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John Gill's

A BODY OF PRACTICAL DIVINITY

Book 1—Chapter 16

OF RESIGNATION TO THE WILL OF GOD

Submission, or resignation of the will of man to the will of God, is a part of self-denial, as has been observed in the preceding chapter, and therefore properly next requires a distinct consideration. It is no other than an entire acquiescence in the will of God in all things, and especially in adverse dispensations of providence, which is a trial of it; as in Eli, when he was told of the distresses that should come upon his family, said, "It is the Lord, let him do what seemeth him good!" (1 Sam. 3:18), and in much the same temper and disposition of mind was David, when he ordered the ark to be carried back to Jerusalem, which he was obliged to leave (2 Sam. 15:25,26). This is no other than for a man to have his will swallowed up in the will of God, and to have no will of his own, but what is the Lord's; or only to will what he wills, and is pleasing to him; this, in its highest perfection, was in Christ in the midst of his agonies; "Not my will, but thine be done!" Something of this kind may be expected from a follower of Christ; but that anything similar to it should drop from the lips of an heathen, is somewhat extraordinary; and yet Epictetus gives this advice, "Will nothing but what God wills;" there is indeed a difference between giving advice and acting up to it, and between theory and practice; and yet this same heathen says, "I yield my appetite to God; does he will that I should have a fever? I will it also. Does he will that I should attempt anything? I likewise will it. Would he have me desire anything? I also will it. Would he have me enjoy anything? the same is my will. Does he nill? I also nill. Would he have me die? I am willing to die." How far he said this with truth, and acted according to it, I will not say; but to have the will so resigned to the will of God, highly becomes a Christian. But,

1. First, there must be much done to the will of man, and much management of it, under the power of divine grace, to bring the will of man to be subject to the will of God. For,

1a1. The will of man is very stubborn and inflexible; we often read of the hardness of the heart, and of its being hardened through the deceitfulness of sin; and of the stony heart, a heart as hard as a stone, yea, as an adamant stone, on which no impressions can be made, nor becomes pliable and flexible by any methods made use of; and such is the obstinacy of the will of man.

1a2. It is averse to all that is good; it hates the good and loves the evil; it hates the good law of God, and is not subject to it; nor can it be, without the power of divine grace; it hates good men, and all their good instructions; as men to do good have no knowledge, so neither will they understand; they have no will nor desire to understand what is good, and still less to practice it.

1a3. The will of men is biased to, and bent upon that which is evil; their hearts are "fully set in them, to do evil" (Eccl. 8:11), their language is, "we will walk after our own devices," &c. (Jer. 18:12; 44:16,17).

1a4. The will of man is opposite to the will of God in all things; yea, in things that are most for his good; even for his everlasting welfare and happiness. The will of God is, that men should be saved, or have everlasting life and salvation only by Christ; but the will of men is averse to this way of salvation; "Ye will not come to me, that ye might have life" (John 5:40), the will of God is, that men should be justified in his sight, not by the works of the law, but by the righteousness of Christ; but, on the contrary, so stouthearted, and far from this way of righteousness, are men, that they seek justification, not by faith, but, as it were, by the works of the law, and go about to establish their own righteousness, and will not submit to the righteousness of Christ. God has set up Christ as king over Zion, and requires obedience to his word and ordinances; but such is the perverseness of wills of men, that they declare, saying, "We will not have this Man to reign over us;" and therefore break the bands, and cast away the cords of his laws and ordinances from them: and if they are so averse to the methods of his grace and kingdom, then much more so to the dispensation of his providence.

1a5. The carnal mind and will of man is "enmity" itself "against God," his law and gospel, his purposes and providences; it is full of rebellion to him; it rebels against the light of nature, and against the law of God; the Israelites were always a rebellious people, though favored with the knowledge of the will of God above all people; and so the elect of God, while in a state of nature, are styled "rebellious" (Ps. 68:18).

1a6. It is one of the characters of sinful men, that they are "self-willed" (2 Pet. 2:10), men naturally desire to have their own wills and ways; they do not care to be contradicted and gainsayed; even God's elect, before conversion, are studiously

"fulfilling the desires of the flesh," or the wills of the flesh, their carnal wills, and choose to live to the lusts of the flesh, and not to the will of God. In such a bad and depraved state is the will of man naturally; so that much must be done with it to bring it into subjection to the will of God.

1b. Now the various steps which God takes, and the various things he does to the will of man, in order to work it up, and bring it to a submission to his will, are these:

1b1. He "breaks" the wills of men, he crosses them, by one afflictive providence after another, and brings them by degrees to give up their wills to his; he will not let them have their own wills and ways; but thwarts them, and denies them those things their wills are set upon; until at length they are content that his will should be done; as creatures not used to a yoke, at first are very reluctant, and wriggle and toss about, and will not easily submit, until some rough methods are taken, to break them. Graceless men are sons of Belial, children without a yoke; such are the people of God before conversion; but then they are called to take a yoke upon them, not only of Christ's commands and ordinances, but of afflictions and reproaches for Christ's sake; when they are, at first, like "a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke," and it sits uneasy upon them; but afterwards, when they are more used to it, they become more patient and quiet under it; hence it is said to be "good for a man that he bear the yoke in his youth;" for thereby he is inured to it, and bears it more quietly and patiently (Lam. 3:27), it not being perceived so heavy as at first.

1b2. The Lord exerts his mighty power upon the wills of men, and of unwilling makes them willing; when the power of God is put forth upon them, then they are made willing, as to serve the Lord, and to be saved by him in his own way; so to part with everything he calls for, and to bear and suffer whatever is his will and pleasure; but such a willing disposition is not by "might and power" of men; a man cannot make himself willing, or work himself to such a submissive frame; but it is effected by the Spirit of God, and the power of his efficacious grace; and this is not done by force and compulsion: God does not force the will, but allures and attracts it; works upon it, as Austin says, with an omnipotent sweetness, and a sweet omnipotence.

1b3. The Lord takes away the obduracy and hardness, the stubbornness and stiffness of the will, and makes it flexible to his will; he takes away the stony heart, and gives an heart of flesh, a soft heart, susceptible of impressions, by which it may be wrought upon to a compliance to the will of God; this he sometimes does by his word, which is as an hammer to break the rock in pieces; and sometimes by afflictive providences, by which God sometimes makes "the heart soft," as he did Job's; though perhaps he may mean it in a somewhat different sense (Job 23:16), men, in a state of nature, their "neck is an iron sinew," or the sinew of their neck is like a bar of iron, which will not bend; but such a bar, when put into the fire, and made soft, it may be bent at pleasure; so men, called by grace, and put into the furnace of affliction, they become soft and pliable to the will of God.

1b4. The will of man is made free by the power of divine grace in conversion, which before was a slave to sin and Satan, and brought into bondage; and while it so continues it is not, and cannot be obedient to the will of God; while it is a servant to various lusts and pleasures, it cannot willingly submit to adverse dispensations of providence; but "if the Son makes it free, it is free" indeed, to take up the cross and follow him; when men are "made free from sin," from the dominion, bondage, and slavery of it, they become "the servants of righteousness, and servants to God," and submissive to his will, both to do and suffer whatever is his pleasure to call them to.

1b5. God effectually works in his people, "both to will and to do of his good pleasure;" he does not create a new faculty of the will, but he frees it from what hinders its operations in a right way, and influences it by his grace to act according to his own will and pleasure; when to "will is present" with them, though sometimes they find want of power to perform as they would; the "spirit is willing," both to do and suffer what is the will of God; "but the flesh is weak," and has not strength to act, but throws clogs and difficulties in the way; however, the will is so powerfully wrought upon as to say, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" I am willing to do anything, and bear anything, thou art pleased to call me to (Acts 9:6). So submissive is the will under a divine influence. I proceed to consider,

2. Secondly, the various phrases by which submission to the will of God, especially under adverse dispensations of providence, is expressed.

2a. To be "still," and quiet and easy; "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10), which is directed to amidst the commotions, stirs, and tumults, in the world, and the desolations made in the earth, as the context shows; and is to be understood.

2a1. Not of insensibility and stupidity; that men should be as "still as a stone," or be like stocks and stones, senseless and unconcerned; they should be sensible of the hand of God in his providences, and own it as directed to in the exhortation, "Know that I am God;" own and acknowledge my hand in all these things; so Eli said, "It is the Lord, let him do what seemeth him good!" and so Job; "The Lord hath given, and the Lord hath taken away!" they should be sensible of the cause of these things; for, as David said, "Is there not a cause?" There and that is sin; "If his children forsake my law, &c. then will I visit their transgressions with a rod": and they should be sensible of the affliction itself; not only feel the rod, but bear it, take notice of it, and learn by it; indeed, sometimes so stupid are men, that "God speaketh once, yea twice," by an afflictive providence, one after another, "yet man perceiveth it not," takes no notice of it; it has no effect upon him; though he is "stricken" and "beaten," he "feels" it not: there are two extremes often in men under the afflicting hand of God; either they are apt to faint, and sink under an affliction, or to neglect it, overlook it, *ολιγορει*, make little or nothing of it; both which are guarded against in the exhortation in (Heb. 12:5). Nor,

2a2. Of a stoical apathy is the phrase to be understood; as if a man should be quite unaffected with an afflictive providence; though the affections are to be checked,

when they become inordinate, yet there may be a due use of them; they are not indeed to be set on earth, and earthly things, but upon things in heaven; and such a disposition of them will make a man more quiet and easy under the loss of things temporal; yet he is not wholly divested of his affections under such losses; when Job lost all his substance, as well as his children, and was all submission to the will of God, yet he gave manifest tokens of his affections being moved by the providence; as by rending his mantle, shaving his head, and falling down upon the ground: and though Christians are not to sorrow for the loss of relations and friends, as the heathens, without hope, and in that immoderate and barbarous manner they did, yet may with moderation; Abraham went to Hebron to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her, when dead; and Joseph made a mourning for his father seven days; devout men carried Stephen to his grave, and made great lamentation over him; and Christ himself wept over the grave of Lazarus.

2a3. Nor is the phrase expressive of inactivity. The strength of men in such cases is not to "sit still" and do nothing; there is much to be done under afflictive providences; as various graces to be exercised; when men are chastened by the Lord, they are called upon to be "zealous" and "repent;" and they have need of faith and confidence in the divine promises to support them, which should not be cast away, but exercised; and of patience, that when they have done the will of God by suffering afflictions, they may receive the promises. And there are duties to be performed, as both prayer and praise; "If any be afflicted, let him pray," for support under the affliction, and that it may be sanctified to him, and he may be delivered from it in due time: and praise too, so Job blessed the Lord when he was stripped of all he had; the cross is to be taken up, in which saints are active, and bear it patiently, and through many tribulations follow Christ, and enter into the kingdom. But,

2a4. It is opposed to the fretting of the mind at the prosperity of others, and at their own adversity; which is dehorted from, "fret not thyself" (Ps. 37:1,7,8), and to all impatience, restlessness, and disquietude, under the hand of God; a good man should not act like a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke, and much less like a wild bull in a net; but the phrase signifies, composure of mind, sedateness, a quiet submission to the will of God, and patience under his mighty hand.

2b. Submission to the will of God, is expressed by a man's holding his peace, and being dumb and silent; thus Aaron, when he lost his two sons in an awful manner, by fire from heaven; it is said, "And Aaron held his peace" (Lev. 10:2), said not one word against what was done, or as complaining of the providence: so David was dumb when under a sore affliction (Ps. 39:9), and of a good man under the yoke of affliction it is said, "He sitteth alone, and keepeth silence" (Lam. 3:28). Now,

2b1. All this is to be understood, not as though there was nothing to be said under an afflictive providence; for it should be owned that it is of God, that it is of his appointing, in his secret purposes and decrees; "He performeth the thing that is appointed for me" (Job 23:14). Job is there speaking chiefly of his afflictions, and

has respect to them; and as they are appointed in God's purposes, they are brought on by his over ruling providence; there is "no evil," of such a kind, in a city, but the Lord has done it; he makes peace, and "creates evil;" adversity and prosperity are from him, and he sets the one against the other. It should also be acknowledged by the saints, that they are deserving of such afflictions; "Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" it may be expected. Nor should the people of God be silent in prayer under such providences; God expects to hear from them then; "In their affliction they will seek me early," for, help, support, and deliverance. Nor should they be silent in praise to God, but bless his name; since it might have been worse with them than it is; especially when they are taught of God under their afflictions, and by them, and when they evidently see that they work together for their good; and they should not fail to speak to others of the goodness of God to them; of gracious experiences in their afflictions, how that everlasting arms are underneath them, their bed is made in their sickness, God is with them when they pass through the fire and through the waters, and he chooses them in the furnace of affliction. But,

2b2. Such silence is opposed to murmuring against God, and complaining of his providence, as the Israelites in the wilderness did; and to charging his ways with inequality, as the Jews in the times of Ezekiel: but it denotes such behavior as Job's under such providences, who sinned not, nor charged God foolishly (Job 1:22).

2c. Submission to the will of God is expressed by "hearing the rod, and him who has appointed it" (Micah 6:9), by the rod is meant the rod of correction, with which God, as a Father, scourges and chastises his children, called the "rod of God," because of his appointing, and which he makes use of in a fatherly way; and the rod of man, because it is no other than what is common to men, and is used in a kind and tender way, after the manner of men. In which rod there is the voice of the Lord, which cries unto men in a way of reproof for sin, and by commanding them to return from iniquity; which calls for humiliation, and instructs in the way of duty; and then it is heard and hearkened to, when men are obedient and submit to the will of God, signified by it; when their ears are opened to discipline, and they attend to it, and instruction is sealed unto them, and they are impressed by it.

2d. The same is signified by men "humbling themselves under the mighty hand of God," according to the exhortation in (1 Pet. 5:6), by the hand of God is meant his correcting and chastising hand, which sometimes is heavy, and presses sore; and which Job felt, and therefore cried to his friends to have pity on him, because the hand of the Lord was upon him; and "strong is his hand, and high is his right hand;" and which, though it is laid on in mercy, yet sometimes is very heavy and distressing: and the end and use of it is to humble men; as all the Lord's dealings with the Israelites in the wilderness were to humble them, and to prove them; so are all the Lord's dispensations of providence towards his people, to hide pride from them, and to bring them to his feet, and to own his sovereignty over them; and this is the way to be exalted. In short, all these phrases are expressive of submission to the will of God; the language of them is, "The will of the Lord be done!" (Acts

21:14), and, indeed, this should be submitted to in all things; and it should be the constant language of the saints, with respect to everything in which they are concerned; "If the Lord will, we shall live and do this and that" (Jam. 4:15; see 1Co 4:19). It is a phrase often used by Socrates, as may be seen in the writings of Plato, εὐν θεος εθελη, "If God will;" and which well becomes the mouth of a Christian at all times, who ought to be all submission to God, and to be wholly absorbed in the will of God; for which,

3. Thirdly, the following reasons may be given among many.

3a. First, whatever is done in providence is done by the Lord; his will and his hand are in it; and this should reconcile the will of man to it, be it what it may; so said Eli, "It is the Lord," who has said it and will do it, "let him do what seemeth him good!" it was the consideration of this, that the Lord was concerned in all Job's losses, that it was he who gave and took away, which made them sit so easy on his mind; and even to say, "Blessed be the name of the Lord!" and this is what makes and keeps quiet and still, under the most afflictive providences, to know that it is the Lord who wills them. As,

3a1. That he is a sovereign Being, who does according to his will in heaven and in earth, who has the disposal of the whole world, and of all creatures and things in it; he has a sovereign right to all, and may do what he will with his own; give and take away at pleasure; and therefore to be submitted to.

3a2. That he is immutable, and his will is irresistible; his mind is invariable, and his purpose unalterable; "Who shall disannul it?" make it void and of none effect: "And his hand is stretched out" in providence, to execute his purpose, "and who shall turn it back?" as it would be impious, so in vain to attempt it; for "who hath resisted his will?" his counsel shall stand, and he will do all his pleasure; and therefore his will is to be submitted to (Job 23:13; Isa.. 14:27).

3a3. He is not accountable to his creatures; nor is it fitting and reasonable that he should; they are accountable to him, but not he to them; therefore "he giveth no account of his matters" (Job 32:13), as none can "stay his hand" or stop the course of his providence; so none ought to "say to him, What doest thou?" but a silent submission should be yielded to him.

3a4. That he is the wise, and the only wise God, and does all his works in wisdom; though he does all things according to his will, in a sovereign way, yet, "after the counsel of his own will;" in the best and wisest manner, as such things are usually done, when done with consultation; as all his works in nature and in grace are made in wisdom, so his works of providence, in which there is a "bathos," "a depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God." What is said of Christ with respect to his miracles, "He hath done all things well," is true of God in the dispensations of his providence, and therefore to be submitted to.

3a5. That he is holy and righteous in all his ways and works, and there is no unrighteousness in him; he cannot be charged with an unjust action, and with any inequality in his ways, and therefore not to be complained of in any respect.

3a6. That he is a faithful God, and it is in faithfulness he afflicts his people; and while they are under the affliction he will not suffer them to be tempted, or afflicted, above what they are able to bear; not will he take away his kindness from them, nor break his covenant with them; all which displays his faithfulness (Ps. 119:75; 89:33,34; 1 Cor. 10:13).

3a7. That all his ways are mercy and love to his people; when he hides his face he loves, when he chides he loves, and when he chastises he loves; the rod is in a Father's hand, and should be submissively attended to.

3b. Secondly, what is done by the Lord seems good to him; and what seems good to him must be good; "Let him do what seemeth him good": he is good originally and underivatively, the fountain of all goodness; there is nothing but goodness in him, and nothing else comes from him, or is done by him; "Thou art good, and doest good," says David (Ps. 119:68), all he did in creation was "very good," and all he does in providence is very good, even in the adverse dispensations of it: when Isaiah, from the Lord, told Hezekiah what evil should befall his posterity, he replied, "Good is of the Lord, which thou hast spoken" (Isa. 39:6-8). What God does, it is his pleasure to do, and he will do all his pleasure; he sits in the heavens, and does whatsoever he pleases; and what pleases him should please us. It is said of David, "Whatsoever the king did pleased all the people" (2 Sam. 3:36). What the King of kings does should please all his people, all his saints, of whom he is King. It was a flattering speech of a courtier to king Astyages, "All is pleasing that the king does," even when he had treated him in a shocking and barbarous manner: but without any flattery, and with a laudable submission of will to the will of God, every saint may say, whatever the Lord does is pleasing, is all well done; being for his own glory and the good of his people.