

Finding God's Will
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
April 18, 2021-PM Service
Reverend Peter Jonker
Hebrews 13:20-21

Tonight we reflect on a topic that Christians think about just about every day. I want to talk to you today about the finding will of God. It's a topic at the center of the benediction we just read. After 12 chapters of exhortation and instruction, the author of Hebrews finishes his book with a final prayer, and it's a prayer that they might know the will of God: "May the Lord make you complete in everything good so that you might do his will. The will of God. From the moment we are very young we hear people using the phrase. The 5-year-old girl hears that her parents are thinking about moving to a new place, and her dad is thinking about taking a new job. Her dad explains to her: "We're trying to figure out if this is what God wants for us. We're trying to figure out if it is his will." The minister gets on the pulpit during the church service and before the reading of the law he says, "God's will for our life is found in Exodus 20 brothers and sisters, Exodus 20:1-17." The young woman talks to her friend about her love life. "I really like this guy I'm with. But I'm not sure he's the one? Should I marry him? I need God to show me his will."

God's will is not always such an easy thing to find. I think all of us know that as individuals and as institutions we can find ourselves facing big decisions, where we're not at all sure what to do, where we are terribly worried that we will do the wrong thing. Tonight I hope we can gain a little clarity when it comes to the will of God. I want to help us think clearly about God's will so that we may grow in our ability to discern it and I want to start by recognizing that there are two distinct ways in which the Bible talks about God's will. Living in God's will means first understanding these two different senses of God's will, and then bringing them together as we make our decisions.

First, sometimes when the Bible talks about the will of God, it talks about the Will of Decree. This is God's will in its grandest, most sweeping sense. The Will of Decree is God's eternal plan for creation. These are the things God has decreed will happen in this world. God has willed these things from the beginning of time and, in sovereign majesty, he is determined that they will occur. There are many Bible passages that speak of God's will this way. Ephesians 1 for example says: "With wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him." (Eph. 1:9-10) Or listen to Isaiah 46: "I am God and there is no one like me, declaring the end from the beginning, declaring from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'my purpose shall stand and I will fulfill my intention.' This is the side of God's will reflected in the Heidelberg Catechism, when it says that 'All things come to us not by chance, but from his Fatherly hand.' Both the Bible and our confession tell us that God has a grand plan for history. And he will see this plan through. This is the Will of Decree.

But this is also the part of God's will where we have hard questions, this is the part where the frustrations come in. We have this great sovereign God who has decreed that history will move in a redemptive direction. All things will be made new! Evil will be defeated! Every knee shall bow and all God's purposes will be accomplished. The grand Will of Decree flows towards goodness and shalom. But then we see history unfold and there are all these events which seem to flow in exactly the opposite direction. They don't flow towards goodness and shalom, they

flow towards chaos. The Holocaust. The Armenian Genocide. The decline of the western church. “Lord I don’t get it. Is this your will?” Sometimes the retrograde motion, the backwards flow, is in our personal life. Our beloved child leaves the faith. A spouse abandons us. A person we love dies at just the wrong time. Is this your will Lord? Why does your will allow for such things? On the ground level, the grand promise of the Will of Decree is complicated by swirls and eddies and rapids and a ton of backwards flow, and in the middle of all that churn it’s really hard to figure out the path through ordinary days.

When it comes to dealing with this part of God’s Will of Decree, I think Paul should be our guide. In Romans 9-11 we see Paul struggling with events in his life which seem to flow against the Will of Decree. He is celebrating the fact that Jesus has finally come and through his death and resurrection has set people free. The first 8 chapters of Romans are a spirited celebration of how God has worked out his plan. They celebrate the grandeur of God’s Will of Decree. But then Paul holds up the big plan against some of his personal losses. Specifically, he thinks about his brothers and sisters and family members who haven’t accepted Jesus. When it comes to his brothers and sisters, the flow seems to be going in the opposite direction, so Paul spends three chapters trying to figure out what God is doing in the short term. Do you know what his conclusion is? “O the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments; his paths beyond tracing out!” Paul finishes his struggle with God’s Will of Decree by saying, “God will save somehow, but ultimately I don’t know exactly how. “How unsearchable are his judgments; his paths beyond tracing out.”

As he wrestles with his personal question and his personal pain, Paul concludes we cannot know the precise path. We can know God’s grand purpose in his Will of Decree, but the churn of events on the ground prevent us from discerning precisely what God’s will is in an individual day or week or year. The paths are beyond tracing out. We need to have that clear as we try to find God’s will for our own lives. We can trust God’s grand plan. We can rest ourselves in his broad will of decree, but that doesn’t mean we can know his will in all the small ground-level moments of life. That path is beyond tracing out.

In his book, *Just Do Something*, Kevin DeYoung tells the story of a famous Christian author who counsels Christian believers to seek God’s will at every moment of your life, every decision, every choice should be brought before God so that you will act within his will. Which is right, of course. But then that author goes on to illustrate the point by telling the story of a horseback riding accident he had. He chastises himself because, although he’d sought God’s will about whether or not to go on a ride that morning, he’d not sought God’s will about where to ride, and OBVIOUSLY, if he had, God would have revealed his will and he would have been okay. This man means well, but I believe that he’s missing the point when it comes to God’s will. He hasn’t learned what Paul learned in Romans 9-11. He hasn’t realized that when it comes to the small stuff, you can’t figure out God’s paths ahead of time. God isn’t a crystal ball who reveals the future. God isn’t a fortune teller who will tell us where to ride our horse if we only ask.

This brings us to a second way that the Bible talks about God’s will. There is also the will of desire. When Scripture talks about God’s will it’s often referring to the behavior God wants from us. In this case God’s will for our life refers not to what he has planned, but more to how he wants us to live. There are many Bible passages that have this sense of God’s will. Like 1 John 2 where John warns the church not to follow the world and its desires, “For the world and its desires are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever.” God’s will is something you do, a set of values you follow. Matthew 7 also has this sense of God’s will: “Not everyone

who says to me, “Lord, Lord!” will enter the Kingdom of heaven. But only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.” And I think that’s also the sense in which will it used in our passage, Hebrews 13: “May the Lord make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will.” Again, the will of God is something we do, a set of rules we live by.

If the God’s Will of Decree is a mystery – beyond all tracing out – this part of God’s will is more or less clear. God has revealed this part of his will. He has shown us how he wants us to live in the world. In the words of Micah 6: “He has shown you, O Mortal, what is good. What does the Lord require of you? [What is his will?] To do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God.” He has shown you O mortal what is good. He has laid out for us the kind of life he’s looking for. The 10 commandments aren’t hidden. The fruits of the Spirit have not been put away in a file marked “Top Secret.” We know these things. We know what God desires. God gives us more than enough here to see the kind of things he wants us to value and the kind of virtues he wants us to exercise.

Not only do we know it, but we can also be formed by that will. We can immerse ourselves in God’s stories and in God’s instructions. We can pay deep attention to scripture so that we get a rich sense of God’s character, what God loves, what God hates. We can prayerfully submit to the Holy Spirit so his word can dwell in us richly. Meditate on Scripture and meditate on God’s ways for long enough, and his will starts to become part of your intuition. You start to get Holy instincts. God’s will of desire will be planted deep in your heart. Like a basketball player who shoots a hundred 3-pointers a day, the action becomes instinctive. You don’t have to think about the shot, you just do it.

So those are the two parts of God’s will. He’s told us about his Will of Decree: “I’m the one making all things new through Jesus and his church. I’m in the process of bringing all things together in Christ and you are called to seek the Kingdom with me.” He’s shown us his will of desire: “I want love, joy, peace, patience and kindness. I want you to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God.” Once we know those basic things, we have everything we need to do his will to the best of our abilities.

Bringing the two sides of God’s will together in our decisions looks more like this: Say you’re trying to decide which college to attend. This is not about you waiting around for God to give you some magic sign that points you. “I woke up in the morning and the first news story was about two people marooned on an island, the second news story was about the price of gold. I knew God wanted me to go to Calvin!” No! No! No! If you’re trying to choose a college, look first at God’s Will of Decree: God is making all things new, fighting sin, bringing people and creation back into harmony. Which of these college choices best help me to prepare for that work? Which of these colleges help me to grow the gifts God has given me, so that I can be an effective servant in his kingdom? Then you look at God’s Will of Desire: I know God wants me to live a life of love, hope, joy, faith, kindness and mercy. Can I do that at these colleges? Is there a good church community near the campus that will help form me and plant God’s Will of Desire in me? Is one of these colleges so cutthroat, so competitive in my discipline that the Spirit’s fruits won’t flourish in that soil? Would any of these college choices be about personal pride or selfish ambition (look at me everyone, I got into Harvard) instead of the Spirit’s values? Do this all prayerfully. Do this all talking to trusted Christian friends. Then choose. And what if, after all these considerations, there are 3 colleges that fit the bill? Don’t sweat it. Just choose. Act with confidence. Whichever you choose you will be acting within God’s will. And God will bless. I know I make it sound easy when I put it like that. I also know that trying to do God’s will

in the middle of the bump and grind of real life can be terrifying and uncertain. But these are the basics, these are the tools.

Finally, as we make these decisions, let us also remember that we are not the power source here. We are sailors adjusting our sails, the power comes from the wind of the Holy Spirit. That wind is strong and it cannot fail to carry our little boat to the Father's shore. So let the last word about all this not be a word of instruction, but a prayer for all of us as we try to find our way: Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great Shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, may he make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

© Rev. Peter Jonker