

The prayer Jesus taught us

Lesson 5 - Thy will be done

1 Introduction

What is the will of God? In context I believe it is the Sermon on the Mount. "Your will be done" means, then, 'your Sermon on the Mount be done.' [...] We do not pray "May we do your will", though this is certainly wanted. Rather, we pray that God the Father will do his will, or will cause his will to be done.

Frederik Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary. Volume 1 The Christbook, Matthew 1-12* (Eerdmans 1987) p. x

2 Similar to 'Thy Kingdom Come'

One of the commonest characteristics of Hebrew style is what is technically known as parallelism. The Hebrew tended to say everything twice. He said it in one way, and then he said it in another way which repeated or amplified or explained the first way. Almost any verse of the Psalms will show this parallelism in action. Almost every verse of the Psalms divides in two in the middle; and the second half repeats or amplifies or explains the first half.

Let us take some examples and the thing will become clear:

"God is our refuge and strength--a very present help in trouble (Psalms 46:1).

"The Lord of Hosts is with us--the God of Jacob is our refuge (Psalms 46:7).

"The Lord is my shepherd--I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures--He leads me beside still waters" (Psalms 23:1-2).

Let us apply this principle to these two petitions of the Lord's Prayer. Let us set them down side by side:

"Thy Kingdom come--Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven."

Let us assume that the second petition explains, and amplifies, and defines the first.

We then have the perfect definition of the Kingdom of God--The Kingdom of God is a society, upon earth where Gods will is as perfectly done as it is in heaven. Here we have the explanation of how the Kingdom can be past, present and future all at the one time. Any man who at any time in history perfectly did God's will was within the Kingdom; any man who perfectly does God's will is within the Kingdom; but since the world is very far from being a place where God's will is perfectly and universally done, the consummation of the Kingdom is still in the future and is still something for which we must pray.

To be in the Kingdom is to obey the will of God. Immediately we see that the Kingdom is not something which primarily has to do with nations and peoples and countries. It is something which has to do with each one of us. The Kingdom is in fact the most

personal thing in the world. The Kingdom demands the submission of my will, my heart, my life. It is only when each one of us makes his personal decision and submission that the Kingdom comes.

[A] Chinese Christian prayed the well-known prayer, "Lord, revive thy Church, beginning with me," and we might well paraphrase that and say, "Lord, bring in thy Kingdom, beginning with me." To pray for the Kingdom of Heaven is to pray that we may submit our wills entirely to the will of God.

William Barclay, *Matthew*, pp. 210-214

The phrase ['On earth as in heaven'] does not refer to this third petition alone but to all three. Just as God sanctifies His Name always in heaven where He reigns and executes His will, so God also sanctifies His Name on earth, reigns and executes His will. Or to put it in another way, God sanctifies His Name, rules and executes His will in the entire cosmos which includes heaven and earth.

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"Ye'aseh Retsonekha," Thy will be done.

This phrase parallels the first, for being a subject in the Kingdom of God means doing the will of the Sovereign of the Kingdom. This is decidedly not an appeal for Stoic or passive resignation in the face of frustration or disappointment, since the modifying phrase, "on earth as it is in heaven" precludes this interpretation. Rather, "Thy will be done" involves active consecration or dedication to the cause of promoting the reign of God within our hearts. We fulfill the will of the LORD when we keep His mitzvot (1 John 2:3-4) and proclaim His Salvation (Matthew 28:19-20).

The Lord's Prayer in Hebrew - Part 2

Matthew's additional petition looks forward to what will happen adte God's KIngdom comes - a perfect harmony between the way in which heaven and earth run.nUnderstood in this eschatological sense, the petition does not add new content to the second petition.

Daniel J. Harrington SJ, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Liturgical Press, 2007) p. 95

3 Prayer for ourselves

Now, what does God want more than that we ourselves walk according to his ways? We ask therefore that he supply us with the energy of his own will and the capacity to do it, that we may be saved, both in heaven and on earth. The sum of his will is the salvation of those whom he has adopted.

Tertullian, *On Prayer* 4.1-2

Your will be done, as in heaven, so on earth. This petition is worthy of the saints and full of all praise. We request that power may be given to those on earth to do the will of God and nominate the conduct practiced above in heaven by the holy angels. [...]

Having received their righteousness that is in Christ by faith, they may become pure and skilful in every good work. [...] The will of God over all is that those on earth should live in holiness, piously without blame, being washed from all impurity, and diligent in imitating the spiritual beauty of the spirits above in heaven. That the church on earth, since it is the visible likeness and image of the church of the firstborn that is above, may please Christ.

Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on Luke, Homily 74

The execution of the Father's will is another polite command. It is an emphasis for Matthew particularly important for the disciples' lives. It is in a loving submission that all the citizens of the kingdom celebrate the love of their covenant King. Jesus himself will submit to the Father's will as testimony that everything is subject to the Father. It is in the prayer of the arrival of the kingdom of God that the removal of rebellion occurs. The transformation of lives through conversion through the preaching of the gospel. The natural man that is an enmity with God while the regenerate man loves his King.

Exegesis of The Lord's Prayer Matthew 6/9-13 Nil Nisi Verum

This petition identifies the priority of yielding to the will of God, in the same way the angels are always ready to do his will; it is a rejection of our own will, and a submission to his. Just as the petition "Your kingdom come" asks that God's desires be paramount in our lives, this petition is a request to live in growing obedience to those desires. As Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." (Is. 52: 7-10)

Mr. Storage's Close - A Brief Exegetical Study of the Lord's Prayer

14. We add, also, and say, "Your will be done, as in heaven so in earth; " not that God should do what He wills, but that we may be able to do what God wills. For who resists God, that I He may not do what He wills? But since we are hindered by the devil from obeying with our thought and deed God's will in all things, we pray and ask that God's will may be done in us; and that it may be done in us we have need of God's good will, that is, of His help and protection, since no one is strong in his own strength, but he is safe by the grace and mercy of God. And further, the Lord, setting forth the infirmity of the humanity which He bore, says, Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me' and affording an example to His disciples that they should do not their own will, but God's, He went on to say, "Nevertheless not as I will, but as You will." And in another place He says, "I came down from heaven not to do my own will, but the will of Him that sent me." Now if the Son was obedient to do His Father's will, how much more should the servant be obedient to do his Master's will! As in his epistle John also exhorts and instructs us to do the will of God, saying, "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world is the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the

ambition of life, which is not of the Father, but of the lust of the world. And the world shall pass away, and the lust thereof: but he that does the will of God abides for ever, even as God also abides for ever." We who desire to abide for ever should do the will of God, who is everlasting.

15. Now that is the will of God which Christ both did and taught. Humility in conversation; steadfastness in faith; modesty in words; justice in deeds; mercifulness in works; discipline in morals; to be unable to do a wrong, and to be able to bear a wrong when done; to keep peace with the brethren; to love God with all one's heart; to love Him in that He is a Father; to fear Him in that He is God; to prefer nothing whatever to Christ, because He did not prefer anything to us; to adhere inseparably to His love; to stand by His cross bravely and faithfully; when there is any contest on behalf of His name and honour, to exhibit in discourse that constancy wherewith we make confession; in torture, that confidence wherewith we do battle; in death, that patience whereby we are crowned—this is to desire to be fellow-heirs with Christ; this is to do the commandment of God; this is to fulfil the will of the Father.

St Cyprian, On the Lord's Prayer 14-15

4 Right attitude

[The] most important thing in the world is to obey the will of God; the most important words in the world are "Thy will be done." But it is equally clear that the frame of mind and the tone of voice in which these words are spoken will make a world of difference.

(i) A man may say, "Thy will be done," in a tone of defeated resignation. He may say it, not because he wishes to say it, but because he has accepted the fact that he cannot possibly say anything else; he may say it because he has accepted the fact that God is too strong for him, and that it is useless to batter his head against the walls of the universe. He may say it thinking only of the ineluctable power of God which has him in its grip.[...] A man may accept the will of God for no other reason than that he has realized that he cannot do anything else.

(ii) A man may say, "Thy will be done," in a tone of bitter resentment. Swinburne spoke of men feeling the trampling of the iron feet of God. He speaks of the supreme evil, God. Beethoven died all alone; and it is said that when they found his body his lips were drawn back in a snarl and his fists were clenched as if he were shaking his fists in the very face of God and of high heaven. A man may feel that God is his enemy, and yet an enemy so strong that he cannot resist. He may therefore accept God's will, but he may accept it with bitter resentment and smouldering anger.

(iii) A man may say, "Thy will be done," in perfect love and trust. He may say it gladly and willingly, no matter what that will may be. It should be easy for the Christian to say, "Thy will be done," like that; for the Christian can be very sure of two things about God.

(a) He can be sure of the wisdom of God. Sometimes when we want something built or constructed, or altered or repaired, we take it to the craftsman and consult him about it. He makes some suggestion, and we often end up by saying, "Well, do what you think best. You are the expert." God is the expert in life, and his guidance can never lead anyone astray.[...]

(b) He can be sure of the love of God. We do not believe in a mocking and a capricious God, or in a blind and iron determinism. [...] We believe in a God whose name is love. [...] And as Paul had it: "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?" (Romans 8:32). No man can look at the Cross and doubt the love of God, and when we are sure of the love of God, it is easy to say, "Thy will be done."

William Barclay, *Matthew*, pp. 210-214

5 Mission

The third petition is perhaps more directed towards life in the kingdom. If the disciples are anxious to see God's rule conquering the apathy and self-centeredness of their friends who are not yet disciples, they should be no less concerned to see his will being done in their own lives, changing them and making them more like their Master. Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew* (IVP, 1988) p. 100

The worship of those in heaven reflects what the goal is for those on earth. The disciples are to pray that as God's will is done in heaven with no sin, the same would happen on earth. It is on earth where men are in rebellion to God while in heaven they see the kingdom and celebrate and worship the King. Praying for the will of God to be done on earth as it is in heaven is a prayer for the changing of hearts of men. Praying citizens of the kingdom of God pray for the gospel to spread through the ordained means of preaching to make the eschatological future a reality. When this is done, what is happening in heaven will become the earthly reality. His name will be honored, His kingship acknowledged and His perfect will done.

Exegesis of The Lord's Prayer Matthew 6/9-13 Nil Nisi Verum

17. And it may be thus understood, beloved brethren, that since the Lord commands and admonishes us even to love our enemies, and to pray even for those who persecute us, we should ask, moreover, for those who are still earth, and have not yet begun to be heavenly, that even in respect of these God's will should be done, which Christ accomplished in preserving and renewing humanity. For since the disciples are not now called by Him earth, but the salt of the earth, and the apostle designates the first man as being from the dust of the earth, but the second from heaven, we reasonably, who ought to be like God our Father, who makes His sun to rise upon the good and bad, and sends rain upon the just and the unjust, so pray and ask by the admonition of Christ as to make our prayer for the salvation of all men; that as in heaven—that is, in us by our faith—the will of God has been done, so that we might

be of heaven; so also in earth — that is, in those who believe not — God's will may be done, that they who as yet are by their first birth of earth, may, being born of water and of the Spirit, begin to be of heaven.

St Cyprian, On the Lord's Prayer 17

6 Eschatological prayer

Except for Rev 4,11 which speaks of the creative will of God, the 'problem' of God in the entire New Testament denotes His gratuitous universal will for salvation, revealed and promulgated in its entirety only in the eschatological era inaugurated by Christ. The will of God to save all of humanity is expressed at times under the form of a promise, at other times in a form of a precept. The third petition of the 'Our Father' includes both aspects of the will of God.

Christians ask God to fulfill His plan of salvation which will arrive at the end of time. They also ask that humanity to not obstruct with sins the fulfillment of the divine project of salvation. Furthermore in positive terms, Christians ask that humanity co-operate with the will of God by observing His ethical demands.

If it is true, as St. Augustine teaches, that 'God does not want to save you without your co-operation', then God fulfills His plan of salvation in such a way that humanity, with the help of the Holy Spirit, feels free to follow the divine precepts.

This third petition is not about disheartened and depressive peoples who accept passively and with resignation, the will of God. It is instead about individuals who await and hasten (2Pet 3,12) dynamically the definitive and complete execution of the divine will by fulfilling its ethical obligations.

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"Ba'arets ka'asher na'asah vashamayim," on earth, as it is in heaven

God's kingdom is fully established in heaven, where His perfect rule is forever unchallenged. Yet His authority is not regarded here on earth, where the kingdoms of this world will ultimately be dashed in pieces like a potter's vessel (Psalm 2), and those who disobey His commandments will be subject to everlasting punishment (Matthew 25:31-46).

Are you willing to obey the Rule of the LORD by sanctifying yourself through faith in Him? The choice is ultimately your own....

The Lord's Prayer in Hebrew - Part 2

The doing of YHWH's will on earth as in heaven is, of course, part of the whole apocalyptic theme in which heavenly truths and events become embodied in their earthly counterparts. Part of the point of the whole Sinai theophany — the central part, in fact, of the Exodus story — was the meeting of heaven and earth, with Moses as the intermediary who went to and fro between the two spheres, so that laws and instructions made in heaven could be carried out on earth. This anticipates (or, depending on one's view of Pentateuchal origins, reflects) the temple theology in which

the sanctuary was considered to be quite literally the place where heaven and earth met. If Torah was the means by which, within Israel, God's will was to be done on earth as in heaven, and if the temple was the place where this was embodied in cultic celebration and sacrifice, to pray that this might happen anew — within the context of the New Exodus motifs already so strongly present — was to pray not merely that certain things might occur within the earthly realm that would coincide with plans that God had made in the heavenly realm, but that a fresh integration of heaven and earth would take place in which all that temple and Torah had stood for would be realized afresh. It was to pray both that God's saving purpose for Israel and the world would come about through God's personal action, and that God's people would find themselves not merely shaped by a law, however divine, or focused on a building, however God-given, but embraced by a saving personal love.

"Thy will be done on earth as in heaven" can, of course, carry all sorts of further overtones, such as prayers for wise political solutions to world-shaking crises, prayers for bread for the hungry, and prayers for justice for the oppressed. But at its heart lies a prayer for the appropriate integration of heaven and earth that the early Christians came to see already accomplished in Jesus himself — who was like Moses, but so much more so — and came to long for in God's eventual future (cf. Rev. 21; see also Rom. 8:17-30, which we will discuss later).

NT Wright, *The Lord's Prayer as a Paradigm of Christian Prayer* (Originally published in *Into God's Presence: Prayer in the New Testament*, ed. R.L. Longenecker. 2001, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 132-54. Reproduced by permission of the author.)

7 On Earth as in Heaven

The phrase "On Earth as it is in Heaven" is often overlooked, but it is in fact the central phrase tying the two halves of the prayer together. Here, the prayer turns from heavenly talk of God's name, God's kingdom, and God's will, to talk of earthly things: daily bread, forgiveness, and deliverance. It is the very axis upon which the prayer turns.

Mr. Storage's Close - A Brief Exegetical Study of the Lord's Prayer

John Ortberg interprets this phrase as follows: "Many people think our job is to get my afterlife destination taken care of, then tread water till we all get ejected and God comes back and torches this place. But Jesus never told anybody—neither his disciples nor us—to pray, 'Get me out of here so I can go up there.' His prayer was, 'Make up there come down here.' Make things down here run the way they do up there." The request that "thy will be done" is God's invitation to "join him in making things down here the way they are up there."

Lord's Prayer , From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

"Thy will be done as in Heaven, so in earth." The third thing we pray for is that His will may be done as in Heaven so in earth. And in this, too, we wish well for ourselves. For the will of God must necessarily be done. It is the will of God that the good should reign and the wicked be damned. Is it possible that this will should not be done? But what good do we wish ourselves when we say, "Thy will be done as in Heaven, so in earth?" Give ear. For this petition may be understood in many ways, and many things are to be in our thoughts in this petition when we pray God, "Thy will be done as in Heaven, so in earth." As Thy angels offend Thee not, so may we also not offend Thee. Again, how is "Thy will be done as in Heaven, so in earth," understood? All the holy patriarchs, all the prophets, all the apostles, all the spiritual are, as it were, God's Heaven; and we in comparison of them are earth. "Thy will be done as in Heaven, so in earth"; as, in them, so in us also. Again, "Thy will be done as in Heaven, so in earth"; The Church of God is Heaven, His enemies are earth. So we wish well for our enemies, that they, too, may believe and become Christians, and so the will of God be done as in Heaven, so also in earth. Again, "Thy will be done as in Heaven, so in earth." Our spirit is Heaven and the flesh earth; as our spirit is renewed by believing, so may our flesh be renewed by rising again, and "the will of God be done as in Heaven, so in earth."

Saint Augustine, On the Lord's Prayer

8 Surely God will answer this prayer

Any human, mortal, weak and still burdened with sinful flesh does not refuse to give the good things which he possesses, although they are earthly and weak, to his children whom he loves. Our heavenly Father, even more than this man, lavishes the good things of heaven, which do not perish, on those who ask of him and are endowed with fear and love of him.

Bede, Homilies in the Gospels 2.14

We sometimes come near to our bounteous God offering him petitions for various objects according to one's pleasures. Sometimes we pray without discernment or any careful examination of what truly is to our advantage, and if granted by God would prove a blessing or would be to our injury if we received it. Rather, by the inconsiderate impulse of our desire, we fall into desires full of ruin that thrust the souls of those that entertain them into the snare of death and the meshes of hell. When we ask God anything of this kind, we will by no means receive it. [...] Why will we not receive it? Is God weary of bestowing gifts on us? By no means. "Why then", someone may say, "will he not give, since he is bounteous in giving?" [...]

When he says, "you who are evil", he means "you whose mind is capable of being influenced by evil and not uniformly inclined to good like the God of all." "You know how to give good gifts to your children; how much more shall your heavenly Father give a good spirit to them that ask him"? By a "good spirit" he means, spiritual grace.

This is good in every way. If a person receives it, he will become most blessed and worthy of admiration.

Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on Luke, Homily 79

9 Article by John Piper

John Piper, *What Is the Will of God and How Do We Know It?* see <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/what-is-the-will-of-god-and-how-do-we-know-it>

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:1-2)

The aim of Romans 12:1–2 is that all of life would become “spiritual worship.” Verse 1: “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” The aim of all human life in God’s eyes is that Christ would be made to look as valuable as he is. Worship means using our minds and hearts and bodies to express the worth of God and all he is for us in Jesus. There is a way to live — a way to love — that does that. There is a way to do your job that expresses the true value of God. If you can’t find it, that may mean you should change jobs. Or it might mean that verse 2 is not happening to the degree it should.

Verse 2 is Paul’s answer to how we turn all of life into worship. We must be transformed. Not just our external behavior, but the way we feel and think — our minds. Verse 2: “Be transformed by the renewal of your mind.”

Those who believe in Christ Jesus are already blood-bought new creatures in Christ. “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17). But now we must become what we are. “Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened” (1 Corinthians 5:7).

“You have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator” (Colossians 3:10). You have been made new in Christ; and now you are being renewed day by day.

We focus on the last part of verse 2, namely, the aim of the renewed mind: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, [now here comes the aim] that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good

and acceptable and perfect.” So our focus today is on the meaning of the term “will of God,” and how we discern it.

There are two clear and very different meanings for the term “will of God” in the Bible. We need to know them and decide which one is being used here in Romans 12:2. In fact, knowing the difference between these two meanings of “the will of God” is crucial to understanding one of the biggest and most perplexing things in all the Bible, namely, that God is sovereign over all things and yet disapproves of many things. Which means that God disapproves of some of what he ordains to happen. That is, he forbids some of the things he brings about. And he commands some of the things he hinders. Or to put it most paradoxically: God wills some events in one sense that he does not will in another sense.

1. God’s Will of Decree, or Sovereign Will

Let’s see the passages of Scripture that make us think this way. First consider passages that describe “the will of God” as his sovereign control of all that comes to pass. One of the clearest is the way Jesus spoke of the will of God in Gethsemane when he was praying. He said, in Matthew 26:39, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.” What does the will of God refer to in this verse? It refers to the sovereign plan of God that will happen in the coming hours. You recall how Acts 4:27–28 says this: “Truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.” So the “will of God” was that Jesus die. This was his plan, his decree. There was no changing it, and Jesus bowed and said, “Here’s my request, but you do what is best to do.” That’s the sovereign will of God.

And don’t miss the very crucial point here that it includes the sins of man. Herod, Pilate, the soldiers, the Jewish leaders — they all sinned in fulfilling God’s will that his Son be crucified (Isaiah 53:10). So be very clear on this: God wills to come to pass some things that he hates.

Here’s an example from 1 Peter. In 1 Peter 3:17 Peter writes, “It is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will, than for doing evil.” In other words, it may be God’s will that Christians suffer for doing good. He has in mind persecution. But persecution of Christians who do not deserve it is sin. So again, God sometimes wills that events come about that include sin. “It is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will.”

Paul gives a sweeping summary statement of this truth in Ephesians 1:11, “In him [Christ] we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will.” The will of

God is God's sovereign governance of all that comes to pass. And there are many other passages in the Bible that teach that God's providence over the universe extends to the smallest details of nature and human decisions. Not one sparrow falls to the ground apart from our Father in heaven (Matthew 10:29). "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord" (Proverbs 16:33). "The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord" (Proverbs 16:1). "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will" (Proverbs 21:1).

That's the first meaning of the will of God: It is God's sovereign control of all things. We will call this his "sovereign will" or his "will of decree." It cannot be broken. It always comes to pass. "He does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, 'What have you done?'" (Daniel 4:35).

2. God's Will of Command

Now the other meaning for "the will of God" in the Bible is what we can call his "will of command." His will is what he commands us to do. This is the will of God we can disobey and fail to do. The will of decree we do whether we believe in it or not. The will of command we can fail to do. For example, Jesus said, "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 7:21). Not all do the will of his Father. He says so. "Not everyone will enter the kingdom of heaven." Why? Because not all do the will of God.

Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4:3, "This is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality." Here we have a very specific instance of what God commands of us: holiness, sanctification, sexual purity. This is his will of command. But, oh, so many do not obey.

Then Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:18, "Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." There again is a specific aspect of his will of command: Give thanks in all circumstances. But many do not do this will of God. "Immerse yourself in the written word of God. Saturate your mind with it."

One more example: "And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:17). Not all abide forever. Some do. Some don't. The difference? Some do the will of God. Some don't. The will of God, in this sense, does not always happen.

So I conclude from these and many other passages of the Bible that there are two ways of talking about the will of God. Both are true, and both are important to understand and believe in. One we can call God's will of decree (or his sovereign will) and the other

we can call God's will of command. His will of decree always comes to pass whether we believe in it or not. His will of command can be broken, and is every day.

The Preciousness of These Truths

Before I relate this to Romans 12:2 let me comment on how precious these two truths are. Both correspond to a deep need that we all have when we are deeply hurt or experience great loss. On the one hand, we need the assurance that God is in control and therefore is able to work all of my pain and loss together for my good and the good of all who love him. On the other hand, we need to know that God empathizes with us and does not delight in sin or pain in and of themselves. These two needs correspond to God's will of decree and his will of command.

For example, if you were badly abused as a child, and someone asks you, "Do you think that was the will of God?" you now have a way to make some biblical sense out of this, and give an answer that doesn't contradict the Bible. You may say, "No it was not God's will; because he commands that humans not be abusive, but love each other. The abuse broke his commandment and therefore moved his heart with anger and grief (Mark 3:5). But, in another sense, yes, it was God's will (his sovereign will), because there are a hundred ways he could have stopped it. But for reasons I don't yet fully understand, he didn't."

And corresponding to these two wills are the two things you need in this situation: one is a God who is strong and sovereign enough to turn it for good; and the other is a God who is able to empathize with you. On the one hand, Christ is a sovereign High King, and nothing happens apart from his will (Matthew 28:18). On the other hand, Christ is a merciful High Priest and sympathizes with our weaknesses and pain (Hebrews 4:15). The Holy Spirit conquers us and our sins when he wills (John 1:13; Romans 9:15–16), and allows himself to be quenched and grieved and angered when he wills (Ephesians 4:30; 1 Thessalonians 5:19). His sovereign will is invincible, and his will of command can be grievously broken.

We need both these truths — both these understandings of the will of God — not only to make sense out of the Bible, but to hold fast to God in suffering.

Which Will Is Referred to in Romans 12:2?

Now, which of these is meant in Romans 12:2, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." The answer surely is that Paul is referring to God's will of command. I say this for at least two reasons. One is that God does not intend for us to know most of his sovereign will ahead of time. "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us" (Deuteronomy 29:29). If you want to know the future details of God's will of decree,

you don't want a renewed mind, you want a crystal ball. This is not called transformation and obedience; it's called divination, soothsaying.

The other reason I say that the will of God in Romans 12:2 is God's will of command and not his will of decree is that the phrase "by testing you may discern" implies that we should approve of the will of God and then obediently do it. But in fact we should not approve of sin or do it, even though it is part of God's sovereign will. Paul's meaning in Romans 12:2 is paraphrased almost exactly in Hebrews 5:14, which says, "Solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil." (See another paraphrase in Philippians 1:9–11.) That's the goal of this verse: not ferreting out the secret will of God that he plans to do, but discerning the revealed will of God that we ought to do.

Three Stages of Knowing and Doing the Revealed Will of God

There are three stages of knowing and doing the revealed will of God, that is, his will of command; and all of them require the renewed mind with its Holy-Spirit-given discernment that we talked about last time.

Stage One

First, God's will of command is revealed with final, decisive authority only in the Bible. And we need the renewed mind to understand and embrace what God commands in the Scripture. Without the renewed mind, we will distort the Scriptures to avoid their radical commands for self-denial, and love, and purity, and supreme satisfaction in Christ alone. God's authoritative will of command is found only in the Bible. Paul says that the Scriptures are inspired and make the Christian "competent, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16–17). Not just some good works. "Every good work." Oh, what energy and time and devotion Christians should spend meditating on the written word of God.

Stage Two

The second stage of God's will of command is our application of the biblical truth to new situations that may or may not be explicitly addressed in the Bible. The Bible does not tell you which person to marry, or which car to drive, or whether to own a home, where you take your vacation, what cell phone plan to buy, or which brand of orange juice to drink. Or a thousand other choices you must make.

"If you want to know the future details of God's will of decree, you don't want a renewed mind, you want a crystal ball."

What is necessary is that we have a renewed mind, that is so shaped and so governed by the revealed will of God in the Bible, that we see and assess all relevant factors with the mind of Christ, and discern what God is calling us to do. This is very different from constantly trying to hear God's voice saying do this and do that. People who try to lead their lives by hearing voices are not in sync with Romans 12:2.

There is a world of difference between praying and laboring for a renewed mind that discerns how to apply God's word, on the one hand, and the habit of asking God to give you new revelation of what to do, on the other hand. Divination does not require transformation. God's aim is a new mind, a new way of thinking and judging, not just new information. His aim is that we be transformed, sanctified, freed by the truth of his revealed word (John 8:32; 17:17). So the second stage of God's will of command is the discerning application of the Scriptures to new situations in life by means of a renewed mind.

Stage Three

Finally, the third stage of God's will of command is the vast majority of living where there is no conscious reflection before we act. I venture to say that a good 95 percent of your behavior you do not premeditate. That is, most of your thoughts, attitudes, and actions are spontaneous. They are just spillover from what's inside. Jesus said, "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil. I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak" (Matthew 12:34–36).

Why do I call this part of God's will of command? For one reason. Because God commands things like: Don't be angry. Don't be prideful. Don't covet. Don't be anxious. Don't be jealous. Don't envy. And none of those actions are premeditated. Anger, pride, covetousness, anxiety, jealousy, envy — they all just rise up out of the heart with no conscious reflection or intention. And we are guilty because of them. They break the commandment of God.

Is it not plain therefore that there is one great task of the Christian life: Be transformed by the renewing of your mind. We need new hearts and new minds. Make the tree good and the fruit will be good (Matthew 12:33). That's the great challenge. That is what God calls you to. You can't do it on your own. You need Christ, who died for your sins. And you need the Holy Spirit to lead you into Christ-exalting truth and to work in you truth-embracing humility.

Give yourself to this. Immerse yourself in the written word of God; saturate your mind with it. And pray that the Spirit of Christ would make you so new that the spillover would be good, acceptable, and perfect — the will of God.