

The Will of God

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The concept that ties together everything about life is the will of God, the purpose of God, the desires of God, which are all the same thing. Steve Compton's pamphlet, "The Eternal Purpose," lays it out in an organized and understandable way. We summarized it on our sign in Fulton with "God created the universe as an incubator for faith."

Think about it. Considering all the trouble that the earth has been since day six, why would God put Himself through that? Is He just a really bad engineer?

Before creation, He already had angels to love and to be loved back. Angels think; they make choices. Did God fail with angels, since a significant number of them went their own way? Was God hoping He would do better by starting over?

What about after Judgment? Angels lived with the big guy, yet a significant number of them departed. Just being in the presence of God is not enough to keep you in heaven. After arriving in heaven in our spiritual bodies, can we still flunk out? Angels did. Will we lose our ability to choose, thereby destroying both faith and love and become mindless robots programmed to sing God's praises?

Perhaps faith is all it takes to stick with God? Obviously not. Lots of people in the Bible developed faith, then abandoned it. As a wise man once said, "Never underestimate the stupidity of people." Faith is no guarantee that we will not deceive ourselves or become complacent or choke out that seed with the cares of life.

What does it take to survive eternal life and not flunk out? The angels (the ones who still live with God) have half of it. We have half of it. The angels learn faith by watching us – which may account for the low response rate among angels. When we get to hobnob with God like the angels and also have faith, both we and the angels have what it takes for the long haul. Starting out, we walk by faith, not by sight. Starting out, angels walk by sight, not by faith. We both survive when we have both. As Hebrews 12:22 describes the city of the living God – an innumerable company of angels are part of the general assembly and church of the firstborn. Angels who caught on to faith by observing people will make it. If we can catch on to what it means to be seated in the heavenly places right now, so will we.

This is the will of God we must understand. Ephesians 5:15 – 17, "See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise but understand what the will of the Lord is."

The will of God is mentioned, by my count, 187 times in the New Testament, translated "desire," or "will," or "pleasure." I think the translators picked one or the other because most church organizations teach that, if it is the will of God, it is going to happen. So, they switch to the "desires" of God if putting the will of God in that verse would mess up their theory. Also, a lot of people think that everything that happens on earth, because God allowed it to happen, is the will of God. Obviously, that is not true. Here's my proof. A huge proportion of what happens on earth is the result of unbelief, sin. Unless you want to claim that God is the author of unbelief, God does not get His way all that often. Certainly, if God sets out to do something, He has the skill to get it done. But what He does should not be described as "His will." They are two different things.

I've always thought that the line in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," was almost humorous. Jesus was referring to pre-war heaven, when Satan and his guys had free access, when Satan was still the accuser. Jesus' prayer implies that, while heaven still included some really bad dudes who were in open rebellion, it was better than earth.

People have lots of crazy ideas about what the will of God is and how it gets done. We must start with the fact that God can't mess with our freedom to choose or He will destroy the fundamental reason for the universe. Without the freedom to choose, faith does not exist. People get twisted around with passages like 1 Corinthians 12:18, "God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased." The context says that God placed particular gifts of the Spirit in the church. But a lot of people think that God sets certain individuals in the church. Even overlooking the problem that makes for freedom of choice, that means that Paul was wrong to admonish so many people in various churches,

because God had set those problem children of the Kingdom right where He wanted them. No, we, like all those misdirected Christians to whom the New Testament admonitions were originally addressed, have the right to choose badly. Those who believe that free will is a delusion serve the Great Deceiver.

The ability to understand the will of God is implied in Ephesians 5, but stated clearly in Ephesians 1:9, “Having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure, which He purposed in Himself.” Or Colossians 1:9, “That you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding.” He made it known. Every mystery mentioned in the New Testament has been revealed.

So what does the New Testament say about the will of God that we are supposed to understand? Here’s my short list:

- In Matthew 9 and again in chapter 12, Jesus quoted a line from Hosea to get the Pharisees thinking, “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy and not sacrifice.’” It is the will of God that all God’s people show mercy rather than major in ritual. But, God doesn’t get His way all that often.
- After the parable of the lost sheep and after the teaching about the faithful having the humility of a child, Jesus said, “It is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.” But, sadly, some lost sheep are eaten by wolves and some humble people of faith are driven away by the stone-cutters, who manufacture stumbling blocks to order.
- Romans 12:2 “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” Our transformation proves what the will of God is – which is our transformation.
- Galatians 1:3 – 4 “Grace and peace from the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age; according to the will of our God and Father.” It is the will of God that the faithful be delivered from their respective evil ages. That’s God’s intension; but, to use Peter’s illustration, we have to get on the boat.
- Ephesians 1:4 – 5 “He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will.” That’s what God wants – to adopt us. How are we doing?
- 1 Thessalonians 4:3 “For this is the will of God, your sanctification.” The same description is in Hebrews 10:10. Based on the long list of admonitions in the letters, this did not always take.
- 1 Thessalonians 5:18 “In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” I think a good way to look at this is that it is the will of God that all faithful people be happy, positive, and thankful.
- 2 Timothy 2:4 “Who desires all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.” If it were translated consistently, it would say, “God’s will is for all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth.”
- 1 Peter 2:15 “This is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men.”

And it is the will of God that the faithful participate in the will of God.

- Ephesians 6:6 To bondservants, “Doing the will of God from the heart.”
- Hebrews 10:36 “For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise.”
- 1 Peter 4:2 “that he [meaning we] no longer should live the rest of the time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.”
- 1 John 2:17 “The world is passing away and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.”
- As Epaphras prayed for his fellow Christians in Colossae, “That you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God.”

In short, the will of God is that all be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth, that we be reserved for godly purposes, that we be transformed, that we be happy, positive, thankful people, do good stuff, and participate in getting others on board. Reflecting on all the details that people claim are the will of God, what is actually in the text is pretty general. How are we supposed to sort out which specific activities constitute doing the will of God?

Back to Ephesians 5:15 – 17, “See then that you walk circumspectly (does that mean to go in circles, because, if it does, there are a lot more faithful people than I thought. No, because Paul continues with...), not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise but understand what the will of the Lord is.” Understanding the will of the Lord requires wisdom.

Have you noticed that the less information the Bible contains on a particular concept, the more people expound on it? We have this perverse desire to fill in all the blanks. Faith says that we need to get comfortable not knowing. Wisdom teaches us where the line is between what we can know and what we can't know.

Since our theme this weekend is “those upon whom the ends of the ages have come,” I thought I would use examples from 1 Corinthians 10 to illustrate the difference.

We are often amazed at the bad choices made by the Israelites in the wilderness. Yet, Paul's point in citing them was that he thought that they were excellent and timely examples for Christians of his time. That line, “the ends of the ages,” can be understood two ways, but here, only one. In Hebrews 9:26, Jesus is said to have died “at the end of the ages.” We are very certain that He died a long time ago. We are also certain that none of the Christians of Corinth who received this letter are still alive today. Paul did not have a misconception that the end of time was just around the corner – or we would have a legitimate concern about what else he may have gotten wrong. So, to the original audience, his point was that they were in a unique position, in that transition period when the church was not fully formed and the Law was not fully obsolete.

Although we are not facing what Jesus described at the worst time in all of history, before or since, we certainly can use those examples from the Wilderness in very similar fashion. We like to think, if we had seen all those miracles in the Wilderness, that we could have been out there with Caleb and Joshua. But, to quote a friend in Fulton, miracles never converted anyone, they just confirmed to honest seekers that they had found the right place.

Listen to the folks in the Wilderness. Moses had been gone for nearly six weeks without so much as a text message. But that is understandable – cell service in the Sinai is still poor. They said, as recorded in Exodus 32:1, “Come, let us make a god that shall go before us; for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.”

They didn't have answers, so they made up their own. I could understand some anxiety when the Egyptian army is bearing down on them, but at this time they were safely encamped at the base of Mount Sinai. No sizeable army could attack them there – it was really remote and required ridiculously long supply lines. The manna had already started. They got water out of a rock – enough for several million head of cattle, not to mention the people. But they did not have answers. They just had to fill in the gap. So they made a god that suited their imaginations.

I doubt that we would ever make a golden calf – but not because we are more faithful but because, in our culture, golden calves are only good for museums. We think giving our allegiance to a shiny, albeit valuable, metal object to be just plain dumb. Our calves are more along the lines of brick and mortar.

The Israelites complained that life in the Wilderness was so hard – conveniently overlooking free food, water out of nowhere, and hand-to-hand combat with no casualties. I've never been to the Sinai desert, but from what I see in National Geographic, I think that was a good decision. I can sympathize. It's an ugly place. What wisdom did they miss? First, they brought it on themselves. If they had voted with Caleb and Joshua the first time, they would have already been in the Promised Land. Secondly, what they had was not as bad as what they came from, slavery.

Can we relate to that? Probably not. But we whine the same way. We forget what life was like before, as slaves of sin, hating ourselves, seeing no end to our downward spiral. So, we decide that our adversity is a sign that God does not want us to go that way. We invent closed doors and open doors

without a shred of evidence other than sometimes things work and sometimes things get hard. We have no evidence that God had anything to do with either one, but we confidently assert that we can see the hand of God. It's just complaining clothed in modern theology.

In Exodus 17, the people were very thirsty because, surprise, surprise, there was not enough water in the desert. So God told Moses to strike this rock and provide water. If it worked once, maybe it would work twice. So, in Numbers 20, the same problem arose, so God told Moses to speak to the rock. But, Moses struck the rock, twice. The text does not give Moses' rationale. But God called it unbelief and it kept Moses out of the Promised Land.

Think about Moses' situation. That staff had been involved in some big stuff – changed to a snake and back, twice. Held it up and the Red Sea parted. Struck a rock to make a river. This time, he was to carry the staff, and speak to the rock. I understand Moses' unbelief. He just had to play it up.

We are not into making miracles with a shepherd's staff, so this is a little hard for us to imagine. But we will play up a chain of vaguely connected events and call it Providence. God knows when to go for theatrics and when to be understated. We don't. God knows when to put his signature on an event and when to stay hidden. We don't get to decide which ones are released for publication. God can never be described as subtle. When He does something, He does it big. When He does it behind the scenes, you are just not going to know. Faith demands that we get comfortable not knowing. Filling in the blanks is not faith.

Hebrews 3 makes the same comparison as 1 Corinthians 10; don't be like those folks in the Wilderness. But Hebrews takes it a step further by comparing the time in the Wilderness to our lives on earth. We have been delivered from slavery to sin. We are fed daily by the body of Jesus, which He compared to manna. Our thirst is quenched by living water that flows from Him. This is one of the things we celebrate in the Lord's Supper, in which we remind ourselves that those in Wilderness could not enter the Promised Rest because of unbelief.

Unbelief takes many forms, from culturalization to whining to theatrics. How do we know when we have crossed the line? Wisdom.

Ephesians 5:15 – 17 See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise but understand what the will of the Lord is.

It's that "circumspectly" word. Some translations put, "Walk carefully." I don't think that does it justice. Examine all the angles. Think it all the way through. And how do I do that? Examine the evidence. With such a deplorable history of bad choices, it's time to stick with the boring facts. Wisdom is the key to understanding the will of the Lord, and wisdom operates on evidence, not on what we really want to see but can't prove.

Christianity is unique in the world in that it is the only religion based on evidence. Judaism almost qualified, except they dropped the ball with Jesus. No other religion even comes close. They do not even make claims to evidence. We have a hard time relating to that because everything we do in our culture is based on evidence. We laugh at people who buy cars based on how they look. We expect juries to reach a verdict based on the evidence before them. We assume that drugs and products have been tested before being marketed and have been proven to be reasonably safe. We may be skeptical at times; we may get disappointed; but our fundamental expectation is that everything runs on evidence.

Whatever standards we use for evidence in everyday life, we need to do the same with faith.

The apostle John began his first letter with "That which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands handled, concerning the Word of life..."

Paul's most important point from 1 Corinthians 15:3 was not the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, which is only about one-third of the story, but rather evidence: "according to the Scriptures" and "seen by more than 500 brethren." Of first importance to Paul was the evidence of the prophets and the evidence of a great number of eye-witnesses.

Luke began with, "It seemed good to me, also, having accurately followed all things from the very first, to write you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed."

Hebrews 2 starts, “Therefore we must give more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away. For if the word spoken by angels proved steadfast and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him, God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will?”

2 Corinthians 12:12, “Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds.”

Romans 15:18 – 19, “For I will not dare to speak of any of those things which Christ has not accomplished through me, in word and deed, to make the Gentiles obedient, in mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Holy Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and round about to Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of God.”

When Paul wrote in four of his letters, “Paul, an apostle by the will of God...” – he could prove it in a big way. If God has not given you similarly huge and miraculous evidence, then He has not said if He has specific plans for you, and you need to be comfortable not knowing, and not try to fill in the blanks intentionally left that way by God. If the evidence is not overwhelming and irrefutable, it is not God’s style. The will of God has to do with how we react to the events of life on a broken planet, not the events themselves.

But we want to know if we are acceptable to God. To do that in the right way, we need to use the evidence He gives, not the evidence we want.

When Paul wrote, “We have this treasure in earthen vessels that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us,” he was in the middle of a two and a half chapter dissertation on evangelism. People will see a miraculous change in us and want to know how they might get some. The Bible does not try to argue people into submission, or threaten them, or appeal to their selfish interests. Peter wrote that the draw was Jesus’ virtue and character. Paul wrote that the draw was the kindness of God. People whose light bulbs have not yet gone out are desperate to find a way to escape themselves. We show them two things in the same event: (1) we are transformed and (2) they know we didn’t do it because we were just as messed up as they are. They see us overcome, or display Jesus brand of faith, or God’s brand of love, and they want a piece of it. At the same time, we obtain the miraculous evidence that God thinks we are OK. We know we are acceptable because the Spirit is working through us in a way that can be clearly seen by outsiders.

The temptation for us is to fake it – to try harder. That’s works, not faith. God says to grow your faith so that the Spirit can work through you. How do I do that? Through really mundane stuff like hanging out with other believers on a regular basis, singing about Bible things everywhere you go, praying, participating in all fourteen facets of the Lord’s Supper, building up the faith of others, and learning what God calls faith. And, we have the promise in Philippians 2:13, “For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.” If we have what God calls faith, the Spirit that He gives us makes it happen, not only the doing but also the wanting. But, as James cautions, let not the double minded, wavering person expect to receive anything.

Paul applauded the Macedonians for their generosity in 2 Corinthians 8, but in a strange way, “They first gave themselves to the Lord, and then to us by the will of God.” They first were saved and came to a knowledge of the true, they first were sanctified, they first were thankful – which is the will of God – and so they gave of their means.

In the next verse after my assigned text, Ephesians 5:18, Paul wrote another piece of how this walking wisely in the will of God is supposed to work. He wrote, “Endeavor to be filled with the Spirit.” Our modern translations don’t do justice to the original. He actually wrote, “Endeavor to be fulfilled with the Spirit.” That word, fulfilled, is used figuratively, but has a very physical and literal meaning. The literal picture is of a basket heaped over full. If you go to a Third World country, you will see lots of vendors selling their wares in the middle of traffic. A woman selling loaves of bread has them heaped up in a basket that is balanced on her head. Her basket is fulfilled, heaped up to overflowing. We are to be

heaped up to overflowing with the Spirit so people can see what we are selling a long way off. If the product is appealing and they are hungry, they stop traffic and buy.

So when James cautions business people to amend their plans to say, “If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that,” James is not telling them to search for subtle nuances as to whether this business trip is the right thing for the Kingdom of God. We are too good at self-deception for that. If we really want to do something, we will find the right clues so we can appropriate God’s blessing of our plans without His consent. Or, if we really don’t want to do it, we can find any number of reasons to blame our choice on the will of God. No, James’ caution is to not compartmentalize life, business here, faith there, and never the twain shall meet. We know that the will of the Lord is that all men be saved, be sanctified, be thankful, do good stuff, and participate in that objective. Our business plans need to start there and work outward.

This leads to the final point, “Redeeming the time.”

Ephesians 5:15 – 21 “See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be fulfilled [filled to overflowing] with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs [Paul covered all the musical genres of his day], singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another in the fear of God.”

Wisdom, that which, through hard evidence helps us understand the will of the Lord, redeems time that otherwise would be evil (isn’t that like redeeming people?). “For the days are evil” acknowledges that we live in a broken world, broken by the accumulated bad choices of people over a very long time. The source of all that brokenness is impossible to track because we have been at it too long. It matches up well with Paul’s admonition to be “saved from this crooked and perverse generation.” If it was crooked and perverse 2000 years ago, I wonder what adjectives he would use today.

The idea of redeeming time is a bit hard to picture. The “redeem” word in our English Bibles comes from two different Greek words, one of them focusing more on the release or rescue idea, the other on the purchase idea. This one is the purchase idea. It is based on the word used for the common marketplace. Markets then were not like markets now. The euphemism for “lowlife” was “market-person.” The word for “redeem” is like go to the place of the lowlifes and buy some. Re-purpose that time that would be misspent and wasted.

Redeeming the time is like recycling. When you recycle, at least in theory, what would have ended up as litter or fodder for the landfill gets re-manufactured into something useful. In the Kingdom of God, we recycle time and people together. We could see them in the same way as we look at a discarded beer can on the side of the road. We curse the irresponsible person who tossed it there. We think someone should pick it up, but I’m going too fast on the highway to stop and pick up one crushed beer can. And, you know, in places of less concentrated population, recycling is hardly cost effective just because of the pick-up and sorting costs – and the technology for making really useful products from recycled materials is not fully mature, so what we get is kind of junky anyway.

I’ll stop the illustration there and let you carry it as far as you want. That’s as far as I can go because it makes me angry, that we can treat time and people as disposable. You know all those passages about fear in the New Testament? Read the context. Every one of them is about fear, not for me, but for them.

Paul uses the same line in Colossians 4:5, “Walk in wisdom toward those who are outside, redeeming the time. Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how to answer each one.”

So why don’t we redeem more time? I think it is for the same reason James admonished businessmen not to compartmentalize – we don’t think we have enough time to recycle. The real question is, do you control time or does time control you?

Here’s a comparison. We have all grown up in the American financial system. I’m not sure what we should call it, but we are reasonably familiar with how it works. You earn money. You spend money.

And the government gets a cut. Bottom line, we understand that you get in a lot of trouble if you spend more than you have, or if the government doesn't get its portion. Money is a finite resource, unless, of course, you are the Chairman of the Federal Reserve.. To put it plainly, money doesn't grow on trees. So, we have real trouble deciding how much and for what we should spend money in the Kingdom. But, there is a promise in 2 Corinthians 9 that "God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good deed." Paul repeats the promise three times in different ways in hopes of getting across to them one of those humanly impossible promises. On the one side we have generally accepted accounting principles, on the other side we have a blatantly unrealistic promise. I'm not surprised that faith loses most of the time.

Time is money – so the adage goes. We are pretty sure there are only 24 hours in a day. Just like money, it is not a good idea to commit the same hour twice. How are we supposed to purchase time on the open market and stay in the 24-hour framework? Unfortunately, many people have approached this with a works mentality and made a real mess. Some can't find time in their busy schedules for recycling time or people. I understand. They honestly cannot see how they can juggle one more thing between work and family and regular church meetings. I'm not talking about those who spend hours in front on one or more of their electronic media devices every day. I'm talking about those who are genuinely busy. The works mentality says about behavior, "I'm being the best that I can be." The works mentality says about time, "There are only 24 hours in a day." In both cases, we don't trust that God can make the impossible work in my very physical and finite corner of the world.

Twice Paul wrote, "Redeem the time." I get the idea he means that faithful people get to do that – by faith.

So how does that work? If I knew the answer, I would not need faith and I would have the beginning of a best-seller self-help book.

Of course, don't run across to the other ditch and double book the same hour. Don't try to back God into a corner by hanging yourself out to dry and expect God to get your down off the clothesline. The promise is humanly impossible, so I expect the way God makes it happen will be of similar nature. You are not going to figure out how He makes it work. But I can say that I have learned not to say that I don't have time. God will make a hole somewhere. When He does, it is best you are not standing on that spot saying there is no hole. Been there; done that. It hurts.

So how does that work in real time? I do not have a clue – that is God's business and, apparently a secret He intends to keep that way. But here's what I do and it has been reasonably successful. An opportunity is dropped in your lap. That's the starting point. If you work very hard to manufacture your own opportunities, you will be disappointed. If you see a miserable person, that's an opportunity. The immediate problem could be kids or their marriage or money or a death in the family or, my favorite, they hate themselves but have no idea how to fix what they hate. All you need to do is start a conversation and listen. Match up the facet of the gospel that addresses what they hate about themselves. Or, if that's not working for you, just care about them.

If someone asks a question, that's an opportunity. The quality of your answer is not the important part. The quality of your care for them is.

Flexibility is essential. God will re-arrange your schedule. Don't stress over it.

If you find conflicts between work, family, and Kingdom obligations, take a step back and re-assess. You missed something. They are supposed to work together.

That's redeeming the time – recycling the worn out and used up.

"See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise but understand what the will of the Lord is." The will of the Lord is that all men be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth, and it is the will of the Lord is that the faithful participate in that. We need to go at this circumspectly, thinking it through, checking all the angles, and then being comfortable not knowing what God has not made blatantly and miraculously obvious. Wisdom shows us the line between what we can know and what we cannot know, and that wisdom operates on hard, physical evidence.

The will of the Lord is the same as the Eternal Purpose. Build an incubator for faith so that both people and angels may live.