

# **KNOWING AND DOING THE WILL OF GOD**

## **Study One: The Will of God & the Will of Man**

### **Motivation for Learning of the Will**

Probably because of our fallenness we always seem to lack motivation towards learning that which is good. Ecclesiastes 3:11 tells us that God has put eternity in our heart so that by searching we cannot find out the end from the beginning. The writer indicates that there is a drive in our heart to gather information on almost everything. We seem to think that having gathered it all—or even enough—we will then know what we need to know. Even so certain elements are unattractive to us, and I suggest one of them is knowing the will of God. This may well be because we wish to do our own will, and not be confronted by His.

Psalm 40:8-9 says, ‘I delight to do thy will, O my God; thy law is within my heart. I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation.’ The context of verses 1 to 5 shows that God has shown His ‘steadfast love and faithfulness’ to the Psalmist, and now he wishes to do God’s will, and delights in it. It is no burden to him, for ‘thy law is within my heart’. There are, then, two elements of motivation, the first being God’s action of love and care, and the second is the very law itself. The law is God’s will spelled out for us, or least that which we can read and practice. Once law looked like bondage but now, instead of being a heavy legal demand, it is the way of freedom and deep enjoyment as Psalms 1, 19 and 199 show so well, and James teaches in the first two chapters of his epistle.

Psalm 40:6—8 is quoted in Hebrews 10:5–7 where it is applied to Christ who delighted to do the Father’s will, as we also see elsewhere. Because man is wayward and seeks to do his own will he thinks that the will of God is onerous, and wishes only to do his own will. The truth that delight can come from doing God’s will has to be taught—and learned.

Again in I John 2:17 we read that ‘he who does the will of God abides forever’. That, surely, is a great motivating truth. We all want to abide forever. We will leave motivation for the time and return to it. We will seek to understand the matter of will—both Divine and human. Yet again, in John 9:31, ‘if anyone is a worshipper of God and does his will, God listens to him’. One can scarcely think of anything more amazing. Further to this in 7:17 ‘if any man’s will is to do his (God’s) will then he will know whether the teaching (Jesus’s) is of God.’

So the advantages—many of which are unstated explicitly—mount up, and become strong constraints to further do the will of God.

### **The Will the Very Centre of Conscious Being and Living**

Everyone knows what will is. It is that drive by which we desire to do something or refrain from doing something. Far from being simply a psychological faculty, it is the whole thrust of our being. It is the centre of our consciousness. We really do not conflict with others until we oppose their will, or they, ours. God is always willing, because He

is always doing and so is man; hence either the conflict or the total harmony of two beings—man and God, or man and man—the first being the worst we experience and the second being the best.

In the Old Testament the main verb ‘to will’ is ‘abhah which is ‘to breathe after’ or ‘to long for’, or ‘to consent’, and carries with it the idea of voluntariness of action. The main noun is *ratson* generally with the idea of ‘goodwill’ or ‘good pleasure’, and here the will is not so much thought of as a nounal thing (substantive), as an attitude or desire. In the New Testament the two Greek verbs *boulemai*, *thelo* and *thelema*, along with the nouns *boule*, *boulema* and *thelema* cover much the same ideas. In one sense ‘to will’ is as an auxiliary verb, e.g. ‘I will go’, ‘I will love’, so that it mainly a thrust of doing rather than an act within itself. An example of this can be seen in Mark 1:40–41, where ‘if you will you can make me clean,’ really means, ‘If you will to make me clean then you are able to do so,’ the answer to which was, ‘I will; be clean.’

In all of this matter of will is the voluntariness of the action (*voluntus*). This can be seen in Leviticus 1:3; 19:5 and 22:19. Willing, then, comes from the heart—whether it be good or otherwise. It carries the idea of pleasure, desire, and enjoyment of doing. In Isaiah 53:10 the A.V. has ‘It pleased the Lord to bruise him’, and in the R.S.V. it has ‘It was the will of the Lord to bruise him’. In Revelation 4:11 the A.V. has ‘for thy pleasure they are and were created’, whilst the R.S.V. has ‘by thy will they existed and were created’. The idea is really very simple: will is that action of God or a person which is prompted by desire, and which for many reasons is pleasing to the actor. This may not mean that in the short term there is pleasure in the action, but that there is the knowledge that it is the best possible of all decisions as in say, Isaiah 53:10. In some way, then, the doing of willing is linked with the conscience.

### **The Nature, Action and Scope of God’s Will**

The first thing we must keep in mind is that we can only know the will of God as He reveals it to us. We cannot analyse and assess that will by the criteria we use on the human level. Even if we claim to know ‘the revealed will of God’, we grasp it only as we grasp anything else of God’s nature and being, i.e. from the vantage point of a creature. Given wisdom may make us wise, but our wisdom does not grasp the nature of God. All we know is by revelation.

The way in which God reveals is by speaking to us. For this He uses various media, but primarily the prophets in and for—i.e. to—past times, and His Son for these times, and him through the Holy Spirit. In this process has come ‘the inscripturated word’, i.e. the Bible. It is here we see the nature, action and scope of God’s will, that is, of course, as it relates to humanity and all creation.

### **God’s Will Is His Wisdom**

In Ephesians 1:5 Paul speaks of God’s predestination as being ‘according to the purpose (*eudokia*: desire, pleasure) of his will’, and in 1:11 God has His ‘purpose’ (*prothesis*: purpose) which he accomplishes ‘according to the counsel of his will’ (*boulen tou thelmatos autou*). This *prothesis* is again mentioned in 3:11 (cf. Rom. 8:28; 9:11; II Tim 1:9) where God’s ‘eternal purpose’—i.e. the goal of His will—has been ‘realised in Christ Jesus our Lord’. God’s will is a mystery (*mysterion*) as we see in 1:8 (cf. 3:3, 4, 9; Rev. 10:7).

The term ‘counsel’ (boule)—often itself translated as ‘will’—is used in Acts 2:23 as ‘definite plan’; 4:28 as ‘thy plan’; 13:36 and 20:27 as ‘the counsel’. Boule is used over 100 times in the LXX, and with a number of meanings other than the simply word ‘will;’. In Deuteronomy 32:28–29 Israel is a nation ‘void of counsel’, i.e. ‘there is no understanding in them’, but ‘if they were wise they would understand this, and they would discern their latter end’. Here, then, counsel is a matter of wisdom and discerning God’s plan. In Proverbs 2:11 and 8:12 it is as wisdom. In Isaiah 11:2 the ‘Spirit of the Lord’ is the ‘spirit of counsel’, i.e. reflection., and in 9:6 Messiah is ‘wonderful counselor’. There is ‘the counsel of the ungodly’ as in Psalm 1:1, i.e. their advice and wisdom—so called, and there is the council of the Lord, i.e. the gathering of His mighty and wise ones, in which the prophets could hear the counsel of God and prophesy according to this wisdom and plan (cf. Jer. 31:16–22). In Psalm 73:24 God guides with His counsel, and in Psalm 33:10\_11 God brings to nothing the counsel of the nations, and the plans of the people, showing that wisdom and plan are linked, and are indeed, the one. Hence the Psalmist said, ‘The counsel of the Lord stands forever.

From this brief study, then we can conclude that God’s plan—His counsel and will— are wise. They are in wisdom. We will later develop this thought when we look at the various aspects of the will of God. Of course we could come to no other conclusion. No man is in the position to decide that God’s counsel is not wise, or, for that matter, to decide—of himself—that it is wise.

### **The Action and Scope of God’s Will**

‘From eternity to eternity’ describes the scope of God’s will. Isaiah 46:9–11 covers this thought, ‘^am God and there is none other; I am God and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose . . . I have spoken and I will bring it to pass; I have purposed and I will do it.’ To this we add Isaiah 48:3–13 in which God speaks of His own planning and the attempts of some to take credit for what He has done, claiming that it issued from them.

The scope of God’s plan is from prior to eternity, through creation, encompassing the fall of man, judgements on that sinfulness, the vast sweep of covenantal grace from Noah to Abraham, to Israel, to the New Covenant with His new people—the church, and through the battle with Satan to the end—the telos—and on into the era of the new world, the new heavens and the new earth. This must be what Paul; refers to in Acts 20:27 as ‘the whole counsel (boule) of God’. It is what Paul calls in Ephesians 1:9 ‘the mystery of his will’—a statement we will have cause to examine more closely. For the present let us look at the absolute wisdom in which the plan has been initiated and carried out by God. We must be content with stating it as it is given,

*(i) Before time—before the creation of the world—God had planned all things:*

- (a) His people, the people of God (Eph. 1:4),
- (b) His people were to be holy (Eph. 1:4),
- (c) His people were to have salvation ( II Tim. 1:9; I Pet. 1:18–19; Eph. 1:7),
- (d) His people were to have eternal life (Titus 1:1-2; Rev. 13:8),
- (e) His people were to enter His Kingdom and become heirs of it (Matt. 25:34),
- (f) His people were to be glorified (I Cor. 2:6–10; Eph. 1:11-13; Isa 43:6–7),

(g) All created things were to be unified in Christ (Eph. 1:10), i.e. filled up by him (Eph. 1:23; 4:10), reconciled by him (Col. 1:20), and harmonised by him (cf. Col. 3:15).

(h) All evil was to be judged (II Pet. 3:7; Prov. 16:4; cf. Rev. chs 19, 20),

(i) There were to be the new world, the new heavens and the new earth in which the people of God would be 'a kingdom of priests unto their God', and reign for ever and ever (Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:4; 22:5).

*(ii) In time God created all things as He had planned—in wisdom*

We read in Jeremiah 10:12, 'It is he who made the earth by his power, who established the world by his wisdom, and by his understanding stretched out the heavens' (cf. Jer. 51:15; cf. Job 38:4-7; Psa. 148:4-5; Psa. 78:69; Gen. 1:21; Eccles. 3:11; Eccles 7:29). All of this means that God is a 'faithful Creator' (I Pet. 4:19), so that He will carry creation to its destined end. Meanwhile the order of creation is a fixed (stable) one, so that we need not fear (Psa. 148:5-6; Jer. 31:35-36). God's plan for creation can be seen in '(i)' above.

*(iii) Before time, in time, and with a view to eternity was, is and will be the kingdom of God.*

Nebuchanezzar had thought of himself as doing his own will (cf. Eccles 8:3) but learned that only God can do His own will. Hence he said, 'The Most High . . . does according to his will in the host of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What doest thou?"' (Dan. 4:35; cf. Isa. 64:8; Rom.9:19-24). Psalm 135:6-7 shows that the will of God obtains in creation and in this sense all creation is His Kingdom, 'Whatever the Lord pleases he does in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all the deeps. He it is who makes the clouds rise at the end of the earth, who makes lightnings for the rain and brings forth the wind from his storehouse.'

In one sense the Kingdom of God is not something which God works at in order to devise and perfect, for the Kingdom always was since it is the reign and rule of God however that operates in any era or situation. In another sense it is something which God wills, i.e. His sovereignty determines how and what it shall be. So in the N.T. the Kingdom's imminent coming is announced by John the Baptist, and by Jesus. It comes into action in the ministry of Jesus—'If I, by the Spirit of God cast out demons, then has the kingdom of God come upon you' (Matt. 12:28; 4:23), and its importance and nature is shown by the Lord's given-prayer (given to his people to pray), 'Our Father . . . thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as in heaven'. In fact the work of the Cross and the Resurrection dynamically secures the Kingdom, in the sense that its moral-spiritual dynamic defeats Satan and his evil powers, seals their doom for ever, and liberates the believing community of Christ to do its work in a way impossible apart from the work of salvation. The defeat of evil is a powerful dimension of the Kingdom.

In yet another sense the Kingdom is eschatological. It is yet to come, although it is dynamically coming day by day. Believers will inherit it and be a kingdom of priests unto their God.

*(iv) All things relating to salvation are the will of God.*

We have already set out much of the plan of 'salvation history' in '(i)'—above. We will be looking at Jesus doing the will of God especially as it is set out in John's Gospel, and we will see this will is for man's salvation. The Son is the servant of the

Father, effecting salvation so that he is the good shepherd, laying down his life for the sheep. He is the bread of life and his flesh is given for the life of the world. He is the door by which if any man enters he is saved. He is the serpent to be lifted up on the Cross drawing all men unto him. His 'food is to do the will of him, who sent me'; his judgement is just because 'I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me, and he has 'come down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me'. That will of the Father is bringing to salvation those who believe in him and in the Father Who sent him.

The accomplishment of this salvation is not only God's will but the proclamation and dissemination of it also. In Luke 24:44–49 Jesus makes it clear that what he has done in his life, ministry, Cross, Resurrection and Ascension has been pro- prophesied, and the result of it also prophesied, namely that 'repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem'. Prophecy, of course, is the stated will of God in history, the action of 'the living God', i.e. 'the God Who acts'.

The story of the 'Acts of the Apostles' is the account of the will of God in action as the early church is empowered and led by the Holy Spirit. The church knows the will of God by the Holy Spirit, and that will is also the will of the Lord of the Church, Jesus the Messiah (cf. Acts 13:1–4; 15:28f; 16:6–10). Hebrews 2:4 (cf. Rom. 15:18–19) speaks of the preaching of the gospel through 'signs and wonders and . . . gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.'

Paul speaks of himself in almost all his letters as an apostle 'by the will of God'. Regarding salvation, we have a statement such as Galatians 1:4 which says that the Lord Jesus Christ 'gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father.'

Generally speaking, the four sections immediately above cover the will of God for our understanding.. There are two more matters for our discussion, (i) the will of God in the community of Christ, and (ii) the will of God regarding the eschaton, and we shall deal with these later. Our immediate purpose is to see the obedience of Christ as Son of man, and as Son of God doing the Father's will, for this is personally valuable and enlightening for us who see Christ as our paradigm, as the one we imitate, and as the one who dwells within us, and enables us to love the will of God and do it.

## Study Two: Jesus Knowing and Doing the Will of God

### Created Man and the Will of God

Creation resulted from the action of God's will. Revelation 4:11, has,

‘Worthy art thou, our Lord and God,  
to receive glory and honour and power,  
for thou didst create all things,  
and by thy will they existed and were created.

Proverbs 16:4 says that God has made everything for its own purpose. He, Himself, created everything by His will and for His will, i.e. for His own purpose. In I Corinthians 8:6 Paul says, ‘There is one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.’ All creation, then, is purposive. Psalm 104: 29–30 and Job 33:4 support the accounts of Genesis 1:1-2 in showing that creation came into being via the Spirit of God, and Colossians 1:15–17, John 1:1-3, Hebrews 1:2-3 and I Corinthians 8:6 show that the mediator of this creation was God' Son or the Divine Logos. Psalms 33:6-9 and 148:5–6 show that the creation came by the word of God.

We can say then that God's will for creation came into fulfilment by His word, His creative word. Hebrews 11:3 confirms this, ‘By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear.’ In the account of creation in Genesis 1 we have the repetition of ‘Let’, and this is really an evocative imperative. Bt the word of God all things come into being. God's commendation of the whole of creation in Genesis 1:31—‘God saw that it was very good’—seals the rightness of all things. Hence when Job 38:7 says, at creation, ‘The morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy,’ then there was praise for this great act of God's will through His word, as indeed we find in Revelation 4:11, and other places.

If out of God's will this complete creation came into being, so we would expect that man who was the crown of creation would also be perfect. Such is indicated in Genesis 1:26-31 and in Psalm 8:3–5. We would expect his will also to be gladly aligned with that of God's will. This was the case at first, but then man's will was subverted by the serpent, at the time of the temptation, resulting in the fall. We will further examine this matter later, but we see that because of the fall, man does not wholly do the will of God. We would think that since creation came by the word so man—by the word—would be aligned with the will of God. It was precisely because Adam refused the word he heard that his will became autonomous—separated from the will of God.

Whilst it is true that David—and perhaps others—could be described by God as ‘a man after my own heart, who will do all my will’, yet we know that all human beings were—and are—sinners, though doubtless men of faith—such as are described in Hebrews 11—are in one sense those who seek to do the will of God. In fact, in history, only one man was ever found to do the will of God and that was Jesus. It is interesting to note that he knew that man can only live by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. In passing we can note that this is a—or the—principle of life for man.

## **Jesus Doing the Will of the Father**

### **Jesus Doing God's Will With Delight in Hebrews 10**

We have already seen that the writer of Hebrews applies the 40th. Psalm to Jesus, and in particular verses. Whilst we do not doubt that originally David was rescued from great trouble and out of gratitude delighted to do God's will, yet the writer of Hebrews sees how apt this Scripture is when applied to Jesus. There are other references to persons who delight in God's will especially as it is expressed in God's law— Psalms 112:1; 119:16,24, 47; Jeremiah 15:16, Job 27:12:cf. Psalm 37:31.

Fine as is the attitude of Jesus to God in wanting to do His will, the writer of Hebrews has a pretty hefty proposition to unveil. From verse 5 to 14 he is saying something like the following,

In accordance with Psalm 40:6–8 whilst sacrifices and burnt-offerings were prescribed by God yet the Psalmist knows what God requires is a spirit that delights to do God's will. In this passage (Heb. 10:5ff.) Jesus is pictured as saying, 'The old sacrifices were right in their time, but they had to do with the law of the covenant. Now, O God, you have prepared a body for me—the Son and Messiah—so that I can offer a better sacrifice than any which has been offered. The Old Testament Scriptures are saying (i.e. have prophesied) that I have come to do Your will, O God. What is this will but to abrogate the old offerings, and myself to be the new offering—the better offering—by which sin is taken away. Your will.'

The writer then concludes in verse 10 that the will of God has sanctified His people. He means that had not God's will been to offer Christ as the sacrifice then the people would not have been sanctified. It has been observed that sanctified means cleansing, and approximates to the Pauline idea of sanctification. What concerns us, however is that it was the delight of Jesus to do God's will, i.e. his will was one with God's will.

### **Jesus Doing God's Will in the Synoptic Gospels, especially in Matthew**

The various references to doing 'the will of my Father in heaven' (Mtt. 12:50; cf. Mtt. 7:21) are directed to God's people, but Jesus scarcely directs us to do the will of his Father, if he does not do the same himself. This is seen in Mark 3:35 when Jesus says, 'Whoever does the will of God is my brother.' If it is 'like brother like brother', then it is 'like Father like Son'. That is all children of God wish to do his will.

Perhaps one of the profoundest passages in the Gospels is Matthew 11:20–30 where Jesus first upbraids the cities of Galilee for their virtual rejection of him who in their midst had done 'mighty works'. Whereas we would undoubtedly have been angry and critical, he said, 'I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and prudent, and revealed them unto babes; yes, Father, for such was thy gracious will.'

Jesus was saying that the Father's will on the one hand was to close the Kingdom against the antagonists and to open its mysteries to 'babes'. We have plenty of evidence for this, but it is Jesus' attitude to his Father's will which is so profound. He accepts that will when others of good mind might have deplored it, seemingly with some justification. He sees into the very heart of that will and gladly accepts it, calling it 'gracious'. This gives us the key to Jesus' understanding of what His Father was about. There is nothing of bland acceptance of all things or mindless resignation. He sees the wisdom of the will.

It is worth observing here that most human anger arises from having one's will opposed, or being unable to put it into operation. There was none of this with Christ. He believed in His Father and His whole plan for creation, and wished to carry out that will.

Teaching on the will of God in the Synoptic Gospels is in relation as to how human beings should regard it and we will leave consideration of this until later. We will also defer looking at what seems a conflict of Jesus' will with that of the Father, in the garden of Gethemene.

### **Jesus and the Will of God in John's Gospel**

This is the Gospel in which Jesus clearly states his attitude to the will of God. He also speaks of the will of man. In this section we will speak specifically of his doing God's will.

Three times he speaks explicitly of doing God's will. The first occasion is in 4:34, where he says, 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work.' There is no sense that he is just simply willing to do the will of God—willy-nilly! No, he does the will of God because it is the wise counsel and plan of God which has its designed and proper end. It is 'to accomplish (God's) work'. How many occasions in this Gospel he speaks of God's timing, of doing nothing but what the Father shows him, of doing the works of God, and having accomplished the work which the Father has given him to do. So being in the will of God and doing it, is for him the very essence of life. It is, in fact, the richness of vocation.

The second occasion is in 5:30, 'I can do nothing on my own authority; as I hear, I judge; and my judgement is just, because I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me.' In verse 23 Jesus had said, 'The Father judges no one, but has given all judgement to the Son,' which is no small matter. If the Son and the Father are not one, then the judgement will not be just. In 3:35 we read that 'the Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hands.' Thus the wills of the Father and Son are one, and so the work is one. This is what we need to keep in mind when we think, ourselves, of doing God's will. The important clause—'I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me', tells of the intimacy with God in being one with His will.

The third occasion—6:38–40—spells out the whole matter of God's will. 'For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me; and this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up at the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that every one who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day.' We may well exclaim, 'What a will!' To be sure, we will be raised up at the last day is indeed thrilling—and securing to the otherwise troubled spirit. When Jesus says on the second and third occasions that he does not seek to do his own will he does not mean he has any goal other than that which is the Father's. His will is one with the Father's.

We ought then to learn from this paradigm which is Jesus, that to do God's will is to be intimately one with him, and one with his Father. This is the most thrilling thing of all life for it means we have true vocation, and that everything we do is authentic action. Life could not be more rich than when occupied in this work, and the reality of this is borne out in the Son. When, then, at the end he cries with a loud voice, 'It is finished,' we know that the divine will in salvation has been fulfilled. This is the goal of all true will and willingness.

## The Will of Jesus in Gesthemene

Jesus had taught his disciples to pray, 'Thy will be done; thy kingdom come.' The will was not an unknown thing and so the prayer was not mindless. God's will, primarily, is the coming of His Kingdom. In John's Gospel we have what has been called 'the Johannine Gesthemene' in the passage of 12:27–28, 'Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour? No, for this purpose I have come to this hour Father, glorify thy name.' According to the way it is read it means either that Jesus was in a state of confusion and prayed to be saved from the hour, or was saying he did not need to be saved from the hour because he was doing the Father's will. The point is made that he must do the father's will—whatever!

In the synoptic Gospels the study of Gesthemene is indeed a rewarding one. The traditional view is that Jesus prayed that the Father would save him from the death of the Cross. If however that was impossible—if revocation of the divine will could not take place—then Jesus would resign himself to that decision. In this view it is said that Jesus was so shocked at the nature of the Cross at the time of Gesthemene—'the beginning of sorrows'—that his soul was revulsed, and he longed not to be identified with the sin, evil and pollution of mankind. Those who hold this view say that Jesus was a man like any of us, and his dread of the Cross was reasonable, and a true human reaction. What is outstanding—it is said—was that he was still prepared to do the Father's will, no matter how terrible and frightful enduring the Cross would be.

Certainly this traditional view has much going for it. For myself, however, I must say that I find Jesus' prayer for evasion of the Cross quite surprising. To this point he had strongly stressed the necessity of his going to the Cross. Three times in the Gospel of Mark he insisted he must go to the Cross (cf. 8:31; 9:31; 10:32), and now, at Gestheme, he seeks to withdraw I think the traditional view has missed the point that Jesus believed he was dying in the garden. The statement of Matthew 26:38, 'My soul is very sorrowful, even to death,' has been passed by as though it were exaggeration or hyperbole. But was it? Was he not, in fact, dying? Some suggest that since—according to Luke 22:53—this was 'your hour, and the power (authority) of darkness', that in fact Satan and his powers were bearing down on Jesus in the garden. We cannot say with certainty, but both the traditional view and my view agree that the pressure on him in the garden was fearful. I believe it was severe enough to press him down to death, and that he was asking the Father to save him from death, there, in the garden. This would perfectly accord with Hebrews 5:7, '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 for his godly fear.' Hebrews 5:8–9 then makes great sense, 'Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.'

Some of the old manuscripts of Luke 22:43 and 44 have 'there appeared to him an angel from heaven strengthening him. And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground.' We know that at the time of the Temptation in the wilderness 'angels came and ministered to him' (Matt. 4:11; Mark 1:13), and in fact that he needed this ministry, during and following the temptation. I see no reason why angels should not have ministered to Jesus in the garden. In fact it seems to me that they were the answer to his prayer, 'Father, save me from this hour'. They assisted him not to die in the garden, so that he could go to the cross which his soul deeply desired.

One of my reasons for liking this interpretation—which, by the way, is held by some scholars—is that I cannot believe Jesus would seek to escape from God's will or

to have it changed. I think that Jesus was bewildered by the pressure that was seeking to kill him, for he had never envisaged anything other than the death of the Cross. If then he was saying—paraphrased—'Father, I thought I was going to the Cross, but I find myself dying, so please save me from this hour—this pressing death—and let me go to the Cross for the redemption of mankind as he had planned,' then his cry, 'Nevertheless, not my will but thine be done', is far more powerful than if he were simply resigning himself to the death of the Cross, having failed to move the Father to alter His original plan.' The latter seems to me to be so out of character with the Father and the Son. As I see it he longed to go to the Cross, not to forego it, so that foregoing it—if that were the way it had to be—speaks of the highest compliance to the will of God.

I have spent much time on this event because I believe the traditional view goes clean contrary to everything else pertaining to Christ doing the will of God.

### **Conclusion to 'Jesus Knowing and Doing the Will of God'**

Without doubt our study of the subject has not delved in any great depth into the relationships between the Father and the Son, but we know that Jesus could say 'The Father is greater than I,' and insist that he was subject to the Father's will, and also could say, 'I and the Father are one,' meaning that he had no will of his own which he desired to execute. He was one with the Father's will. This is, indeed, the true paradigm for obedience. This is the true vocation which we should all espouse.

What we will see in our next study is that man does the will of God in Christ, and not otherwise. This must mean that the Son goes on doing the will of God, and that his doing was not finished at the Cross. A study of I Corinthians 15:24–28, Philippians 2:9–11, and the many eschatological passages of the Gospels, the Epistles and the Book of the Revelation will show that the Son goes on doing the will of God—that will only being completed at the end of the eschaton—the last times and the beginning of the new aeon.

## **Study Three: Man Knowing and Doing the Will of God**

### **The Human Rejection of God's Will**

In our first study we saw that man—as created—was given will, and that his will was aligned with God's. The testing of his will came regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Man sought to be as God, and so sought to be autonomous. This meant he was self-willed, and out of alignment with the will of God. Since will is the centre of personal being, man could not interact with God. In that sense he died to God and came alive to himself (cf. II Cor. 5:15). Not doing the will of God according to His creational mandate and His moral law, meant that man was not truly himself, for only union with God constitutes true (authentic, functional) human being and doing.

### **The Bondage of the Human Will**

Much as been said about this by Luther, Erasmus, Calvin and Jonathan Edwards. Jesus famous statement covers all elements, 'Every one who commits sin is a slave to sin'. The writer of Proverbs also knew it, 'The iniquities of the wicked ensnare him, and he is caught in the toils of his sin.' The writer of II Peter describes people who 'promise freedom, but they themselves are slaves of corruption; for whatever overcomes a man, to that he is enslaved.' Paul speaks of those forced to 'follow the course of this world . . . the prince of the power of the air'.

Fallen man, then, is a slave. Every human being has apparent freedom of will, although he may not have actual freedom of will. By this we mean that sin and evil so affect what has been called an 'equipoise of choice' that man only appears to have true choice. Secondly, although a person can seem to choose a particular way he cannot enforce it, i.e. carry it through to a conclusion. An alcoholic may choose not to drink, but the power to effect his choice is absent. We then have to ask whether he had made an authentic choice. What factors influenced him to go on drinking when he had chosen not to do so?

There are other related questions such as, 'What is true humanity, and so true human freedom? Is a person really free when he does not pursue God-given vocation, e.g. the creational mandate of Genesis 1:28? These questions involve the issues of freedom and slavery. Central to these is Jeremiah 10:23, 'The way of a man is not in himself, it is not in man to direct his [own] steps'. Another way of saying this is man is not man unless in union with God; a man is not truly man unless he is dependent, and that dependence must be upon God, and none other. Not to be this way is to be enslaved to some other god, lord, idol, deity, creature or thing.

### **The Question of Human Ability**

If there is no authentic (ontological) 'I, of myself', then what is man's ability? We have seen that the slave of alcohol cannot recover himself of himself. Does this mean man has no ability? Man has the ability to sin, to do evil, and to do relative good, though not absolute good. He is most competent to do things which do not require moral power. When he does those things they may be related to relative good or essential evil.

Paul's famous passage of Romans 7—especially from verses 13 to 25— shows that man-as-man is not more powerful than sin-as-sin. Even if a man is redeemed he can 'will what is right, but cannot do it' (verse 18). The redeemed man can 'delight in the law after the inmost self' but finds another law (principle) which wars with his mind (decision to do good) and makes him captive to the law of sin (verses 22–23). Such a redeemed man will need to know the power of the Holy Spirit above the 'power' of his own spirit, in order for him to desist from evil and accomplish good.

Man—even redeemed man—finds this humiliating, but it need not be. The discovery of creaturehood, and the innate weakness of humanity is indeed a liberating discovery, rightly seen. It means redeemed man will advert to God for the good he desires to do.

### **Man Coming to Know and Do the Will of God**

Only regeneration—the conversion of the whole person—will bring a human being to be aligned with the will of God. When a person goes through the actions of repentance and faith, and so is forgiven, purified, justified, regenerated, adopted and sanctified, then that person will desire to have his (or, her) will as one with God's.

Psalm 40:8 shows us the Psalmist as delighting to do the will of God. This is because he has gone through a harrowing experience from which God delivered him. Likewise when a man is rescued by God from an existence which is death, then he is glad to do God's will. In Romans 6 the person who has been through the redeeming death and resurrection of Christ—via baptism into him—now 'obeys from the heart that form of doctrine to which he has been delivered' (verse 17) so he is now 'a slave of righteousness'. In Ephesians 6:6 Paul talks about 'doing the will of God from the heart'. The radical regeneration has altered the disposition or attitude of the person to God and to sin. We will now consider related factors which affect the disposition of the will.

#### **Factors Which Affect the Disposition of the Will Changing it Radically**

- (i) The revelation of God as Father alters the attitude of the person. Man—in nature— sees God as grim, severe, legal, demanding, perfectionist, judgemental, and an executer. To see—through Christ the Son, and the Cross—that God is Father is a powerfully liberating revelation. One has a will to do God's will because He is Father.
- (ii) The revelation of God as Father is effected personally and affectionally by the Holy Spirit who causes the person to see God as Father, and to cry from within, 'Abba! Father!' so that His Fatherhood is warm, intimate, and securing. Because the Son loved to do the Father's will, so the sons also will desire to do His will.
- (iii) The revelation of Christ as Lord, by the Holy Spirit (John 16:12–15; Rom. 8:14–17; Gal. 4:4–7; cf. I Cor. 12:2) brings Christ's Lordship as a rich relationship to the believer, who desires to do the will of his new Lord. The co-revelation that Christ is his Elder Brother also stimulates willingness in obedience.
- (iv) The Holy Spirit brings love to the heart of the new man (Rom. 5:5) , and love is driving force or constraint to the believer (II Cor. 5:14; I John 1:19; I Cor. 16:14). It is love which makes a man willing to do the will of God.

### **Factors Which Affect the Disposition of the Will Changing it Further**

There are a number of experimental factors which keep the new man going in in accordance with the will of God. These are,

(i) As created man has great moral powers and these depend on his union with God. What we have to realise is that man is not static, not passive, not inert. Ephesians 2:2 says that fallen man is 'energized within' by Satan, and Philippians 2:13 says that the believer is 'energized within' by God. When man is the slave of sin he has power to sin. When he is the slave of righteousness he has power to do righteousness. We saw in Romans 7:13–25 that sin of-itself is more powerful than the new man in Christ of-himself, but 'of-himself' is not a true state of regenerated humanity. The power of God is now in that person if he will work that way. So success in action spurs on the believer to more and more action.

(ii) We see that law carries within it its own delight, its own attractiveness, its own on-going motivation and constraint. The subject is too vast for us to open here but readings of Psalms 1, 19 and 119 will open it up powerfully. As we saw there is delight in doing God's law, and that delight spurs the believer on. It gives delight because the believer is walking in the functional way of true living. The old guilts and their heaviness are gone. The delight of a new relationship urges the believer on to new experiences of obedience.

(iii) Obedience brings further revelation of God. As Calvin once said, 'True knowledge of God is born out of obedience', and this theme is described in Jeremiah 31:31–34, where God says His people will have knowledge of him through the forgiveness of sins, and with that forgiveness will come what I call 'the internalizing of the law', for the law is written on the heart and the inward parts. Thus, when we are led by the Spirit and walk in the Spirit (Gal. 5:16–18, 22–25) we 'fulfil the just requirements of the law (Rom. 8:4) which is another way of saying we do the will of God. This kind of obedience, then, as its own inner dynamic to further knowledge of God and so further obedience.

(iv) The pursuit of law is onward moving. What we must realise is that law in the O.T. was called 'instruction', and it was 'instruction on the way', i.e. not simply legislation or even moral standards, but walking and working in the way of the will of God. It is hard for us who have been so legally oriented to law to see that law is a delightful thing, i.e. 'the royal law' and 'the law of perfect liberty', because we are at one with God when we walk in it. In this sense the law is 'forward-moving' even eschatological, drawing us on to the goal of God as we fulfil His purpose through obedience. We do not have space and time here to fill this out, but it is fascinating insight and principle.

(v) Vocation is of the esse of man. By this we mean that man is not man without vocation. Most human regard it as the bene esse, i.e. that if vocation is pursued then that is a good thing, but not an essential one. God created man with a view to his vocation. When man does his own will he is out of authentic vocation. When he does the will of God he is in true vocation, and so true human experience. We know there are three great drives for redeemed man—love, faith and hope. Now vocation is based on hope, for the fulfilment of vocation is the fulfilment of the person, and it is set in the end-time. This is

because all true wills concur with God's will and are the outworking of that will in Christ. Our vocation is really fulfilling His. Again the delight of pursuing vocation acts as an ever-accelerating, ever-compounding motivation. The alignment of man's will with God's is the source of true delight.

### **Matters Of Knowing and Doing God's Will in the Community of Christ**

Doing the will of God may be a matter of choice but, really, it is mandatory. Genesis 1:28 indicates that man was to do the will of God, although that will was not limited to the mandate. There has always been God's law, although there was not always the law of Moses (cf. Rom. 5:12-14; Gen. 26:4-5). Exodus 20:1ff. shows that there was law—God's will—in Israel, although it was all in the context of covenant, i.e. God's purposes for His people.

In the New Testament the people of God are bidden to pray the Lord's Prayer, i.e. that God's will may be done, and that being so His Kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven. Of course such prayer eventually involves them—as the church—in proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom, and in one sense demonstrating it.

In the Gospels the will of God is discussed by Jesus. In Matthew 7:21 only those who do the will of God will enter the Kingdom of heaven. In Matthew 12:50 whoever does the will of the Father that one is a brother, sister or mother to Jesus. In Luke 12:42-48 we are told that the unfaithful servant will be beaten because he knew his master's will but did not obey it: likewise shall we who are God's unfaithful servants be punished. Again in the Gospels the use of the human will determines what the person will be and do. He who wills to save his life loses it, and who wills to lose it saves it. Who will to serve will be greatest, but who wills to be greatest will be least. Who wills to follow Christ must forsake all, count the cost, and take up the Cross. The will, then, is dynamic, and—as we have said—is the very heart and centre of the person.

In the Epistles there is varied teaching on the will of God and of man. We have seen that all ministry is really by the will of God. Paul says—time and again—that his ministry is by that will, and we assume this is the same for all—whatever their ministry may be. He tells the Romans (1:10) that he visits them 'by the will of God' and at the end of the letter prays 'that by God's will I may come to you with joy'. We have seen that the apostolic band always looked to know the will of God as to where they should go, that will generally being made clear by the Holy Spirit. Doubtless in Galatians 5:16-18, 22-25 the walk by the Spirit is not confined to holiness of living but also refers to the proclaiming of the Gospel.

In II Corinthians 8-9 the Macedonian Christians gave themselves to God 'by the will of God'. and their gifts also by that will. In Ephesians the readers are exhorted to know the will of God, 'Therefore be not foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is' (5:17). In 1:9 Paul speaks of the mystery of this will, and that is opened to us in 3:1-11. One needs to know this will which is both general—for all time—and specific—for the church at any point of its life, as also for each person at his point of life-experience. So in Colossians 1:9 Paul prays that his readers 'may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding' for that will has to do with all time and eternity, and all the action of His people in their living. In Colossians 4:12 Epaphras prays that the Colossians 'may stand fully mature and fully assured in all the will of God'—again an all-embracing prayer..

We have seen in Ephesians 6:6 that servants of masters are primarily servants of Christ and must do 'the will of God from the heart'. That will does not only encompass the commands of the masters, but all that they do in life.

In I Thessalonians 4:3 Paul states, 'For this is the will of God, your sanctification, and then proceeds to show the extent of God's will practice under the heading of 'sanctification' namely that they live in true morality, true marital fidelity, and having nothing to do with sexual impurity. This is one of the few places in which the will of God is spelled out specifically. Most readers would have known that true moral and ethical living constitute the will of God. In fact, in 5:12–22 there are more exhortations given on details of Christian living and they are summed up as 'the will of God in Christ for you'.

In Hebrews 10:36 there is an exhortation in the midst of other details, 'Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that you may do the will of God and receive what is promised.' Doing the will of God is here linked with vocation and its ultimate goal. In 13:20-21 comes the beautiful 'great Shepherd' benediction where the writer prays, 'The God of peace . . . equip you with everything good that you may do his will working in you that which is pleasing in his sight.'

Peter in his first Epistle is anxious that his readers understand the will of God in its outworking. In 2:15 it is 'God's will that by doing right you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish men'. In 3:17 'It is better to suffer for doing right, if that should be God's will, than for doing wrong.' In 4:1-2 says, 'Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same thought, for who ever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer by human passions, but by the will of God.' God's will then seems in Peter's letter to be connected with suffering, so that we are not surprised to read in 4:19, 'Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will do right and entrust their souls to a faithful Creator.'

John only twice mentions the will of God explicitly. The first is to say 'he who does the will of God abides forever' and that 'if we ask anything according to God's will he will hear us', a great principle of prayer formerly opened to—and by—the apostle in John chapters 12–16.

In this section we have really only tabulated the explicit mentions of God's will, but each is worthy of exposition in itself. The general conclusion that is apparent is that we should know the will of God, and live in the will of God as it has been made explicit, that such will be linked with suffering, but is also moving towards rich reward, as the will of God comes to completion in the history of creation. Indeed everything above that we have subsumed under the will of God ought to act dynamically for us as guidance in what we do.

Also, we are aware all the time that the prayer for the coming of the Kingdom, and the ways of presently living in that Kingdom (Col. 1:13; Rom. 14:17; I Cor 4:20) should always be in the minds of believers. Christ present action in bringing the Kingdom in (I Cor. 15:24–34) is the overall will of God, and all other elements of exhortation regarding the Kingdom fit into this. That is what makes our research into all these elements so valuable because they are part of the will of God explicitly set forth in them.

## **The Will of God and the Will of Man**

We come again to look at God's creation, and to note the conflict of will within it. There is the will of God for all creation, and there is the will of Satan and his powers opposing the Divine will. Also the wills of rebellious human creatures are set against God. Out of this conflict of wills comes the person misery that all creatures must know when they do not align themselves with God's will. Out of it comes warring, hatreds, rivalries, deceits, destructive ambitions, and dreadful personal evil.

Man has not been slow to consider and discuss the matter of human and divine will. Rationalisations of 'luck' and 'fate' or the instance that man's will is free are superficial readings of the human scene. The refusal to accept authority in any form is linked with the illusion of human freedom. Whilst the claim to freedom means for many 'no interference from others' and 'freedom to do as I wish', this cannot obtain properly in the affairs of society—in families, local society, nations and the vast family of nations. Some see freedom of the will is the ability to act against what even the understanding, i.e. the power of contrary choice even within one's own self

### **Pelagius, Augustine and Arminius On the Freedom of the Will**

What we have asserted early on in our essay—biblically, we would claim—is that man as a sinner is under the power of sin and does not have the power to liberate himself from his bondage. Pelagius—around the 4th. century—claimed that men would have the moral freedom to obey the law were it not for the bad example of Adam. He denied the doctrine of original sin, and of death from that sin, and said that man could—inspired by the example of Jesus—have the moral freedom to obey the law. Grace merely enables man to do what he could do even without it. In other words man as God creates him—especially had he not had the bad example of Adam—is able to render obedience from himself. Pelagius believed in justification by faith alone, but demanded that the baptized person live sinlessly in his post-baptismal state—insisting that he can if he wills.

Pelagius in his day was opposed by Augustine who spoke of the impossibility of even the beginning of faith without prevenient grace, by whose power the will is prepared by God to turn to Him. An exponent of the free will of man was a Dutch theologian named Arminius who lived mainly in the 16th. century. He opposed the orthodoxy of the Reformers and especially their view of election which was that God's grace was dependent on election. Arminius reversed this—election is conditional upon man's response, God of course foreknowing who would believe. Man—if he will—can believe in Christ, because his will is free.

We have seen above from passages such as John 8:34; Ephesians 2:1–3 and related references that man is not free. His will, doubtless, has apparent freedom of choice, but not actual freedom of choice. We have also seen that man's will is freed by salvation, but then that freedom is freedom to obey, and so is freedom-in-obedience. Romans 7 teaches us that although the believer is free to choose the good and reject the evil, he does not of himself have the power to carry out the choice of his will. It is important to see that freedom to choose is one thing, but it does not mean freedom to execute one's choice, i.e. to fulfil it. This choice requires the power of God (of the Spirit: Rom. 8:13) to enable it to execute the desire of the will.

Doubtless our treatment above of the three great theologians is minimal and we have not dealt with the theology of Luther and Calvin, both theological giants who

believed in the bondage of the will, and the inability of man—of himself and prior to the grace of justification—to achieve anything, i.e. to turn to God apart from prevenient grace. These two theologians have often been maligned by those who have not thoroughly studied their systems. It is also a fact that we have a mind-set which has grown partly from what the natural man erroneously thinks (John 3:3–6; I Cor. 2:14; cf. II Cor. 5:16) and partly out of the conditioning of our teachers. When we come to the matter of human freedom something of man's pride is at stake. Therefore when we consider the freedom of the will we may well have hidden agenda, unseen factors which give us a strong bias towards one view or another. We can assess that through the centuries there have been two systems of the working of the will. The first is called monergism, i.e. one working and that is God, and the second is synergism, i.e. two working cooperatively, i.e. God and man. Monergism distinctively outlines amazing grace, and synergism saves man's pride.

We must come to see that everything pivots around the doctrine of grace, i.e. whether grace wholly does what man cannot do, or grace simply assists man to do what he should do. Predestination, calling and election in Reformed theology are all totally of grace—'So it depends not on man's will or exertion, but upon God's mercy' (Rom. 9:16). There is no place in this reasoning for synergism. Even after the grace of justification man still needs God's grace wholly in order to be able to obey, and biblically we are taught that God is energizing within redeemed man 'both to will and to work for his good pleasure' (Phil. 2:12–13). Salvation is in no way deserved. The following statement of Christ does seem to gather up this view, 'Everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. . . So if the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed!' We are wholly bound, but the Son wholly frees us.

### **'The Glorious Liberty of the Children of God'**

This statement, found in Romans 8:21 refers to the eschatological state of man, i.e. at the end-time when man will be freed from his mortality, and rise to eternal life, and live in a different state of creation—one that will have been glorified. Whilst that is an experience to come, there is also a present state of glorious liberty which the redeemed person can know. We will proceed to examine this.

It is necessary that we first examine the state of fallen man's bondage—something we have touched upon previously. Man can be said to be under the bondage of many enemies such as Satan, his world-powers and his world system. This system also manipulates man by his sin, by fear of death, and fear of death relates to God's judgement, which God's wrath upon sin that will be finally executed. The holy law of God is what makes death and judgement so fearful and keeps man in the bondage of his guilt, and man's very conscience becomes a terrifying tyrant to him. Because man functionally cannot live without worship—even if it be self-worship and will-worship—man turns to his idols and finds that eventually they also become tyrants, having their own laws insisting on forms of obedience. All of this, then, is the bondage in which man lives, and from which he cannot extricate himself.

What is not always seen is the fact that two great wills are operating in the universe—that of God, and that of Satan. We may call these two rival systems. God and Satan, then, vie for man's loyalty and obedience. By creational right man's will belongs to God. By rebellion Satan has 'captured man to do his will' (II Tim. 2:26). Man may see himself as alone, fighting his battle against God, and even thinking he battles

against Satan, but the truth is man cannot live as a sole person, a free-lance individual, a free-standing creature. History, then is the battle of the wills—God’s, Satan’s, and man’s.

### **The Liberation of Man**

This story is quickly told. Jesus came Zechariah prophesied, ‘that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all that hate us . . . that we being delivered from the hands of our enemies might serve him (God) without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all the days of our life.’ This was to be through ‘knowledge of salvation . . . in the forgiveness of sins’ (Luke 1:68–79).

So then, Christ bore our sins in his body on the tree, died as the just for the unjust, was made to be sin for us, and was set forth as a propitiation. This meant he purged the guilt of man, purified him from moral pollution, and ensured he would never be judged and punished. When guilt is removed, then the power of every enemy is broken. Man—repentant, believing man—is liberated, freed from all bondage. This is the glorious liberty of the children of God. The dynamic of this freedom carries man on to the end.

Of course his enemies will try to recapture him, to bring him again under guilt, but justification frees him forever from accusation. Who will condemn him? It does not matter for God has justified him. Does he sin from time to time. It does not matter, for Christ goes on being the propitiation for his sins. Does defilement come from time to time? It does not matter for the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ keeps on cleansing him from all sin. Do powers of darkness seek to separate him from God and destroy him? It does not matter for Christ—seated at the right hand of God—ever lives to make intercession for him. This then is the present glorious liberty of the children of God.

### **The Present Continuing Liberty**

Man was freed from guilt—i.e. the penalty of sin—in order to be free from its power, because sin’s power lies in guilt. Man was freed from sin’s bondage in order to be able to obey the will of God for its own sake, and not in order to justify himself. Since the law of God is ‘the royal law’, and ‘the perfect law of liberty’ (James 1:22–25; 2:8–13; Psa. 119:44–45) then liberated man is free in obeying the law, i.e. doing the will of God. That is obedience is the way of liberty. There is a further step. It is this, ‘No man is wholly free until he is free not to do what he is free to do.’ That is all things are lawful but not all things are expedient.

### **The Joy of Doing God’s Will**

We have seen from Psalm 40:8–9 and Hebrews 10:5–10 that doing the will of God is a matter of joy. Joy comes because to do the will of God is to be truly man, wholly interacting with God, and being one with him.

What increases the joy because it makes doing God’s will intelligible, is to know the shape, the process, and the goal—the telos—of that will. We now set out that will, repeating what we said in our first Study, so that we will not have to turn back the pages to look at it. It may seem strange to repeat the text already given, but only after our entire study of knowing and doing the will of God can we realise the true importance of the things we outlined in the beginning of our First Study

## The Will of God For His Creation

(i) *Before time—before the creation of the world—God had planned all things:*

- (a) His people, the people of God (Eph. 1:4),
- (b) His people were to be holy (Eph. 1:4),
- (c) His people were to have salvation ( II Tim. 1:9; I Pet. 1:18–19; Eph. 1:7),
- (d) His people were to have eternal life (Titus 1:1-2; Rev. 13:8),
- (e) His people were to enter His Kingdom and become heirs of it (Matt. 25:34),
- (f) His people were to be glorified (I Cor. 2:6–10; Eph. 1:11-13; Isa 43:6–7),
- (g) All created things were to be unified in Christ (Eph. 1:10), i.e. filled up by him (Eph. 1:23; 4:10), reconciled by him (Col. 1:20), and harmonised by him (cf. Col. 3:15).
- (h) All evil was to be judged (II Pet. 3:7; Prov. 16:4; cf. Rev. chs 19, 20),
- (i) There were to be the new world, the new heavens and the new earth in which the people of God would be ‘a kingdom of priests unto their God’, and reign for ever and ever (Isa.65:17ff; 66:23ff; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:4; 22:5).

(ii) *In time God created all things as He had planned—in wisdom*

We read in Jeremiah 10:12, ‘It is he who made the earth by his power, who established the world by his wisdom, and by his understanding stretched out the heavens’ (cf. Jer. 51:15; cf. Job 38:4-7; Psa. 148:4–5; Psa. 78:69; Gen. 1:21; Eccles. 3:11; Eccles 7:29). All of this means that God is a ‘faithful Creator’ (I Pet. 4:19), so that He will carry creation to its destined end. Meanwhile the order of creation is a fixed (stable) one, so that we need not fear (Psa. 148:5–6; Jer. 31:35–36). God’s plan for creation can be seen in ‘(i)’ above.

(iii) *Before time, in time, and with a view to eternity was, is and will be the kingdom of God.*

Nebuchanezzar had thought of himself as doing his own will (cf. Eccles 8:3) but learned that only God can do His own will. Hence he said, ‘The Most High . . . does according to his will in the host of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, ‘What doest thou?’’ (Dan. 4:35; cf. Isa. 64:8; Rom.9:19–24). Psalm 135:6-7 shows the that the will of God obtains in creation and in this sense all creation is His Kingdom, ‘Whatever the Lord pleases he does in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all the deeps. He it is who makes the clouds rise at the end of the earth, who makes lightnings for the rain and brings forth the wind from his storehouse.’

In one sense the Kingdom of God is not something which God works at in order to devise and perfect, for the Kingdom always was since it is the reign and rule of God however that operates in any era or situation. In another sense it is something which God wills, i.e. His sovereignty determines how and what it shall be. So in the N.T. the Kingdom’s imminent coming is announced by John the Baptist, and by Jesus. It comes into action in the ministry of Jesus—‘If I, by the Spirit of God cast out demons, then has the kingdom of God come upon you’ (Matt. 12:28; 4:23), and its importance and nature is shown by the Lord’s given-prayer (given to his people to pray), ‘Our Father . . . thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as in heaven’. In fact the work of the Cross and the Resurrection dynamically secures the Kingdom, in the sense that its moral-spiritual dynamic defeats Satan and his evil powers, seals their doom for ever, and liberates the believing community of Christ to do its work in a way impossible apart from the work of salvation. The defeat of evil is a powerful dimension of the Kingdom.

In yet another sense the Kingdom is eschatological. It is yet to come, although it is dynamically coming day by day. Believers will inherit it and be a kingdom of priests unto their God.

*(iv) All things relating to salvation are the will of God.*

We have already set out much of the plan of ‘salvation history’ in ‘(i)’—above. We will be looking at Jesus doing the will of God especially as it is set out in John’s Gospel, and we will see this will is for man’s salvation. The Son is the servant of the Father, effecting salvation so that he is the good shepherd, laying down his life for the sheep. He is the bread of life and his flesh is given for the life of the world. He is the door by which if any man enters he is saved. He is the serpent to be lifted up on the Cross drawing all men unto him. His ‘food is to do the will of him, who sent me’; his judgement is just because ‘I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me, and he has ‘come down from heaven not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me’. That will of the Father is bringing to salvation those who believe in him and in the Father Who sent him.

The accomplishment of this salvation is not only God’s will but the proclamation and dissemination of it is also part of that will. In Luke 24:44–49 Jesus makes it clear that what he has done in his life, ministry, Cross, Resurrection and Ascension has been pro-phanesied, and the result of it also prophesied, namely that ‘repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem’. Prophecy, of course, is the stated will of God in history, the action of ‘the living God’, i.e. ‘the God Who acts’.

The story of the ‘Acts of the Apostles’ is the account of the will of God in action as the early church is empowered and led by the Holy Spirit. The church knows the will of God by the Holy Spirit, and that will is also the will of the Lord of the Church, Jesus the Messiah (cf. Acts 13:1–4; 15:28f; 16:6–10). Hebrews 2:4 (cf. Rom. 15:18–19) speaks of the preaching of the gospel through ‘signs and wonders and . . . gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.’

### **A Summary of the Plan—‘The Mystery of His will’**

The term ‘mystery of his will’ is found in Ephesians 1:9–10, ‘For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on the earth.’ This, then, is what history is moving towards, namely that everything will be headed up, summed up and unified in Christ. As in Colossians 1:15–17 everything has been created in him, through him and for him and so holds together in him, so also it will consummate in him. As we have previously commented this will be the same as filling up all things, reconciling all things and harmonizing all things. This is the same as the action referred to in Romans 1:18–25—everything will be emancipated into the ‘glorious liberty of the sons of God’. Corruption will be banished. Immortality will prevail in the whole creation.

In Ephesians 3:1–11 the ‘mystery of his will’ is the same as ‘the mystery (3:3), ‘the mystery of Christ (3:4) and ‘the plan of the mystery’ (3:9) are all one, that is all history is rooted and consummated in Christ. In him Jew and Gentile become one, and eventually all things are unified. This is ‘the mystery of God’ seen in Revelation 10:5–7, ‘And the angel whom, I saw standing on sea and land lifted up his right hand to heaven and swore by him who created heaven and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it,

that there should be no more delay, but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God, as he announced to his servants the prophets, should be fulfilled.'

If we link this passage with Revelation 19:10—'the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy' then we see that all history is the plan and will of God. It is the mystery of the plan, the mystery of God, and it is through that Divine will that history is completed and perfected in Christ. If we remember the original mandate God gave to man in Genesis 1:18 then we see that man is God's fellow-worker in His plan and purpose. If we understand the Abrahamic covenant and the 'sub-covenants' which follow then we can see man-under-grace as a covenant partner with God. When we remember the commission Christ gave to his church—the redemptional proclamation in all the world—then we see that true man has his life's work within the will of God.

When we realise this then we know the delight of doing His will, of participating with Him—in His Son and His Holy Spirit—in the entire plan. It was for this we were created. This is our life and it is our destiny. Anything less is nothing. There cannot be more. When—at the end of the age—we will look back on doing the will of God we will know why the Psalmist of Psalm 40, and Messiah himself said, 'I delight to do thy will, O God'

### **Conclusion to 'Knowing and Doing the Will of God'**

I can think of no better statement of man's helplessness to do the will of God than George Matheson's hymn appended below, especially if man endeavour to do that will out of his own resources. I can think of no better encouragement and explanation of fulfilling that will than the hymn itself,

Make me a captive, Lord,  
And then I shall be free;  
Force me to render up my sword,  
And I shall conq'ror be.  
I sink in life's alarms  
When by myself I stand;  
Imprison me within Thine arms.  
And strong shall be my hand.

My heart is weak and poor  
Until it master find:  
It has no spring of action sure:  
It varies with the wind;  
It cannot freely move  
Till thou hast wrought its chain.  
Enslave it with thy matchless love,  
And deathless it shall reign.

My power is faint and low  
Till I have learned to serve:  
It wants the needed fire to glow,  
It wants the breeze to nerve;  
It cannot drive the world  
Until its self be driven;  
Its flag can only be unfurled  
When Thou shalt breathe from heaven.

My will is not my own  
Till Thou hast made it Thine;  
If it would reach the monarch's throne  
It must its crown resign:  
It only stand unbent  
Amid the clashing strife,  
When on thy bosom it has leant,  
And found in Thee its life.