

Grace Church
Roanoke, Virginia

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Lesson #51

ACTS
The Will of God
Acts 21:1-14

After a person becomes a Christian, the next most important step is to ascertain the will of God for his life. The most vital question for a Christian is, “What is the will of God for my life?” The Christian is not only asked to know the will of God, but he is commanded to know the will of God for his life. “So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is (Eph. 5:17).

According to the Bible, there are at least four different forms of the will of God. Bible scholars have tried to give more than four categories, but these four essentially express all we need to know as Christians about the will of God.

The Secret Will of God

The secret will of God flows out of God’s sovereignty and includes what He planned in eternity past, and this will (plan) most certainly will come to pass. The secret will is known only to God and not to man.

“Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure’” (Isa. 46:9, 10).

“The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law” (Deut. 29:29).

It is important to know that God has a secret will for it gives the Christian confidence that God has a plan for this work and for each Christian individually.

The Revealed Will of God

The revealed will of God refers to the commands of Scripture. It deals with what God desires for the Christian to do and with what the Christian ought to do according to God’s revelation in the Bible (Deut. 29:29). The revealed will is never done perfectly by the Christian but it is his ethical standard of conduct. Christians, for instance, are commanded to be holy in conduct (I Pet. 1:15, 16), to have a prayer life (I Thes. 5:17), to grow in grace and knowledge (II Pet. 3:18), to love one another (Jn. 13:34, 35), to witness for Christ in this world (Matt. 28:19) and to keep hundreds of other commands

written in Scripture. If a Christian fails to keep the revealed will of God, then he must pay the consequences for his disobedience.

The Permissive Will of God

The permissive will of God is a theological way of explaining how nothing can happen outside of God's secret will, and yet God is not responsible for sin. Human sin falls under the permissive will of God. It is related to those responsible actions of men which God passively allows, and yet He still has control over them. The permissive will of God deals with the negative aspects of God's secret will.

The Directive Will of God

The directive will of God deals with those things God is actively and deliberately directing in His secret will. It is related to the positive aspects of the secret will of God. God's directive will deals with the guidance of the Christian so that he knows in his experience, at least in part, the outworking of the secret will of God.

What Is Involved in the Directive Will?

The directive will is getting divine leading and guidance in the Christian's life so he knows in his experience that he is in the center of God's will and being directed by God. Most, if not all, problems in the directive will of God can be placed into three categories: 1) Vocation: what do you want me to do in life? 2) Location: where do you want me to live geographically? 3) Situation: seeking divine guidance and knowing God's will for every situation.

How Is the Directive Will of God Determined?

Primary Methods. There are four primary methods for determining the directive will of God.

Bible. The Bible is the first and primary source for determining God's directive will. One must know the commands and principles of Scripture and apply these to one's experience. It is never the will of God to do anything if it is contrary to any biblical command or principle (Col. 1:9).

Prayer. One must pray honestly for God's will over any matter, making it known to God that He is willing and ready to do anything God reveals to him. If a person is not open and honest before God in prayer, then he will never know the directive will of God.

Fellowship. It is important that a Christian be in fellowship with Christ at all times. Where we are and what we are to do are not nearly so important as what we are to God. He wants us to be constantly in fellowship with Christ at all times no matter what the circumstances may be.

Common Sense. A Christian must use all of his God-given natural faculties in studying all factors in finding the will of God. However, all reasoning must be directed by biblical principles and bathed in prayers, for the mind is still tainted by sin and the heart is deceitful and desperately wicked.

Conviction. Quite often the Holy Spirit gives a strong conviction which cannot be shaken. It is the still small voice of God speaking to the conscience that we are to do something for Him. The inner witness of the Spirit is a reality for every Christian in fellowship with his Lord.

Secondary Methods

Circumstances. God may lead by opening and closing doors (Col. 4:3). The Christian should pray, "If this is not your will, Lord, then shut every door, no matter what it may cost me personally."

Counsel. It is always wise to seek out the counsel of another Christian or Christians to talk over the matter (Prov. 15:22). The counsel may be rejected, but it is good to get wisdom from older, more mature Christians. The facts, or the clarification of facts, may come through a counselor, but the leading must come from the Lord. To reject the advice of a counselor is not always wrong, especially if a person has a strong conviction from the Lord that he is to do something.

Peace. If God is in some move, He will give a peace which passes all human understanding (Col. 3:15). A person should pray until he has divine peace. He may be afraid emotionally of the situation but may have peace that he is doing the right thing.

Knowing the will of God is what Acts 21:1-26 is all about. The Apostle Paul had to know the will of God for his life in the same way we have to know the will of God for our lives, and he struggled with and faced the same kind of problems about the will of God as we do.

THE WILL OF GOD IN GUIDANCE - Acts 21:1-14

At Tyre (21:1-6)

Crossing the Sea (1-3)

"And when it came about that we had departed from them and had set sail, . . ." – Paul, Luke and other disciples of Christ left the Ephesian elders on Miletus and set sail, their destiny being Jerusalem. The word "departed" is a very affectionate word and means "to tear oneself away." Paul and the others had such a deep love for the elders at Ephesus that to leave was a heart rending experience.

" . . . we ran a straight course to Cos and the next day to Rhodes and from there to Patara;

and having found a ship crossing over to Phoenicia, we went abroad and set sail. And when we had come in sight of Cyprus, leaving it on the left, we kept sailing to Syria and landed at Tyre; for there the ship was to unload its cargo.” – The ship had to stop in Tyre for seven days in order to unload its cargo but that did not stop Paul and the others from Christian activity.

Counsel by Disciples (4-6)

“And after looking up the disciples, we stayed there seven days; . . .” – The very first thing Paul did in Tyre was to find other Christians. The word “look up” actually means “searched out.” Paul was no tourist in Tyre. Sightseeing was irrelevant to him. He wanted to be with his Christian brethren. It is quite likely that Paul never met these Christians at Tyre before but he wanted to be with them. The bond of true Christian fellowship is mighty strong.

What a lesson for Christians. When God moves us into another city, is our first concern the local church where we shall worship Christ and fellowship with Christians, or is it the nicest neighborhood to buy a house? Or even more serious, is there a Christian local church at all in that city where we can effectively worship Christ? Do we seek the will of God about a church above anything else when we move or are transferred to a new city?

“. . . and they kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem . . .” – Apparently among these Christians at Tyre there were some who had the spiritual gift of prophecy. They were able, through the Holy Spirit, to foretell or predict great suffering for Paul in Jerusalem. It was only natural that his friends would try to dissuade him from going to Jerusalem where he would face tribulation and imprisonment. These disciples warned Paul, but he was not to be diverted from his intention to go to Jerusalem because God had spoken to him that he was to go. “And now, behold, bound in spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me” (Acts 10:22, 23). Paul was obedient to the revealed will of God for him. In every city where Paul stopped on the way to Jerusalem, there were prophets who foretold of Paul's dangers in Jerusalem. God gave these predictions to Paul over and over that Paul might clearly think through the issues of true discipleship and persevere unto the end, calling upon God for strength to endure whatever was before him.

Some fine Bible scholars feel that Paul was out of the will of God here, for he went on to Jerusalem in spite of the warnings of various prophets and friends who spoke in the Spirit. They say it was God's will for Paul to get to Rome but not in chains. He was to speak to the Emperor Nero and other Roman officials but not as a prisoner. Their claim is that Paul was bullheaded about going to Jerusalem because he felt he was God's gifted evangelist to the Jews, but God had called him to preach to the Gentiles. The claim that Paul was out of the will of God is faulty because: 1) Paul was carrying a love offering from the Gentile Christians to the needy saints in Jerusalem, and he had promised to deliver it himself. 2) Later in Paul's writing to the Philippians from a Roman prison he expresses that all the things that had happened to him had not hindered the gospel but

furthered it. “Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel” (Phil. 1:12). 3) According to the Bible, Paul was to preach before kings and rulers, and he had not done so up to this point. “But the Lord said to him, ‘Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name's sake’” (Acts 9:15, 16). Imprisonment was God's way of getting Paul before the Roman authorities.

The Holy Spirit had prepared Paul for what he was to face in Jerusalem and he was following the conviction of the Holy Spirit to his own conscience.

“And when it came about that our days there were ended, we departed and started on our journey, while they all, with wives and children, escorted us until we were out of the city. And after kneeling down on the beach, we said farewell to one another. Then we went on board ship, and they returned home again.” – What a scene that must have been, Paul and the saints and their families kneeling down on the seashore praying. They certainly were not afraid of displaying their convictions to the unbelieving community.

Prayer may be made in any position, but the best position is that of kneeling, for it produces an outward attitude of humility and submission.

At Caesarea (21:7-14)

Fellowship With Philip (7-9)

“And when we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais; and after greeting the brethren, we stayed with them for a day.” – Again, the first thing Paul did when he arrived at Ptolemais was to get in touch with the Christians.

“And on the next day we departed and came to Caesarea; and entering the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, we stayed with him.” – What a meeting this must have been. Twenty years prior to this time, Philip had been the most ardent evangelist of the early church. He was evangelizing before the Apostle Paul was saved. The original pioneer missionary beyond Jerusalem, Philip, met the greatest pioneer missionary beyond Jerusalem, Paul. They must have had such a good time swapping Christian war stories. Philip was also one of the original seven deacons. Philip's good friend was Stephen who Paul, before conversion to Christ, encouraged to be put to death. Surely they talked of this incident, but Philip held no grudges because he realized that Paul had been forgiven by Christ and was a new creature in Christ.

“Now this man had four virgin daughters who were prophetesses.” – Philip had four unmarried daughters who were in the ministry which undoubtedly made him a proud father. Since Scripture does not contradict itself, we can assume these women did their prophesying outside the local church, but they were active in the ministry. “Let the women keep silent in the churches; for they are not permitted to speak, but let them subject themselves, just as the Law also says” (1 Cor. 14:34). This verse shows that women did occupy a prominent place in the ministry of the early church.

It is interesting to note that from the last time Philip is mentioned in Acts 8, there is 20 years of silence. What was he doing those many years? We don't know for sure, but we can be quite definite that he was still evangelizing and he had been raising four daughters in a Christ-centered home who grew up to love Christ. The will of God for Philip was not only to win men to Christ but to raise children under the sound of the gospel and win them to Christ. Raising children for Christ is one of the most important ministries in the world and to dodge this responsibility is a clear denial of the revealed will of God.

Foretelling of Agabus (10, 11)

“And as we were staying there for some days, a certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea.” – Agabus was a true prophet for back in Acts 11, he had rightly predicted the famine of A.D. 46. The early church needed prophets for the New Testament had not been written yet. There are no prophets or prophetesses in the New Testament sense today, for we have completed written revelation in the New Testament.

“And coming to us, he took Paul’s belt and bound his own feet and hands, and said, ‘This is what the Holy Spirit says: “In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles”’” – Agabus, in a dramatic, visual way by which orientals illustrate truth, took Paul's sash from around his waist and bound his feet and hands and made his prediction concerning Paul's imprisonment. Notice carefully that Agabus does not say, “It is against God’s will for you to go,” but “If you go, this is what will happen to you.” This was just another warning given to Paul to cause him to think through his own commitment to do God's revealed will in his life, even when it meant imprisonment and death.

Feeling for Paul (12)

“And when we heard this, we as well as the local residents began begging him not to go to Jerusalem.” – Luke and the local Christians at Caesarea pleaded with Paul not to go to Jerusalem. They interpreted this prediction of Agabus as a divine warning not to go to Jerusalem. They, therefore, sought to change Paul’s mind about going. Paul was given counsel by his friends, but in this case they had not understood the predictions of Agabus correctly. This tells us that counselors can be wrong in giving advice, especially if they do not have all the facts or misinterpret the facts as Paul's friends did. Also, their emotional love for Paul took over their reasoning power so they gave the wrong advice. They were actually subtly trying to keep Paul from doing the will of God. Luke and the other disciples had a pure motive for not wanting Paul to go, but Paul had a higher motive--the revealed will of God that he was to go to Jerusalem and his desire to win men for Christ. Paul, in this case, ignored the advice of other spiritual men because he had the inward conviction of the Holy Spirit that he was to go to Jerusalem.

In finding God's directive will, God may use counselors, but ultimately God must bring the understanding of His will to the one who is seeking God's will. Counselors can

clarify facts, give illustrations from their own experience or the experiences of others and warn of danger, but ultimately God must lead the person seeking God's will for his life. If, after advice, a person still feels he must do what God is telling him to do, then we must encourage and not discourage him in whatever he feels God would have him to do. It is a very serious matter to play God so as to discourage another Christian from doing the will of God.

At the time of the Reformation in England, one of the converts to Christ was Thomas Bilney, a student at Cambridge. Bilney got hold of a Greek New Testament and read the words, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief." God used this verse to open up his eyes to the fact that salvation is all by God's grace and appropriated through faith in Christ. He became a powerful voice for Christ. Then came the counter-reformation and many reformers were burnt at the stake if they would not recant their biblical beliefs. Bilney was imprisoned and was told to recant or face death by flames. Friends urged him to recant.

Just two days before he was to be burned, his friends poured into the prison, overwhelming him with arguments and examples of why he should recant. But Bilney had an inward struggle which agitated his soul, for he felt he had a conviction from the Holy Spirit that he should die. The words of the Bible, "Whosoever will save his life will lose it," went through his mind over and over again. Finally Bilney broke and rationalized in his mind a compromise. He said, "I will preserve my life in order to dedicate it to the Lord." He recanted and within a few months Bilney, ridden with guilt, confused in mind, began to give up the Christian Faith altogether. Having denied the Word of God, he could no longer bear to hear it. He wandered from the faith and finally one day, overburdened by grief, he fell as lifeless into the arms of his friends. They knew they had caused his fall and they cried out, "God by a just judgment deliver up to the tempest of their conscience all who deny Christ's truth," referring to themselves who were instruments in Bilney's rejection of the revealed will of God.

This apparent apostasy by Bilney went on for several years but gradually Bilney returned to the Faith. Again he became a strong voice for Christ and again he was arrested and told to recant or be burned at the stake. Bilney, having learned his lesson, refused to give up his beliefs about Christ. The night before he was to be executed by fire, he stretched his hand out towards the lamp that was burning on the table. He placed his finger in the flame and kept it there until his finger had burned off to the joint. He then said to his friends, "I am persuaded, by God's holy Word and the experience of martyrs, that when the flames consume me, I shall not feel them. However, this stubble of a body shall be wasted by it, a pain for the time will be followed by joy unspeakable.

The next day he descended into the Lollard's Pit where many Christian martyrs had gone up in flames. He fell on his knees and prayed. Then rising up, warmly embracing the stake, he kissed it.

What is the lesson? Bilney's friends almost ruined him. When someone is set on the will of God, don't try to talk him out of it!

Fixation of Paul (13)

“The Paul answered, ‘What are you doing weeping, and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.’” – The words “breaking my heart” literally mean “softening my will.” Their weeping weakened Paul emotionally almost causing him to break his resolve to go to Jerusalem. Their pleadings distracted Paul's mind from what he knew to be the revealed will of God for him (Acts 20:22, 23). He would not yield to their pleadings. He had to follow the conviction of the Holy Spirit in his own life. His mind was fixed on going to Jerusalem and he felt he was prepared for whatever awaited him.

Expressions of love, even tears, are proper and inevitable when we must depart from a loved one, but emotional pleading must never be allowed to keep one from doing the will of God as God has directed him to do.

When Martin Luther was on his way to face the diet of Worms where he was sure to conflict with religious authorities and possibly be imprisoned or put to death, his dear friend tried to dissuade him. He answered, “If there were more devils in Worms than tiles on the roofs, still, I would go.”

Fully Accepting the Will of God (14)

“And since he would not be persuaded, we fell silent, remarking, ‘The will of the Lord be done!’” – When his Christian friends realized that Paul was resolved to go to Jerusalem, they became assured themselves that he was in the will of God. When they said, “The Lord's will be done,” they were referring to the secret, sovereign will of God. They were now ready to submit to God's secret will for Paul's life no matter what the personal loss to them. They commended their dear friend Paul to the secret will of God, confident that whatever might occur was right for Paul. “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Rom. 8:28). Paul had already accepted the will of God for his life even if it meant death. “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life” (Rev. 2:10).

Suppose you have a son (or daughter) who says to you that he feels God's will for him is to be a missionary. The thought strikes you that you may be separated from your child and grandchildren for much of life. As a wise parent, you should seek to reason with your child about this matter, giving the pros and cons, but once that child has a fixed conviction that God wants him in the ministry, do not discourage the child but encourage him, for nothing can be more wonderful for that child than to be in the center of God's directive will. As a good parent, you should cheerfully and confidently commit the child to God whom he serves, remembering that the parting of Christians, perhaps for life, will be short. Soon, son or daughter and parents will be united in heaven and be with one another for all eternity.

A missionary was about to leave London for the continent of Africa to preach the gospel. His family and friends said to him, "Don't go there, you will die," to which he replied, "I have already died in Christ in London and now I am ready to die for Christ in Africa."

CONCLUSION

If you are without Christ, what is the will of God for you? God's revealed will is that you should turn to Christ in faith and repentance, receiving Him as your personal Savior from sin and as your Lord, giving Him the right to rule your life.

"Turn to Me, and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other" (Isa. 45:22).

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me" (John 14:6).

"He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him!" (John 3:36).

Christ will save you if you obey the revealed will of God.

When you receive Jesus Christ, then you will come to understand that your salvation was all part of the secret plan of God. You will come to understand that you are a free man in Christ. Free, not to sin, but to follow the glorious Christ and the liberating Law of Christ. Free to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Free to enter into the will of God. Christ will make you free, truly free!