

DOING GOD'S WILL

By SCOTT GRANT

I have a friend who regularly would say, in a distinctive Midwestern accent, "I wonder what God's will is." She poked fun at herself when noting the regularity with which she brought up the subject. Some of us in our fellowship, in a friendly way, would imitate her when we were speculating about God's will. The truth is, we were all wondering about the will of God, and her endearing way of speaking to the subject allowed us to engage with it more easily. Those of us who have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ regularly wrestle with God's will: what it is and how you find out what it is.

Sometimes, the will of God is all too clear; the scriptures tell us what to do, but we don't want to do it or we seem unable to do it. Other times, the will of God seems like some buried treasure that we'll never dig up. In any case, we need help. We need help to do what God wants us to do, and we need help finding out what he wants us to do. The Apostle Paul comes to our aid in Romans 12:1-2. Finding and doing the will of God involves presenting ourselves to God and renewing our minds.

Romans 12-16 not only constitutes the fourth and final section of Paul's letter, it features what he really wants to say. Why, then, did he write Romans 1-11? Because everything in Romans 1-11 helps him make his appeals in Romans 12-16. One section of Romans cascades into another so that everything that has come before flows into the next section. If, for example, you study Romans 1-8 without moving on to Romans 9-16, you never see where the river is heading.

In Romans 1-4, Paul featured the faithfulness of God, which created a worldwide family defined by faith in the lordship of Jesus Christ. In Romans 5-8, Paul demonstrated that this family, as God's new humanity, has experienced a new exodus, not from Egypt but from sin, and that it journeys through the wilderness of this world on its way to the new Promised Land, the new creation. In Romans 9-11, Paul showed that God has been, and will be, faithful to the Jews, the people with whom he partnered to rescue the world from sin and death. In Romans 12-16, Paul presents his vision for community life based on common belief in the lordship of Christ. The more general instructions of Romans 12-13 prepare the way for the more specific instructions of Romans 14-15. Paul's goal is to unite Jews and Gentiles in the Roman church so that they may "with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 15:6).

The first two verses of Romans 12 introduce and summarize the final section. Some of the key words that appear in these verses reappear later in the context of more specific exhortations. The most significant of these is the word "good," which Paul will contrast with "evil." Paul has shown in Romans 1-11 that God has defeated evil through the death and resurrection of Christ. Now, in Romans 12-16, we are invited to participate in the implementation of his victory through the Holy Spirit, whom God has sent to renew the world.

Romans 12:1-2:

¹*Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.*
²*And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.*

Present your bodies

Paul's appeal in verses 1-2 is based on the "mercies of God," a phrase that neatly sums up the gospel, which he featured in Romans 1-11. The word "therefore" also ties Paul's appeal to Romans 1-11 in that verses 1-2 share similarities with parts of the letter that span the first 11 chapters. We live in a culture that demands its rights. Sometimes we complain, when things don't go our way, "I don't deserve this." Whatever it is we think we deserve, Romans 1-11 tells us that we deserve worse. All deserve condemnation, but God has been merciful through the gospel, which features the lordship of Jesus Christ, the defeat of sin and death, and the restoration of humanity and creation.¹

Reflecting on God's mercies should help us carry out Paul's exhortation concerning worship. Whereas the Mosaic Law of the old covenant called for animal sacrifices, the new covenant, ratified by the blood of Christ, calls for human sacrifices. The other difference—for which we can be thankful—is that we're not put to death. Nevertheless, we sacrifice ourselves to God with the knowledge that we deserve death and that God in his mercy has given us new life, in relationship to him, because of our union with Christ. We present ourselves to God as those "alive from the dead" (Romans 6:13). Living sacrifices, unlike animal sacrifices, continue in their effectiveness.

Specifically, the exhortation is to present to God our "bodies"—that is, our entire selves, including our bodies. Humans who worshiped other gods dishonored their bodies, but we honor our bodies when we offer them to God, in that they were made by him and for him (Romans 1:24). The gospel upholds the dignity of the human body, unlike Gnostic thought, which finds its way into New Age thinking and advocates an escape from the body. On the other hand, the body is not to be worshiped, as some would do with it today. Instead, it is offered to God as part of one's worship. There is nothing more personal than our bodies, and when we offer them to God, we're saying that they belong to him. Paul is urging upon us the kind of offerings to which the animal sacrifices always pointed, as David observed: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise" (Psalm 51:17).

Our sacrifices are not only living, they are "holy" and "acceptable to God," descriptions that were applied to the sacrifices that the law commanded. The setting aside of an animal for sacrifice made it holy. Our sacrifices are holy in that we make ourselves available to God. Animals without blemish were selected for sacrifice. When the Israelites intentionally withheld their best animals, God was not pleased (Malachi 1:8-10). We are therefore called to hold nothing back: to offer God everything. Presenting ourselves to God as a living sacrifice means total commitment. With such sacrifices God is pleased.

Animal sacrifices were integral to Israel's worship. Now Paul calls human sacrifices "your spiritual service of worship." The word translated "spiritual" would be better translated "rational" or "reasonable." Humans, who thought themselves wise, foolishly worshiped other gods (Romans 1:22-24). Offering one's body to God, in

response to his mercies, is what one does when he's in his right mind. This kind of worship integrates our bodies and minds.

It also fulfills the Mosaic Law and transforms the worship that the law commanded. Only priests in Israel would "present" the animals for sacrifice. Now we're all priests, and we ourselves are the sacrifice.

Renew your minds

The word translated "world" in verse 2 would be more literally translated "age." The Israelites conceived of two ages: this age and the age to come. This age is characterized by opposition to God. Such opposition took a particular form in the world of the recipients of this letter, with both pagan and Jewish influences. The age to come would be inaugurated when God acted decisively on behalf of his people. The kingdom of God would come. God has acted in Jesus Christ to rescue us from sin and death. He has given us his Holy Spirit. The age to come has broken into this age.

Living in this age, we are exposed to its values, many of which reflect opposition to God and the gospel. Our age promotes individualism, materialism, consumerism and success at almost any cost. If we allow the values of this age to influence us, we will be "conformed" to it. We will evaluate relationships, sexuality, careers and parenting as if this age were more important than the age to come. Paul, however, would have us be influenced instead by the values of the age to come. If this occurs, we will be "transformed," living the life of the future in the present and giving evidence that God has acted decisively in Jesus Christ. The words translated "eternal life" in the New Testament would be more literally translated "life of age": life of the age to come, which we experience now. We are called to be, in a word, countercultural.

What does it look like to be transformed? In short, it looks like Christ. God "predestined us to be conformed to the image of his Son," who flawlessly bears the image of God, as all humans were intended to do (Romans 8:29). The enduring image connected with the Son of God is the cross, which symbolizes God's love for the world. When we are transformed, we are not conformed to this age but to the image of God's Son.² We become fully human, if you will, embodying costly love, bearing and reflecting God's glory, serving him in creation now and in the new creation later. We are transformed from "old age" people into "new age" people.

Because the command to "be transformed" is in the passive voice, we are left to assume that we cannot transform ourselves. Transformation is God's work, through the Holy Spirit. Only he can transform us into men and women who increasingly reflect his glory. One day, he will complete our transformation, as the Apostle John observes concerning the return of Christ: "We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is" (1 John 3:2). We cannot transform ourselves, but we can renew our minds, and if we renew our minds, we're left to assume that God will transform us.

The word "mind" conveys a worldview: a way of thinking and believing. Because of idolatry, God gave humans over to "a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper" (Romans 1:28). With one's mind a person decides what to do with his or her body. A mind at the mercy of the influence of this age will endorse things that are not proper. Our minds, therefore, need to be renewed.

In Jewish thought, renewal took place through one's connection to the Mosaic Law. When Paul talks of renewal, however, he's talking about the involvement of the Holy Spirit, which fulfills the role of the law.³ We serve God "in newness of the Spirit," not the oldness of the law (Romans 7:6). Sin invaded the law, waged war against Israel's mind and imprisoned the nation (Romans 7:23).⁴ The Spirit is a revealer of truth. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 3:18 and 4:6 that the Spirit reveals to us the glory of God, as seen in the face of Christ, and transforms us into the image of God.

Still, we have a part, and that part is to renew our minds, even if the Holy Spirit is helping us to do so. Because Paul is not specific regarding methodology, one is left to assume that there is more than one way to renew one's mind. However, in that we know from 2 Corinthians that transformation takes place through exposure to the glory of God, we can assume that renewal involves, at the very least, some application of thought and heart to the greatness of God, as seen in all his attributes. If we renew our minds, the Spirit will transform us. You become like that which you worship, either the God of creation or the gods of this world (Psalm 115:8). God is renewing and transforming his world through his Holy Spirit. When we renew our minds that we might be transformed, we become caught up in God's plan to transform the world and even, through the Holy Spirit, become agents of renewal and transformation.

Transformation through renewal of the mind results in the ability to "prove"—or "approve of"—the will of God. The renewed mind, contrary to a depraved mind that endorses improper behavior, values God and his will. The more significant struggle for the believer is not discovering God's will but wanting to do his will. Someone once said, "Have we never risen from our knees in haste for fear God's will should become too unmistakable if we prayed longer?"⁵ God has revealed his general will in the scriptures. He also continues to reveal his more specific will on a day-by-day basis to those whose minds are being renewed. If God has not yet revealed his specific will for us, it may be because we're not ready to do it. The renewal of the mind results in behavior in accordance with God's will so that we do those things that are proper. Paul was critical of Jews who broke God's law even though they were confident that they could "approve the things that are essential" because of their connection to the law (Romans 2:18). The Holy Spirit enables God's people to value and carry out God's will in a way that transcends the law. The will of God cannot be reduced to a set of rules, much less a set of rules that one people uses to reinforce their supposed superiority to the rest of the world. Neither can the will of God be codified.⁶

The will of God, as it is revealed in the scriptures and to his people day by day, is "good and acceptable and perfect." Just as we are acceptable, or pleasing, to God when we offer ourselves to him, we are pleasing to him when we approve of and carry out his will, contrary to those who don't possess the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:8). When we offer ourselves to God, we make ourselves available to him so that we can respond to his will. The word translated "perfect" concerns the fulfillment of purpose. We fulfill God's purpose for us when we respond to his will. It's deeply satisfying when our lives resonate with God's purposes for us.

Paul's goal in Romans 12:1-2 is for the Romans and, by extension, us to do God's will. Motivated by God's mercy, we present ourselves to God and renew our minds so that we might do God's will. In the rest of Romans 12-16, Paul will reveal his understanding of God's will for community life. We are transformed not for the sake of individual piety but for the sake of others—others in our spiritual community, others in

our world. We will need to stay alert in these chapters, while presenting ourselves to God and renewing our minds, so that we might discern how we might do God's will in our context.⁷

What it looks like

What does Romans 12:1-2 look like in a life? It looks like Isaiah 6. Isaiah 6 illustrates what Romans 12 commands. The prophet connects with the mercies of God, he offers himself to God, he is transformed by renewing his mind and he does the will of God, which concerns ministry to others.

Isaiah 6:1-8:

¹In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. ²Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. ³And one called out to another and said,

*"Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts,
The whole earth is full of His glory."*

⁴And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. ⁵Then I said,

"Woe is me, for I am ruined!

*Because I am a man of unclean lips,
And I live among a people of unclean lips;*

For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts."

⁶Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. ⁷He touched my mouth with it and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven." ⁸Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" Then I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

Isaiah has a vision of the Lord that reflects his holiness, which includes his moral purity. Isaiah considers himself to be destroyed by what he presumes to be the Lord's judgment against him, and he has nothing to say in his defense. The reason for his ruination has to do with lips and eyes—his lips; the lips of the people he lives among; and his eyes, which have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. The lips of the seraphim proclaimed the holiness of the Lord and shook the thresholds of the temple. Isaiah recognizes that words formed by his lips do not reflect a life of such worship. He recognizes that the same is true of the people of Israel, whom he lives among. The problem, though, isn't so much with the people; it's with Isaiah. He lives among these people, and he hasn't lived substantially different from the way they have lived.

Have we seen the Lord in this way? Have we seen the holy King, the Lord of hosts, sitting on his throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of his robe filling the temple, being waited on by his attendants whose voices of worship cause the temple to tremble? Have we seen the awesome majesty of the Lord? Have we seen that he is holy, holy, holy? You can see the Lord this way right now. Already in your mind, as you have read Isaiah 6, there is a picture of this scene. It's almost impossible to concentrate on a story

like this without forming a picture of it in your mind. Spend a few moments with your eyes closed and focus in on the picture.

This vision calls for total worship and uncompromising devotion. Now think of your lips and the words that come out of them. Do your lips reflect total worship and uncompromising devotion? If they don't, woe is you, for you are ruined. This is a bone-rattling, heart-stopping, dead-in-your-tracks vision of the Lord. Many of us live with a sense of guilt that is vague enough to make us think that we'll be good enough for God if we can crank up our spiritual lives another notch. It takes this kind of vision of the Lord to knock that belief out of us and cause us to fall flat on our faces before a holy God.

The seraph takes a burning coal from the altar, where animal sacrifices were burned. In this picture, the coal represents substitutionary sacrifice—atonement for sin. The coal touches Isaiah in the mouth, on his lips. He had acknowledged his lips as unclean—unpresentable to the Lord. The Lord, through the seraph, touches Isaiah at the place of sin, the place of recognized need. The seraph then tells Isaiah that this touch means that his iniquity is taken away, that his sin is forgiven. He's been altered so that he can see a vision of God and live, or at least to know that he can see a vision of God and live. The image of the coal is fulfilled in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, who took away our sin and enables us to behold the glory of God (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Isaiah was touched at his place of acknowledged sin. Where is that place for you? Where is that place that causes you guilt and shame? Where is that place you don't want anyone to know about? Where is that place that is so deep and dark and walled off that it is inaccessible to anyone? You know where it is. Jesus knows where it is, too. And if you'll acknowledge it and confess it before him, he'll go to that place, and he will touch it with the burning coal of his love. Because of the touch of Jesus, your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven. Your unholy condition has been altered. In your complete depravity and your specific sin, you've been totally forgiven, totally cleansed, totally purified.

The Lord doesn't coerce Isaiah, and initially he doesn't tell the prophet what he wants him to do. This has the effect of (1) inviting, not forcing, Isaiah to participate in divine purposes and of (2) inviting Isaiah to trust the Lord for how Isaiah will be specifically involved in those purposes. The Lord draws out the passion and calls forth the faith. Isaiah jumps at the opportunity. He accepts the job without even knowing what the job is.

What has happened to this man that he is this eager and has this kind of faith? He's been devastated by the holiness of the Lord and restored by the mercy of the Lord. That's why he responds so passionately to this strange invitation. If the Lord invites—the holy Lord of hosts who took away his iniquity and forgave his sin—then Isaiah will respond. He not only sees God and lives, he sees God, lives and serves.

Such a vision will put fire in your belly and will fuel passionate availability to the Lord. If you're serving solely out of a sense of duty or obligation, or if you feel that you've had your arm twisted, you may need to back off and wait for a fresh vision of the Lord.

What is the Lord going to ask Isaiah to do? He's going to ask him to preach. What is he going to preach with? His lips! That part of him which he thought disqualified him has now become the vehicle for ministry. He speaks with clean lips. Your place of sin, touched by the burning coal of Jesus' love, becomes not your weakness but your strength. It becomes a place of passion and compassion, and you minister from that place.

Isaiah's job assignment borders on the incredulous. The prophet is commissioned to preach truth to unresponsive people until the Lord devastates the land and sends them into exile (Isaiah 6:9-13). It's not a job Isaiah or anyone else would have chosen, but he takes it. If the Lord told me to preach for decades to a church that would not listen to me, I'd want to ask for another assignment. The Lord calls us to serve him in ways we wouldn't have chosen for ourselves. Serving the Lord is costly. It involves sacrifice. Isaiah would say, and Paul would agree, that it's worth it. Anything that involves obedience to the one who loves us and calls us to fulfill his design for us is worth it.

By the mercies of God, Isaiah presents his body a living and holy sacrifice. He has been transformed by renewing his mind with a vision of the holiness and mercy of God. He discerns that the will of God is to involve himself with the community in a specific way, and he does it. Motivated by God's mercy, we present ourselves to God and renew our minds that we might do his will.

Here am I

The voice of the Lord goes out today, looking for people devastated by his holiness and restored by his mercy, for people responsive to him and willing to trust him to make the call with the direction of their lives. Today he is saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" Do you hear his voice, drawing out your passion and calling forth your faith? If you do, here's what you have to do: Say to the Lord, "Here am I. Send me." After that, he'll get you where he needs to get you. As our friend Jan Johnson says, "You do the connecting; God does the perfecting."

The voice of the Lord goes out today to Peninsula Bible Church, to its leaders and to the entire community. Is this a church that wants a fresh vision of the holiness and mercy of God? Do we want to be renewed? Do we want to be transformed? Do we want to be agents of renewal and transformation in our world? Let us say together as a church to our Lord, "Here are we. Send us."

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¹ The plural use of the noun "mercy" relates to the two-fold mercy articulated in Romans 11:30-32, where Paul demonstrated that God has been merciful to both Jews and Gentiles. Despite their differences, the Jews and Gentiles of the Roman church are now part of the same spiritual family. Paul appeals to them as "brethren," brothers and sisters who must learn to live together as God's family despite their differences.

² Paul uses similar renewal and transformation language that involves God's "image" in Colossians 3:9-11 and 2 Corinthians 3:18.

³ In 1 Corinthians 2:16 and 7:40 Paul all but equates having the mind of Christ with having the Spirit of God. Renewal is also connected with the Holy Spirit in Titus 3:5.

⁴ Paul in Romans 7 uses the first-person singular "I" as a way of identifying with Israel.

⁵ Quoted by C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses*, © 1975, 1980 by the Trustees of the Estate of C.S. Lewis, Touchstone, New York. P. 139.

⁶ The word translated “prove” (*dokimazō*) and its antithesis (*adokimos*) are both used in Romans 1:28, where Paul is speaking of Gentile history: “And just as they did not see fit [*dokimazō*] to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved [*adokimos*] mind, to do those things which are not proper.”

⁷ Concepts associated with the will of God in verse 2 (“prove,” “good” and “acceptable”) surface later in Romans in the context of community life (Romans 12:9, 21; 13: 3, 4; 14:16, 18, 21-22; 15:2; 16:19). The will of God in verse 2 concerns community life.