

IN HIS WILL IS OUR PEACE

A Sermon by Leslie Weatherhead

In this section I should like the reader to have in his mind not only the sentence of Dante which stands at the head, “In his will is our peace,” but also a word of God for us in the book of Proverbs: “In all thy ways acknowledge him and he shall direct thy paths.”

We may feel that it was all very well for Dante to say, “In his will is our peace;” but there are so many things happening in the world today that are outside his will – at any rate in the sense of being outside his intention – that we may feel debarred from peace. Exactly! That is why we do not find peace, but instead war without and restlessness within. After all the years of war it is not surprising to find so many people ill. If not incapacitated in body, thousands are anxious and worried and sleepless. But on top of it, if a man has any imagination or sensitiveness left, and lets his mind brood over the slaughter and suffering the worry and unhappiness of this war-stricken world, his mind is continually wounded, and the power of the mind over the body is so great that one almost feels it is true to say that only those can feel well who are living, both mentally and physically, remote from the horror of war, or who somehow, by virtue of their temperament or their indifference or by the skillful practice of looking the other way, have built up a wall of defense between themselves and the bleeding world around them. For most of us there is the dull sorrow which goes on day after day, and which then is suddenly focused into some poignant case of suffering, thrusting itself upon our attention because the sufferer is dear to us or because he chooses us as the recipient of his burden. One is glad when he finds the relief of a burden shared, but sometimes some of us feel we do not know how to go on for another day. We are so burdened down that we even feel impatient with Dante, and say, “Yes but all this is not his will, and therefore how may peace be found?”

Here should come, I think, the value of our earlier thinking and our distinction between the intentional, the circumstantial, and the ultimate will of God.

We saw that even though the intentional will of God is deflected by man's misuse of free will – by the folly and ignorance of the world, and by that family relationship through which all humanity is so closely bound together that your sins affect me and my sins hurt you – yet, even so, there is *a* will of God within the circumstances which evil has caused. I believe, as we have said before that the Cross was not the intention of God for Jesus. God's intention was that Jesus should be followed, not crucified. But when evil men thrust the Cross upon him, he accepted God's will in those circumstances and so reacted to them that he made his Cross an instrument of power by which the ultimate will of God could be done. In the Garden of Gethsemane, when the shadows were falling upon him, he saw like Bunyan's pilgrim, the bright Light; and by keeping on the path that led to it, he achieved God's purposes not only in spite of the Cross, but through it.

So the message of this section is that no evil circumstances can ever befall us but we can find in them a path which is God's way for us just then, and we must train ourselves, as we saw in the last section, so as to discern the will of God that we shall not falter or fail to find the path. When we find it, then, though all the world is in tumult, there is at least an inner peace at the core of our being – a peace that comes from knowing that we are within his will and his will is revealed to us in those circumstances and at that moment.

To be within God's will means peace for three reasons:

1. We lose the fear of getting lost. Everyone knows the terror of the child who cannot find the path that leads to home. There is a good illustration for us here in the way an airman finds his way home. A radio beam is sent out from his own home station, and once in that beam he has only to follow it to find his way. If he goes out of that directing beam a buzzer sounds in his earphones, telling him clearly enough: "You are going wrong. You must get back until all is quiet." In the home beam there is peace. I think it is not stretching the illustration to say that God sends out, as it were, a beam of direction – namely, his will for us in those circumstances in which we find ourselves – and as long as we keep in his will there is peace. It is when we go out of it or cannot find it – and this can be our case sometimes, however hard we try, as I know to my sorrow – that disturbance and unrest are set up in our minds.

I suspect the same thing happens in the brain of a bird. We must not talk of the “courage” and “trust” of the swallow, for these are values which have no meaning in birdland. But in the spring or early summer a swallow away in Africa will start off on a journey of thousands of miles, and come back to the eaves of the same little village church among the elms where she built her nest last year. She will not be deflected or lose her way. She will find an unknown path through storms and driving winds and across the leagues of sea without disturbance, fretting, or anxiety, because, although mechanically she is in the pat of God’s will and in his will there is peace. So, says Browning:

I go to prove my soul!

I see my way as birds their trackless way.

I shall arrive! What time, what circuit first,

I ask not ...

In some time, his good time, I shall arrive

Let us take this message to heart, that by keeping within the will of God, as we see it in any experience, we find our way even through apparently overwhelming storms, until we arrive at last where God wants us to be – and the goal of all human endeavor is to fulfill God’s purposes and to be one with him.

2. The second reason why I think we find peace within the will of God is this: The dread of carrying the responsibility of what happens is removed. What a dreadful moment it was when the crowd, intent on the crucifixion of Christ, shout out: “His blood be on us, and on our children.” They were asserting that they were quite ready to take the responsibility for their actions. It is that responsibility which so often weighs us down. But I believe God’s message to us includes this: it is as though he said “As long as you try to do my will, I will accept responsibility for whatever happens. I will carry that burden for you. I will direct you, and the consequences are my responsibility, not yours.” “In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.”

Perhaps an illustration will serve here. I heard recently of a little girl whose mother was away from home so that the child had the task of housekeeping for her father and several smaller brothers or sisters. One can only imagine the burden of responsibility which the child carried, as she tried to fill her mother's place, not only in keeping house, but in answering the demands of the smaller children. She bore up bravely and carried through her duties splendidly, but when her mother came back one can imagine the relief of the little girl as she cried, "Oh, Mummy, I'm so glad you have come." Remember that the child probably still did most of the duties that she had been doing before, but her mother bore the responsibility. I feel that the illustration goes a good way, that when we submit our will to the will of God in a sense we can say to God "I'm so glad you have come." We are not any longer carrying out a set of duties in loneliness and bearing the responsibility of life alone. We are trying to do the will of One who is all the time there, and who says to us: "All you have to do is follow the plan of my will from day to day, and the responsibility for what happens I will carry for you." Instead of that we are trying to bear in the world what is God's burden of responsibility.

I wonder if I might further illustrate by quoting part of a prayer which I wrote down for my own comfort recently, during some very heavy days of strain:

Lord Jesus, Bearer of men's burdens, Comforter of the sorrowful, we would bring to thee all whose hearts are sad. Help us to mediate thy strengthening sympathy to others but grant that we may be so continually refreshed by our companionship with thee that we may not be crushed by the world's burdens. Thou art the burden bearer – not we. Thou are the Redeemer – not we. Thou alone O Christ canst in thy strong heart carry the woes of the world. In this faith, teach us to do our duty day by day as we see it to be thy will, and save us from the depression of those who try to carry more than man was made to bear, and ever to look to thee, O Lamb of God who bearest the sins of the world.

3. The third reason why God's will means our peace is that in his will our conflicts are resolved. I am aware that an element of conflict is essential to the progress of the soul. The soul that is unconscious of any conflict would be one ceasing to recognize a clash of good and evil – the soul so dulled by acquiescence to impulse that temptation had lost its power, the thing desired being done without conflict. A dreadful deterioration of personality would follow. At the same time, now weak is the man who constantly weighs "Shall I do this?" with "Shall I do that?" The guiding principle "I will do God's will as far as I can see it" is one that answers a great many of our conflicts and therefore brings us peace and strength. If it be said, "Yes, but you could end conflict by deciding to do wrong," my answer is that doing wrong always sets up a dozen conflicts where formerly there was one. We wade more and more deeply into the morass of evil and are exhausted in the attempts to get out of it, for the trend of the universe is toward goodness.

For the everlasting right

The eternal stars are strong

If this were a psychological lecture, I should try to explain how often the personality is exhausted by these conflicts. As I write these words, I recall a young officer in the A.T.S. who once consulted me, complaining of a fatigue so great that at times she could not lift her arms above her shoulder level in order to do her hair. Her mind was tormented by the obsession that she would fall ill. The truth was that part of her mind wanted to fall ill because illness would bring sympathy, love, the security of home, and her parents' care. A recent love affair which had been broken off had deprived her of love, and she craved the love of her mother. But another part of her mind feared illness, since illness in her case for which there was no real cause, would only be a guilt-causing get-out from the Army life that she hated and in which there was no chance of being loved. The hunger for love and the deprivation of love are known to every psychologist as fruitful causes of neurosis.

Again and again these conflicts weaken and exhaust us. A young girl feels the conflict between duty to her mother and a desire for independence. Dr. Hadfield tells us that in the mind of a soldier the sense of duty was so much in conflict with the desire to run away, promoted by the self-preservation instinct that a condition of

paralysis of the legs was produced which solved the immediate problem but of course disabled the patient. In our own psychological clinic I have known the conflict in the student between the desire to excel, as he had done at school, and the inferiority which he felt so keenly when proceeding to the university, where he found himself among those of finer mental caliber than he had met at school. The frustration of not being, as it were, top of the class any longer, the fear of being found out to be ordinary and the desire for the top places even in the university produced a conflict so exhausting as to disable the patient altogether. Hadfield wisely says: “By facing our conflicts and deliberately making our choice, by directing all our endeavors to one great purpose confidently and fearlessly, the soul is restored to harmony and strength.”

I always imagine that the lovely picture Jesus painted in his phrase “Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls,” is really that of the strong ox yoked with the weaker, untried animal. The weaker has to pull only his own weight, as we say, and keep level with the stronger. The stronger carries the heaven end of the yoke. The stronger is responsible for the straight furrow and for reaching the end of it. If the weaker keeps pulling out into a direction of his own the yoke chafes his shoulders, and the burden becomes heavy. “Take my yoke upon you,” says Jesus “and learn of me to be meek and lowly in heart. Don’t be self-opinionated and proud and self-assertive, saying, ‘I’m going my own way.’ Bu doing that you make the yoke chafe your shoulders. Walk with me, and it becomes easy (in the true sense of that word.) The responsibility is taken from you, and the burden becomes light.” “In his will is our peace.”

In my early teens I often had a holiday at a farmhouse in the Chamwood Forest. Near the farm there was one rocky crag on which I loved to sit, especially at the sunset hour. Below my feet the hillside ran steeply down to a big reservoir, fringed with reeds and rushes. Then there was the expanse of water, and on the other side of it a grand red granite crag, rising sheer from the lake and crowned with stately pines. I have sat there in silence at all hours of the day. I can close my eyes now and recover the sense of calm and peace that came to me in that lonely spot. I can almost hear the cry of the coot in the rushes, the lovely whisper of the wind in the bracken, and the chattering of the water among the stones of a tiny beach between

the reeds. One day there came to me, almost as a revelation, a thought which may be quite a platitude to you but which struck my mind with the shock of truth. There was no human being or even human habitation in sight. Everything I could see was fulfilling perfectly the will of God. Agreed that that will was mechanically done and that the wild life around me had no burden of choice, but I seemed to learn the secret of harmony and peace of that spot. The will of God was perfectly done. If we could do voluntarily that which is done in nature mechanically, I believe we should find the same sense of peace. "In all thy ways acknowledge him [as the birds do], and he shall direct thy paths."

The poets say these things better than we do. Let me conclude with some verses of the poet William Cullen Bryant, written as he watched the figure of a wild bird flying, as it seemed, into the heart of the sunset:

Wither, 'midst falling dew,
While glow the heavens with the last steps of day,
Far, through their rosey depths, dost thou pursue
Thy solitary way?
Vainly the fowler's eye
Might mark thy distant flight to do thee wrong,
As, darkly painted on the crimson sky,
Thy figure floats along.
Seek'st thou the plashy brink
Of weedy lake, or marge of river wide,
Or where the rocking billows rise and sink
On the chafed ocean side?

There is a Power whose care
Teaches thy way along that pathless coast, -
The desert and illimitable air, -
Lone wandering, but not lost.
Thou'rt gone the abyss of heaven

Hath swallowed up thy form; yet on my heart
Deeply hath sunk the lesson thou hast given
And shall not soon depart.

He who, from zone to zone,
Guides through the boundless sky thy certain flight,
In the long way that I must tread alone
Will lead my steps aright.

- *William Cullen Bryant*

Fifth 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.