

“The Will of God” (Part 2)

This is the second in a series of messages on the will of God. These sermons are based on the classic little book of that title, written by Leslie Weatherhead, a prominent British pastor and author.

He tries to help us understand this difficult subject more clearly by speaking of the *intentional* will of God – God’s ideal plan and purpose for us, which is all good; the *circumstantial* will of God – God’s plan within certain circumstances when God’s intentional will is thwarted; and the *ultimate* will of God – the final realization of God’s purposes.

Last week we looked at the *intentional* will of God, and said because God has a Father’s heart He wills only good things for us, not bad, hurtful things. ***But it’s not hard for us to see that God’s ideal plan for us, His intentional will, is often spoiled and short-circuited:*** human ignorance often creates bad situations; we humans make mistakes and do stupid things; and, there is evil in the world, and in us (sin). These all can spoil God’s good and perfect will for us.

Because God has granted us a tremendous amount of freedom as human beings, we can mess up His ideal purposes. Because we are all part of the whole human family, and are interdependent on one another, my actions can hinder God’s intention for *someone else*. What other people do can interfere with God’s intentional will *for me*.

So when God’s intentional will, His ideal purposes, are blocked by our evilness, or foolishness, or human errors, ***within these circumstances*** God’s will comes into play in a different way. It’s kind of a “will within the will”, sort of like God goes to “Plan B”. And if we can know and do God’s will *within these circumstances and this new situation*, we can find peace, and live creative lives.

Let me use a personal illustration to help us think more about God’s circumstantial will. I had an aunt who died of cancer at the age of 38. I don’t believe it was God’s will for Mary Louise to die so young, and leave a husband and young child behind. I don’t believe God wills people to get cancer. The New Testament bears out that sickness is part of the rule and realm of evil. Jesus healed people, and attacked disease as something alien to God’s good purposes.

During her illness, I was able to visit Mary Louise 3 or 4 times (she lived quite a distance from where we were living). These visits were the most meaningful times I ever spent with Mary Louise. She didn’t fight against God or get angry at Him. She accepted the fact that she might not get well, though she knew many of us were praying for her recovery. Several times I asked her, “Are you afraid?” She said, “no”. “Are you bitter?” “No.” “I’m ready,” she said. She not only bore her *illness* with grace, but also some other *heartbreaking* family issues that drained her emotionally.

I believe ***within those circumstances*** of her illness, that God’s will was done in her life - even though God’s *intentional will* was hindered (for whatever reason). I also believe that because of her faith and her acceptance of what life threw at her that God’s *ultimate will* is being worked out in Mary Louise in heaven.

Let's think a bit more about God's *circumstantial will*, His will within the circumstances created when His original intentions for us are thwarted.

Dr. Weatherhead suggests that there is a physical element involved. There are *natural laws* that have to be acknowledged. In his book he says someone once asked him, when a baby had fallen from a fifth story window, whether the baby's death was the will of God. His answer: Yes, and no. Yes in that God's will that the law of gravity should work, and that when a baby made of flesh and blood hits a pavement, its body is crushed. These laws reflect God's will for nature and the universe, and are not set aside. But, no, it was not God's will that the baby should have been dropped in the first place.

Soon after we moved to South Carolina several years ago, Nancy and I traveled back to PA to help get my mom moved out of her home and into the Quarryville Presbyterian Home. We were staying at our son and daughter-in-law's home in Media, driving a lot, working hard getting ready for mom's move. Late one night as we were returning to Media I fell asleep at the wheel. I dozed just long enough for our minivan to hit a guard rail, and do \$10,000 worth of damage.

Was this God's will? ***Yes.*** Natural laws were at work. Metal gets mangled when it hits other metal at 55 mph. ***No.*** It was not God's will that people fall asleep when they are driving, have accidents that cost you money, and risk injury or death to yourself or others. But within those circumstances, God worked things out. The Toyota Sienna was fixed. Our insurance company was helpful and treated us well. No one was injured or killed. I was embarrassed and humbled enough by it that it taught me not to keep driving when tired. (And actually, the whole right side of our minivan was new!).

So, there is a *physical, natural law* element to the question of God's will. There is something else too: that is: ***How we respond to the bad things that happen to us.*** This represents a ***spiritual component*** to our whole discussion.

A group of middle school aged boys having a snowball fight. One boy packs a hard snowball and flings it at another boy wearing eyeglasses. The snowball hits him in the face, shattering his glasses, and injuring one eye to the point where he goes blind in that eye. *Is that the will of God?*

Yes, in that there is the dependability of certain laws of physics that kick in when a hard snowball is thrown, then hits eyeglasses. But no, God doesn't get a rise out of young boys losing their eyesight.

But whether or not God's will is done *within these circumstances* of this boy losing sight in one of his eyes depends on the response of the boy and his family. Will this boy grow up to hate the kid who threw the snowball? Will he become bitter, always complaining that he can't see as well as most other people? Will he look for pity? Will he use having a blind eye as an excuse for not making something of his life? Will his parents live the rest of their lives with resentment,

and maybe even sue the other family? Or will boy and his parents eventually accept what happened, and not let that get in the way of his getting an education, finding a worthwhile job. Will they be able to forgive the boy who threw the snowball, and acknowledge that as humans we make mistakes and do foolish things, and that the boy meant no harm.

We all know of situations, don't we, where people have been dealt a hard blow in life. Some allow these circumstances to diminish or destroy them. They get mad at God. They become bitter about how life has treated them. They are miserable human beings. Others have bad things happen to them, but try to bring good out of it. They trust God even when they can't understand why things happened. They don't wallow in self-pity, but look for ways to use the loss or impediment for good purposes. They inspire us!

And it's in these situations that we can say God's *circumstantial will* is being fulfilled. God's will is being carried out in the "backup plan"!

Of course, there is a verse of Scripture that fits so well here: Romans 8:28 says, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

I want to share 2 stories. One is from the Bible. The other is from contemporary life. Both relate to what we are calling the circumstantial will of God.

There is the story of Joseph in the Old Testament. It starts with a man named Abram. God promises Abram that he will have many descendants (although at the time Abram is very old and childless). His descendants will become a great nation, be blessed, and God will bless the whole world through them. Sure enough, Abraham and his wife Sarah have a son, Isaac. Isaac has a son named Jacob, who is the father of 12 sons.

There is strife among Jacob's 12 sons. Eleven of the brothers become jealous of Joseph, the youngest, and decide to kill him. But then they back off, and instead sell him into slavery in Egypt. Now we know that God doesn't will for siblings to kill each other, or sell one of their brother into slavery!

While in Egypt, Joseph rises to a position of prominence and power, but then loses that position and is thrown into jail on false charges of sexual harassment! I can't help but ask whether Joseph, sitting in jail though he's innocent, wondered where is God's will in all of this! But through it all, Joseph remains faithful and obedient to God.

Eventually, Joseph is vindicated, and is restored to a position of power under Pharaoh. Joseph can interpret dreams, and he tells Pharaoh that there will be a severe famine in the future. Joseph is put in charge of the grain houses, and storing up grain for Egypt's future.

Back in Canaan where Joseph's father and brothers remained, the famine is severe. Jacob and his family can be wiped out unless they get food, and God's promise to Abraham would be left

unfulfilled. So some of Joseph's brothers are sent to Egypt, in hopes of buying grain. There, they are reunited with Joseph, whom they had sold into slavery years before. Joseph is able to forgive them. They are restored as a family. Joseph provides the food necessary to keep his family alive.

In all of this, Joseph is able to see God working out His will even through his brothers' jealous anger and what they did to him. The family line is preserved, and God's promise to Abraham and plan to bless the world is still alive! There are these marvelous words in Genesis 50:18-20: "Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, 'We are here as your slaves.' But Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.'"

A more modern story is the story of Joey and Rory. In 2008, a country music husband and wife couple began to gain prominence in the music world. Rory Feek, a singer-songwriter, and his wife Joey, as devoted followers of Jesus, focused many of their songs on family and faith. Their love for the Lord, and affection for one another, came through loud and clear. They cut several CD's and were featured on Gaither videos and TV broadcasts. Then they got their own TV show, *The Joey and Rory Show*. Joey, along with her sister-in-law, opened a restaurant in Tennessee. They also hosted a TV show featuring downhome talk and country cooking. Life was good for Joey and Rory and they were able to bear witness of Christ to many people.

In February of 2014 Joey gave birth to a baby. They soon learned that the little girl, Indiana, had Downs Syndrome. In a humble, open and honest way, they both on stage and off stage shared through social media what it was like for them to have a special needs child.

Later that year, Joey was diagnosed with cancer, but after surgery, she was declared cancer free. But then Joey's cancer came back, and in October of 2015 she was told that her treatments were not at all effective. She and Rory made the difficult decision to stop all treatments. Eventually Joey was put in hospice care. Both Rory and Joey again, through social media, shared their faith with the world. They also openly talked about their struggles in dealing with terminal illness. Their courage and faith were revealed in the words and pictures they shared.....and they inspired so many people who followed them in Joey's final days.

Even during this whole time they continued to record songs, and their song "If I Needed You" was nominated for a Grammy Award. Their final CD was released February 12th, 2016, and Joey died about 3 weeks later.

What happened in those last 2 years of Joey's life – was that God's will? No. Not in the sense that God wanted Joey to suffer and die at the age of 40, just as they were beginning to impact many more people for the Lord in their music and life. ***But yes.*** Given their circumstances, I believe God's will was being done through them, as they inspired probably millions of others. And their influence for Christ continues as Rory gives interviews on TV networks and stories for magazines, and through their recorded music, and a film that's been made of their lives.

We've looked at the difficult topic of the will of God by thinking of God's *intentional will* – His original plan for good for all His creation; God's *circumstantial will* – “Plan B” – His will that's done in the circumstances created when His intentional will is hindered or blocked.

Again, this is so well described in that verse in Romans: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).

*There is one more aspect of God's will that Dr. Weatherhead suggests, and it's an important one: that is **God's ultimate will**. We will look at that in the next message.*

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