

EVIL, SUFFERING, DEATH: WHY?

Lesson 3. "THE WILL OF GOD"

INTRODUCTION:

Needless to say, there are some great misconceptions regarding the title of this segment of our study. Someone trying to comfort the grieving parents who'd lost their small child to cancer, who had suffered terribly for a year before succumbing, uses the words, "Well, it was just God's will." A religious group in a prayer meeting regarding a plane crash in which there were 18 survivors were very liberal in their use of the thought: "It was the will of God!" that these people were saved! Was it also the "will of God" that the other 147 people aboard the plane DIED? **OR**, dare we say that the great successes of "**con**" men and others who prey on the aged or unprotected are just *fulfilling "God's will"*? Doesn't God's providential care for us demand that if we're trying to fulfill His purpose in our lives that "HIS WILL" is for good things to happen to us? **A vital point we want to get across in this lesson is that everything that happens is not necessarily "God's will" ... at least in the sense most people use the term: "GOD'S DESIRED DETERMINATION!"**

I. GOD DOES PROMISE GOOD THINGS FOR US --- BUT DOES THE BASIS FOR RECEIVING HIS BLESSINGS RELATE TO HOW WE TRY TO OBEY HIS COMMANDMENTS?

- A. What do the PROMISES OF GOD have to do with a lesson like this? Aren't His promises, in a sense, a preview of His WILL?
1. When God gave His promise to Abraham in Gen.12:1-3, it effected a great change in His revealing Himself to men.
 - a) Always before, those early interventions with His creation was for the purpose of punishment! It had been a response to human rebellion!
 - b) Now, with Abraham, God steps in not to punish, but to set into motion a new plan, **with attendant promises**, for human history!
 - 1) And for these promises, God wanted man to show faith in Him. "Faith" is what God valued, and it soon became clear that faith was the best way for humans to express a love for God. **Abraham demonstrated for us the kind of faith that pleased God**, and it "*was counted to him for righteousness*".
 - 2) And, to be effective, this "faith" had to be demonstrated in the face of monstrous ordeals, and afflictions, and turmoils, and adversities, as that roll-call in Hebrews 11 brings to our attention.
 - 3) We have only to cite examples of people such as Joseph or Daniel to illustrate the overwhelming complexities and ordeals that their trust and steadfastness and love for God had to see them through.
 2. WHAT DOES GOD WANT OF US? ONLY the same things He has always wanted of all His people. He wants us to show our love for Him by our faith! Micah 6:8-"*He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God!*"

- B. OUR goals and our perspectives on life determine our responses to adversity, and show whether we're fulfilling GOD'S GOALS FOR US; that is, allowing Him to USE US!
1. **God's goal for us is that we be "holy" and "blameless".** Eph 1:3-4 (NKJV) *"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, 4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be **holy and without blame** before Him in love,"* Col 1:21-23 (NKJV) *"And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled 22 in the body of His flesh through death, **to present you holy, and blameless**, and above reproach in His sight; 23 if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heaven, of which I, Paul, became a minister."* Rom 8:29 (NKJV) *"For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to **be conformed to the image of His Son**, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren."*
 2. His goal for us is NOT to just imitate Jesus Christ, but to LET JESUS LIVE IN OUR PLACE! God wants our SELF crucified! Gal.2:20.
 - a) We can do many "religious" activities and still be exalting SELF, if our motives and attitudes and purposes aren't in keeping with the standard the Lord has given us!
 - 1) We PRAY, especially when we have a special, personal need.
 - 2) We STUDY, for our comfort or for our direction -- or to keep up with the other members of the class.
 - 3) We are KIND to others, so they will be kind to us!
 - 4) We CONTRIBUTE, because a special need has been mentioned that has touched our hearts.
 - 5) We WITNESS to others only when we've been highly motivated to do so.
 - 6) We are habitual, and intimidated by others' standard of right action, in our ATTENDANCE.
 - b) ALL OF THESE are activities that Christ, Himself, did while He was on earth, yet ***do these actions really sound like Christ?*** Something just really seems to be wrong, doesn't it?
- C. We're ready to admit that we're sometimes *disappointed with God* when we have to suffer, or a prayer is not answered in a way we'd like, or there's still things we don't understand so we don't always perceive how to cope with them --- *BUT DO YOU SUPPOSE THAT GOD'S EVER BEEN DISAPPOINTED WITH US?*
1. Just look at the people in the pews of ANY local congregation and [as per 2 Cor.13:5] ask yourself: ***"IS THIS REALLY WHAT GOD HAD IN MIND?"*** God's trying to appeal to the lost of the world through the members of local congregations ... *that's His plan ...* kind of gives a little more meaning to the phrase *"the foolishness of preaching"* when you realize who's to do the preaching, doesn't it? Often, a better term might be the **"preaching of the foolish"!**
 2. Frederick Buechner, in his book A Room Called Remember, marvels at the seeming rashness of using MAN for the most important work in the world: "to choose for his holy work in the world ... lamebrains and misfits and nitpickers and holier-than-thous and stuffed shirts and odd ducks and egomaniacs and milquetoasts and closet sensualists". And yet, Paul says that *"the foolishness of God is wiser than men"!*
 3. Yes, *if you want to see God today, then look at the people who belong to Him --- they are His "bodies". They are the body of Christ!* And referring to lesson two, where so many think God ought to come right out and SAY something, or DO something, we asked the question, *IS GOD SILENT?* We should really ask it like this: Is the Church silent? We are his mouthpiece, his **designated speakers** on this planet.

- D. We must conclude that God has continued to BLESS US, according to His divine WILL, in spite of our adherence to His will. THAT'S WHY we refer to God's love as an "agape" love --- that is, *it's unconditional!* We all understand, of course, that sometimes we must **do something** to RECEIVE His blessings!
1. HOW are His promises of physical blessings for us effected?
 - a) Such as, **Deut.8:18**, where it says that the "*power to get wealth*" comes from God?
 - b) Or, **2 Cor.9:8-11**, where He seems to promise that if we'll do good He'll keep providing us with the **means to do more good?**
 2. It doesn't just depend on OUR ACTIONS, we know, but to me this falls into the same category as the answering of prayers and invoking His care!

II. PRAYERS --- HOW DO THEY WORK?

- A First of all, what does **PRAYER** have to do with such a study as this?
1. It causes us to consider that there are options/alternatives that need to be decided on and pursued, as ambitiously as we can!
 2. Prayer helps us to focus on our dependency, and helps us to be more *HUMBLE!*
 3. PRAYER teaches us and gives us hope: Relief/ Understanding/ teaches us Patience/ Helps us to look forward to something BETTER!
 4. Our prayers, if they're to be effective, must be of the disposition "*IF IT BE THY WILL!*"
- B. **PRAYER IS A MEANS OF MANIFESTING OUR CONTINUED YIELDING TO THE WILL OF GOD! Col.4:12.**
1. The goal of both Paul and Epaphras that *others might be complete and fully assured in Christ* was enhanced by the diligent efforts of each toward that goal through prayers!
 - a) This is a marked difference from many today who act like you get the blessings of God in the work of the kingdom just like you get candy from a machine: **put in the coins and out comes the treat!**
 - b) So, the thought seems to be and efforts are based on the premise that, regardless of who or what you are, if you plan wisely, work hard, have plenty of personality, money & skill, everything comes out all right!
 - 1) Many modern "christians" approach efforts in the kingdom that require great undertakings and momentous decisions without much effort of prayer. [The "power" of school administrators or of attorneys is NOT that they know all the answers, but they know where to get the answers, and how to effectually serve their benefactors!]
 - 2) Gospel meetings, classes, and services are often planned and approached without petitioning the Lord, in whose name it's all being done!
 - 3) Major undertakings are often engaged in with only human understanding and skills, and then there's a great wonder why things didn't work out better ... or why churches of Christ are diminishing in numbers, devotion, allegiance and spiritual values!
 2. KINGDOM WORK is not the same as secular work that might be governed by material or scientific principles and whose outcome may be determined by merely pushing the right set of buttons -- **or inserting the right coins!** [There's not a "template" that works the same in appealing to every sinner, or that causes remorseful repentance in every erring child of God!]

3. There is another, POTENT, Divine, PROMISED ELEMENT that accompanies the work of Jesus Christ, and that's the assurance that HE WILL BE WITH US! **Matt.18:20; 28:20; 1 Jno.5:14-15.**
- C. Prayer is largely a response to God's actions, ALONG WITH our perceptions as to its effectiveness -- which is a manifestation of our faith in the WILL OF GOD! Jack Cottrell states in his book, **What The Bible Says About God The Ruler**, "*A failure to respond [pray-vw] to providence is a warning sign of a dead soul!*"
1. The "world-view" of our day is that we live in a closed system, which has no place for a God who changes things! [The argument goes something like this: *there is a cause for every effect and an effect for every cause. Since things (effects) happen because of natural laws, their causes can be discovered by observation and experimentation. Thus, things are explainable, understandable, and predictable! God, if there is a God, will not intrude on the established order; so there is little use for prayer. After all, what's the use of praying in a system where "what is going to be will be"?*]
 2. Some Christians, even, are confused by their misunderstanding between miraculous effects of God's actions and the providential effectiveness of prayers.
 - a) We all understand, accurately I believe, that miracles have ceased; but we must also correctly understand that GOD CAN ALSO DO THINGS that do not involve the miraculous!
 - b) There are too many examples of God working through the natural realm, so it's erroneous to think that the only way God can effect changes in the world is by the working of miracles!
 - 1) The **NATURAL REALM** is a part of God's CREATION, and as a result is compatible to and UNDER HIS WILL!
 - 2) He will not violate His codes of the natural realm, because they are principles of His own nature, but He is free to manipulate them within normal bounds.
 - 3) Specifically, the principles of nature themselves operate because God is operating them! This is why He is free to manipulate them!
 - c) Paul has full confidence in the effectiveness of prayer, not just for apostles who could work miracles, but for those everyday church members who had a faith and confidence in their Creator! cf. **Phil.4:6**-(NKJV) "*Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God;*"
 3. If God is not a personal God who listens to and communes with us, able to do what we ask, and merciful to act in our best interests, WHY TALK TO HIM AT ALL? Why ask for anything or give Him thanks for anything **if our words to Him in prayer are meaningless?**
 - a) Whatever it is, Paul says to talk to God about it! PRAY! Seek God's assistance in your life! Lay your needs before the throne of grace!
 - b) Is Paul saying that God's going to do everything you want done, regardless? Certainly NOT!
 - 1) Even Paul's own experience is proof that prayers are not always answered in ways we first perceive as being prudent.
 - 2) God refused to remove Paul's "thorn in the flesh" (**2 Cor.12:8**) because, as Paul later discovered, he needed that thorn! (**12:7**).
 - 3) So then, Paul stopped praying for its removal and began boasting and taking pleasure in it! (**12:9-10**).

III. WHAT IS THE "WILL OF GOD"? [It's never been as clearly defined for us as it was for Moses and Gideon, et al, because we've never heard His booming voice from the whirlwind!]

A. CREATION was an expression of God's will!

1. CREATION of the heavens & earth expresses an absolute or infinite **POWER**; and bringing a *kosmos* out of the original *chaos* further reveals that that absolute power was guided by an infinite **INTELLIGENCE** who had absolute **KNOWLEDGE** of what He wanted and the absolute **WISDOM** to provide for what He intended to do!
 - a) So God's knowledge (what He wanted) WAS WHAT HE PLANNED!
 - b) This led to His will (purpose), WHICH WAS HIS DESIRE!
 - c) Which led to His Intelligence, THE MEANS TO ACCOMPLISH HIS WILL!
 - d) Which then led to His Creation, THE RESULT!
2. Jehovah's creative power was expressed through His word ... spoken into existence by His word.
3. So, according to this, the creation of all things is an expression of God's divine will; they existed in His mind or purpose before the creation, and, instead of coming through a process of evolution, they were spoken into existence by His will.
4. God created His universe so that He has complete control over all, except where He has created free beings (angels and men). Over these His sovereignty is exercised by moral suasion through moral government; *there is no other way by which He can control a moral being.*

B. God's infinite forethought enabled Him to create a universe that He could control **through laws which express His will.** This control covers both the animate and the inanimate worlds, including man and the nations! By this **designed control** He is able to achieve His divine purposes.

1. Because *man was created a free being* he is capable of making his own choices; he can obey or disobey the laws under which he lives, and can thereby enjoy or suffer the consequences of his actions.
2. Since he can obey or disobey, God's foresight and forethought had a plan for him if he should not sin (which is unrevealed) and a plan for his redemption should he sin (which is what we have revealed).
3. The Bible is the revealing of that plan for sinful man AS WELL AS THE overcoming and destruction of Satan who enticed man to sin.

C. The purpose for that revelation is in order to EFFECT THE SALVATION of the one who chose to separate from God! Eph.1:3-14.

1. That which God **PURPOSED** was an **expression of His will!** [*But which was a mystery until the "fulness of times".*]
2. That will is **REVEALED** and preached in, and through, the gospel. [Paul says it was given to him to preach the mystery to the Gentiles, "*And to make all men see what is the dispensation (the arrangement or administration) of the mystery which for ages hath been hid in God who created all things*"- Eph.3:9]
3. The fulfilling of that purpose was so **SURE -- SO CERTAIN --** that Paul could speak of it as though it were already consummated even as it lay a silent plan in the mind of God in eternity.
 - a) That **CERTAINTY OF FULFILLMENT** is expressed in such passages as Rom. 8:29-30-(NKJV) "*For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. 30 Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.*" (the "called" are those who hear and heed the word); Matt.21:14--

"Then the blind and the lame came to Him in the temple, and He healed them." **23:37-**"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" **1 Tim.2:4-** "who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."

- b) Paul is looking at the completed purpose **from God's point of view before the world was even created** and sees it as if completed in eternity!
 - c) It is as one who draws a house plan and, **in the plan**, can see the house as it will be when completed and occupied!
4. This heaven-born plan of God was "*a mystery*" until fulfilled in Christ and revealed by the Holy Spirit thru the apostles.
- D. The **SUCCESS** of this plan of God for man is totally dependent on **GOD BEING IN CONTROL** of His creation!
- a) God **DOES** work in our lives and is in control, *but all we can know is what's revealed!* **Eccl.3:1-**"There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven:"
 - b) And the reason we cannot explain everything someone might desire to know about it all is because our understanding is restricted.
 - c) In this same vein the wise man continues in **vs. 14-**"I know that whatsoever God doeth, it shall be forever [i.e. final]: *nothing can be put to it, nor anything taken from it; and God hath done it that man should fear before Him*".
 - d) **WHY DOES** the "Will of God" allow evil and suffering in the world? The wise man gives us the answer in **vs.18:** "*I said in my heart, it is because of the sons of men, that God may prove them, and that they may see that they themselves are but as beasts!*"
- E. According to William N. Clark in **An Outline of Christian Theology**, there are at least four truths **concerning God's providence** that are **AN EXPRESSION OF HIS WILL!**
1. Man under the natural order is subject to all natural laws and consequences --- blessings, accidents, suffering, and death.
 2. The natural order is adapted to the moral and spiritual training of free beings. **Jas.1:3-5:** (NKJV) "*knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. 4 But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing. 5 If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him.*" **1 Pet.1:5-6:** (NKJV) "*who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials,*"
 3. God has the power of guiding free beings **from above their freedom** without interfering with it; including both nations and individuals!
 4. **IF HE WILLS IT**, God can directly alter the course of events **in answer to** human prayer or even **without it**.
- F. We're not told what life would have been like on earth in a sinless state or what God's plan for man was in such a state!
1. The fact is that when he did sin he brought about his separation from God in his untimely spiritual death, and ultimately his physical death!
 2. But even as He had a plan for man had he not sinned, so He also had a plan or purpose for his redemption if he should sin!
 3. **The unfolding and carrying out of this purpose in His providence is the central theme of the Bible!**

- G. The fact that the phrase "the will of God" can be used in several ways allows confusion and misunderstanding to take place. It would be best to understand that there's a difference in the **Intentional Will**, and the **Circumstantial Will**, and the **Ultimate Will**!
1. The *intentional will of God* would be what God would prefer, what He intends to happen to men. [**Two categories**: the *Revealed Will* and the *Unrevealed Will* of God.]
 2. The *circumstantial will of God* would be what God does due to circumstances arising that He did not intend. God allows man free will, which often leads to sin. God does not intend this sin, but when it occurs God's will is how He reacts under those circumstances.
 3. The *ultimate will of God* is what God can ultimately achieve in the various circumstances of life such as the sinful rebellion of man. [These three meanings can be illustrated by examining God's will in relation to the pain, suffering, and death of Jesus Christ.]
- H. Paul recognized that his plans were to be made, cognizant of the divine providence superintending his life, as illustrated in these verses:
- Acts 18:21** (NKJV) *"but took leave of them, saying, "I must by all means keep this coming feast in Jerusalem; but I will return again to you, God willing." And he sailed from Ephesus."*
- Rom 1:10** (NKJV) *"making request if, by some means, now at last I may find a way in the will of God to come to you."*
- 1 Cor 4:19** (NKJV) *"But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord wills, and I will know, not the word of those who are puffed up, but the power."*
- 1 Cor 16:5-7** (NKJV) *"Now I will come to you when I pass through Macedonia (for I am passing through Macedonia). 6 And it may be that I will remain, or even spend the winter with you, that you may send me on my journey, wherever I go. 7 For I do not wish to see you now on the way; but I hope to stay a while with you, if the Lord permits."*
- Phil 1:12** (NKJV) *"But I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel,"*
- Phil 1:19** (NKJV) *"For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ,"*
- Phil 1:22** (NKJV) *"But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you."*
1. So, he set his course of action and pursued the doing of God's will no matter how closely things worked out to what he had personally planned!
 2. It was not a "DEFEATIST'S ATTITUDE, but full assurance that God was with him and helping him every step of the way! See **Phil.4:11-13**.
 - a) It's a shame **vs.13** has been wrested from its context by many today!
 - b) Paul is saying he was adequate to any circumstance, good or bad. He could bear with equal composure of spirit whatever providence permitted to come his way!
 - 1) Paul is confident in maintaining his joy, regardless of circumstances.
 - 2) Paul's faith was in Jesus Christ, and THIS was his power connection!
 - 3). WE can have this same connection today, and because of this Christians should be the most positive people on earth! [But the quest for THINGS often makes us negative!]
- I. **ROMANS 8:28**-"*And we know that to them that love God all things work together for good, even to them that are called according to his purpose.*" This is an oft quoted and much misunderstood and misapplied passage of scripture!
1. It is erroneous to interpret this to mean that "Only good things will happen to those who love God." "All things" doesn't mean everything that happens in our lives, but it's those things of God's plan that effect [*bring about*] our salvation.

- a) **THAT** is what he has been talking about in the previous text, and also what he continues to pursue as he outlines God's scheme of redemption and then of the Christian's security in Christ!
- b) This "mystery" and then the "revealing" had to do with planning and activity in and by those in the "unseen world"!
2. God uses adversity in the lives of His children. The circumstances and events that we frequently see as "setbacks" are more often the very things that launch us into periods of intense spiritual growth, so the promise of Paul here has to be understood conditionally!
 - a) The "good" is not about a man who loses his job and then in the end gets a better one! And it is NOT the story of a young woman who loses her love only to find a better catch later on!
 - b) The reason we struggle so intensely with adversity is often because we have yet to adopt God's perspective and priorities. A quick perusal of the lives of bible characters impresses us that their endings are seldom with the words: "And they lived happily ever after!" Usually, it's just the opposite! Moses died in the desert just a few miles before he got to the Promised land. Stephen was martyred. And traditionally, all the apostles but John met early and tragic deaths!
3. SO, "***all things***" [ALL OF THE PROVISIONS GOD HAS MADE REGARDING HIS SCHEME OF REDEMPTION FOR MAN] will "***work together***" [ACCOMPLISH, GET THE JOB DONE] "***for good***" [WILL BE EFFECTIVE FOR US, WILL GRANT US GOD'S SALVATION] "***to them that love the Lord***" [THOSE WHO ARE WORKING HIS WILL, **JNO.14:15**-"*IF YOU LOVE ME YOU WILL KEEP MY COMMANDMENTS*"].

CONCLUSION:

Our **acceptance of OR our confidence in** God's providence, the fulfillment of His will, is NOT IN MEASURING **WHAT HAPPENS TO US**, but it **IS TOTALLY COMMENSURATE WITH HOW WE HANDLE IT!**