

# **Man's Will**

**Its nature, freedom, bondage  
and relation to God's decree**

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## Ground rules

- Unambiguous statements from Scripture are to be accepted and not dismissed or made to mean what they obviously do not mean by “rational” or “philosophical” argumentation.
- Discussion of what appears to be a *genuine* contradiction of scriptural statements is valid. *Genuine* contradictions must be resolved.

However, often what people claim is a contradiction in scripture is simply a contradiction between what scripture says and *inferences* they have made.

Example: “God works all things after the counsel of His will” - If that applies to all the decisions we make *then [inference!] our decisions are meaningless and not real*. But Scripture teaches in many places our decisions are very real and not meaningless ... and that God works all things after the counsel of His will.

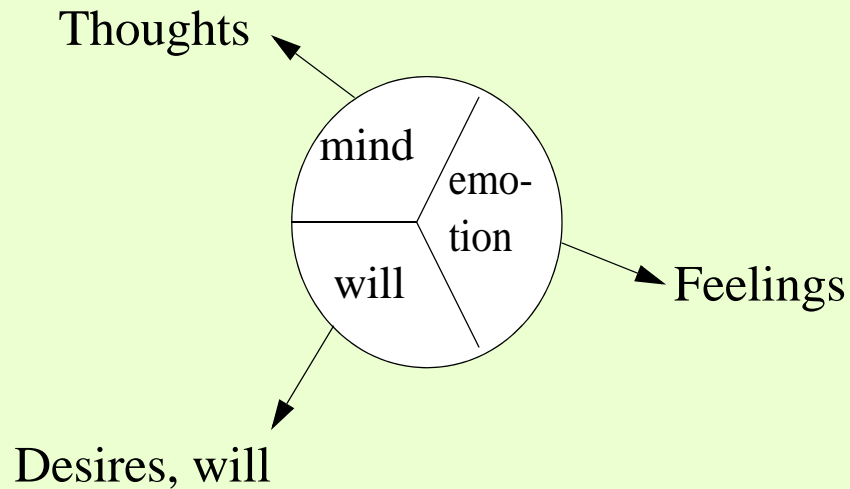
Calvinists can be as bad as Arminians regarding this!

- All of Scripture is to be heard on the subject.
- I will focus on man in his fallen state and not have extensive discussions regarding Adam. We are doing this in three sessions.

# The nature of man's will

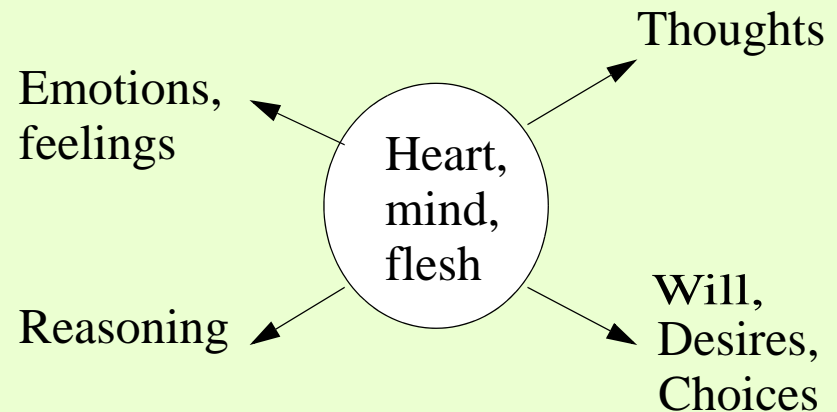
## Incorrect View

Man's will a component part of his being



## Scripture Representation

Man's will is the *product* of his heart



- When I say, “my will (noun) is for you to go to the store”, I am expressing what *I desire* you to do.
- When I say, “I am willing (verb) for you to go to the store”, I’m expressing I approve of you going to the store.
- In neither case am I referring to a component part of my being like a transmission is part of a car.

- Of the 64 uses of the noun *thelema* (θελημα) and the 208 uses of the verb *thelo* (θελω) in the NT it never speaks of man's will as being a component part of his being.
  - Ephesians 2:3 precisely illustrates that the will, thelema, is the product of the heart (or mind, or flesh).
  - The verbs do not need to be considered, they refer to the action, i.e. desires, wants, of a person's mind or heart.
- Our "wills" or "desires" are expressions of our hearts just as are thoughts, emotions, reasonings, choices, likes, dislikes.
- Matthew 12:33-35
- Matthew 15:18-19

## Does fallen man have a “free” will?

- It depends on what you mean by “free”!
  - Does he act freely, i.e. without coercion? Yes. Does he make choices freely, without being forced to make the particular choice he makes? Yes.
  - Can he make choices or desire things contrary to the “affections” or “preferences” or “likes” of his heart? No.
  - Can he act in a way which conflicts with God’s decree of whatsoever comes to pass? No.
- Other terms may (or may not!) be helpful
  - Liberty - I tend to think of liberty as freedom which has been given to man by God, i.e. God has given man liberty.
  - Volition -

## **Freedom and ability are two different things** **- Freedom -**

- Freedom refers to man choosing a course of action freely, i.e. without external constraint.
  - c9:1
  - c3:1
- God suspends this freedom, or overrides this freedom when He pleases and no man can effectually resist - i.e. get his way.
  - Daniel 4:35, Psalm 115:3, and many more.
- Entailments (necessary implications)
  - Choices are real choices, i.e. *we* make them.
  - Man is responsible for the choices he makes.

## Freedom and ability are two different things - Ability -

- Ability (in this discussion relating to man's will) means I am *able* to make a certain choice.
- The Scripture teaches that men are faced with many "possible choices."

A "possible choice" is one which is not prohibited or restrained against by God.

- Although men are given the opportunity to make many choices they are *unable* to make certain choices because of the corruption of their hearts.

Often man is actually commanded to make these choices but he refuses to. A few examples from the gospel of John:

- John 3:18-20
- John 5:39-44
- Confession 9:3 (see long list of Scripture references)



- Man, *left to himself*, is free but is *unwilling and unable* to make *any* choice that would lead to his salvation. Which is why we have statements like John 6:44 in the Bible.
- Historical statement by R.C Sproul regarding Augustine [emphasis mine].

Augustine did not deny that fallen man *still has a will* and that *the will is capable of making choices*. He argued that *fallen man still has a free will (liberium arbitrium)* but has lost his moral liberty (libertas). The state of original sin leaves us in the wretched condition of being *unable to refrain from sinning*. We still are *able to choose what we desire*, but *our desires remain chained by our evil impulses*. He argued that the freedom that remains in the will always leads to sin. Thus in the flesh we are free only to sin, a hollow freedom indeed. It is freedom without liberty, a real moral bondage. True liberty can only come from without, from the work of God on the soul. Therefore we are not only partly dependent upon grace for our conversion but totally dependent upon grace.

## God is free to change or not change men's hearts

- God can and does affect a person's choices (will) by changing a person's heart. He has the *right* to do so (Romans 9:18, 21, ff).
- God hardened Pharaoh's heart so he would refuse (choose) to let Israel go sooner. See also Joshua 11:19-20.
- Israel's enemies - Psalm 105:25
- New covenant believers
  - Jeremiah 32:39, Ezekiel 11:19-20, 36:26-27 - A new heart results in new choices.
  - Philippians 2:13 - God works in us both to will and do.
  - Romans 8:5-14, especially verse 9, the state of being *in the Spirit* affects the walk, i.e. choices. This is a NT expression of Jeremiah 32 and Ezekiel 11, 36.
- Confession 9:4, 9:5, 9:7

## The Lord is The Initiating Cause of Our Salvation

- Although Scripture states in numerous places that our faith and repentance *are the effects* of God's choosing and calling us by the gospel, the doctrine of man's inability to desire salvation confirms that God's actions are the *ultimate* cause of our salvation. Who has made us to differ? Man or God? God.

If God did nothing more than make salvation ready and issue an invitation and then wait for us to respond, no one would be saved. No man seeks for God (Rom. 3:11) *but* God seeks men!

- Three biblical metaphors describing our conversion/salvation teach God's activity is the cause, our believing is the effect.
  - The new birth - no one initiates their own birth.
  - Resurrection - no one initiates their own resurrection.
  - A new creation - no one self creates.
- One passage: 2 Corinthians 4:3-6  
Blinded minds to Christ's glory *choose not to believe* in Him.  
Those with blinded minds *cannot believe* in Him.

## The Wesleyan Doctrine of “prevenient Grace”

- Wesley acknowledged that scripture teaches total inability.
- But he insisted that all men’s wills were elevated to a point of *neutrality* by prevenient grace. God performs this act of grace on all people, preserving their wills in state of neutrality. And now the final decision to believe or not is back in man’s hands. Notice that in this approach it appears the will is being viewed as a separate component of man’s being. Separate from his mind, heart, and flesh.
- The problem with the prevenient grace theory is that it is simply not found in scripture. The main text appealed to, John 1:3-5, must be misinterpreted to support the theory.
- Scripture clearly teaches that men’s hearts and minds are not neutral. The natural mind is hostile toward God (Rom. 8:7).
- Man’s problem in sin is this: ***Biased hearts do not make neutral choices.*** *Light has come into the world but men loved (bias) the darkness rather than the light.*

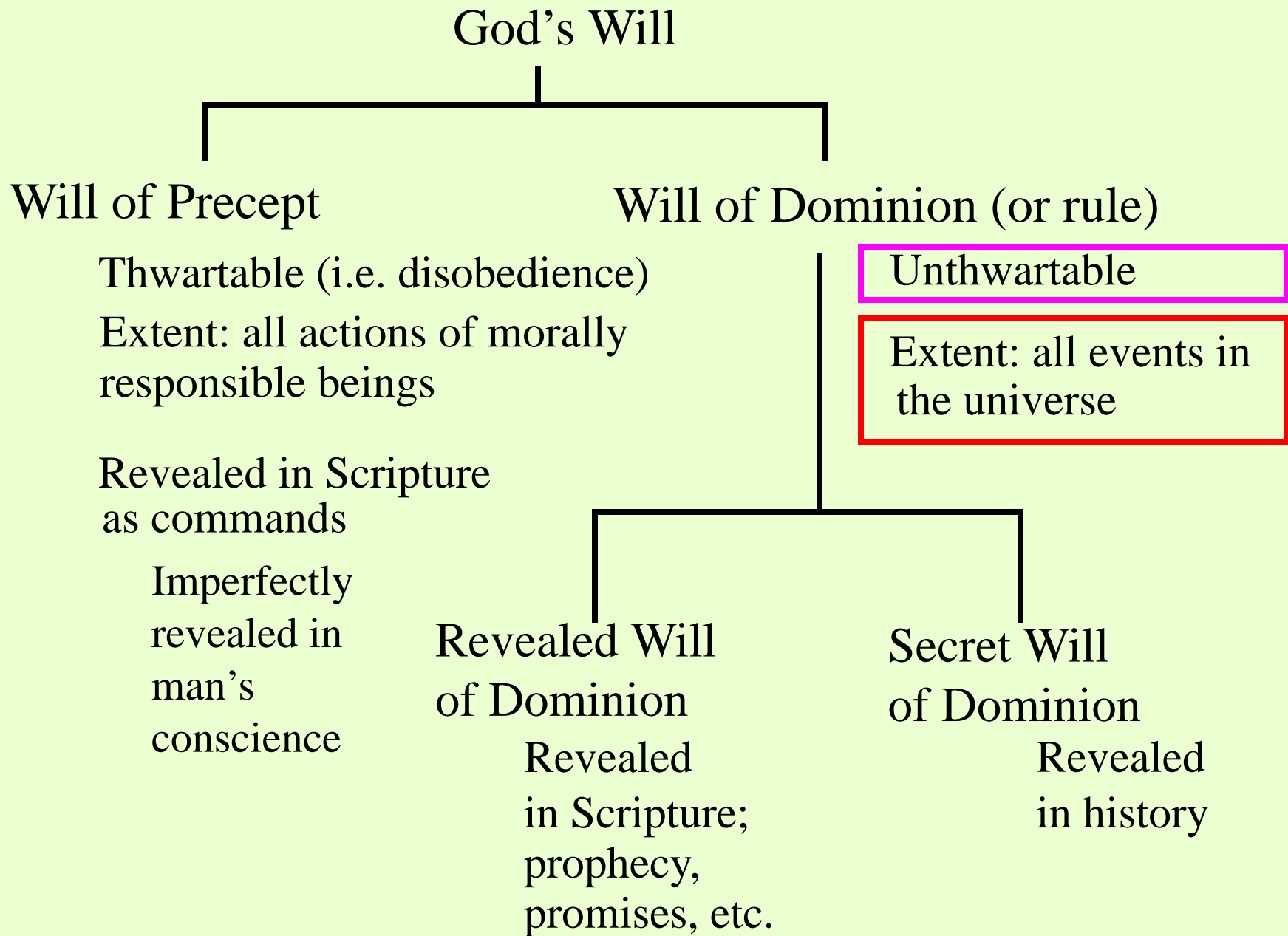
## Do God's exhaustive Sovereignty and man's freedom (as defined above) *meaningfully* coexist?

- Definitions
  - God's preceptive will: Matthew 7:21
  - God's "will of dominion" (secret, decretive): Isaiah 46:10
- Are these "wills" thwartable or unthwartable? See chart.
- **Unthwartable**? Yes, Isa. 14:24, 26-27, Jer. 32:17
- God's *exhaustive* sovereignty - does it exist? It doesn't necessarily have to but Scripture affirms that it does.

Kings on thrones, sparrows falling from trees, and everything in between, occur according to the will of God who works all things after the counsel of His will.

*There are no truly random and unintentional, and therefore meaningless, events in God's universe. And we who are reconciled to God are taught to take great comfort in this!*

- The meaning of God's will, its extent, and where revealed



- God's exhaustive sovereignty is taught in Scripture in at least three ways:

**By declaration:** Statements that indicate that all that comes to pass is according to his decretive will.

Eph. 1:11, Matt. 10:29

**By summation:** Add up all the events of life which Scripture states unfold according to God's will and everything seems to be covered.

Rev. 4:11, Dan. 4:32-35, Rom. 13:1, Acts 4:27-28, 1 Pet. 4:19, Matt. 10:29, 1 Ch. 29:11-12, Heb. 9:27, Eccl. 3:1-9, Rev. 13:4-8, 1 Thes. 2:11-12, Prov. 16:1,9,33, 20:24, 21:1, Matt. 11:25-27, Rom. 8:29-30, 9:15-18, Psa. 139:16, Job 14:5, Psa. 75:6-7.

**By negation:** Statements which say *nothing* happens *outside* of God's will. These are actually the most logically persuasive statements that God's exhaustive sovereignty is a reality.

James 4:13-15, if the Lord wills we will do ..., Jer. 10:23, Prov. 16:9, 19:21, 20:24, 21:30.

## **Do God's exhaustive Sovereignty (as defined above) and man's freedom (as defined above) *meaningfully* coexist?**

- If we accept that **all Scripture** is profitable for **doctrine** - teaching on what we should **believe** - is this a legitimate question since both of these truths are plainly declared?

Sometimes the Scriptures say “no”. Romans 9:18-20, Job 38:1-2, 40:7-8,

God is not obligated to explain His “why or how” according to our “evaluation” of His behavior. Often He does, sometimes not.

- We ought to believe and affirm what Scripture clearly declares. I don't think I have used any deductions or inferences to defend *the main affirmations* above regarding man's will and God's sovereign control of all events in His world.
- Nevertheless God's works are studied by all who delight in Him so I think it's legitimate and profitable to think through these matters seeking to achieve a greater sense of “peace”.



- There are at least three common objections, all relating to the matter of God holding men responsible in spite of their inability, His decreeing of all events, and His hardening the hearts of some.

It helps to express these objections them precisely:

- If men are *unable* to do good God would be *unjust* to hold them responsible to do good.
- If all of our choices and whatever comes to pass is decreed beforehand by God we cannot be responsible for the choices we make.
- If God hardens men's hearts, ensuring they will make sinful choices 1) is He not authoring sin and 2) how can those hardened be responsible for the choices they make?

## **If men are *unable* to do good God would be unjust to hold them responsible to do good.**

- Here's how an individual expressed this objection:

“Now if non-flying was a sin, could God hold us responsible for something we were not designed to do? No, He could not. He is the designer, and it is up to Him to give us the ability to fly if we are supposed to do it.... God could not hold us accountable for this sin [not flying] because He did not give us the ability to be able to fly.... Being held accountable for the impossible, to me this is total nonsense.”
- When God created Adam and Eve they were designed to fly *and* able to fly! They were “very good”, *able* to obey.
- God warned Adam if he disobeyed he would die. Adam disobeyed. *He broke off his own wings* and died. By his sin he plunged himself and all his posterity into sin and death, which left him, and his posterity, without the ability to fly (obey).
- God did not tell Adam, “if you sin and ruin yourself so that you are no longer able to obey my commandments, I will lower the standard to something that you are able to do now that you have wrecked yourself.”

- Just as Adam, every person has used their “free will” to wreck themselves. God is not obligated to change his law in response to *the consequences* of man’s sin. Nor is He obligated to remove any of the consequences of *our* sins.
- There is no injustice in God when He holds us responsible, even after we have ruined ourselves.
- It is true that “we cannot be held responsible for something we were not *designed* to do.” But we are held responsible for what *we have done, including all the consequences*. We, along with Adam, are the ones who rebelled. We reap only what we have sown. No injustice on God’s part here.
- Left to himself man will not do what is right with his free will. But this does not relieve him of his *obligation* to do so.
- That man’s obligation to obey remains in-spite of his inability to obey is confirmed by Scripture where the inability of individuals to perform a certain good is stated followed by a statement of their still being held responsible to do what they have been told they cannot do; Matt. 12:34-36, Jer. 13:23-24

- Scripture does teach that man's responsibility relates to something he possesses, that something is not ability to do right, but *knowledge of what is right*. In God's world knowing the right thing to do is what makes men responsible to do the right thing.

James 4:17, Luke 12:47-48, Num. 15:30-31, Matt 11:22-24, John 9:41, 12:48, 15:22-24.

Rom. 1:20-21 - The knowledge given by God in general revelation makes all men responsible to worship Him and not idols. They are responsible enough to be without excuse.

**If all of our choices and whatever comes to pass is decreed beforehand by God we cannot be responsible for the choices we make.**

- Admittedly, given our limited experience of the world this seems to be the case.
- However, underlying the statement, “we cannot be responsible for the choices we make” is the belief that our choices *are not real* since none of them can go against God’s decree. But Scripture affirms over and over that our choices *are real*.
- Scripture also affirms God’s exhaustive Sovereignty (see above).
- Apparently, **God is able** to construct a world *where both of these things are true*. He certainly has declared such. Our inferring their incompatibility is **imposing a limitation on God** which is nowhere found in Scripture (since both truths are declared).
- **Confession 3:1** - notice the confession strains to affirm both truths. The confession properly summarizes, with great care, what is found in Scripture.

- It helps to consider some notable examples in Scripture of both of these realities (sovereignty and freedom/responsibility) operating side by side.
- Joseph's rejection by his brothers (Genesis 37-46)

The account tells us three times in the space of five verses (37:4-9) that Joseph's brothers hated him, aroused by Jacob's favoritism, ultimately caused by Jacob's polygamy (his favorite wife), caused by Laban's scheming, fueled by Joseph's dreams and unwisely (?) proclaiming them.

Everyone is exercising their "free-will" sinning left and right! Yet it all pieces together exactly what the Lord intended.

- Preservation of Israel - Genesis 50:19-20
- On a larger scale Abraham's descendants 400 year captivity.
- And more! God's judging the gods of Egypt, the Ammorites. And more, and more, and we don't know how much more!

- We know what's been revealed.
- But what about what's not been revealed?

We **know** God has an unthwartable plan *for all things* - but He hasn't revealed it all to us - but He's revealed that He does have such a plan and He will accomplish it.

- The death of Christ is a most notable example.

Acts 4:24-28

Acts 2:22-24

John 19:8-11

- Thus from the examples in Scripture we see both of these realities (sovereignty and freedom/responsibility) operating side by side.
- At this point we ought to be “intellectually” content - the Lord has declared what He does and He's given us enough concrete examples of how He operates. We ought to believe Him.

**If God *hardens* men's hearts, *ensuring* they will make sinful choices 1) is He not authoring sin? and 2) how can those hardened be responsible for the choices they make?**

- Let's begin by considering the case of those whom God *has not* hardened. A person may be born, *and left entirely to himself with no direct influence from God upon him* and yet Psalm 58:3 and 51:5 are still true.
- It is also true that any whom God' hardens, *have already gone astray on their own*. Thus there is no injustice on God's part to not save them. ***God's hardening of sinners does not cause them to go from neutrality to enmity against him.***

Isaiah 53:6, Romans 3:10-18 and 8:7 are true of all humanity prior to God hardening anyone.



- Three notable passages regarding God hardening men's hearts:
  - John 12:37-41
  - 2 Thes. 2:9-12
  - Romans 9:16-18
  - See also Joshua 11:19-20, Matthew 11:23-26
- The “hardening” case is harder, (no pun intended) because it appears that the Lord is causing sin and rebellion.
- What does Scripture actually say regarding God not being the author of evil? Not a lot. James 1:13 - any xrefs in your Bible?
- The Scripture spends much more time emphasizing that *God's actions are not unrighteous*.

However, in some notable cases when men call into question if God's actions are righteous the Lord basically says, “I do not have to answer to you for what I have done!”

Job 38:1-2, 40:7-8, Romans 9:18-21

- Although men are already justly condemned *before* God hardens their hearts, it does seem that hardening them *causes* them to sin more.

Perhaps this is not the case?

Perhaps since God “caused” these sins He doesn’t hold them accountable for these particular sins? This is speculation.

- Is God unjust in hardening men’s hearts? Answer - without speculation - “No” - the Scriptures **declare** [no speculation necessary] repeatedly that there is no un-righteousness in God. Abraham’s question, *Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?*” (Gen 18:25) is always answered in Scripture with a resounding yes!

D.A Carson on John 12:37-41, “God’s judicial hardening is not presented as the capricious manipulation of an arbitrary potentate cursing morally neutral or even morally pure beings, but as a holy condemnation of a guilty people who are condemned to do and be what they themselves have chosen.”