift of grace in Christ Jesus precedes all other gifts mentioned in Scripture, just as the promise of life in Christ Jesus precedes all other promises (cf Tit. 1:2). Both are pre-eonian. Both date from that far distant past when God's purpose was first conceived.

Even as this promise of life in Christ Jesus was made when there was no one other than Christ to receive it, so also the gift of grace in Christ Jesus was made when there was none but Him to accept it. He received both on behalf of all that should subsequently come into being through Him. Consequently both are all-inclusive, all-embracing.

Colossians, the contemporary letter with Ephesians, speaks of Christ as "the Image of the invisible God, Firstborn of every creature, for in Him is all created, that in the heavens and that on the earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones, or lordships, or sovereignties, or authorities, all is created through Him and for Him, and He is before all, and all has its cohesion in Him" (Col. 1:15-17).

Here Christ is portrayed as the Image of God, Firstborn of every creature, all in the heavens and on the earth being created in Him.

But Paul continues, "And He is the Head of the body, the ecclesia, Who is Sovereign, Firstborn from among the dead, that in all He may be becoming first, for in Him the entire complement delights to dwell, and through Him to reconcile all to Him (making peace through the blood of His cross), through Him, whether those on the earth or those in the heavens."

Here we have Christ, the Complement of God, Firstborn from the dead, all on the earth and in the heavens reconciled through Him.

. . . .

We are now living in a day of grace. If we believe in Christ Jesus, we are already receiving God's grace in richest measure. With us a rescue act is already in operation, for we are being made competent for a part of the allotment of the saints in light, being rescued out of the jurisdiction of Darkness, and transported into the kingdom of the Son of God's love (Col. 1:12, 13). In this we have in every way a prior expectancy over the rest of creation, but not a sole expectancy. In Romans 8, Paul speaks of the expectancy of creation. "For the premonition of the creation is awaiting the unveiling of the sons of God." That is, creation is intuitively, in-

stinctively awaiting the revealing of the sons of God in glory. "For to vanity was the creation subjected, not voluntarily, but because of Him Who subjects it, in expectation that the creation itself, also, shall be freed from the slavery of corruption into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Rom. 8:19-21). Creation is not made subject to vanity willingly, but because it is God's choice that it should be so. That God's purpose may remain as a choice applies here, too.

When God's conciliatory hand of friendship has been grasped by all in complete reconciliation, and when the wisdom of His choosings and His appointments, that is, His sovereignty, has been universally accepted beyond question—in short, when God is All in all, then every one of His creatures will rejoice in being one of His achievements, and all in heaven and earth will be both prepared and glad to acknowledge that of themselves they have contributed nothing, but that

ALL HAS BEEN OF HIM.

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