

FINDING THE WILL OF GOD

by Ray C. Stedman

Is there any problem more persistently difficult to a Christian, especially a young Christian, than the problem of finding the will of God? At young people's conferences, when surveys are made of subjects that young people would like to have discussed, this subject is always high on the list. Either this is no problem at all or it is a very serious and perplexing mystery. There are, of course, those uncrucified Christians who snap their fingers at this whole matter of finding the will of God and go on their own way, thus raising very serious questions as to whether they are Christians at all. But to anyone who takes the Christian faith seriously, this is usually a perplexing matter and he feels troubled over this question: "How can I find the will of God?"

It is highly significant to note how this question is usually put. The will of God is frequently conceived of as some kind of program. This idea is reflected in the questions that are asked:

- How can I find what God wants me to do?
- Who is it that God intends that I should marry?
- What kind of business does God want me to be in?
- What line of work should I follow?
- Where should I live?

Such questions indicate that, in the minds of those who ask them, the problem of finding the will of God has resolved itself into a matter of guidance. "How will God indicate his choice to me? What are the signs to look for that I may know, between two or three possible objectives, which is the right one? How much do circumstances enter into the picture? How much am I to be led by what happens to me?" These are the usual questions that are evoked by this subject of the will of God.

I wish to state flatly, at the outset of this study, that if we approach the problem this way we will never come to a satisfying answer. We are starting out on the wrong foot when we come at it in that way. I speak out of years of frustrating experience, during which I attempted to find the will of God by just such a manner. I never came to an answer until I saw that I was approaching the problem wrongly.

This is the case with many of the questions that confuse us and bewilder us about the Christian life. So frequently we have simply put the question wrong, we are approaching it in the wrong way. For the will of God is not a program, it is a relationship. It is not what you do, it is what you are. It is not primarily a question of guidance (that is a part of it, admittedly, but it is a very minor part), it is really a question of acceptance.

Have I confused you sufficiently?

Then it is time to turn to a Scripture I am sure will help us. There are only two places in the New Testament where you find the phrase, "this is the will of God," and both of these occur in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonian church. We will begin with the first of these two statements, found in Chapter 4, Verse 3:

For this is the will of God, your sanctification. {1 Th 4:3 RSV}

This is the will of God, your sanctification! Now it is obvious immediately that whatever sanctification may or may not mean (and this is one of those confused words in our Christian vocabulary), it has to do, at least, with what we are and not what we do.

As many of you may know, this word comes from the same root from which we get our word *holy*. If we

were to coin a word that exactly expresses what *sanctified* means it would be the word, "holified." "This is the will of God, your holification."

What do we mean when we say a thing is holy? Look at your Bible and it says, "Holy Bible." What makes it holy? The land of Israel is called, "the Holy land," and the city of Jerusalem is called, "the Holy City." Why? There is a quality about all three which they share in common. They all belong to God. The Bible is God's book, Israel is God's land; Jerusalem is God's city -- they are God's property! That is why they are holy, they belong to God. Perhaps one of the most helpful ways of expressing the will of God is to put it in that very practical way. The will of God is simply that you may become God's property. "This is the will of God, your sanctification; that you become God's property."

Peter states just that in his first letter. Writing to the dispersed Christians, he says in Chapter 2, Verse 9:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, {1 Pet 2:9a RSV}

In the margin, for "God's own people" we read: "a people for his possession." That's it. A people for God's possession, God's property, a people he owns and possesses. The thought is more than the idea that he owns you, it also carries with it the thought that God dwells there: You are his home. As Paul so beautifully puts it in his prayer in Ephesians 3, "that Christ may make his home in your hearts," {cf, Eph 3:17a}. That is the will of God.

He is the Holy One and it is his presence in us that makes us holy. It is his dwelling in us that makes us his property, and this ownership extends to the whole of man, every part of his being. Look at the way Paul puts it in this same letter, First Thessalonians 5, Verse 23. His prayer is,

May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. {1 Th 5:23 RSV}

"The God of peace himself." It is he who makes us holy; it is his indwelling presence that makes us his property. The Amplified Version of Paul's prayer in Ephesians 3 puts it wonderfully, "that we may be a body wholly filled and flooded with God himself."

The indwelling presence of God in our spirit, soul, and body is the will of God for us, but it is an entirely voluntary thing. Love never compels, and God is love. Therefore, the will of God is that we may voluntarily permit this occupancy of our three-fold being, body, soul and spirit. It is God's will for you that he dwell in you and completely control you, body, soul and spirit. (Or, to put it in the right order, the scriptural order, spirit, soul and body.) But you must agree to it. He will never force the issue.

Imagine, if you can, a man or a woman, boy or a girl, whose whole spirit, soul and body is unreservedly, unconditionally, at the disposal of a God who dwells within and who is quite ready to work through the human mind and will of that man or woman, boy or girl. If you met that person, whom would you see behaving -- man or God? You would see God behaving, not man. That is God's will for us, that we may be instruments of his life so others will see God behaving. If you are that man or woman, boy or girl, and the God that is dwelling within is Jesus Christ the eternal Son, Lord of Lords and King of Kings, who would the world see -- you, or Christ in you? This is what we mean when we sing,

Let the beauty of Jesus be seen in me,
All His wonderful passion and purity;
O Thou Spirit divine, all my nature refine...

(No, no, that will never do! God is not in the business of refining natures. "All my nature possess," that is it! "But," you say, "that does not rhyme." I don't care if it does or not, it is the truth anyway.)

O Thou Spirit divine, all my nature possess,
Till the beauty of Jesus be seen in me.

Now we are ready to formulate our first statement of what the will of God is:

1. The will of God is a possession permitted.

Do not talk about finding what God is asking of you: A voluntary submission to his desire to inhabit you -- body, soul and spirit -- so that your being, your redeemed humanity, may be the full expression of his life. Do you see that? Do not talk about finding the will of God in any other terms than that. "This is the will of God, even your sanctification."

God's question to you is, are you willing that this should be true? Will you agree to it?

This is why Paul begins that marvelous 12th chapter to the Romans with the exhortation:

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies [because when you give your body you give the soul and the spirit with it] a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your intelligent service [your intelligent purpose] proving [or demonstrating] what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. {cf, Rom 12:1-2}

That is the will of God. A body presented to God for his exclusive use.

How do you feel about this?

Do you regard it as an intrusion, an interruption of your plans and your program? Or do you regard it as an infinite honor that mere creatures may be the full expression of the holy and magnificent life of God?

This is what Paul calls an intelligent fulfillment of purpose.

Now, you never can find the will of God until you start there. Have you ever made an intelligent presentation of yourself, your body, your soul (your emotional and mental life), and your spirit unto God? Have you ever presented yourself as what you are, nothing, in order that you may have what he is, everything, and step out into every new day in complete expectation that his life will be manifest in you? That is Christianity. That is the will of God.

Now I know what many of you are thinking: You are saying, "Oh, I have heard this before. I have known this truth, and I have made this surrender, and meant it when I did it. I can look back at times, more than once, when I have presented myself to God and said, 'Lord, here I am, take me, use me,' and meant every word of it. But in the hour of pressure, when temptation came upon me, when I got out of the church service and was away from the rest of the Christians, on my own, in the midst of the pressures and frustrations and dog-eat-dog attitudes of the world, I found that I was too weak to do what I had intended to do. I know what God's will is for me, but my problem is not what God wants me to do, but how to do it."

I want you to know there is no one more aware of this aspect of the problem than the Apostle Paul. Read that graphic biographical account he gives us in the seventh chapter of Romans and you will see that he has fully entered into this sense of frustration and bewilderment at this point. He says, "to will is present with me, but how to perform that which is good I find not," {Rom 7:18 KJV}. That is the problem. "I can will what is right but I cannot do it."

Now, he has not forgotten this aspect in writing to the Thessalonians. The question of "How" is strongly before him as he writes here. Note verses one and two of chapter four,

Finally, brethren, we beseech and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you learn from us how you ought to live and to please God, just as you are doing, you do so more and more. For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. {1 Th 4:1-2 RSV}

He had thoroughly gone into this matter with them. This was a very basic, elementary, foundational thing in the gospel that he preached to them. "I know," he said, "it is no use telling you what to do without telling you how to do it, and I have gone into this with you." He had carefully imparted to them the instructions which he had received directly from the Lord Jesus himself, and they were already doing them. He says, "Just as you are doing, do so more and more." These people knew the "how" as well as the "what." And we have a clue as to what these instructions included as to this matter of "how" in his phrase here, "to please God." He had taught these Thessalonian Christians how to please God.

What kind of a life pleases God? What ingredient is absolutely essential before any life is pleasing to Him? Perhaps some of you are already thinking of Hebrews 11:6, "Without faith it is impossible to please him." Notice, it does not say it is difficult -- it says it is impossible! Therefore, the life that pleases God is the life that is lived by faith. This is the essential quality which Paul had imparted to those Thessalonian Christians by the instructions given to him through the Lord Jesus. They must live a life of faith.

Faith, in this context, simply means believing that God's view of a matter is true no matter what everybody else says. How you look at a temptation makes all the difference in the world in the power that it has upon you. If God says a thing is bad and we say it is good, we will soon be doing it, and be under the power of it; and vice versa. If God says a thing is good, and we say it is bad, we will never discover the glory and liberty of it. Faith believes that, in the cross of Jesus Christ, God took your old life, received from Adam, and judged it as having no good in it, sentenced it, and executed it. Faith believes that there is nothing left in you that is any good of itself, that your abilities and knowledge, qualities that the world may applaud and acclaim as marvelous and wonderful, are really good for nothing in producing that which has any value in the sight of God. Faith believes that. And faith believes that in its place God gave you a totally new basis of operation so that you no longer are trying to be good by your own efforts, but you are putting into practice God's promise to do in you and through you what you cannot do yourself, which is simply everything. Do you understand that principle? Have you grasped the difference between you trying your human best to do something for him, and Jesus Christ doing his divine best through your obedient humanity? Have you discovered this?

This is the second part of the will of God:

2. It is not only a possession permitted, but also a principle perceived.

It is the life of faith that pleases God by similar situation and regarding it as God regards it.

Now, suppose you do this. Suppose you are quite willing to be God's property. You even long for it; you want with all your heart that your human life may be the expression of all that God is, and you understand that each circumstance you encounter is to be looked at from God's point of view and you act on that basis. Then how do you know for sure that you have found the will of God? What unmistakable mark will indicate to you, and to everyone else, that you are a body wholly filled and flooded with God himself? Do you know what it will be? That mark will inevitably be purity practiced! Paul declares:

... that you abstain from immorality; that each one of you know how to take a wife for himself in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like heathen who do not know God; that no man transgress, and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we solemnly forewarned you. For God has not called us for uncleanness, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you. {1 Th 4:3b-8 RSV}

In one spot in this section the rendering of our Revised Version is hopelessly weak, even wrong. The reading, "that each one of you know how to take a wife for himself," is pure interpretation, for what it literally says is,

"... that each one of you know how to possess his vessel in holiness and honor."

If you are an unmarried maiden, perhaps your heart leaped up with expectation when it appeared that Scripture commands every young man to take a wife for himself. I am sorry to take this passage away from you, but it simply does not say that. What it says is "that you may learn to possess your vessel in holiness and honor."

Other translations read here "to master your body," "to control the body." That is an acceptable rendering if you remember that the body means far more than the physical mechanism with its five senses. It includes as well the mind, and the heart, the emotions. The "vessel" means our total life structure, our life mechanism, the body, mind and soul.

This is clearly indicated by that other verse where the phrase, "this is the will of God" occurs. Chapter 5 of First Thessalonians, Verse 18:

Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.
{1 Th 5:18 RSV}

That indicates clearly that the mind and the will is involved. Give thanks, rejoice in all circumstances. This includes more than the body then, so that the "possession of the vessel" means the total man.

Now we can come to our third and final formulation of the will of God:

3. The will of God is not only a possession permitted, and a principle perceived, but it is visibly evidenced by a purity practiced.

I want to read these verses for you again in Phillip's very fine rendering.

Every one of you should learn to control his body, keeping it pure and treating it with respect, and never regarding it as an instrument for self-gratification, as do pagans with no knowledge of God. You cannot break this rule without in some way cheating your fellow-men. And you must remember that God will punish all who do offend in this matter, and we have warned you how we have seen this work out in our experience of life. The calling of God is not to impurity but to the thorough purity, and anyone who makes light of this matter is not making light of man's ruling but of God's command. It is not for nothing that the Spirit God gives us is called the *Holy* Spirit. {1 Th 4:3b-8 J. B. Phillips}

Tell me now, is not that Scripture coming to grips with life as we know it?

A Christian father told me a few days ago that his son, in his late teens, came to him, and said, "Dad, I know what Christianity says about sex outside of marriage, but judging from what my friends say, I feel like I am missing something. I feel that life is passing me by and there is something I am being cheated of. I want you to know, Dad, that I mean to find out for myself."

There you have the satanic lie in all its naked allurements: Do not think for one moment that this pressure, this fearsome pressure to misuse the body, to use it as an instrument of self-gratification, is not being felt by our Christian young people in the full power of it almost every moment today. I confess to you that I wept this week in frustration and sorrow when I found in this auditorium a crumpled note that had been passed among our young people during the evening service last week which contained a number of filthy and obscene words. I wept out of utter frustration in trying to convey to them the terrible danger of these things, and the ease with which many are deluded and drift into a sense of carelessness in these matters.

But notice how Paul handles this. He returns to the principle of faith. He says, "I warn you that what God has said about this will prove to be true. Satan is a liar. What he appears to offer, he never delivers, he can never fulfill."

What that young man thought would be his by the gratification of his fleshly desires outside of marriage would never be realized. Paul says, "I am not sermonizing. This is not mere preaching, I am telling you the truth. The result is completely predictable. What God says will happen. The Lord is the avenger in all these things."

What a tragic toll is being extracted daily because of this terrible delusion, this awful decline of morality, a toll that finds its expression in tension, torment, and nervous collapse, in mental illness, despair, and even suicide. The rate mounts up and up, and we seem to be utterly blind as to what is the cause of it. "God is the avenger of

these things, " Paul says. He writes to the Ephesians, and in Chapter 5, says, "You Christians are not even to talk about these things among yourselves. They are not fit to be mentioned among saints. Do not let anyone persuade you by plausible words that things are otherwise, for it is for this cause that the wrath of God comes upon the children of disobedience," {cf, Eph 5:3-6}.

I tell you, it takes power to live today. You know that, do you not? Out in the business world, with its sharp practices and its easy morality, in the social world, with its constant emphasis upon the gratification of the flesh, in all the areas of our life it takes power to live today. But it is not your power, it takes God's power. His is the only adequate power. And let me add this: The times in which we are living are rapidly weeding out the phonies! If we have not learned what the will of God is in terms of our experience, all the facades that we have erected for others to see will come crashing in utter ruins at our feet as the pressure of the times mounts and exposes the rotten fabric of our lives.

"This is the will of God, your sanctification," that you may be a body wholly filled and flooded with God himself.

What a challenge, what a glory, what a marvellous thing, that in the midst of this sweeping current of immorality washing everything down the stream to utter destruction, there may be those who are able to stand in wholesome purity, reflecting the love and grace and glory of the life of Jesus Christ. This is the will of God!

When you have found that, the matter of guidance takes care of itself. It is easy for God to lead someone who belongs to him body, soul, and spirit.

Perhaps we should take a brief moment to allow each of us, in the loneliness of his own relationship with God, to talk to him, to present to him, if you have never done it before, your body and soul and spirit as his -- his property -- and to remember that this is maintained only as you believe him about every circumstance into which you come. This is the life of faith. Thus, and only thus can you practice the purity of body, soul, and spirit that is God's purpose and will for you today.

Will you, in a moment of silent, quiet prayer commit yourself again to him, to his keeping grace in this perilous world?

Prayer

Our Father, thank you for these mighty truths, to know that all the glory and the beauty of life as God intended it to be may be fulfilled in each of us as, without hesitation or reservation, we fulfill your will, and become your property. We pray, Lord, that the full meaning of this may break upon us as we walk out on this great principle, that you are in us, us, Lord, our life, our strength, our victory, our peace, our sanctification. Thank you. In Christ's name, Amen.

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