

Unintended Consequences

Commentary for March 20, 2009 — Unforeseen Results of Our Actions

Have you ever experienced “unintended consequences” for actions you took in life? Of course you have, we all have. We intend one thing and do another. We act and unexpected good or bad results. The apostle Paul explains why this happens even to Christians (Romans 7: 14–21).

Historically unforeseen circumstances abound. The leaders of ancient Rome developed a marvelous innovation to transport water throughout the city, and even into the private homes of the wealthy. That innovation was lead piping which we now know had the unintended consequence of being a slow poison to the general population and particularly the wealthy of Rome. A small amount of lead can have a range of [deleterious effects](#).

Unforeseen circumstances also affect economic occurrences. Frédéric Bastiat (1801-1850), a French politician of the early 19th century wrote:

“In the economic sphere an act, a habit, an institution, a law produces not only one effect, but a series of effects. Of these effects, the first alone is immediate; it appears simultaneously with its cause; it is seen. The other effects emerge only subsequently; they are not seen; we are fortunate if we foresee them.”

• [“Selected Essays on Political Economy”](#)

Unintended consequences occur in life every day (even with today’s “financial bailouts”).

- In medicine unintended consequences are called side effects. Thalidimide, an anti-nausea agent, caused horrendous birth defects in the 1950s and 60s in Europe and Australia. Viagra, originally developed as a heart medicine, had a side effect of treating erectile dysfunction in men. Negative side effects are still being determined.
- In the 1950s the United States interstate highway system was developed initially for military purposes. One unintended consequence was that because travel was easier to the center of cities. People work in the cities but live in the suburbs which expanded while downtown areas declined in population, tax base, and safety.
- In foreign policy terms unintended consequences are called “blowback,” as when U.S. government support for Afghan rebels to defeat the Soviet Union invasion later led to the rise of the Taliban regime and the Al Qaida movement.

Biblically, look at Satan’s actions in Job chapters 1 and 2, his temptation of Jesus, and in his possession of Judas to betray Jesus. Things did not turn out as Satan intended. but as God intended. Judas’ horror at his betrayal of Jesus was an unintended consequence of what he thought was a good idea when he took the 30 pieces of silver from the Chief priests and elders. He killed himself.

Christ’s Experience

During His life Jesus completely subordinated His will and had no expectations except to do the will of His Father. This minimized the unintended consequences of His actions. What may have been an unexpected (unintended) consequence of His being born as a man was Jesus’ fleshly and natural emotional reaction that, as His suffering and death approached, Jesus asked God the Father to change His mind.

In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus had great fear of the immediate future as expressed in the King James Version: **“Then says he unto them, ‘My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto**

death" (Matthew 26:38). He even prayed to God to remove the task that was before Him — a natural reaction. Even so, He subordinated His own will to the will of God the Father. Jesus asked three times for an alternative outcome:

³⁹ [1] **O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as you will.** ...

⁴² [2] **He went away again the second time, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, your will be done.** ...

⁴⁴ [3] **And he left them, and went away again, and prayed the third time, saying the same words.**"

• *Matthew 26:39, 42, 44*

God's will demanded and required that He go through with His sacrifice. God's will was done.

God the Father's Experience

God the Father is the only being who has not experienced unintended consequences.¹ Every consequence of His actions always turns out as He intended. This is because He knows, understands, and controls all aspects and all circumstances of every situation and what will result. We can know for a certainty that God's will is for all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4; John 3:16–17) and we can know for certain that God's will shall be fulfilled.

"That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he [God] might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him: In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who works all things after the counsel of his own will."

• *Ephesians 1:10–11*

"And the world [*kosmos*] passes away, and the lust thereof: but he that does the will of God abides for ever [for the eon]."

• *1 John 2:17*

We are to endeavor to learn God's will that we might gain wisdom and spiritual understanding. It was Paul's great desire for the *ekklesias* under his care that they (and by extension us) might be knowledgeable of God's will:

"For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that you might be filled with the knowledge [*epignosis*, full knowledge] of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; That you might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God. ...

That their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgement [*epignosis*, full knowledge] of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ; In whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."

• *Colossians 1:9–10, 2:2–3*

Doing God's will has unintended positive consequences. In fact, through Christ doing God's will and completing His work, we cannot even imagine: **"... the things which God has prepared for them that love him."** (1 Corinthians 2:7–11).

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1. Contrary to what most people believe, the fall of Adam and Eve did not take God by surprise. In fact, the temptation in the Garden was according to God's will.