

Question #1: Is God Always In Control?

When attempting to answer questions regarding God's "control" over all things, we are forced to deal with the issue of His "sovereignty". God's sovereignty is our way of referring to His will and His accomplishing of that will in history. In order to understand these issues, we must carefully study what He has revealed in Scripture regarding these things. When we rightly see and understand His plan and power, we will, by His grace, understand more of His sovereignty in all situations, even COVID-19 and all of the concerns that accompany it. To begin our study of God's sovereignty, let's look at what He has revealed about His will.

The Will of God

The topic of God's will is something that always draws great interest from Christians, but it is overwhelmingly clouded with unimaginable confusion. You would think that an issue as important as "God's will" would be clear in the mind of all disciples of Christ, but the reality is that many (if not most) remain in a constant state of confusion not only regarding what God's will is but also regarding if they are "living in it". Many people seem to be on a life-long hunt for this mysterious "will of God". Because this level of confusion exists, it is imperative for us to spend our first lesson discovering truth about God's will that has been revealed clearly in His sufficient word. If we truly want to please God with how we think and live, then we need to know what He has revealed about His will in Scripture. So, from the beginning, you need to learn that when you are faced with questions regarding God's will, one of the best habits you can develop is to ask, "Which will?".

God's Preceptive Will

Though our Triune God has only one will, He has revealed it to us in Scripture in two ways. The first is what we consider God's "preceptive will".¹ This refers to what God has commanded in His precepts. This focuses on what "should" be done in creation, not necessarily on what "will" be done.

Appropriately understanding this aspect of God's will helps us maintain a biblical balance between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. It will help us know the difference between what He plans to do and what we are responsible to do. This also helps us understand how some passages can speak of God's will being violated or rejected and other passages speak of His will being immutable and infallible. Therefore, God's will is most helpfully described in 2 ways, and we will begin by giving our attention to His preceptive will.

In defining this aspect of God's will, Gary Friessen said, "God's [preceptive] will ... may be defined as God's moral commands that are revealed in the Bible, teaching men how they ought to believe and live."² In order to understand this aspect of God's will, take time to read the descriptions below, and be sure to notice how these points are gathered from the passages that are included. There are blanks provided for you to record your answers and observations.

¹ Sometimes referred to as His moral will, revealed will, commanding will, directive will, etc.

² Decision Making and the Will of God, p. 33

1. God's preceptive will is completely contained in Scripture

Paul says that the Jews learned God's will from where in Romans 2:17-18?

Rom. 2:17-18 - But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law...

What does Ephesians 5:17 call those who do not understand what the will of the Lord is?

Eph. 5:15-17 - Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

These passages help us see that there is an aspect of God's will that we are commanded to know and do. This is shocking to many because they assume that God's will is something that either can't be known or can only be known after great and mysterious "hunt". Moses made this helpful distinction between what we are responsible to know and what God alone knows in Deuteronomy 29:29.

Deuteronomy 29:29 - 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.

There are clearly "secret" things that belong only to the Lord, but there are other things that He has chosen to reveal. Those things that are "revealed" are what we are supposed to focus on and study. In commenting on the desire many have to know the unknowable, Gary Meadors said:

"A surface reading of 'will of God' passages where verbs like 'know', 'be filled with', or 'understand' are used have caused some to think that these terms are synonyms for 'find'. Such an understanding, however, is not true to the biblical contexts. These exhortations are not invitations to obtain new revelation but are appeals to engage the information already available."³

Know from the beginning that, when we speak of God's preceptive will, we are talking about His will that is not a mystery. We are talking about His will that is discovered through Bible study and meditation. This is not the end goal though. Once we know and understand this will, we are obligated to do it!

2. You are responsible to fulfill God's preceptive will

What does the Psalmist ask God to do in Psalm 143:10?

Ps. 143:10 - Teach me to do your will, for you are my God! Let your good Spirit lead me on level ground!

³ Decision Making God's Way, p. 98 - I added apostrophes for clarity

What does Jesus say is a distinguishing mark between hypocrites and His family members according to Matthew 7:21 and 12:50?

Matthew 7:21 - “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

Matthew 12:50 - For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.

Though many people can know God’s preceptive will, His children are marked by doing this will, but it is not merely outward conformity. From where does Ephesians 6:5-6 say that our obedience is supposed to originate?

Eph. 6:5-6 - Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free.

We learn from these passages that God’s will is not only something that may or may not be done, but it is also something that, when it is done, it must be done from the heart! God’s preceptive will is neither automatically accomplished nor merely concerned with outward performance. It always has obedience from the heart as its goal, even though that goal may not always be realized.

3. God’s preceptive will does not give specific details about every area of life

It needs to be clear to us that there are no aspects of God’s preceptive will that are unrevealed, but that does not mean that His commands directly and explicitly cover every area of our lives. There are many times in our lives where we have freedom to choose according to wisdom rather than an explicit command.

For instance, in the Garden, God’s command to Adam involved which tree he was to NOT eat from. God’s command did not involve rules regarding which fruit must be eaten. God did not prescribe how many meals Adam was to have a day, the order in which the fruits must be eaten, nor a billion other “practical” decisions that would need to be made. God gave Adam a clear command to not eat from one tree, and that meant that there was freedom regarding other parts of his diet. We see more examples of this “freedom” in the passages below.

Lev. 11:2-8 - “Speak to the people of Israel, saying, These are the living things that you may eat among all the animals that are on the earth. *Whatever parts the hoof and is cloven-footed and chews the cud, among the animals, you may eat.* Nevertheless, among those that chew the cud or part the hoof, you shall not eat these: The camel, because it chews the cud but does not part the hoof, is unclean to you. And the rock badger, because it chews the cud but does not part the hoof, is unclean to you. And the hare, because it chews the cud but does not part the hoof, is unclean to you. And the pig, because it parts the hoof and is cloven-footed but does not chew the cud, is unclean to you. You shall not eat any of their flesh, and you shall not touch their carcasses; they are unclean to you.

Deut. 14:26 - And if the way is too long for you, so that you are not able to carry the tithe, when the Lord your God blesses you, because the place is too far from you, which the Lord your God chooses, to set his name there, then you shall turn it into money and bind up the money in your hand and go to the place that the Lord your God chooses and spend the money for *whatever you desire*—oxen or sheep or wine or strong drink,

whatever your appetite craves. And you shall eat there before the Lord your God and rejoice, you and your household.

Deut. 23:15-16 - "You shall not give up to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you. He shall dwell with you, in your midst, in the place that he shall choose within one of your towns, wherever it suits him. You shall not wrong him.

2 Cor. 9:7 - Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

When we study God's preceptive will, we notice that it does not cover every area of life. There are decisions we will make that do not involve direct commands from the Lord, but, if the Lord has commanded something, then there is no wiggle-room for how we respond. So though God's preceptive will does not cover everything in life, whatever it does cover is to be fulfilled without question.

Summarize what each passage teaches you regarding God's will, and notice how clear this kind of revelation is regarding God's will.

1 Thessalonians 4:3 - For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality...

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 - Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

1 Pet. 2:13-17 - Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God. Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor.

God's preceptive will is completely clear on what it does cover, but it does not involve every single detail of all creation and history. There are areas of life that are not directly covered by this will. This will be helpful to remember when we contrast it with the other aspect of God's will later.

4. We are praying for the day when God's preceptive will is only and always done on Earth

The last description we will look at regarding God's preceptive will involves the fact that it is not always accomplished. This was mentioned earlier, but it is worth noting what Jesus taught us regarding this will and prayer.

What does Jesus teach us to pray for in the "Disciples' Prayer" (Matthew 6:9-13), and what does this teach you about God's preceptive will on earth right now as opposed to when Jesus establishes His Kingdom?

Matthew 6:10 - Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

In summary, God's preceptive will is: 1) Clearly revealed and wholly contained in Scripture, 2) Our responsibility to learn and accomplish, 3) Not specific about every area and detail of life, 4) Is not always done on earth.

The survey above helps you see why the preceptive will of God is described as what "should" happen in creation. This is the will of God that is broken every time someone sins, and it is the will of God that is accomplished every time someone obeys from the heart. For example, every time someone murders, we can say with 100% certainty that they clearly violated the will of the Lord because He has clearly said that people must not murder. The same could be said for every act of lying, stealing, slander, or any other sin. I can also be just as certain about God's will regarding loving others, telling the truth, devoting myself to prayer, and other acts of righteousness clearly given to us in God's word. God has revealed His will to us in precepts, and this "preceptive will" is one that must not be ignored.

Practical Applications of God's Preceptive Will

In light of what we have seen regarding the preceptive will of God, let's think through a few ways in which embracing these truths will impact our lives.

1. Where God commands, obey

Though we tend to take this part for granted, don't overlook the fact that God's revealed will in Scripture does cover many neglected areas of the Christian life. God has commanded many actions that must be done, and He has spoken to which actions are to be avoided. He has also made it clear that the doing and avoiding of these actions is to be coupled with certain attitudes, motivations, and effort. In other words, God cares about what you do, why you do it, and how you do it. This is not a small category that can be glossed over in our attempts to know God's will. In fact, this preceptive will of God is the only will of God we are called to fulfill. As we will see in the next section, God alone will accomplish the other aspect of His will, but, for now, we must focus our attention on His will that we must fully know and obey.

This also means that the search for God's will is over if you know His word. We must give ourselves to the study of His word and applying it by means of meditating on it. So exert all of your efforts in your "search" for God's will by reading, studying, meditating, memorizing, and applying His word. And remember that we are doing all of this as a means of knowing Christ better! Having this motivation in the forefront of your mind will help your spiritual disciplines remain a joy-filled pursuit rather than a burden.

2. Where there is no command, exercise your freedom responsibly with wisdom

When you have a decision in life that is not directly or explicitly covered by Scripture, remember that God has given you the responsibility to use your freedom with wisdom. This means

that there will be times where the Lord has not explicitly spoken, and, because of this freedom, Christians can make different and opposite decisions and still please the Lord. Paul gave a clear example of this in Romans 14:2-6.

Rom. 14:2-6 - One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.

Many people would prefer the Lord to just whisper His “secret” will into their ear, but if He was going to do that, what would be the purpose of giving us His word? Why would a teacher take the time to teach, give homework, and create quizzes, if, on test day, the answers were provided for all who asked? The Lord has not promised to work this way, and we, therefore, can’t expect him to. Because wisdom is so crucial in our decision making process, it is necessary to stay “sharp”, or all of life’s decisions will be more difficult than necessary. Solomon made this clear in Ecclesiastes 10:10.

Ecc. 10:10 - If the iron is *blunt*, and one does not *sharpen* the edge, *he must use more strength*, but *wisdom helps one to succeed*.

There is not one example in the New Testament where an Apostle instructed people to “find” God’s hidden will for a decision needed to be made in a “non-commanded area”. They never encouraged people to look at signs and miracles to determine what should be done. Instead, they modeled a way of wisdom that showed freedom in certain areas. So we must give as much effort as we can to search for wisdom because “she” promised (Proverbs 8:17) that those who do that will find “her”. In your search for wisdom, pray (James 1:5), study (Ps. 19:7; 119:97-104; Rom. 12:1-2), and seek counsel from God’s people (Prov. 1:5; 12:15; 15:22; 19:20).

3. When you have chosen what is moral and wise, trust God’s sovereignty to work everything out in the best way possible so that His glory and your good are promoted

Once you have searched Scripture for God’s preceptive will, prayed for Him to give you wisdom, and used the wise counselors He has provided for you, make your decision with complete confidence that His sovereign will is always going to have His greatest glory and your greatest good in mind. Remember that we are finite and fallen creatures, and we can often make wrong decisions. None of this jeopardizes His plans (as we will see in the next lesson). Knowing this will keep us from consuming ourselves with the parts of His will that are hidden, and it will serve as a pillow for us to rest upon. Our God is a good Father who knows infinitely more than we do and can do immeasurably more than we can even imagine. Use this as a comfort for the times when you have made the best decision you can.

In our next study, we will deal with God’s “decretal” will. This will help us look to that part of His will that is unknown, out of our control, and guaranteed to be accomplished. In doing this, we will be better prepared to answer the question, “Is God Always In Control?”