

Finding the Elusive Will of God

Rom 12:1-2; Eph 1:3-10

Intro:

Wow, look at this 10 bucks! What am I supposed to do with this? Am I supposed to keep this money? (Shake magic 8 ball). Well if I'm not supposed to keep it am I supposed to take myself out for ice cream after the service? (shake magic 8 ball). Am I supposed to give this money away? (shake Magic 8 ball) Yes!? Oh what a drag! Alright, well you are going to have to show me who I am supposed to give this money to. Is it...

How do I know what God's will is for my life? How do I know what He wants from me? What He wants me to do, who He wants me to marry, where He wants me to serve, where He wants me to go to school, where He wants me to work? How do I make sure I don't miss what He has for me and end up with His second best? I'm tired of guessing, how can I know His will for my life for sure?!

If you were here for the first Sunday in May you may remember a sermon about David and his companion Abishai sneaking into Saul's camp at night and finding Saul asleep with his spear stuck in the ground by his head. And you might remember that Abishai, a mighty warrior, claimed to have a word from God. He told David that since God had given him the opportunity to kill Saul God obviously wanted them to do it. Not only that, but Abishai was willing to do the deed himself.

But if you remember that story you may also remember that David did a pretty strange thing at that point. He turned Abishai's offer down and acted on conviction instead of opportunity. He said, just because the opportunity was there, and the desire was there –David wanted to become king – didn't mean it was God's will.

David knew that to kill Saul would be to murder the Lord's anointed king, and despite how bad he might have wanted this he knew it was not God's will.

So, having the opportunity or the open door to do something doesn't mean that it is God's will to do it. What then is God's will for our lives? Does God have a plan for us? Can we know this? Should we know this?

These are important life altering questions that need answers. And in my experience there are two main views in the church on how to live in God's will. The first camp prays about their decisions and seeks God's direction, and then waits for peace. But this raises difficult questions: How much peace do I need? Does peace mean no nervousness at all? If it does

how do people get past that last day before they get married? Does peace before a big decision feel different than a normal day when I'm not making a decision?

The other camp is full of skeptics and realists who have given up on praying at all because finding God's will seems so elusive. These people had friends who claimed to follow God's will and got married only to end up divorced a short while later or watched friends claim great peace about investments they were making only months before the stock market crashed. God seemed to be letting these people down.

And so many people don't bother to pursue God's will at all.

Neither of these camps sound particularly appealing, luckily there is an alternative.

In fact the confusion about the will of God is actually a lot simpler to understand than we might think. The confusion comes from the fact that when we talk about the will of God we are actually referring to two different things. Today we are going to be looking at two texts that demonstrate the different sides of the "Will of God" coin – the "Decree" will of God and the "Desire" will of God.

The Decree Will of God

First I want to look at is something theologians call the "Decree" Will of God. And I should mention at this point that I got the format for this sermon from a friend of mine, Pastor Jason Tarn and a lecture He gave entitled "Decision Making & the will of God". If you are interested in getting a copy of his lecture come and talk with me after the service.¹

Okay, so what is the decree will of God?

When we talk about the "Decree" will of God we are referring to this idea that God has a plan for our lives, and indeed for everything that happens in the world, and He is carrying these plans out in a very specific way. Words like "predestined" or "foreknew" or "in accordance with His plan" or "in the fullness of time" come up a lot when we talk about this kind of will of God.

And this is an idea that is clearly spelled out in the Scriptures. So, at this point I would like to draw our attention to our first text today, Ephesians 1:3-10. If you have your Bibles I think you

¹ Decree and Desire format adapted from "*Decision Making & the Will of God – Part One*" Delivered by Pastor Jason Tarn on March 21st, 2010 http://www.dhbc.ca/sermons/?sermon_id=139

are going to want to follow along as there are some really big ideas in this text that you will want to see for yourself.

[Read Ephesians 1:3-10]

This text is absolutely full of big words and mysterious ideas – in fact Paul even uses the word “mystery” in verse 9. So what is Paul talking about here?

In a word, he is talking about the decree will of God. Popularly we make reference to this will when we talk about things that have already happened. For example, Nikki and I are looking to buy a house right now. We have seen all sorts of great houses, but one in particular caught our attention this last week. It would be a perfect house for us, it is big enough to host church events and close enough that I could walk to work, but the price was a bit high. So we put in an offer that we could afford... but it got rejected. And so we said to each other, “Well I guess it wasn’t God’s will for us to get this house at this time.”

Or perhaps you are graduating this year and have applied to several universities for next fall but some turned you down. You could say, “Well I guess it wasn’t God’s will that I go there.”

When we talk like this we are referring to the idea that God has a plan for our lives that is unalterable. And we can see this plan clearly in the past – things that happened, happened because God planned them. In Psalm 139:16 David says “All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.”

But more than just having a plan for our lives as individuals, the “Decree” will of God speaks of God’s ultimate plan for the whole world; a plan that is not up for debate.

In Genesis 1 when God said “let there be light” there was no debate in the heavens about preference for darkness, the text reads “God said... And there was light.”

When God decided to make people in His image Adam didn’t get a say in the matter – it just was because God willed it to be that way.

Later when humanity rebelled against God and God decided that He was going to send a flood to wipe people off the face of the earth there was no struggle that He had to overcome in order to bring this disaster about. He did no battle with the god of the ocean. He simply willed and it occurred.

All throughout the Old Testament there is this strong sense of the Divine “decree” will of God. And in the New Testament we find out what that ultimate plan was. And it is this ultimate plan that we read about in Ephesians 1.

Look at verse 4. “For He chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight.”

While humanity had rebelled against God at the very beginning it was always God’s plan to bring humanity back to the relationship we shared with Him in the Garden of Eden.

This was the ultimate exercise of His will of decree, and verse 7 continues.

“In Him (That’s Jesus) we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace.”

The mystery of God’s will that verse 9 talks about is that when Jesus died on the cross something called “substitutionary atonement” occurred. Jesus became our substitute, He stood in our place, and He atoned or paid the debt for our sin that we owed to God.

And the mystery is this: Jesus wasn’t God’s wiping boy. Some poor fool God sent down to take our punishment. No, Jesus was God, God come to earth to pay the debt owed to Himself on our behalf.

It is like a judge whose son is convicted of murder and who comes before him and pleads guilty. The father, the judge can’t just say “it is no big deal that you killed someone I forgive you”, if he said that he would be in contempt of justice. Instead the father as judge declares “you are guilty” and “the punishment for this crime is death”, and then that judge comes down out of his podium, takes off his judge’s robes and says, “I will take the punishment for my son, I will die in his place.”

Justice is served, but it is served on God, on Jesus, in our place. This is substitutionary atonement. And this was the ultimate “decree” will of God. All history was crafted to bring this mystery to pass and nothing on earth could ever stand in the way of this Divine Decree will of God.

Satan tried, it didn’t work.

So God has a will, a plan for our lives and an ultimate plan for the world and there is no standing in the way of this plan.

God’s will of Desire

But there is a second kind of will of God that is very different and this is something called the “Desire” will of God.

The “Desire will of God is what God wants to happen but refuses to force.

To get this let’s turn a few books back to Romans 12:1-2. In Romans 12 Paul talks about how God wants us to respond to what He has done for us through Jesus. As we look here remember the words that were so prevalent when talking about the decree will of God “Predestination, foreknew, in the fullness of time. Those words are absent here and in their place we have words of request like urge, offer and test.” So let’s read Romans 12:1-2

[Read Romans 12:1-2]

When we talk about the “Desire” will of God we talk about His moral will for us – the way He wants us to live. But unlike the “Decree” will of God that works out exactly as God plans, He refuses to force His moral will on us – instead He gives us the choice on how we want to live in response to what He has done for us.

And here is the amazing thing about the Desire will of God.

Verse 2 tells us “you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – His good pleasing and perfect will.”

Paul says there is no ambiguity in God’s will of desire for us. It can be sought out, obtained and even tested. It is absolutely clear. And what is that will?

It starts back half way through verse 1:

“offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God”. God’s “Desire” will for our lives is that we live holy lives that please Him – this is His will for us.

Now when God calls us to live holy lives why does He ask this, and what does living holy lives mean?

Well, let’s look at the text. Verse 1 reads “Offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.

The picture here is one derived from first century slavery. In the first century slaves were forced to work regardless of what they wanted to do.² But this verse says “offer your bodies”

² Newell, William. “Romans Verse by Verse” (Chicago, Moody Press), 1938. pg 449

or in other words, give yourselves to the work of holiness willingly because of what God has done for you.

God made us, He owns us, He could have demanded servitude from us, indeed He could have forced us with His will of decree, but instead of demanding it here he urges, or beseeches, or requests service from us. This is an incredibly humble position for the God of the universe to take.

God is like a boss who pays you up front to do a certain job for him, and then turns around and asks you if you would be willing to do the job he has just paid you for. Crazy right!

So what does worshipping God with our bodies look like?

Verse 2 explains this for us. It says: “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

The word “conform” here is a modeling word. Not modeling as in super model, but as in model airplane. For those of you who didn’t know, Pastor Lyle used to love making model airplanes that were true to life, they looked and even flew just like the real thing (those that didn’t get sat on when he left them on the couch!)

And what Paul is saying here is that to offer our bodies as living sacrifices means that we must not be models of the people around us who are not Christians.

So ask yourself what do the people who are not Christians that you know look like? And this is going to be different for all of us. If you are a mechanic and you work with other mechanics who aren’t Christians what do they look like? What kinds of things do they do?

Well, they probably use crude language, have filthy pictures hanging up in their back offices and are overly concerned with getting drunk on the weekends. Of course we are not called to look like that.

But Paul’s words here go beyond just mechanics. If you are retired and live in a gated community next to a friendly old grandmother who buys girl guide cookies as knits all day but isn’t a Christian Paul’s words are the same. Do not be models of the people next door.

In fact, it may be easier to look like Jesus a mechanic than as a resident of a retirement village – we aren’t called be nice, we are called to be different!

And Paul goes on in verse 2; instead of being conformed to this world we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

And how does this change occur? It occurs verse 2 tells us as our minds are **renewed**. In Titus 3:5 Paul says “[Jesus] saved us through the washing of rebirth and **renewal** by the Holy Spirit.”

The renewal of our minds is what happens as the Holy Spirit changes our thoughts and passions away from ourselves and towards His Kingdom. Before we become Christians our minds are focused on our own self betterment.

After all, why do we sin? Why do people lie? Get drunk? Involve themselves in sexual relationships outside of marriage? Cheat on their taxes? Look at pornography? Why do people gossip? Why?

People do all these things because we are focused on our own pleasure. Our minds are wrapped up on ourselves. But Paul says, allow your mind to be renewed by the Holy Spirit. When this happens your passions will be changed away from yourself and towards the furthering of Jesus’ Kingdom on earth. You will be passionate about helping people who are in need. Passionate about sharing your faith. Passionate about looking like Jesus in the work place. Passionate about obedience.

Now hear this, Paul isn’t talking here about us forcing ourselves to do these things. He is talking about having our minds changed so that we will want to do these things of our own accord.

It won’t be a chore to help people who are in need because we have the mind of Christ. It won’t be a chore to witness to the people who live beside us because we have the mind of Christ. It won’t be a chore to pursue obedience with because we have the mind of Christ.

See God’s will of desire isn’t some secret thing we have to figure out. God’s will of for us is that we let the mind of Christ guide us to obedience.

Four people were baptized this morning. These people are saying “I know the will of God for my life and I’m choosing to follow it –The waters of baptism are a public commitment to be obedient to the desire will of God. And in declaring this publicly these people are asking us to hold them to their commitment. Heavy stuff!

Ok. So then there are two parts to the will of God. There is the Decree will of God which can not be thwarted and always comes to pass. And then we have the Desire will of God. This is what He wants from us.

One verse in Deuteronomy 29 sums these two wills up perfectly.

It reads “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us... that we may follow all the words of this law.” (vs 29)

The secret things are the decree will of God that we get no say in, but the revealed things are the desire will of God that lead us to obedience.

God's will of Direction?

And together these two sides of the coin make up what the Bible teaches about the will of God. And I think when examined by themselves there is very little confusion involved. But confusion does occur when they are combined into something people call God's will of direction.

People seek this when they are looking for insight into issues that are not clearly laid out in the Bible. Like "what job should I pursue? Where should I go to school? Who should I marry?"

But God's will of direction is actually not a third kind of will at all. And what these people are really trying to find is God's will of decree (what will happen) before it comes to pass. They want to know what God has ordained so that they don't have to choose.

But here is the problem with this kind of thinking. The premise here is that God's will is like a puzzle that we have to figure out, or that God has a secret plan of what is the best for us that we have to somehow gain access to it.

This kind of thinking could lead to a scenario like this:

Imagine you were deciding whether to go to CNC or UNBC in the fall. And you were seeking God's will and you thought you had peace about going to CNC but actually God was up in Heaven smacking His head and saying "Noooo, not CNC, UNBC! No, you missed it, now your whole life is ruined!" Of course this is foolishness right!

A theology like this would lead to frustration that God was ignoring us or speaking too quietly to hear, it would lead to inaction as we wait for God to give direction that never comes, and it would lead to fear of missing what God has for us. All things that are obviously not from God.

Now there are stories in the Bible about people who sought this kind of direction from God, and God gave it to them. I think of Gideon with his fleece or David as he prayed and got information about what Saul was doing and indeed there are lots of other examples.

But the interesting thing about all these stories is that they all occur before the Holy Spirit came and dwelt within us and **renewed our minds** as we already talked about. After Pentecost in Acts 2 the followers of Christ never seek this kind of direction again and God never promises to give it.

Of course God is still able to give insight into His decree will as He did on occasion to Paul, but Paul never sought this direction out like Gideon or David had done.

Now, having the mind of Christ doesn't mean we have secret knowledge of God's will of decree, but it does mean that we are able to follow His will of desire in matters of obedience. And in matters of non-obedience like what school to go to or what house to buy, we are able to choose wisely without fear of missing what God has for us.

So how then are we supposed to live? To wrap this up I would like to lay out three principles to following God's will and then quickly go through them with an example.

The principles are these:

We need to trust God's will of Decree
We need to Pursue God's will of Desire
We need to Act in wisdom by seeking counsel

So, by way of example let's suppose you want to get married.

First, Understanding God's will for your life means that you will trust God's will of Decree.

This means that you trust that whatever has happened in your life up till now has been God's path for you to take. If you are single this doesn't mean you have missed God's will, it means that God's will for you right now is that you are single – live in that today. And if you want to get married don't pray that God will point someone out to you as you walk down the street – get out and meet people!

Then imagine you get married. At that point trusting in God's will of decree means knowing that the person you married is God's will for you, God chose this person for you from before the world began. "The One" for you is your husband or your wife.

Then after you are married, trusting God's will of decree means in spite of difficulties you encounter in your relationship you know you didn't choose the wrong person, the wife or husband you have is God's chosen one for you.

Trust God's will of Decree.

Second, understanding God's will for your life means pursuing God's will of desire. In order to know what God wants from us we need to go to the Bible for answers. While the Bible doesn't tell us specifically who to marry it does tell us how to follow God's will in the process of choosing someone.

In Genesis 2:24 the Bible tells us that marriage is for one man and one woman. If there are two guys here who want to get married I can assure you this is not God's will for your life.

Then 2 Corinthians 6:14 tells us that we are not to be married to people who don't share the same faith commitment that we do. This means if your girlfriend or boyfriend is not a Christian this is not God's will for your life. This also means if you are a strong Christian and your girlfriend or boyfriend claims to be a Christian but doesn't really care about pursuing God then this is not God's will for your life.

Then Hebrews 13:4 tells us that marriage should be honored and the marriage bed kept holy. This means it is God's will that you wait to have sex until you get married. It also means living together before marriage is not God's will.

The Bible also speaks about marriage after divorce in Matthew 5:31-32 and tells us that if we marry people who were divorced for non-biblical reasons then we commit adultery and this is not God's will.

These are some pretty unpopular ideas in our world today.

But God's will for us is not a mystery, the question is, are we going to be obedient to it or not. The Bible also tells us that when we choose to be obedient then, regardless of how difficult it is, our lives will be blessed.

Third, understanding God's will for your life means not waiting for God's specific will of direction. This means don't seek a sign from heaven to tell you for sure that this is the one! It sounds spiritual to say that we are seeking God's leading to point out who you should marry, but it is a poor cover up for personal insecurity.

Instead of waiting for specific direction pray for wisdom. Our minds have been renewed by the Holy Spirit, we have the mind of Christ, we are able to make difficult decisions. Pray that God will strengthen you to choose wisely. Then seek godly counsel. Talk to people of faith that you trust and get their honest opinion on your relationships. People who aren't tied up in the emotions of your situation will be able to help you judge wisely.

And then act in sound judgment knowing that you aren't missing God's will.

God has a will and a plan for your life. Both a will of decree that is being carried out and a will of desire that He wants you to follow. God's call on us today is to trust His will of decree. Trust that He knows best. And second seek out His will of Desire and be obedient to it. And finally say goodbye to your magic 8 ball, use the mind of Christ you have been given to live in wisdom.

Let's pray.