

Cosmic Treason

“Not my will, but Thine” (Matthew 26:39)

God’s “will” is not merely a desire. It’s not a want. It’s what He has sovereignly and lovingly decreed is the way that things are to be. His will, after all, reflects His holiness, His goodness and wisdom. It reflects His beautiful and perfect Person. It’s what He knows to be the infinitely best of all possible options. As Creator, He has the right to demand that His will be carried out by the creatures He made. Therefore He has made His will clearly known to His creatures, in the full expectation that they follow it. And as Ruler of His cosmos, He has the authority (and power) to enforce His will.

The three Persons of the Godhead have but one will. There are not three wills, for that would mean that God is really three different Persons, i.e., Tritheism. The three Persons are in unique fellowship, bonded by love, filled with joy and peace. When God’s perfect will becomes my will, we can be united in fellowship. Let’s stipulate (from other Scriptures) that this is the goal of creating humans, that we might be (in some way) united to God in blessed, eternal, joyful fellowship. The Gospel invites us into this fellowship.

God made humans with a measure of freedom to will as they please. We possess intellect, will and emotions. Of these, our will is of primary importance because it chooses what we think, what we do, what we say, indeed, even what we are. Our intellect typically acts to find reasons to justify what it is that we will. We don’t, of course, have total or absolute free will (only God has that), but we have been given exactly what’s sufficient to carry out God’s purposes for us. And we are responsible to God for whatever it is that we use our freedom to will, for with freedom necessarily comes accountability; justice requires it. How will humans use their freedom to will? The most rational course would be to honor their Creator and acknowledge that His will is the very best. And adopt His will for our own. But we also could use our freedom to will otherwise. To reject God’s will and prefer our own choices would be rebellion. Not just a conflict of wills, but treason. No fellowship is possible.

In the Garden, the issue in Genesis 3 was, Whose will would Adam obey? Adam was tested: would he submit to God’s will, or exercise his own will as if he were autonomous, as if he were his own little god. Let’s observe that Satan didn’t cause the decision to take the fruit. He merely brought the temptation to do it; Satan influenced the decision. Think about it: Humans are finite, with limited capacity to reason, no inherent wisdom or awareness of what’s good. So the only rational decision for Adam to make would be to carry out God’s will. But he decided to do as he pleased. It was therefore an overt act of rebellion. And it is precisely what all humans do since Adam; we reprise that same issue: Whose will shall I fulfill? We all prefer our own will to that of God. The choice is always and only, God’s will or mine. (There’s no other being in this cosmos to express a third choice.)

Psalms 2 makes dramatically explicit the rebellion of all humanity, “Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? . . . Against the Lord, and against His anointed One. ‘Let us break their chains,’ they say, ‘and throw off their fetters.’” But the rebellion is not only on earth. Here’s what Satan said, “I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned . . . I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High” (Isaiah 14:13-14). Half a dozen times in two verses he expresses his treasonous will against that of his Creator! Jesus acknowledged that we have this conflict of wills, saying by necessity “If anyone chooses to do God’s will . . .” (John 7:17). That was because the reality of life is, we choose *not* to do His will, we *refuse* to do it. It’s why the Lord had to instruct those who are concerned about this to pray, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10).

Some theologians hold that God gave humanity over to sin, to being controlled by a sin nature, as punishment for the rebellion that occurred in the Garden. So sin is, itself, a punishment from God. And sin makes us offensive to a holy God so that, in God’s justice, we’re condemned. Sin didn’t enter humanity by means of the forbidden fruit, nor from some force somewhere in the universe. That failed test of obedience resulted in God punishing His beloved humans with a sin nature. (Romans 1 explicitly states that God does this very thing.) Thus all humans are necessarily enslaved and controlled by sin, and we’re accountable for our sins. So the central issue is rebellion; the deliberate refusal to obey God is what *caused* us to have a sin nature. Salvation and the gift of the Spirit that accompany salvation allow our sin nature to be suppressed or restrained, and sin to be avoided, but the ultimate issue is the rebellion, the refusal to honor and glorify God by living out *His* will.

When Jesus was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before the cross, He said, **“Not my will, but Thine.”** That does not mean that Jesus sought to be delivered from the cross, as some commentators allege. Rather, Jesus was calling attention to the essence of the issue that necessitated the cross: a conflict of wills. The Son incarnate, Jesus, representing all rebellious humanity, declared to the Father that it was humanity’s refusal to do God’s will that needed to be dealt with, and His obedience to God’s will was the means of doing that. The great cosmic conflict, whose will shall be fulfilled in life, had to be resolved. Despite the bitter suffering that it entailed, the ideal human, the Second Adam, made real this confession to God, “Not my will but Thine.” And so He went to the cross, fulfilling humanity’s creational obligation to obey God.

Jesus, as our sin-bearer, makes it possible for the rebellion to end. We’re all in rebellion and remain there permanently unless sanctified by the indwelling Spirit. So salvation is ultimately to bring us to wanting to fulfill God’s will and NOT our own will. That choice demonstrates that God’s will is superior and perfect, which honors God, and it means that the rebellion has ended. God’s will for us is revealed in the Word of God, it’s why we have been given all that instruction. Jesus rescues us from sin so that our will is no longer enslaved by sin and we’re free to choose to obey God. Only in Christ, the Second Adam, is it possible for us to do what that first Adam failed to do, what unsaved people are unable to do. People who suppose they’re saved but repudiate sanctification, who refuse to obey God, who continue to exercise their own will throughout their lives, remain in rebellion. “Not my will but Thine” should be what controls the life of a believer, continually.

We’re all engaged in a constant struggle of our own rebellious will *versus* God’s wise and good will. And we need to be overcomers in that core struggle. Jesus was an overcomer by obeying the will of God and willingly going to the cross, to then be raised from the dead. Only followers of Christ are overcomers because they (and only they) are empowered by the indwelling Spirit of the risen Christ to overcome. The Christian life is a continuous reflection on the Word of God to know His will and how to live it, and a daily yielding to the enabling Spirit. It takes commitment, and effort, and personal sacrifice. But the reward is knowing God and enjoying fellowship with Him, a loving fellowship that endures forever.

The reason for the Gospel, indeed, the goal of salvation, is Christ-likeness. And the necessary purpose of Christ-likeness is to make us fit for intimate fellowship with the living Creator God. The forgiveness of sins was necessary, but that’s not all that salvation means. Fellowship with God begins now and goes on for an eternity. There can be no such fellowship if we’re intent on living out our own will in our daily lives. We can’t live as we please, be complacent about our salvation, and still expect to enjoy eternal life in God’s presence. Do not, repeat, DO NOT ignore God’s will.

We need to be clear on this issue, it’s that important. Trusting Christ for forgiveness of sins and eternal life is only the entry point. From that moment on, we must – *must* – go on to being overcomers, to discipleship, to being sanctified, to maturity. Refusing to obey God, rejecting His will for us – or even simply indifference to his will – says to God that we’re really not interested in being in relationship with Him. Obedience to God is a *relationship* issue, and it simply must follow trusting in Christ. No one may remain permanently in the entry point. A second issue we need to clarify is, we mustn’t mistake living out American civic religion with obedience to God. Just by growing up and living here means we’ve imbibed certain biblical values that are embedded by tradition in society. We show compassion and kindness, for example, and we give to charity, we respect others, we don’t kill or steal from people, etc and etc. But these only express or reflect Western civilization. They’re not done in the Spirit or out of love for God. Forgiving others who offend or harm us, loving other believers as Christ loves us, sharing the Gospel, living sacrificially and selflessly, eschewing worldly values, intercessory prayer – these are some of the ways or examples of how we obey God’s will. And a third caveat (one we’ve discussed often and need only to mention again) is this: Attending church services does not substitute for obedience to God’s Word. Faithful church-goers, even those who profess Christ, are still in rebellion against God if they pursue life according to their own lights and refuse to live as God wills for us.

We have a creational, indeed, an existential, obligation to absorb God’s will into our lives and then to live it out, thereby reflecting His glory. This obligation is (or should be) immeasurably heightened by our love for Christ and gratitude for all He’s done. If we knowingly fail in this . . . May God have mercy on us.