

FCC 11-10-19 The Will of God, Part 1. Deut. 29:29

This report was in the news several years ago:

MAN, 91, DIES WAITING FOR WILL OF GOD

Tupelo, Miss.- Walter Houston, described by family members as a devoted Christian, died Monday after waiting seventy years for God to give him clear direction about what to do with his life.

“He hung around the house and prayed a lot, but just never got that confirmation,” his wife Ruby says. “Sometimes he thought he heard God’s voice, but then he wouldn’t be sure, and he’d start the process all over again.”

Houston, she says, never really figured out what his life was about, but felt content to pray continuously about what he might do for the Lord.

Whenever he was about to take action, he would pull back, “because he didn’t want to disappoint God or go against him in any way,” Ruby says. “He was very sensitive to always remaining in God’s will. That was primary to him.”

Friends say they liked Walter, though he seemed not to capitalize on his talents.

“Walter had a number of skills he never got around to using,” says longtime friend Timothy Burns. “He worked very well with wood and had a storyteller side to him too. I always told him, ‘Take a risk. Try something new if you’re not happy,’ but he was too afraid of letting the Lord down.”

To his credit, they say, Houston, who worked mostly as a handyman, was able to pay off the mortgage on the couple’s modest home.

I. Our Problem: Directionally Challenged

I think that all of us, at different times in our lives, want to know what God’s will is. We come to forks in the road of life and wonder what God would want us to do. Maybe the question of God’s will is a question we ask only about those big decisions, like our education, career, marriage, investments, church involvement, or maybe we find ourselves asking the question of God’s will every day for even the smallest of choices. But at some point or another, I think all of us have questioned, pondered, and prayed about what God’s will is for our lives.

We are taught that God has a wonderful plan for our lives. We hear this a lot: on Christian TV and radio, in sermons, in evangelistic tracts, in books, in Christian movies, and the list goes on. And it’s true, God does have a wonderful plan for our lives. We frequently quote *Jeremiah 29:11*, “*For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.*” This is a well-known passage of Scripture that

gets invoked frequently. It's absolutely a wonderful verse. However, I'm afraid that the way we apply it and the way God, through Jeremiah, was applying it are two different applications. God was talking to the whole Israelite nation, to an entire group of people, and not an individual person the way we typically apply it. Also, these plans for welfare and a hopeful future are definitely future: those plans would not see fulfillment within the lifetimes of the exiled Israelites he was talking to. However, we typically apply this verse to say that God's plan for the life of an individual will be fulfilled in that individual's lifetime. Now, I'm not saying that God does not have a plan for individual persons that he will fulfill in their lifetime. I'm just saying that we would be using the Bible more accurately if we turned to other verses to communicate that, like the story of John the Baptist or something. Jeremiah 29:11 might be more accurately applied to a group of God's people, say, a large portion of the global church, who is in a land that does not feel like it should be home, sort of like exile, like cultural exile in the global west?

You see, the prophets of the OT painted in broad brushstrokes you might say. They were communicating on a large scale to entire nations in the vast majority of their prophecies. The prophets are all about the big picture. However, when we talk about the will of God for our lives, being the individualists that we are, we are usually talking about trying to figure out the specific courses of action God wants us to take, regarding our decisions for our lifetime or even just one day.

Now, as Christians, it's true that we want to please God in every way. We don't want to let him down. If we think God wants us to move to Nashville, we don't want to wind up in Fargo. If we think God wants us to buy a home, we don't want to rent anymore. If we think God wants us to go fishing, we better not go bowling. If we were meant for the mission field, we don't want to land in suburbia. We can easily get tangled up in trying to figure out the will of God at every possible crossroad in life. But is this really how God's will works? Or are we over-spiritualizing some of our decisions? Maybe this misdirected piety makes following God more mysterious than it was meant to be. Maybe what this comes down to is the fact that we are overwhelmed with options in life, and confused by them, and we are looking for the one that will give us the best outcome or the most fulfillment. But does following God mean that everything in life will be fulfilling and satisfying? Or have we forgotten that this world as we know it is not our home, that we are pilgrims? Maybe we are afraid to make decisions and take risks for God because we are obsessed with safety and security. Maybe that's why many of our prayers fall into one of two categories: either we ask that everything will

be fine or we ask to know that everything will be fine. We pray for health, travel, and jobs, and we should pray for these things. But a lot of prayers boil down to “God, don’t let anything unpleasant happen to anyone.” Maybe we really want God to tell us what to do so everything will turn out pleasant for us, and so we don’t have to take risks or experience failure. And before we know it, we live as if not making up our minds and meandering through life were marks of spiritual sensitivity.

Honestly, I believe this way of thinking has crept into evangelicalism from the health and wealth gospel movement: the whole idea that if you and I just have enough faith, and name and claim what we want, we can each have our best life now.

Think about Hebrews 11, the famous faith chapter of the Bible. Abel had faith and he died, Enoch had faith and he never died, and Noah had faith and everyone else died! So having faith doesn’t guarantee that life will be candy canes and lollipops. Life is not always fun or fulfilling, and we shouldn’t expect it to be. This world offers us a buffet of options to choose from, and we might be mistaken if we think God should tell us exactly what to do and where to go at every little fork in the road. Especially in modern America, we are overwhelmed with options in life, and we don’t know how to choose from so many options, so instead of setting priorities and using wisdom we try to dump it on God to tell us what to do, what to buy, where to go, etc. Now I’m not against someone leaving an unhappy job to take a shot at what they really love, a shot at what fits them the best, a shot at making big accomplishments in their lifetime; but as we do that, is it biblical to assume that if we have enough faith and listen to God closely enough and do exactly what he says then everything will turn out the way we want it to, almost heaven on earth? and then we get disappointed when earth is so unheavenly or we feel guilty for not listening to God well enough. Maybe all of this reveals the fact that we have little longing left for the transformed society of God’s eternal Kingdom because we’ve come to expect such rewarding experiences in this life. And when every experience and situation must be rewarding and put us on the road to success or fulfillment, then suddenly the decisions about where we live, what house to buy, and whether to go with tile or laminate take on great significance. There is just too much riding on every decision. I’m pretty sure we would be more fulfilled or successful if we didn’t fixate on fulfillment or success so much. But maybe in that fixation we have made the whole concept of the will of God out to be something that it is not. That being said, we still are left with the question of what God’s will is. If we have actually misunderstood it, then what is it?

II. Our Misconception: The “will of God” in Christianese

Maybe what we need to first is de-mystify this mysterious phrase “the will of God.” It’s probably one of the most confusing phrases in all of Christianity.

There are three ways that we typically use this phrase ‘the will of God’. God’s will of decree, God’s will of desire, and God’s will of direction. Our goal is to find out which of these three uses of this phrase are biblical and how to apply them. The first 2 are found in the Bible; actually they are side by side in one particular verse, Deuteronomy 29:29, which we will look at today. But the third we will investigate next week.

Deut. 29:29 says, “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.”

- **God’s will of Decree.** “The secret things belong to the LORD our God.” When we talk about how it’s God’s will that Satan and evil will be defeated, we are talking about God’s will of decree. When we say it was God’s will to send Christ to the cross for our sins, we are talking about God’s will of decree. When we say that God will be present with us and take care of our needs we are talking about God’s will of decree because he has promised to do these things. These are things that God has ordained to happen ahead of time, and they cannot be changed because God is sovereign over all things. God’s will of decree is the aspects of God’s will that are absolute and finalized. Not only does he know the future, but he predetermined or promised certain future realities and therefore they cannot be overturned or avoided. In Deuteronomy 29, Moses referred to these things as ‘secret’ because based on the information he had at the time, in the first five books of the Bible, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, only God knows many of these things. Since the time of Moses, God has revealed more aspects of his will of decree through the prophets and apostles. We have a lot more writing to go on. We call that progressive revelation. As God inspired people to write, he revealed more of his will of decree. Aside from what has been revealed in all of scripture, I’m sure there are many things that God has planned out, only he knows them, and there is nothing we can do to change them. So, when we use this phrase ‘the will of God’ that is one way we use it- to refer to God’s will of Decree, and that is a biblical way to use the phrase God’s will. But there is another way we use it.

- **God’s will of Desire.** Deut. 29:29b says “but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.”

This part of this verse refers to the things that God has commanded: the things that he desires of his creatures that have a free will, that's us. When we say that it is God's will for us to study Scripture, pray, to care for the poor, or to tell people about Jesus, we are talking about God's will of Desire, or the way he wants us to live. When it's used this way, the phrase 'the will of God' is another way to talk about being obedient to God, walking in his ways, with Jesus Christ as our example. Deut. 29:29 refers to God's will of desire as 'revealed' because the things that God desires of his people are plainly communicated to the Israelites through Moses, and that is still true today: God reveals his will of desire to Christians through the entire Bible. So that's the second way we use this phrase 'the will of God'- to refer to God's will of Desire.

So let's put both of these together as we conclude today. If God's will of decree is about things that God does, then God's will of desire is about things that we ought to do. We can't change God's will of Decree, but we can ignore God's will of Desire. God has revealed all of his will of desire to us, but he has not revealed all of his will of decree- those are his secrets, we can trust him with those, some of it is not relevant to our lives anyway, and it would probably overwhelm us if he told us about it. The huge amount of his will of decree that he has already revealed is amazing and incomprehensible as it is.

God's will of desire, and the will of decree he wishes to reveal, are both communicated to us though the life of Jesus Christ, who is our Living Word, and though the Bible, which is our Written Word. God inspired the writings in the Bible so that we can know both of these aspects of his will. It is our responsibility to correctly interpret and apply what the Bible teaches. So as you read the Bible, it may be helpful to categorize the things you read. Ask the question, is this God's will of decree or God's will of desire? Is this something that God has preordained or promised he will do, or is this something that he has desired for me to do?

So today we have seen that when we talk about God's will, and sometimes what we really mean is God's will of desire, then we are using the phrase God's will in a biblical way. And when we talk about God's will, and sometimes what we really mean is God's will of decree, then we are using the phrase God's will in a biblical way as well. Therefore, we can trust in and lean on God's will of decree as we strive to fulfill God's will of desire. That's one of the wonderful things about the Christian life- we have a trustworthy Father who has told us everything we need to know in order to enjoy a relationship with him and to live the way we were made to live. His will of decree is the foundation for our lives, it's in the background of our lives every day, and it points to the future in his kingdom ahead of us as we follow his will of desire.