

**When In Rome:
UNDERSTANDING GOD'S WILL**

Romans 11:33-36

In a world full of tragedy, what is God's will?

A sermon preached by
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Fort Smith, Arkansas
November 12, 2017

The first camping trip I remember as a child was at the Albert Pike recreation area near Langley, Arkansas. We chose a spot right next to the Little Missouri River that flows through the campground. My parents told my little brother and me to go play while they set up camp. Before they even got the tent set up, I had fallen in the river. Of course, it was only about a foot deep. You can hardly imagine a more idyllic scene. We camped there several times; I loved that place!

But in the middle of the night on June 11, 2010, a freak thunderstorm turned the Albert Pike campground into a rushing torrent of water. The river rose 20 feet in a matter of minutes. The flash flood destroyed tents, trailers, vehicles, cabins, and worst of all, lives. Twenty people were killed in the flood.

One of the victims was a little girl I knew, Gayble Moss, age seven. She and her best friend and the friend's grandmother were in one of the vehicles that was swept away. Gayble was the granddaughter of a good friend. She was a great kid, full of life and spunk, a beautiful child. Her death devastated that family, as all 20 deaths did for some family.¹

Was this flood God's will?

This summer was a bad season for hurricanes. There were 10 hurricanes, with Harvey, Irma, and Maria being the worst. 434 people lost their lives in these massive storms. They did over \$316 billion damage.² Were these storms God's will?

Twice in the last six weeks we have endured the horror yet again of mass shootings in our country. A mentally ill man shot up a music concert in Las Vegas, killing 58 and injuring over 500.³ And last Sunday morning, during worship at First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas, another mentally ill man, who should have been denied the right to purchase a gun because of his prior record, shot and killed 26 worshippers, from a toddler to a 77-year-old grandfather.

Were these acts of violence somehow God's will?

"God's will" is a common phrase used much too loosely by too many people. Maybe they just don't know what to say. Maybe they

really believe in a God that would do such monstrous things. Maybe they're just looking for someone to blame, or to make some sense out of things. But you hear it all the time. "It's just God's will. We can't question God's will. There's a reason for everything." Or the worst of all: "God took them because he just needed another angel." How can we understand God's will? There has to be a better way.

Dr. Leslie Weatherhead was a Methodist minister and the pastor of City Temple in London from 1936 to 1960. During World War II, his church was destroyed by German bombs. The suffering and tragedy of war were all around. In 1944, he preached a series of sermons to try to make sense out of the suffering. The sermons became a book called *The Will of God*. Flowing out of his pastor's heart, it became an instant classic and is still a great book to help us understand God's will.

Weatherhead draws the distinction between the intentional will of God, the circumstantial will of God, and the ultimate will of God.

The intentional will of God is what God in his love would want to happen. It is the pouring out of God's goodness on the earth. God never desires the pain or suffering of his children. Jesus said it in Matthew 18: "*It is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.*"⁴ God only wants the best for us.

The question of God's will often arises in cases of illness. Does God cause cancer or heart attacks or any variety of debilitating illness? No. God's intention for each of us is to live a healthy and happy life. Jesus said, "*I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.*"⁵ And he healed multitudes of people.

God's intention is for everything to be good and positive and happy. But it seldom works out that way. There are circumstances that prevent the intentional will of God from happening. That's why we understand that God has a circumstantial will.

God made the world in freedom—natural and human freedom. We are created free because to be fully human we must be free—free to love, free to believe, free to act. God limits his sovereignty, his

control of things, to allow freedom, so that we can be in relationship with him. The problem is, freedom allows us to stray away from God. We sin. Human freedom can have tragic results—crimes, accidents, war. Creation itself is free, but the freedom of nature also sometimes has tragic results—like tornadoes, hurricanes, or floods.

So God has a will within the evil circumstances of life. His circumstantial will is for the best possible result, given the circumstances. His will is for us to respond positively and creatively against the circumstances. This is the will of God expressed in Romans 8:28: “*We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*” God’s intention is for all things to be good, but they’re not. So within the circumstances of life, God still works for good.

Again, think of an illness. God’s intentional will is for health and happiness. If we get sick, the circumstances of the illness call for medical treatment, not acquiescence to the inscrutable will of God who caused the illness. If the illness is the will of God, it would be sinful to try to get well. But in fact, fighting the illness is most often the will of God in that circumstance.

Responding positively and creatively to a tragedy—an earthquake, a wildfire, a car wreck, a hate crime—is God’s will, even when the circumstance of the tragedy was not God’s will. Doing the circumstantial will of God opens up the way to God’s ultimate triumph and the final expression of his intentional will.

So finally the will of God will be done. Ultimately God will have the victory. No circumstance in this world of suffering can ultimately keep God’s will from happening. The real good news is that God can even use the evil circumstances of life to bring about the ultimate triumph of his will.

The best place to see the three understandings of God’s will is in the cross. When God sent Jesus into the world, his intention was not to get him crucified. His intentional will was that Jesus should be followed. If people would have listened and learned from his

teachings instead of rejecting him, history would have been very different. But they didn't. The crucifixion was the will of evil people, not the Heavenly Father, at least initially.

But when Jesus was confronted with the circumstances of evil that rejected his teaching, he could see that in those circumstances, the cross was the only way to be faithful to his Father. In those circumstances, the cross was God's will. So in the Garden Jesus prayed, "*Not my will but yours be done.*"⁶

The death of Jesus allowed God to win the ultimate victory of his will. All God wanted to do was save the planet. It would have been nice if everyone had just listened to Jesus. But they didn't. So it was God's will that he go to the cross. Because on the cross, what happened? God saved the planet! Not only did he defeat the powers of evil, but he used the very instrument of evil—the cross—to accomplish his ultimate will. Isn't God good?

My friendship with Stacy Sells of Little Rock goes all the way back to college. In 2010, she was diagnosed with Inflammatory Breast Cancer, an aggressive and often fatal form of the disease. When she was diagnosed, she began to write an amazing blog, and one day she was reflecting on the will of God.

Twenty-three years earlier, Stacy's husband had been killed by a drunk driver, three weeks after their daughter was born. As a 27-year-old, Stacy's faith was not that mature, and people kept telling her that her husband's death was God's will or part of God's plan, and soon Stacy found herself in a real crisis of faith.

One of her visitors during that time was Dr. James Argue, her pastor at Pulaski Heights United Methodist Church. He came to Stacy's house and said to her, "I have no answers because God does not intend for terrible things like this to happen." Then he gave her a copy of Weatherhead's book *The Will of God*, which she read and cherished.

So when Stacy was diagnosed with cancer twenty-plus years later, she went back and re-read Weatherhead's book. Then she wrote on her blog: "God does not will us to experience the early death of a child

or terminal illness. There are no master control switches or puppet strings where God is orchestrating the evil and sorrowful circumstances of life. Death and illness and natural destruction are not what God intended for us. Instead, God's hope for his children (Intentional Will) is that during sorrowful times (Circumstantial Will), we seek His message of love and comfort and hope (Ultimate Will)."⁷

Stacy was given less than two years to live. That was seven and a half years ago. She has since re-married. Last month, she became a grandmother and was honored by the American Cancer Society for her advocacy. Does all that mean that God likes Stacy better than the women who died of breast cancer in the last seven years? No, I just think it means that Stacy has responded positively and creatively to the evil circumstances of her life, and God is showing her his will. She gets it.

How do we get it? How do we discern the will of God in our life? What does God want us to do in our own circumstances? How do we know?

Weatherhead had several suggestions for discerning the will of God in his book. Being a Methodist, his suggestions sound suspiciously like John Wesley's means of grace. It's not magic, and it's not even all that complicated.

In a nutshell, discerning the will of God is a matter of deepening your friendship with God.⁸ That's how we understand what God wants us to do with our lives. We stay close to him. The deeper our friendship with God, the easier it will be to understand his will.

There are many ways to deepen your friendship with God. You can pray. You can read and study the Scriptures. You can worship with the church body. You can let yourself be accountable to a small group that meets to encourage one another. You can have conversations with Christian friends. You can pay attention to the deep inner voice—call it a conscience or an Inner Light—and listen for the Holy Spirit to speak to your heart. You can engage in acts of mercy and mission. There are many ways to be in relationship with God.

Deepening that relationship by any means available will make his will more apparent to you.

Of course, discerning the will of God is still more of an art than a science. Understanding the distinction between the intentional, circumstantial, and ultimate will of God does not mean that you always understand life. Sometimes there is just not a ready answer for the hardships you face.

As great a Christian as the apostle Paul sometimes ran into a dead end trying to figure out the will of God. In the 11th chapter of Romans, he was trying to explain how the Jews get into heaven, even though they don't have faith in Jesus. Even though they rejected God's Son, Paul couldn't see God abandoning the covenant he had made with Israel. Finally, he threw up his literary hands and exclaimed, "*O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!*"⁹ There is still some mystery to it all. We cannot now and never will be able to completely understand the will of God. There will always be questions. In the end, God is bigger than the questions, because "*from him and through him and to him are all things.*" And in the end, the best we can do is just worship God, so Paul says, "*To him be the glory forever. Amen.*"¹⁰

For now, the questions keep us on the journey. Weatherhead closed one of his sermons with these words:

You see, even Jesus did not say, "I have explained the world." What he did say was, "I have overcome the world." And if we can only trust where we cannot see, walking in the light we have—which is often very much like hanging on in the dark—if we do faithfully that which we see to be the will of God in the circumstances which evil thrusts upon us, we can rest our minds in the assurance that circumstances which God allows, reacted to in faith and trust and courage, can never defeat the purposes which God ultimately wills. So doing, we shall wrest from life something big and splendid. We shall find peace in our own hearts. We shall

achieve integration in our own minds. We shall be able to serve our fellows with courage and joy. And then one day—for this has been promised us—we shall look up into his face and understand.¹¹

We can't understand why a child would die in a flood. We can't understand why a man would gun down innocent people. We can't understand any number of other tragedies and hardships that afflict our lives or the lives of others. We just can't grasp it.

But we can understand that our God is a God of love. He never wants to hurt us. His only intention is for the good of us all.

We can understand that in the evil circumstances of this world, God wants us to respond creatively and positively, so that we can turn evil into good. And God will provide the resources to do just that.

We can understand that in the end nothing can defeat the purposes of God. One day we will look into his face and all the questions and the heartaches and the pain and the frustration of this life will not matter any more. It will all be good. It will all be God.

And that's enough for now.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2010_Arkansas_floods.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2017_Atlantic_hurricane_season.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2017_Las_Vegas_shooting.

⁴ Matthew 18:14.

⁵ John 10:10.

⁶ Luke 22:42.

⁷ Stacy Sells, "Warning: Cancer Lady Deep in Thought About the Will of God," *NeverLoseSpirit.blogspot.com*, March 30, 2010.

⁸ Leslie D. Weatherhead, *The Will of God* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 62.

⁹ Romans 11:33.

¹⁰ Romans 11:36.

¹¹ Weatherhead, 46f.