

Not My Will

Luke 22:39-46 | Dec. 20, 2020 | Bryce Beale

We might sum up the whole of the Christian life as this: coming to believe that the will of God is good.

“Faith, hope love”—this was Paul’s summary of the Christian life.¹ But what is faith, except trusting who God is and therefore what he wills? What is hope, but believing God’s intention for your future is good? And can you love God if you do not believe he is the sort of being who wills good things, rather than bad?

Coming to believe God’s will is good, and therefore happily submitting to that will, that is at the heart of Christianity.

The Arabic word “Muslim” means “One who submits”—but that is a better definition of a Christian than a Muslim.

God has by an act of creative genius fashioned you with your own will, and you and I have, by an act of rebellion, detached our smaller wills from God’s. And so God’s purpose in restoring creation is to find our wills floating out in the ocean on their own, and to pull them back to safety, back to the ship of his will.

But perhaps we are being too vague to be practical. What do we mean by God’s will?

In Scripture we find one will of God, but it is a will that can be seen from different angles—indeed, that must be seen from different angles when we limited creatures look at it.

There is on the one hand God’s revealed will. When God demands from the burning mountain, “You shall not murder,” he reveals to us part of his will.² He does not will that mankind should murder. However, this side of God’s will can be violated. People do murder, every day. So God’s revealed will tell us what he wants, even if it is not done by those who should do it.

But there is another side of God’s will, which we call his secret will, or his will of decree. This is the part of God’s will which cannot be violated, what are called his eternal purposes, since he decided in eternity past all that would transpire. He decreed all

¹ 1 Cor. 13:3.

² Ex. 20:13 (ESV).

that comes to pass. This will is never and cannot be violated, God's secret will. God, says Paul in Ephesians 1:11, "works all things according to the counsel of his will"—that is his secret will, his will of decree.

To which of these aspects of God's will must we surrender as Christians? And the answer is: both. There is as I have said only one will in God, even if we must look at it in different ways. And we are called to put ourselves under the whole thing.

When we obey, we are putting ourselves under God's revealed will. He tells us what he wants us to do, and we do it.

But perhaps the harder part of the Christian life is to put ourselves under the secret will of God, his eternal decree. For in this case, we are not simply obeying something God revealed, but are calming our hearts in the face of all that comes to pass, whether good or bad. This is the very essence of trust—that if something takes place, no matter how horrid it may be, no matter how contrary to that which pleases God, to his revealed will, yet in some mysterious manner he has decreed or allowed it for good.

When God permitted the devil to ruin Job, to strip from him everything, to kill his very children, Job did not know God's purposes. They were hidden—part of his secret will. Nevertheless, Job did not curse God. He praised him. Why? Because he put himself, with great effort and strain, under the will of God. He trusted the purpose of the Lord, just as James would later say: "You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful." Job believed that in the end, God's will would be proven good, that, in his own words, "after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God."³

How are you doing with the will of God this season, in 2020? Do you believe that it is still good? Are you placing your soul beneath it?

To help us in this endeavor, God has provided for us a text like an angel out of heaven to strengthen us, the text we come to today in our study of Luke. Jesus has just been with his twelve disciples in the upper room in Jerusalem, celebrating his last Passover meal. Judas has already departed to fetch the men who will arrest

³ Job 19:26.

him. And so now Jesus and his eleven disciples leave Jerusalem to go to that place where Jesus will be arrested, before he is tried and crucified.

LUKE 22:39-46

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell of this same event, but Luke puts more emphasis on Jesus than the others do, who are also quite interested in the disciples. In verse 39, it is Jesus who goes out to the Mount of Olives, while his disciples simply follow him.

We have seen Jesus on the Mount of Olives before—just this week of his life he gave the Olivet Discourse concerning his return here, on the Mount of Olives. And as Luke makes clear, it was Jesus' "custom" to come to this Mount just east of Jerusalem, across the Kidron. More specifically, it was his custom to frequent with his disciples a certain garden on this mountain known as Gethsemane.

Why did Jesus go here on this night, the night of his betrayal? In order to be betrayed. John tells us this in his gospel: "Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place, for Jesus often met there with his disciples." Jesus has repeatedly said that his betrayal, his arrest, his crucifixion were necessary parts of God's purposes, of his will. And he conducts himself as one surrendered to that will. You and I differ from Jesus in that we don't typically know the secret will of God for our lives before it happens, but Jesus did, at least in broad strokes. This is why, when Judas does finally come with his mob to take Jesus and Peter attacks them with a sword, Jesus can tell Peter to put his sword away because "how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?"⁴

These details make today's passage very interesting. For despite all of this, God wished us to know this morning that when Jesus came to the hour of his necessary death, of his suffering under the wrath of God for us, he very humanly had to wrestle his will into alignment with the Father's. In other words, Jesus had to do what you and I have to do all our lives—and he did, as an example for us.

⁴ Matt. 26:54.

So let's see from the text this example of our Savior, who when faced with the agony of God's will of decree honestly grieved it, but nevertheless submitted to it.

The mystery of Jesus' prayer

Focus first then on the very prayer at the center of our text.

This is in fact a prayer Jesus prayed three times in a row, but Luke condenses the story and puts a single prayer at the middle of this event. This is where our attention must primarily rest. For it is in this prayer that Jesus submits himself, though painfully, to the Father's will. We will not say much about the disciples: Jesus tells them in verse 40, "Pray that you may not enter into temptation." And in verse 46, when he finds them sleeping from sorrow, he tells them this again. We will simply take the force of Christ's command: "Pray!" and obey it, by learning how to pray by the example of Christ.

So then, see Jesus' prayer in verse 41: "And he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed, saying, 'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.'"

Of all the prayers ever offered God, this was perhaps the most pleasing to him. Here was his Son, the highest object of his love, prepared to endure the lowest agony in submission to his will, from a motive of trust and love. Hebrews 5 reflects on this moment in the garden: "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence."⁵

Here we find the Son's reverence, his fear of God, as a man. That is, here he puts himself reverently under the Father's will.

Now, you may wonder how this works, since the Father and the Son are one, two persons of the Triune God, singular in their being though personally distinct. And no act of any person occurs completely apart from the other persons—even the eternal decree of God, though specifically appropriated, as we say, or attributed to the Father, involved also the Son and Spirit. So here

⁵ v. 7.

the Son must submit himself to a decree that he himself was a part of making.

Well, he did. I do not pretend to understand the depths of the mystery of the Trinity. All I can say is that the Father is presented to us as the one who, especially, is involved in the act of decreeing; and the Son, both in eternity and in time, is presented to us as the one who submits himself to that decree. It is a marvel, I admit, but it is a true marvel.

Notice however that the passage in Hebrews 5 begins, “In the days of his flesh.” In the days of Jesus’ flesh, from the time of his incarnation to the time of his death, Jesus could offer up loud and lamenting prayers to God. He could, as in our text here, suffer agony in prayer, as he wrestled his own will perfectly beneath the Father’s.

So while the Son has always in some way submitted to the Father, he never before the days of his flesh had to struggle to do so. This is a part of the mystery of Christ’s existence both as God and as a man. As God, his will is one with the Father’s. But as a man, in the days of his flesh, humanly speaking, he had to wrestle his human will into alignment with his divine. These are mysteries we are uttering! But they are true. And we cannot understand our present text without them.

Here at the climax of history, with the cross of our salvation looming before our Savior, casting its ugly and beautiful shadow across his path, the Son as a man must, like us, bring his will into submission to God’s. That is why he can serve as our example.

That is why he can pray before our eyes, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will [my human will, that is], but yours, be done.”

The example of Jesus’ prayer

How then is this an example for you—you who are summoned by the Creator to entrust yourself completely to him, even in a world full of agonies?

Honesty

I think first it is an example in its honesty.

Jesus begins, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me.” That is the cup of God’s wrath, which all who reject God and

his Christ must drink for eternity in hell.⁶ It is a cup full of suffering, the like of which no tongue can express. And it sits before Jesus. He knows he must drink it, if you and I are to be spared drinking it. It is a cup prepared by God's justice, so someone must drink it, either us, or him. It cannot be violated or ignored.

Jesus has predicted that he will drink it. When James and John desired to sit beside Jesus in his kingdom, he asked them, "Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?"⁷ They would drink it in a lesser sense, since they would be killed for their faith. But Jesus knew that he himself would drink God's wrath, it is "the cup that I drink." Again, in John's Gospel Jesus declares, "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour'? But for this purpose I have come to this hour."⁸

His suffering is necessary.

But as a man, Jesus did not know all things. He did not make full use of his divine omniscience. And so now, as the cup approaches and he can smell its violent fumes, he expresses his honest heart before the Father: "Please, take it away." Perhaps there is a way to fulfill all that has been planned and prophesied without so much suffering—and if so, may it be.

We Christians are not masochists. We suffer more than most, we have historically, because we follow a Savior whom the world hates. And Christians have faced death well—this has been our most successful evangelist technique to date. Old Polycarp the martyr can jest before the crowds in the coliseum who want his blood, and say before the lion, "He will grind me into fine flour as a sacrifice for the Lord."

Nevertheless, we do not say these things because we like to suffer. We dislike it with the rest of the world. When a Christian joyfully submits to the will of God, in the face of persecution or cancer or death or loss, or whatever God's will may bring, we are not trivial about it. We are human, prick us and we too will bleed. Strike us, and we will grieve. And this is good.

⁶ See Is. 51:17 and Rev. 14:10, for example.

⁷ Mark 10:38.

⁸ John 12:27.

Because look—here our Savior and our model grieves too. He is honest with the Father and requests that the cup be removed. Yes, his suffering is so many times worse than any we can know—he will bear the wrath of God for all of us who believe! Yet, his suffering is suffering. And you and I suffer too, and we should suffer like him.

His human will does not want to suffer—in fact, his wrestling to bring his human will under the Father’s is depicted in verse 44: “And being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.”

It is possible that Jesus had a very rare condition known as hematomidrosis, where under stress one’s capillaries burst beneath the skin, causing blood to leak through one’s pores. That is possible and would show how much duress he is under. However, that is a rare condition and is not demanded by the text: his sweat became *like* great drops of blood falling to the ground. That “like” means Luke could simply be saying Jesus was sweating so profusely that it seemed he was covered in wounds and dripping blood, so much was he sweating.

In either case, Jesus’ duress is presented before us. He is in agony. He is using prayer to submit his will to the Father’s, but it is a painful process. On the one hand, we here realize just how great the cup of God’s wrath was, that it should spark this sort of suffering in Jesus. That is entirely true.

But on the other hand, we also learn something important about our own suffering as Christians. And that is—we do not have to pretend it does not affect us. I know that some personalities prefer to hide their suffering. There is, I think, a time and place for that—for example, if we are tempted to complain often about all our woes, we must sometimes learn to silence ourselves.

But Jesus does not here look like John Wayne. He is not a stoic, he is not like ancient Socrates condemned by Athens, who must drink his hemlock but can do so without the slightest sense of trouble or discomfort. Jesus suffers, and his suffering is clear. When others mourned the death of Lazarus, Jesus wept. And here, as he grieves his own impending pains, he sweats and prays and pleads.

What do we learn from this? That the sovereignty of God, a fact we love and live our lives by, does not mean we must not feel. If tragedy should come, in keeping with God’s decree, we must

resign ourselves to it, but we are not robots made of tin. Think of how much emotion King David, that man after God's own heart, felt and expressed. He could dance, and he could weep in the sight of his people. You do not have to have a temperament like his—I do not. But neither do you have to pretend that whatever God has decreed can be shrugged off or laughed off, as light.

God had decreed the cross for Jesus, but he did not regard it as light. Not only did he suffer in the sight of it, but he was willing to tell his Father as much, not far from his disciples. This he did with reverence—we do not have license to vent to God in an irreverent way, do not misunderstand me.

But humbly, like our Savior, in our much lesser sufferings we can be honest with a God who already knows, who already has our tears in his bottle, who knows the words of our prayers before they are on our tongue. To pretend not to suffer when we do is to harm, rather than help, our relationship with our Father. He wishes to hear these things from us; we know this, because he heard them from his perfect and beloved Son.

Submission

But of course that brings us to a second way Jesus is our example, really the second part of Jesus' prayer. "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done." He submits.

That is what makes his prayer reverential: "if you are willing." That is, if somehow the desires of my human will to avoid suffering align with your divine purposes, then take away the cup. It is a request, not a demand. And it is followed by this resolve: "Nevertheless, [if our wills cannot both occur together, then] not my will, but yours, be done."

That is the goal for every follower of Jesus. He drank that cup, drank it to its dregs, so that there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. There's nothing left in the cup for you, if you have turned to Christ. You will never know God's wrath; there is a happy ending for you, and it cannot be otherwise.

But while we are here awaiting that fate, this is God's desire for us, to reach this goal set before us in Jesus, where we too can say in every part of life, no matter how we feel: "not my will, but yours, be done."

You cannot reach that goal unless you believe with all your heart that God's will is good. You must believe that the precepts of his revealed will are good and so obey them—but more than that, you must come to resign yourself to the goodness of his eternal decree, of his purposes, even when they come to you as thorns and thistles. You must be convinced that if God allows a tragedy, it is in order to produce a higher joy for you, the very best good. You do not need to know how God will bring beauty out of your ashes, only to trust that he will.

That is what the Apostle Paul did with the thorn of God's providence given to him. He wrote at the end of his second letter to the Corinthians:

a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

He prayed three times, just as the parallels to our text say that Jesus did. And he asked, "Father, if you are willing, remove this thorn from me." And when God said he was not willing, because he meant to produce something good by the thorn, then Paul said, "I am content."

Conclusion

In Jesus' case, as in Paul's, the Father did not grant the request as it was asked. He did not take away Paul's thorn, and he did not take away Jesus' cup.

But he did something better. Verse 43 of our text says, "And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him." He strengthened Christ to endure the cup, rather than removing it.

This is my desire for myself and for you, especially in this season. You ought to express to God your griefs, and you ought to ask for relief from them. Jesus did, as did Paul.

But there is nothing very remarkable in asking God to take away our suffering. Those who do not know Christ do exactly the same thing, don't they? If you only demand that God remove your troubles, how are you any different from the Gentiles and the tax collectors?

No, you must be perfect, as Christ your Savior is perfect. Here is a remarkable thing, a prayer that no unbeliever can pray in truth: Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.

The only man or woman who can utter that phrase is the one who has come to know and to believe that the will of God is good. It is better than your will. You may see suffering and think, "If I were God, I would not allow it. I can't make sense of why he would." Believers and unbelievers alike say this! But only the believer can continue with these words, "Nevertheless, his will is better than mine. May his will, not mine, come to pass."

If you doubt the goodness of God's will, I can only leave you with this one example of it. Christ asked for the cup to pass, and the Father did not allow it. He did not will it. And so what followed was the worst injustice possible, the false condemnation of the most innocent man, and then the worst suffering imaginable. Christ, as we will see in Luke, will agonize under the weight of God's wrath, as he suffocates and bleeds out upon a cross.

How could God allow this? How could he decree it?

So that you could be saved.

As Isaiah the prophet had foretold six hundred years before:

[I]t was the will of the LORD to crush him;
he has put him to grief;
when his soul makes an offering for guilt,
he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days;
the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.⁹

⁹ Is. 53:10.