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# MARTIN LUTHER

ON THE

BONDAGE OF THE WILL;

TO THE VENERABLE MISTER

## ERASMUS OF ROTTERDAM.

1525.

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FAITHFULLY TRANSLATED FROM THE ORIGINAL LATIN,

BY

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WITH A PREFACE AND NOTES.

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**PART III.** For, when acting in this character, he does not bound himself by his word, but has reserved to himself the most perfect freedom in the exercise of his dominion over all things.

But Diatribe beguiles herself through her ignorance, making no distinction between the proclaimed God, and the hidden God; that is, between the word of God, and God himself. God does many things which he has not shewn us in

Thus it was in God's dealings with the nation of Israel, and with his visible church, as for a season co-extensive with that nation. When now he had formed the seed of Abraham into a nation, and had assumed the relation of king to that people, he gave them a law; by which, instrumentally, he kept them for his own, so long as it was his personal will to keep them, and scattered them when it was the counsel of his personal will to scatter them.\* By the same law instrumentally, He, in their ecclesiastical relation, saved whom he would save, through the bestowal of a grace which was not of their covenant; whilst he at the same time destroyed whom he would destroy, through the withholding of that grace, in perfect consistency with the provisions of the same.

Thus it is also in the Gospel Church, and in the commanded preaching of the Gospel to all nations, and tongues, and people. God, in the relation of the offended sovereign of the human race, commandeth all men every where to repent; giving them what may be called the law of repentance and faith, and demanding of them a state of mind which is suited to their condition as fallen and guilty creatures. 'Repent ye, and believe the Gospel.'† By this legislative will of his, instrumentally, he fulfils the counsels of his personal will; saving whom he has predestinated to save, and destroying whom he has predestinated to destroy.

\* Israel, like Adam in Paradise, broke the law nearly as soon as it was given him; but, by so doing, he prepared the way for all God's future dealings with him.

† Implicitly, but not explicitly, this is the demand, and the alone demand, which God has made upon man, even the whole human race, since the Fall; and shall continue to be so, till his mystery be finished by the Lord's second coming. The form of this demand has been varied, the knowledge of it has been varied; the law, eminently so called, has been interposed to the church, God has "winked at times of ignorance;" but a Manasseh's humbledness of mind, with a peradventure of mercy—the only demand which, in consistency with the recognition of those primary transactions in the Garden, and with the realities of the case, could be made—is in truth the only demand which has been made upon the sons and daughters of fallen Adam, from the period of the ejection out of Paradise until now: a demand which has served to mark the only difference that can ever be found to subsist between the several apostate members of an apostate head; viz, continued apostasy in some, and restoration in others.

his word. He also wills many things which he has not shewn us that he wills, in his word. For instance, he wills not the death of a sinner—according to his word, forsooth—but he wills it according to that inscrutable will of his. Now our business is to look at his word, and to leave that inscrutable will of his to itself: for we must be directed in our path by that word, and not by that inscrutable will. Nay, who could direct himself by that inscrutable and inaccessible will? It is enough for us barely to know, that there is a certain inscrutable will in God.—What that will wills, why it so wills, and how far it so wills, are matters which it is altogether unlawful for us to inquire into, to wish for knowledge about, to trouble ourselves with, or to approach even with our touch. In these matters, we have only to adore and to fear.

So then, it is rightly said, ‘If God wills not death, we must impute it to our own will that we perish.’ Rightly, I say, if you speak of the proclaimed God. For he would have all men to be saved, coming, as he does, with his word of salvation to all men; and the fault is in our own will, which does not admit him; as he says, in Matt. xxiii. “How often would I have gathered thy children, and thou wouldest not?”—But why this majesty of His does not remove this fault of our will, or change it in all men (seeing that it is not in the power of man to do so); or why he imputes this fault of his will to man, when man cannot be without it; these are questions which it is not lawful for us to ask; and which, if you should ask them, you would never get answered. The best answer is that which Paul gives in Romans ix. “Who art thou that repliest against God?” Let these remarks suffice for this passage of Ezekiel, and let us go on to the rest.\*

\* Luther has in substance given the right answer to this cavil from Ezekiel, but has given it, as we have seen, in an exceptionable form; exceptionable, as it respects the distinc-

PART III. After this, Diatribe objects that the exhortations with which the Scripture so much abounds, together with all those manifold promises, threaten-

Exhortations, pro-

tion which he institutes, 'hidden God and revealed God;' and exceptionable, in that he does not show the sameness of this God, which is thus distinguishingly regarded. It is to be remembered, that the words bear only by inference and consequence upon the question of Freewill (which is the question in debate), whatever be the correct interpretation of them; neither does Erasmus represent them fairly. Erasmus speaks of *wailing* and working: but where does Ezekiel say that God "wails?" He says only, 'I would not.' Erasmus argues, 'God deplores; therefore, it is not his doing that they die; therefore, it is their own doing; therefore, there is Freewill.' It is inference two deep; each of which requires proof. What if their death be self-wrought? Why may they not have previously forfeited their Freewill, and therefore die under bondwill? We might hold ourselves excused, therefore, from entering at all into this cavil; it is truly *nihil ad nos*.

But there are reasons why we should rather meet it in the face; and the answer has, by implication, been given to it already.—Some would say, why not at once knock it down with "Secret things belong unto the Lord?" (Deut. xxix. 29.) a convenient text for a perplexed disputant! My answer is, that text does not apply here. The Prophet is not speaking of the *principles* of divine conduct, but of those providential events and arrangements by which God realizes and fulfils them. It was in the counsels of God to bring the nation of Israel to obedience at the last, through a long course of tergiversation and punishment: but they had at that time the word given to them ("the word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart; that is, the word of faith, which we preach." Compare Rom. x. 5—10. with Deut. xxx. 11—14.), which they would at length obey. Now, they had nothing to do with these intermediate events which God would bring about; it was theirs to use that commandment (or rather that Gospel which the commandment fore-preached)—looking through the type to the reality—which he commanded them that day.—Besides, if we were at liberty to use this text here, we must learn from it, that we have nothing to do with election and reprobation at all: as some are fond enough of admonishing us. For it is not a question, who is individually of the one class, and who of the other, that is here to be answered; but whether there really be such distinctions, and why there are such. (See above, note <sup>r</sup>.)—Then meeting the question fairly, though not fairly attached to the question of Freewill, how does this assertion in Ezekiel comport with the God-willed death of a sinner?

· Not to insist upon the peculiarities of the case to which this

ings, expostulations, upbraidings, beseechings, blessings and cursings, and all those numerous

SECT.  
XXIX.

solemn declaration of God is annexed (the house of Israel was brought into peculiar relations to God, and the case of an Israelite was therefore considerably different from that of uncovenanted transgressors); not to notice the ambiguity of Erasmus's expression 'his people' (God works no death in his people properly so called, though he works death in many who have a name to be his people, and are not); without insisting that the original words  $\text{וְעַתָּה וְעַתָּה}$  as well as the  $\theta\acute{\epsilon}\lambda\omega$ , not  $\beta\omicron\upsilon\lambda\omicron\mu\alpha\iota$ , of the Septuagint, express inclination rather than determination—and so the sentiment conveyed may be no more than what our translators have assigned to them, 'have I any pleasure at all,' 'for I have no pleasure;' implying only such a reluctance as is not inconsistent with a contrary decision—though Luther, as well as Erasmus, makes it 'nolo;' waving all such objections, which do not shield the vitals of the truth, though they may serve to parry off a blow from its extremities (for clearly here is God at least declaring his dislike of that death which he nevertheless inflicts, and which we affirm that he wills); the true account of the matter, and that which comprehends all possible cases, has been furnished in the two preceding notes; asserted in note <sup>t</sup>, and illustrated by examples in note <sup>u</sup>.

mises, &c.  
of Scrip-  
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The relative God, in his character of Israel's legislator and sovereign, declares in this chapter that he will deal henceforth both nationally and spiritually with that people, each man according to his own ways; and, in effect, preaches the Gospel to each individual of them, saying, 'Repent, and live.' At the twenty-third verse,\* he signifies that he has no pleasure in the death of him that dieth: in the three last verses, he exhorts and remonstrates, and repeats his gracious assurances.—But it does not belong to these and such like relations, to give grace and power; and, without such grace and power, exhortations promises and threatenings are all, and alike, vain. But is God therefore to withhold them? Man, without this super-added grace, ought to obey them; ought, though he cannot; cannot, through a self-wrought impotency. And are there no reasons, no satisfying reasons, why God should give them? Are not these amongst his choicest instruments, whereby he effects the manifestation of himself; manifestation of himself, through the manifestation of what is in man; "that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and clear when thou judgest."—<sup>1</sup> His elect obey; his non-elect harden themselves yet the more, under his outward calls.—Thus, whether the case set forth in Ezekiel be considered as the peculiar case of the national Israel, or

\* Erasmus quotes the text unfairly, by joining the oath of v. 3 with v. 23; but it is no part of it.

PART III. swarms of precepts, are without meaning necessarily,<sup>y</sup> if no one has it in his power to keep what is commanded.

Diatribes are always forgetting the question at issue, and proving something different from what she undertook to prove: nor does she perceive, how much more strongly every thing she says makes against herself than against us. For she proves from all these passages a liberty and power of keeping all the commandments, by force of the inference which she suggests from the words quoted; when all the while she meant only to prove ‘such a Freewill as can will nothing good without grace, together with a sort of endeavour, which is not to be ascribed however to its own powers.’ I see no proof of such endeavour in any of the passages quoted; I see only a demand of such actions as ought to be performed: what I have indeed said too often already, if it were not that such frequent repetition is necessary, because Diatribe so often blunders upon the same string,<sup>z</sup> putting off her reader with an useless profusion of words.

SC. XXX. Nearly the last passage which she adduces from the Old Testament, is that of Moses in Deut. xxx. ————  
Deut. xxx. 11—14. “This commandment, which I command thee this considered.

the general case of the visible church having the Gospel preached to it (that Gospel which is in one view a statute, enactment, or commandment; whilst, in another view, it is the Jubilee trumpet, by which the Holy Ghost proclaims liberty to the Lord’s captives); we see in it, at last, but a farther exemplification of what has been shewn already; the relative God revealing the absolute, and his legislative fulfilling his personal will.—Luther meant nothing *contrary* to this statement, though his language might seem to imply it.

<sup>y</sup> *Frigere necessariò.*] *Frig.* A metaphor taken from vegetable or animal substances, which are nipped with cold. These exhortations, &c. have no warmth, no life, no power, no meaning in them, without Freewill.

<sup>z</sup> ‘Ut citharædus

Ridetur, chordâ qui semper oberrat eâdem.’

Hor. Art. Poet. 355.

day, is not above thee, nor far off from thee, nor placed in heaven, that you mightest say, who of us is able to ascend up into heaven, to bring it down to us, that we may hear and fulfil it? But the word is very near to thee, in thy mouth and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it." Diatribe maintains it to be declared in this place, that we not only have power to do what is enjoined, but that it is even downhill work to do so; that is, easy, or at least not difficult.

Thanks to you for your immense learning! If then Moses so clearly pronounces that there is not only a *faculty* in us, but even a *facility* of keeping all the commandments; why submit to all this toil? Why have we not at once produced this passage, and asserted Freewill in a field that is without opponent.<sup>a</sup> What need have we any longer of Christ? what need of the Spirit? We have at length found a place which stops every mouth, and distinctly pronounces not only that the will is free, but that the observance of all the commandments is easy! How foolish was Christ to purchase that unnecessary Spirit for us at the price of his own out-poured blood, that it might be made easy to us to keep the commandments; a facility, which it now seems that we possess by nature! Nay, let Diatribe herself recant her own words, in which she said that Freewill can will nothing good without grace: and let her now say, that Freewill is of so great virtue as not only to will good, but even with great ease to keep the chiefest and all the commandments. O see what is the result of having a mind which feels no interest in the cause pleaded! see how impossible it is, that this mind should not betray itself! Is there any longer need to confute Diatribe? Who can confute her more thoroughly than she confutes herself? This, forsooth, is the animal which devours

<sup>a</sup> *Libero campo.*] I understand it 'liber ab hoste, seu antagonistâ:' but I do not find any parallel.