

CIRCUMSTANTIAL WILL OF GOD

A Sermon by Leslie Weatherhead

We said that the phrase "the will of God" is used so loosely as to land us not only in a confusion of mind but in a torment of feeling.

When a dear one dies, we call it "the will of God," though the measures we used to prevent death could hardly be called fighting against the will of God, and if they had been successful we should have thanked God with deep feeling that in the recovery of that dear one his will had been done. Similarly, when sadness, disease, and calamity overtake men they sometimes say with resignation, "God's will be done," when the opposite of his will has been done. When Jesus healed men's bodies and gladdened men's lives in Palestine, he was doing the will of God, not undoing or defeating it.

We therefore divided our subject into three as follows:

1. The intentional will of God - God's ideal plan for man.
2. The circumstantial will of God - God's plan within certain circumstances
3. The ultimate will of God - God's final realization of his purposes.

Once again, even at the risk of being tiresome, let us look at the supreme illustration of the Cross.

It was not the intentional will of God, surely, that Jesus should be crucified, but that he should be followed. If the nation had understood and received his message, repented of its sins, and realized his kingdom, the history of the world would have been very different. Those who say that the Crucifixion was the will of God should remember that it was the will of evil men.

But when Jesus was faced with circumstances brought about by evil and was thrust into the dilemma of running away or of being crucified, then *in those*

circumstances the Cross was his Father's will. It was in this sense that Jesus said, "Not what I will, but what thou wilt."

The ultimate will of God means, in the case of the Cross, that the high goal of man's redemption, or to use simpler English, man's recovery to a unity with God - a goal which would have been reached by God's intentional plan had it not been frustrated - will still be reached through his circumstantial will. In a sentence, no evil is finally able to defeat God or to cause any "value" to be lost.

Let us now concentrate on the second of these divisions and speak about what I call "the circumstantial will of God." We may make the matter clearer still by restating an earlier illustration and thinking of a father planning his boy's career, in co-operation with the boy himself. The will of both may have been, let us say, that the boy should become an architect. Then comes the war. The father is quite willing for his son to be in the armed forces, but a Navy, Army, or Air Force career is only the father's interim or circumstantial will for his boy, his will in the circumstances of evil which war has produced. It would only be confusing to speak as if the father's ideal intention and original plan for his son was that the latter should spend valuable years of his life in the armed forces.

Now in the same way there is an intentional purpose of God for every man's life; but because of human folly and sin, because man's free will creates circumstances of evil that cut across God's plans, because our oneness with the great human family means that the evil among other members of it may create circumstances which disturb God's intention for us, there is a will within the will of God, or what I call "the circumstantial will of God;" and in the doing of that the soul can find peace, the mind can find poise, and the will can be so expressed that ultimately the original plan of God is brought to successful fruition.

I think there are two parts to the circumstantial will of God - one in the natural realm and the other in the spiritual.

1. Let us look at the Cross of Christ again. Given the circumstances of evil, it was God's will that Jesus should be betrayed, taken, crowned with thorns, crucified, left there in the blazing sun to die. The laws of the universe, which are themselves

an expression of God's will, were not set aside for Jesus, the beloved Son. The laws which govern the hammering in of nails held on the day of Crucifixion in just the same way as they do when you nail up a wooden box. If bombs are dropped from an airplane over the closely built dwellings in a city, they pierce the roofs of the godly and the ungodly; and if nails are hit with a hammer wielded by a strong arm, they pierce the flesh even of the Son of God; and because the laws of the universe are operating, and because those laws of the universe are an expression of God's will, you may, if you like, call these things the will of God, but only in the limited sense described. The forces of nature carry out their functions and are not deflected when they are used by the forces of evil. Those who lost dear ones in recent wars will not need me to say more about that. When Christ's flesh was lacerated on the cross, the laws of God in regard to pain operated just as they do when we get hurt; and Christ accepted that as part of the ordering of the universe which was the will of a wise, holy, and loving God. He did not fling it back at God that it was unfair that the laws should operate in his case because of his character.

2. But there is a second element within that circumstantial will of God. The first we may call natural, the second spiritual. Christ did not just submit to this dreaded event of the Crucifixion with what we miscall "resignation." He took hold of the situation. Given those circumstances which evil has produced, it was also God's will that Jesus should not just die like a trapped animal, but that he should so react to evil, positively and creatively, as to wrest good out of evil circumstances, and that is why the Cross is not just a symbol of capital punishment similar to the hangman's rope, but is a symbol of the triumphant use of evil in the cause of the holy purposes of God. In other words, by doing the circumstantial will of God, we open up the way to God's ultimate triumph with no loss of anything of value to ourselves.

Now let us turn from the Cross and see this truth in a very human illustration. Take the case of the unmarried woman in middle life whose mind has almost closed against the probability of marriage. What was once an eager expectancy becomes a hope growing dimmer and dimmer, and then dying away. Now it is not the intentional will of God that she should remain unmarried. The divine intention, surely, is that every woman should have a home and a husband and babies. The very structure of her body and the creative centers in her brain, her sex instinct and her

maternal impulse are sufficient evidence of this, for every woman possesses all these things. Though some instincts can be repressed into unconsciousness, or can be diverted into non-biological activities, every instinct is present in every person, and biological fulfillment is God's intentional plan.

But supposing that the tyranny of evil circumstances - and they are evil if they deprive women of their primary *raison d'etre* - thrusts a woman into a dilemma. She cannot have that part of nature biologically satisfied, let us imagine, unless she sacrifices her ideals - cannot have sex without sin. Then the circumstantial will of God is that she shall remain frustrated, and that circumstantial will can be looked at from two angles. It falls into two parts - one natural, the other spiritual.

First, there will be a physical sense of sex starvation, for no so-called sublimation completely solves the difficulty here. Sublimation is always a second-best for the time being. But, second, she must not merely resign herself, perhaps with bitterness, to the unmarried state, but must react so creatively and positively to God's circumstantial will that she makes something glorious out of life which God can use for the fulfillment of his ultimate will, namely to make her a complete and integrated personality in union with himself.

We note, then, that the second part of God's circumstantial will cannot be done without human co-operation. Without that, the Cross would have been another in the long list of capital sentences carried out by a savage and barbarous state. It would have been a noble sacrifice for an ideal. In the case of the kind of woman we have described, without cooperation the woman would simply resign herself to the forces of the universe and make her frustration unendurable. She has to find a positive and creative attitude to the situation - which, be it noted, evil, not God, has thrust upon her - the circumstantial will of God in it, so that out of the frustration she may make an immense contribution both to her own inner harmony and to the final purposes of God. This, in fact is what many women have done. Sublimation is easier to talk about than to accomplish. It is particularly easy for those who do not have to practice it to talk about its value for others. Actually, it is not technically sublimation until it becomes unconscious - until, that is to say, our instinctive energies are running in a non-biological channel without our realizing the fact at all. But sublimation may well

begin by directing the activities of the personality to some altruistic task which is (a) of use to the community, (b) satisfying to the self, and (c) in harmony with that self's ideals. Only under those three conditions can effective sublimation be realized.

The common illustration is work among other people's children. But in doctoring, nursing, craftsmanship, music, writing, organizing, running clubs and other people's homes, women use up the energy in ways helpful to the community, satisfying to themselves, in harmony with their ideals, and in so doing they extend immensely the kingdom of God.

In parenthesis, one ought to add that nothing could be more cruel or heartless or stupid than to sneer at the unmarried woman in middle life. It is especially intolerable when such a sneer comes from those who are married for no reason for which they should be proud. All who work among the people will report that wherever unselfish service for others is being carried on at a sacrifice of personal comfort, there the unmarried woman in middle life will be found, serving the community and forcing the circumstances of evil that have frustrated God's intentional will to contribute to the achievement of his ultimate plan.

I can imagine such a woman saying, "I know that the will of God was that I should express my nature as other happily married women do, and of course I should love to have my own home and family. But I am not just going to let the universe get me down, for there are no circumstances which God allows that can finally defeat the ultimate purpose which he wills; and as Jesus reacted to the circumstances of evil and thereby turned his crown of thorns into a crown of glory, and his cross into a throne, I can take hold of these circumstances and win something from them that will bring harmony to my own nature, which will contribute to the happiness and a service of the world, and which will further the kingdom of God."

No one, you see, can say to God: "Well, of course I wanted to do this and that, but I was the victim of illness or sorrow or frustration or war or death or loss. So what could I do?" For there are no circumstances which will be so deadly as those Christ had to face. No possible situation can ever arise which *of itself* has the power either to down us or to defeat God - no, not even death. For although thousands of deaths happen that are not the intentional will of God, he is not beaten by any

possible juxtaposition of circumstance. Probably death, and therefore the fact that we serve him in heaven instead of on earth, does not make more difference to the ultimate plans of God than whether we serve him in London or Manchester.

One thing *is* incredible, that God should allow circumstances to happen which inevitably defeat his ultimate purposes. If he did, it would mean that he had abdicated from the throne of the universe, whereas the truth is that, although the revolt against him seems formidable, "The Lord God omnipotent reigneth." As the writer to the Hebrews said, "We see not yet all things subjected to him. But we behold him crowned with glory and honour." So to go back to our early illustrations of death which we too loosely called "the will of God," we can only admit them as God's circumstantial will. Somebody once asked me, when a baby had fallen out of a fifth-story window, whether its death was the will of God. The question shows how important it is that we should get our thinking straight, for the answer is both Yes and No. Yes, it is God's circumstantial will. I mean there that it is God's will that the law of gravity should operate. It is God's will that a baby is made of flesh and blood; and if a baby hits a concrete pavement after falling from such a height, of course it is God's will that the little body should be broken - otherwise God would have made babies' bodies of something like India rubber. Yet we feel that we must answer the question by an emphatic No and say that the death of the baby was not the will of God, for it was not the will of God that it should be allowed to fall out of the window at all.

Again and again, when people ask, "Is it the will of God?" I think we shall have to separate the subject in order to make an intelligent answer.

Consider, for example, the matter of disease. The Christian minister is continually confronted, as he does his visiting, by the question as to whether the onset of disease is the will of God. The important answer is No. The will of God for man is perfect health. Other things being equal, God can use a body free from disease more effectively than a diseased body. Jesus would not have been a great spiritual asset in his early ministry if he had been lame or diabetic or tubercular. But there is a will within evil circumstances; and let every sufferer who may happen to read these lines realize that if he makes the right reaction to these circumstances, the ultimate

will of God will be reached *as effectively as if he had not been ill*. God would not allow cancer, if *of itself*, it had the power to defeat him.

The point may be seen, perhaps, by thinking of these diseases which are due to an invasion of germs. I suppose God is responsible for the creation of the germs, even the germs of disease. Why they are created I don't know. It may be that they serve some good function about which we know nothing. It may be that they have served, in the evolutionary process, some good function. I don't think anybody knows the answer to that question. If these germs invade a body the resistance of which evil circumstances have lowered, then the result is disease; and that disease you can call, if you like, the circumstantial will of God. But it is the will of God only within the circumstances created by evil.

Here again let me repeat that that circumstantial will can be viewed from two angles - the first natural, the second spiritual. There is the physical condition which we call disease; but, second, there is the possibility of the patient's making such a splendid response to that circumstance that he creates out of it a spiritual asset in the community of much more value than most people's health. It is because the saints have thus reacted to evil that the fallacy has got about that disease and suffering are the will of God. Let me put it this way. Given a spiritual awakening so glorious that the personality lives in close co-operation with God, the healthy body is more in line with his will. But so many healthy people are spiritually asleep and are not co-operating with him at all, and so many sick people, have, through the sickness, become spiritually awakened during their illness that out of the circumstances of evil they have created and set free spiritual energies far more valuable than the spiritual apathy of the healthy person.

I am quite sure that the battle *against* disease is the will of God, and I thank God for all those people who are taking part in it. In olden days in this country, wolves used to descend from the woods upon a village and do a great deal of harm. But our sturdy forefathers did not call the invasion of the wolves "the will of God." They called up all their resources, and they "liquidated" the wolves. When the community is set upon by an invasion of germs, that is not the will of God. The situation is just the same. You may tell me that the animals are smaller and the germs

of disease can be seen only through a microscope, but the problem is the same, and the battle is the same. I cannot understand how anybody who has read the New Testament can ever stand at the bedside of a patient, and without explaining himself, utter the pathetic complaint that disease is the will of God. I always imagine that Jesus would speak with anger about such a thoughtless dictum. When a woman was brought to him who had been ill for a long time, he spoke of her as "this woman ... whom Satan hath bound, lo, those eighteen years." Satan! As far as I can understand Jesus' attitude, but in the words he spoke and the healing miracles he so gloriously wrought, he always regarded disease as part of the kingdom of evil, and with all his powers he fought it and instructed his followers to do the same.

I like to think of our Lord standing by the bedside of the patient and working with the doctors and nurses toward the regaining of health, working on the mind and spirit of the patient as the physicians work on the body. Then if the latter fail, I like to think of him showing the sufferer that, in co-operation with him, victory may still be wrested from defeat and the purposes of God realized.

One final thought. If you say, "Well, it's a bit casual of God to *allow* these things to happen if they are not his intention," I agree that there is mystery there. It would be foolish to speak as if all the ways of God to men were clear. I should not like to give the impression that I could make a glib answer to any specific case of suffering that was brought to my notice. I too am often appalled at the suffering people endure, and especially little children.

Yet I wonder if, in a sense, we are not all in the position of little children. I can imagine a child looking up to his own father who loves him, and saying to him, "Don't you think you are rather casual to let me get hurt the way you do?" I amused myself, as I thought about this, by imagining a mass meeting of tiny toddlers who magically had the gift of putting their thoughts into words. Think of them, if you like, crowded into a great hall, with a little toddler as chairman, who adjusting his bib, addresses his fellow toddlers in some such way as this: "I am sure my parents don't care. Look at my knees!" but we do say, "Look at my frustration and sorrow and disappointment and pain! How *can* you be so callous, and how *do* you expect us to think you care?" Perhaps childhood's tragedies are to us what our tragedies are to

God - not that he is callous any more than the ideal parent is, but that his perspective is different. But the thought that comforts the child comforts me. If the child thought about it, I think he would say, "There is much I don't understand, but I know that my father both loves and cares." So, for myself, I am quite certain that because God is love there is nothing in his world that can be regarded as meaningless torture. There is much I cannot understand. There must be much that I cannot be made to understand until I have passed out of childhood's stage. But because I know him through other means, and especially as revealed in Jesus, I know that although I cannot understand the answer to my questions, there *is* an answer, and in that I can rest content.

I only know I cannot drift

Beyond His love and care.

One cannot avoid being deeply impressed by the kind of answer Jesus gave when men came to him with their questions. When John the Baptist asked him a question, he said, "Suffer it to be so now." When Peter asked him a question, he said, "What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter." And when, on the darkest night of the world's history, the night before his death, they all asked him questions, he said, "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now."

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 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 integrating 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. Now we see in a mirror, darkly, but then face to face. Frankly, hard

though it may be to say so, it is a lack of faith not to be able to bear the thought of anything which God allows.

I know that right is right; that givers shall increase;
That duty lights the way for the beautiful feet of peace;
That courage is better than fear, and faith is truer than doubt.
And fierce through the fiends may fight, and long though the angels hide,
I know that Truth and Right have the Universe on their side;
And that somewhere beyond the stars is a Love that is stronger than hate;
When the night unlocks her bars, I shall see Him - and I will wait.

Second in a series of five sermons given by Leslie D. Weatherhead at the City Temple in London after their church was reduced to rubble in World War II.

1. God's Intentional Will
2. God's Circumstantial Will
3. God's Ultimate Will
4. Discerning the Will of God
5. In His Will Is Our Peace

Weatherhead was a Methodist preacher ordained in 1915, serving in India before serving the church City Temple in London. He was a prominent figure in the Oxford Movement of the 1930's. He was born in 1893 and passed away in 1976 at the age of 82.