

**Frequently Asked Questions:
What is God's Will for My Life?**

3/4 2011 FAQ Series

Ephesians 1:3-14

01 23 2011 Sam Jones Memorial UMC

Introduction to the Series

This morning we are continuing our winter worship series entitled **FAQ: Frequently Asked Questions**. The sermons are based on a congregational survey conducted in December. During the past two weeks, we have explored the questions: *"What is heaven like?"* and *"How can I KNOW that I am saved?"* Next week we will conclude the series with a variety of FAQs.

Today's frequently asked question is: *"What is God's will for my life?"*

Scripture: Ephesians 1: 3-14

Introduction

One day the disciples approached Jesus with the request, *"Lord, teach us to pray."* In response, Christ taught his followers what became known as **The Lord's Prayer**. We recited it together this morning.

Part of the prayer includes the petition: *"Thy kingdom come, thy will be done."* Faithful Christians strive to know and do God's will. However, we often wrestle with the process of discerning the Lord's will in our lives.

In our congregational survey, this topic appeared repeatedly. One person asked, *"Explain the will of God in simple terms."* My response is, "It ain't gonna happen!" This subject has been the source of countless books, studies, and sermons over the centuries. It isn't possible to fully address the question in one sermon. My goal is to provide a broad overview of the topic.

I find it helpful to talk about God's will in three ways:

- The general will of God
- The moral will of God
- The individual will of God

I. The General Will of God

Let's begin with the **general** or **cosmic** will of God. From the opening moments of Genesis, we discover an amazing characteristic about our Creator. Genesis portrays God strolling through the Garden of Eden each evening with Adam and Eve, enjoying their company. The Lord God Almighty, maker of the heavens and the earth, the one who designed the universe from subatomic detail to galactic grandeur, longs for our love. God's original will and intent for humanity was to enjoy full fellowship with the Creator.

Adam and Eve disrupted God's plan through their disobedience and sin. **The Fall** occurred because they sought to fulfill their own will rather than God's will. At the center

of the word “Pride” is the letter “I.” They prayed, “*My will be done*” rather than “*Thy will be done.*” We live with the consequences of their actions today.

Even after the Fall, however, our heavenly Father continued to seek his people. The Old Testament recounts the **covenants** that God established with the patriarchs and matriarchs of our faith. The Bible is the story of a covenant making, covenant breaking people and a covenant making, covenant keeping God.

At the appointed time and place, God acted once and for all by sending his Son into the world. **Jesus’** incarnation with his birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension provided a way for all people to enter into right relationship with God. The chasm of sin that divorced us from heaven’s kingdom has been bridged so that we might cross over. Today’s Scripture lesson reminds us that God’s will is for all of his children to be saved so that we can receive forgiveness of sins and everlasting life.

To this cosmic end, the Lord is at work in **history**. History is “*His Story.*” His ultimate aim is to establish a new heaven and earth that the book of Revelation describes in vivid detail. In that day, there will be no more sorrow, crying, or pain--the old will have passed away and the new come. God will be our God, and we will be his people.

With all the symbolism and mysticism of Revelation, John’s message is clear: God wins! The Lord’s will and purpose will not be thwarted. Each event in history is woven into a greater fabric of time that leads to the final time. We can choose either to align ourselves with God’s purpose or to oppose it.

So if you want to know God’s overarching will, then it is for all people to enter into salvation through Jesus the Christ. If we truly pray “*thy will be done,*” then we serve Christ as Savior and Lord. Then we seek to disciple others in turn.

II. The Moral Will of God

At this point, you might be thinking, “The preacher is dodging the question. Everyone knows that God’s general will is for everyone to be saved. But I am more concerned about God’s will for MY life.”

Patience, please, I’m getting there! A second way to answer this question is to discuss the **moral/ethical** will of God.

In Jesus Christ, God became who we are so that we might become who God is. The Lord accepts us “as is,” adopting into the family of God. Then the Holy Spirit works to remake us into God’s image. We are called to be **holy** as our Lord is holy. Ephesians 1: 4 says: “*For God chose us in Christ before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.*”

God’s moral and ethical will for is that we live holy lives. We are called to reflect Christ’s presence in our words, deeds, and attitudes. Hear clearly, we are not saved by righteous deeds; but because we are saved, we act righteously. The New Testament book of James reminds us that faith without works is dead. We fulfill God’s moral/ethical will in the ordinary, mundane, daily acts of life.

In Mark 10, Jesus was approached by a rich young man who fell upon his knees and asked, “*Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*” Jesus answered: “*You*

know the commandments: 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, do not defraud, honor your father and mother.'"

If we had a personal audience with Christ and asked, "*What is your will for my life?*" would we be surprised by the answer? Jesus might say: "You've heard the Sunday School lessons and sermons at church. You've read your Bible and spent time in prayer. You KNOW what to do. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. Love your neighbor as yourself. For more details, read the Bible and pray. This will be enough to keep you busy in this lifetime!"

A *Pontius Puddle* cartoon shows Pontius thinking, "I wonder if God can really hear me." In the next frame, he prays: "Hey, God! What should I do with my life?" In the third frame, a voice from heaven answers: "FEED THE HUNGRY. RIGHT INJUSTICE. WORK FOR PEACE!"

Pontius nervously replies, "Just testing!"

And God responds: "Same here!"

Sometimes we make it more mysterious than it really is. Most of us already know what to do. It's not what we don't know—it's what we do know and aren't doing—that is oftentimes the spiritual issue in our lives.

The Lord's Prayer teaches us how to live Godly lives. Life is a constant choice between saying "*My will be done*" and praying "*Your will be done.*" When we choose for self rather than God, all hell breaks loose in our lives and world. When we choose God's ethical/moral will, then the kingdom of heaven breaks into our lives and world.

III. Individual Will of God

Understanding God's general/cosmic will and moral/ethical will is important. It provides the broad outlines about how we are called to live as Christians in this world.

However, people who ask about the will of God most often want divine direction in their particular lives. So the third way of understanding this important subject is to talk about the **individual will** of God. What are God's purpose, design, and plan for MY life? And even more specifically, how do we discern God's will when we are faced with decisions, choices, and crossroads in life?

The 1981 movie, *Chariots of Fire*, dramatized the story of Eric Liddell (rhymes with "fiddle") who ran in the 1924 Olympics. Liddell was a devout, evangelical Christian who had served as a missionary in China. However, he and his sister, Jeannie, disagreed about his Olympic ambitions. She thought that her brother should go with her to China immediately. He wanted to complete in the Olympics and then return to China. In this scene, he explains his passion to run.

Reflecting on his gifts of speed and endurance, Liddell confided to his sister, "*Jeannie, I believe God made me for a purpose. He made me fast, Jeannie, and when I run, I feel his pleasure.*" He won the Gold Medal in the 400 meter race in Paris, and he used the opportunity to witness about his faith.

God has made each of us for a purpose. Our Lord created us with spiritual gifts, talents, abilities, aptitudes, interests, and opportunities. When we fulfill the divine purpose for our lives, we experience both God's pleasure and personal fulfillment. Oftentimes, we discover God's will where our abilities and the world's need intersect.

The best way to learn God's will for our individual lives is to cultivate a relationship with our Creator. The longer we live with others, the more we can predict their thoughts and deeds. We experience this in marriage and friendship; and it is also true in our relationship with God.

When we spend time with God through Bible study, prayer, fasting, Christian fellowship, etc, then we become naturally inclined to do what God desires.

In *Readers' Digest*, a grown child recounted how his mother had over 200 plants in her Florida home. Exasperated by her children's lack of interest in horticulture, she hit upon an ingenious way to teach them. Before trips to the mall, they would find refrigerator notes that said: "Mike, you'll find the money for one shoe under the kudzu pot. The rest of the money is in the dish with the philodendron." "Mary, your money for the new skirt is under the mignonette." The children finally decided it was easier to identify the plants than move 200 pots in search of their money!"

The BEST way to know God's will is to have such an intimate relationship with the Lord that we naturally do his will.

There are a variety of ways we discover God's call in our lives.

- Prayer
- Bible Study
- Others' council
- Holy Spirit's guidance
- Abilities, gifts, talents, and resources
- Daily opportunities to act in God's name in our world

Sometimes we want God to tell us exactly what to do. We have a vision that the Lord has a master book that details exactly what we ought to do. So we seek God's guidance in every step of life.

However, I'm not sure this is always the case. Walking in Jesus' footsteps is not always like following the step-by-step directions on a map. More often, it is like walking in the wilderness while following a compass direction. Maybe we need to be less concerned about having a detailed road map and more concerned about the next turn.

There are not always clear answers and directions. This can lead to what business leaders call "*analysis paralysis*." We become frozen by indecision.

Some of you will recognize the name of **Charles Allen**. He was a United Methodist minister who served in the North Georgia Conference before becoming the pastor of First UMC of Houston, Texas. Back in the late 80s, I co-hosted the Mossy Creek Campmeeting near Cleveland, Georgia, where he spoke one summer.

During an afternoon lull, Dr. Allen was talking with a group of younger ministers. He said, "Boys, there's really nothing to pastoral counseling. When folk come to my

office for advice, I do three things. First, I ask them to tell me their problem. Second, I ask them what they think they ought to do about it. Third, I tell them to go do it! This method works every time.”

Over the years, I’ve discovered that it’s not as simple as Dr. Allen said; but there is some truth to his words. Most of the time we know what to do—we just don’t want to do it. Or we would prefer God to rubberstamp our own plans rather than submit to God’s will for our lives.

In his blog, Wade Burleson wrote about this subject:

So much of the “seek God’s will” teaching is based on insecurity, the fear of making a mistake, and a desire for self-protection. We erroneously believe that if we just had the right divine information we could avoid a wrong decision and its temporal consequences.

Then Burleson quoted Christian author, Steve Crosby, who suggested that knowing God’s personal will for our lives often involves asking three questions:

- 1) Is it sin . . . yes or no?
- 2) Is it consistent with my identity, gifts, calling, and desires?
- 3) Is the door open?

If it is NOT a sin . . . and it IS consistent with my identity, gifts, calling and desires . . . and the door IS open . . . then quit thinking about it and just do it!
<http://kerussocharis.blogspot.com/2010/10/quit-agonizing-over-finding-perfect.html>

I knew a football coach who often told his players, “If you don’t know what to do, do SOMETHING; and do it FAST!” We should take time to assess the situation; THEN we need to proceed in the best manner possible. If we don’t have specific guidance from God, then we do the best that we can; and we pray God blesses the effort.

Conclusion

The will of God:

- General/cosmic
- Moral/ethical
- Individual/personal

This morning we each prayed one of the most dangerous prayers of all: “*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.*” The prayer recognizes that to do one is to do the other. God’s kingdom breaks into our worlds and lives whenever we do our Creator’s will.

We are asking God to conform our will to the divine will, to lay aside our selfish wants and desires for something greater than ourselves. In the process, we are transformed by the Holy Spirit into the people God intended for us to be.