

GOD'S INTENTIONAL WILL

A Sermon by Leslie Weatherhead

The phrase “the will of God” is used so loosely, and the consequence of that looseness to our peace of mind is so serious, that I want to spend some time in thinking through with you the whole subject. There is nothing about which we ought to think more clearly; and yet, I sometimes think, there is nothing about which men and women are more confused.

Let me illustrate the confusion. I have a good friend whose dearly loved wife recently died. When she was dead, he said, “Well, I must just accept it. It is the will of God.” But he is himself a doctor, and for weeks he had been fighting for her life. He had called in the best specialists in London. He had used all the devices of modern science, all the inventive apparatus by which the energies of nature can be used to fight disease. Was he all that time fighting *against* the will of God? If she had recovered, would he not have called her recovery the will of God? Yet surely we cannot have it both ways. The woman’s recovery and the woman’s death cannot equally be the will of God in the sense of being his intention.

Let me illustrate the confusion again. “My boy was killed ten days ago in one of the raids on Berlin,” said a woman, “but I am trying to bow to the inscrutable will of God.” But was that the will of God? I should have said it was the will of the enemy, of Hitler, if you like, of the evil forces we were fighting. Are they then the same thing?

Here is a mother wringing her hands and weeping in anguish because her baby is dead. Her minister stands by her, longing to comfort her; but though his presence and prayers may offer consolation, he knows only too well that when the storm is raging it is too late to talk about the anchor that should have been put down before the storm began. What I mean is that it is so important that we should try to think clearly before disaster falls upon us. If we do, then in spite of all our grief we have a philosophy of life that steadies us as an anchor steadies a ship. If we do not, the storm is so furious that little can be done until it has abated. If only the minister could have injected into the mind of the woman his own belief about God! But that, alas! is impossible. In her anguish, this is what the woman said: “I suppose it is the

will of God, *but if only the doctor had come in time, he could have saved my baby.*” You see the confusion of thought. If the doctor had come in time, would he have been able to outwit the will of God?

The matter came to me most poignantly when I was in India. I was standing on the veranda of an Indian home darkened by bereavement. My Indian friend had lost his little son, the light of his eyes, in a cholera epidemic. At the far end of his veranda his little daughter, the only remaining child, slept in a cot covered with a mosquito net. We paced up and down, and I tried in my clumsy way to comfort and console him. But he said, “Well, padre, it is the will of God. That’s all there is to it. It is the will of God.”

Fortunately I knew him well enough to be able to reply without being misunderstood, and I said something like this: “Supposing someone crept up the steps onto the veranda tonight, while you all slept, and deliberately put a wad of cotton soaked in cholera germ culture over your little girl’s mouth as she lay in that cot there on the veranda, what would you think about that?”

“My God,” he said “what would I think about that? Nobody would do such a damnable thing. If he attempted it and I caught him, I would kill him with as little compunction as I would a snake, and throw him over the veranda. What do you mean by suggesting such a thing?”

“But, John,” I said quietly, “isn’t that what you have accused God of doing when you said it was his will? Call your little boy’s death the result of mass ignorance, call it mass folly, call it mass sin, if you like, call it bad drains or communal carelessness, but don’t call it the will of God.” Surely, we cannot identify as the will of God something for which a man would be locked up in jail, or put in a criminal lunatic asylum.

Those who want a text for this sermon will find it in the eighteenth chapter of St. Matthew’s Gospel and the fourteenth verse: “It is NOT the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish.”

We see by these illustrations – which, of course, could be applied to other disasters besides death – how confused and loose our thinking is about the will of

God. But let me here at once relieve the tension of your mind by anticipating some of the things that I want to say in subsequent sermons of this series.

My own thinking demands a division on the subject into three parts, the first of which we are discussing:

1. The intentional will of God
2. The circumstantial will of God
3. The ultimate will of God

The trouble arises because we use the phrase “the will of God” to cover all three, without making any distinction between them. But when we look at the Cross of Christ, we can see, I think, the necessity of such a distinction.

1. Was it God’s intention from the beginning that Jesus would go the Cross? I think the answer to that question must be **No**. I don’t think Jesus thought that at the beginning of his ministry. He came with the *intention* that men should follow him, not kill him. The discipleship of men, not the death of Christ, was the intentional will of God, or if you like, God’s ideal purpose – and I sometimes wish that in common language we could keep the phrase “the will of God” for the intentional will of God.

2. But when circumstances wrought by men’s evil set up such a dilemma that Christ as compelled either to die or to run away, then in those circumstances the Cross was the will of God, but only *in those circumstances* which were themselves the fruit of evil. In those circumstances any other way was unworthy and impossible, and it was in this sense that our Lord said, “Nevertheless not what I will, but what thou wilt.” Because a father in the evil circumstances set up by war says to his son, “I am glad you are in the Army, John,” it does not mean that from the beginning he willed the Army as John’s career. The father would much have preferred, let us say, that his son should be an architect. The father wills the Army for his boy only *because in the circumstances which evil has set up* it seems to the father, and, indeed, to the boy, the most honorable, as well as inevitable thing to do.

3. Then there is a third sense in which we use the phrase “the will of God,” when we mean God’s ultimate goal – the purposefulness of God which, in spite of evil and, as we shall see, even through evil arrives, with nothing of value lost, at the same goal as would have been reached if the intentional will of God could have been carried through without frustration. I hope we shall come to see in the other sermons of the series that God cannot be finally defeated, and that is what I mean by his omnipotence – not that everything that happens is his will, but that nothing can happen which *finally* defeats his will. So, in regard to the Cross, God achieved his final goal not simply in spite of the Cross but through it. He achieved a great redemption and realized his ultimate will in as full a sense as he would have done if his intentional will had not been temporarily defeated.

I know people’s minds are very tired through war strain and weariness, but I do want to ask you, in view of any possible hour of subsequent sorrow or disaster, to try to hold in your mind those three distinctive ideas which can finally be harmonized, but which, for clarity, we do well to hold separately: the intentional will of God, the circumstantial will of God, and the ultimate will of God.

So, we concentrate on the first and think of the will of God in the sense of his ideal intention. To accomplish that, one of the first things we must do is to disassociate from the phrase “the will of God” all that is evil and unpleasant and unhappy. That we shall deal with under the heading “The Circumstantial Will of God.” The intentional will of God means the way in which God pours himself out in goodness, such as the true father longs to do for his son.

In this matter see how confused our thinking has been made by bad hymns. Here is a verse from one of them:

Though dark my path and sad my lot,
 Let me be still and murmur not,
 But breathe the prayer divinely taught,
 “Thy will be done.”

What sort of a God is this, who of his own *intention*, not through circumstances thrust into life by ignorance, folly, or sin, but of divine intention, pours misery undeserved and unhappiness, disappointment, and frustration, bereavement, calamity, and ill health on his beloved children, and then asks them to look up through their tears and say, “They will be done?” We simply must break with the idea that everything that happens is the will of God in the sense of being his intention. It is *within* the will of God, if you must use the phrase, in circumstances we have hinted at already. But we must come to terms with the idea that the intentional will of God can be defeated by the will of man *for the time being*. If this were not true, then man would have no real freedom at all. All evil that is temporarily successful temporarily defeats God.

To go back to our earlier illustrations, I could not say to my dear friend, “Your wife’s death is not the will of God at all. It is the fruit of human ignorance, and if we could spend as much on medical research as we spend on a battleship, your wife’s life could have been saved;” but though it was not the right moment to say it, one could not help thinking it.

When a young missionary declares his readiness and determination, having been thoroughly tested, and having passed all the necessary examinations, to give his life in order to bring the good news about Christ to people who have not heard it, then we may truly say, “They will be done.” Not when the baby is dead, but when two young people take their little one to the altar to dedicate him or her to God because they want God to be enthroned in their lovely little home and in the new life that has been born to them – that is the time to say, “Thy will be done.” Not when little children starve in Europe because of the circumstances of war which the evil of the whole world has brought into being, but when Europe is delivered at last from the ruthless heel of the oppressor, and all little children in a United States of Europe have enough to eat, and can sing and play again happily in the sunshine, with fit bodies and fit minds – that is the time to say, “Thy will be done.”

Come with me to some slum home in the dark back streets of a huge city, where men’s lives and services are means to other men’s ends, where there is disease of body and distortion of mind, where evil festers and grows in sordid and terrible conditions, where men have not even the spirit to rebel, but accept their lot with a listless apathy that is more terrible than a revolution. And if you say concerning

those stunted lives, “This is the will of God,” I say to you that that is a greater blasphemy than the denial of the Holy Trinity. Industrial oppression, selfish greed, the denial of God’s gifts to his own children because of the greed of the few, the horror of war – these things spell a greater atheism than any verbal arguments man has devised. We turn back a hundred years and wonder that Christian men could sing hymns to God while slavery was rife. But, please God, a hundred years hence our descendants will turn back and become incredulous that we ever called ourselves by the name of Christ when his body was torn asunder in our churches, trampled on in our streets, exploited in big business, left to disease when medical knowledge and skill were within reach of the human family, and mutilated by the bombs and burning steel we dropped on one another’s cities. Call these things evil, call some of the inevitable evil because of widespread sin, but don’t call them the will of God.

Do you not see, therefore, how important it is that we should get thinking right about the will of God? For by our confusion we thrust people’s minds into unbelievable torment; we blunt the edge of social purpose until men mutter the slogan, “God’s will be done,” when the very opposite of God’s will is being done, and when, if men had seen more clearly into the divine purpose and tightened up their loose thinking, they would have become the instruments of God’s purpose and swept away the evil which they complacently regarded as the will of God. Men have changed the phrase “the will of God” as savages chant incantations, sealing the whole subject with that silencing taboo and evading the challenge of the disturbing questions which honest thinking would have set ringing through their minds with the insistence of a trumpet call.

There are, however, two difficulties:

1. The first might be put like this. You may say, “Yes, that’s all very well, but people get a lot of comfort from supposing that their tragedies are the will of God. One can bear a thing if it is God’s will. It is hard to bear it if it is a ghastly mistake and not the will of God at all. Your view is robbing men of comfort. When they feel a thing is the will of God, they can bear it with equanimity.”

I am unrepentant. Admittedly there is a time when things can be said and there is a time when they cannot be said, however true they may be. If

you are standing in the presence of some great tragedy, there is very little you can say about the will of God. But I would go on immediately to add this: There is never any final comfort in a lie. However closely we may have hugged a lie to our bosom, the moment we see it to be a lie we should be wise to part with it. Those who take refuge in a lie are like those who take refuge in a flimsy storm shelter made of three-ply wood painted to look like stone. When they want the shelter most, it will let them down. He who hides in an idea about God which is not true will, in the hour of real need, be left as comfortless as atheism would leave him; and if it is his own refusal to think things through which lands him in a flimsy shelter than can never give his soul any strengthening protection, then the refusal to think is sin, for Christ commanded that we should love him with all our mind. I know that to face the truth is costly, and people hate to be made to think, but only the truth can set us free.

2. Second, there is another objection which could be expressed thus. A man might say, "It is all very well to keep the phrase 'the will of God' for the lovely, joyous, healthy, beneficent things that happen to people, but surely some of the greatest qualities in people are made by suffering, and therefore is not that suffering the will of God? For example," this objector might say, "look how the war brought courage to men and women." This we will discuss more fully as we think of the circumstantial will of God, but let me make some reply to the objection.

There is a bad snag in the logic of the objector's remark, for he cannot go on to say, "Therefore the war was the will of God." The war did not make courage. It revealed the courage that was there all the time. It gave it a tremendous opportunity for self-expression. Evil is never creative of good, though the circumstances of evil have often been an occasion for the expression of good.

Look not only at the flaw in the logic but at the false implications of theology. If we say that the suffering caused by evil is essential because of the qualities evoked, then logically we must assume that God needs evil to produce good: that he could not produce such a thing as courage unless an evil like war demanded it; that when Jesus healed men he was defying the will of

God instead of doing it, in that he was removing something essential to the growth of the soul. If that is true, what happens in the heaven of heavens after all souls are gathered in at last? Will all the qualities which evil reveals atrophy into nothing because there is no evil to evoke them? I repeat that evil does not *make* good qualities. It *reveals* them and gives them exercise, but there is always the possibility – and surely this is God’s intention – that those same qualities may be revealed and exercised and manifested as a response to goodness.

Let me recall to you in this connection in the words of Jesus: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killeth the prophets, and stoneth them that are sent unto her! How often would I have gathered thy children together as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate.” Note the words “ye would not.” They imply, “Ye might have done.” Or look at some other words of Jesus: “If thou hadst known in this day ... the things which belong unto peace! But now they are hid from thine eyes.” Note the words “If thou hadst known”; they *might* have known, then. The grand qualities in human nature are not given birth by evil. God creates them, and they are sometimes revealed by the right reaction of the good man to evil, but they do not depend for their origin on evil, for they *can* be evoked by a response to the good.

Let us be very, very careful how we use the phrase “the will of God.” I should like in closing this section to make reference to the passing of a very great religious leader, the Rev. Dr. F. Luke Wiseman. On a dreadful, foggy day this old saint of eighty-six preached twice – once in Wesley’s own pulpit in City Road. Then the old man made his way home. His wife died many years ago. His family are all grown up. We can imagine the old man sitting down in his armchair by the fire. He went to sleep and awakened in heaven. About that you can use the phrase “Thy will be done” – and some of us would add another Biblical phrase: “May my last end be like his.”

We will later fit calamity and distress into the framework of our thought about the will of God, but in the meantime keep the phrase for God’s intention. And when you see his glory reflected in this lovely earth, in nature around us so full of his beauty, in poem and song, in picture, in music, in great

architecture and in lowly service, in the lives of lovely people, in the happiness of a home, in the health of the body and the resilience of the mind and the saintliness of the soul, then, looking up to your Father in heaven, say, “They will be done”; and let us so dedicate our selves that we may be made one in the glorious harmony of all things and all people who carry out his will, that it may be done in earth as the angels do it in heaven.

First 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

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Bomb Damage WW2
April 17, 1941



Rebuilt after the war