

“God Wills! – Fatalism or Expectation?”

Matthew 6:10b

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The ancient philosopher Epictetus described life as a dog running downhill with a cart harnessed to him. The dog feels free as long as he stays ahead of the cart. But if he slows down or stops he will be crushed.

He believed everything is predetermined and one either has to go with it or get run over.

Most ancient philosophies and religions were fatalistic.

Even modern philosophies and religions are the same.

The idea that the will of the gods should be done and that we should conform our wills to their will seems present in all religions.

Plato said, “If it is pleasing to the gods, so let it be.”

After all, what does the very word God mean except that he has the ability to do as he chooses?

In Islam, Hinduism, or the secularism of modern America, most believe that ultimately our fates are determined by outside forces.

So whether it is a god or gods or fate isn't everything predetermined as in the words of that modern theologian Doris Day, “Que sera, sera”- “Whatever will be will be”?

An old Stoic proverb said, “The willing are led by fate, the unwilling are dragged by it.”

Is that really any different from the way some portray Christianity as either yielding to God's will now or getting crushed under it later?

When Jesus prayed, “Our Father...Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” was he simply accepting fatalism?

If we pray “your will be done”, as Jesus instructed when he said, “This, then, is how you should pray”, are we just accepting fatalism or are we asking God for something?

Have you ever prayed, “Father, Your will be done”; that is, “Father-God, do what you want”?

Have you ever prayed “Father do what you want” when a loved one was dangerously sick?

I’m not asking if you have ever prayed that prayer when all hope was gone but have you prayed that prayer when the worst looked like it **could** happen.

Have you ever prayed “Father, Your will be done” when you were **about** to lose a job?

I’m not asking if you ever prayed that prayer **after** you lost your income but when it looked like you **could**.

Sometimes when the bad has already happened, we can say, with resignation, “Okay God, whatever you want.”

But what about when it hasn’t yet happened; but it is pending?
Do we then dare to pray, “Your will be done”?

What do we mean when we say those words”?

It seems to me that the words, “Father, do your will on earth as it is done in heaven” **begs answers to a couple of questions:**

- What is the Father’s will?
- If the Father does **his** will, what of **my** will?

What is God’s will?

The Psalmist wrote in Psalm 135:6 “The LORD does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth...”

Is that what we pray for - that God will do whatever he wants?

I don’t think the Psalmist here was speaking of the will of God but of the sovereignty of God – reminding us that God is able to do whatever he pleases.

I don’t think Jesus’ prayer is as general as that.

I don’t think he is just saying God be sovereign!

So what “will” of God is Jesus asking to be done?

Is Jesus thinking of the Scriptures – asking for all of God’s commands to be faithfully carried out by us?

Is Jesus thinking of how God’s people should “dot every I and cross every T” in our obedience?

Is he thinking of compliance with the Ten Commandments or the rest of the Law?

Do we find in this phrase a call to greater compliance with the will of God in our lives?

I don’t think so, and least not in some “command and obey” sense.

We are too prone to reducing the “will of God” to a compliance to law, when I think Jesus has something much broader in mind here.

I don’t mean to suggest they are antithetical, but to do the will of God is less about fulfilling particular commands than it is with pleasing God.

The will of God is more about relationship than precision.

How could the adulterer/murder David be called a “man after God’s own heart” and the repetitively disobedient Abraham be called “the friend of God”?

These men lacked precision in their obedience but they had a relationship with God.

And again, as I noted last week, Jesus is not asking us to do something but for God to do something.

What “will” of God is Jesus asking the Father to do when he prays, “Father your will be done”?

Listen to Jesus’ own words:

John 6:38-40 “For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.”

What is the Father's will? To save his people, fully and finally!

John 3:17 "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

And as the apostle Paul said it:

Ephesians 1:9-10 "And he made known to us the mystery of his will... to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ."

And Paul made it clear that the will of God to save, to restore, and to reconcile extended even to the rest of the created universe:

Romans 8:19-21 "The creation waits in eager expectation for the (final resurrection). For the creation...itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

The "will" of God is the salvation of his people and his creation.

Now it is that active, dynamic, saving work of God which forms the background for us to speak of the will of God not fatalistically but expectantly.

It is not that the will of God is some static, even negative, predetermined plan, but that the will of God is being worked toward the glorious freedom of the children of God.

It is not *Que sera, sera* – but the will of God is the gracious salvation of his people.

So when Jesus prays "Your will be done", and he teaches us to pray the same, what are we asking God to do?

We are asking God to do what he has planned and promised.

We are asking him to work his gracious will in such ways that in and through the events of every day we will be saved and that history will move to the end that God has in mind – a total transformation of this world.

Do it God! Do it!

So what does this mean in my experience today?

What does it mean to pray for and experience God's will in the now?

I am convinced that it is not coincidental that Jesus prayed these very words again in the gospel of Matthew.

And when he prayed them again the words are not said in the abstract but in the concrete experience of life and death.

Stand in honor of God's word and listen carefully to Jesus own experience with this "will" of God:

Matthew 26:36-46 "Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and **he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.** Stay here and keep watch with me." Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, **"My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."**

Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak."

He went away a second time and prayed, **"My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."** When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing.

Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

And with those words Jesus headed to a kangaroo court and crucifixion.

We are told that three times that night in Gethsemane, Jesus prayed the same prayer: Father, I wish I didn't have to go through this but "your will be done".

There those words are again, "Your will be done."

The Scripture teaches us what we can hardly grasp – that before time began the eternal triune God planned that God the Son would come to earth to save his people from the disastrous results of their own sin and rebellion against God.

When God the Son, Jesus, was here on earth, he knew why he was here.

He said in John 3:14 "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up..."

And again in John 12:32,33 "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.

Jesus knew he was the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies about a perfect sacrificial lamb that would be offered to take away the sins of God's people.

In the Garden of Gethsemane he knew his "hour" was near meaning that the greater suffering was imminent and a decision was called for.

And so Jesus prepares for it in prayer.

Jesus does not take a Stoic fatalistic approach – accepting the end philosophically as inevitable.

No, like Jacob of old, Jesus struggles with the Father!

In its final report on Friday, the National Transportation Safety Board said that the 1999 EgyptAir flight 990 that crashed into the ocean off Nantucket Island was driven into the waters by the co-pilot.

As he disconnected the auto-pilot, reduced power to the engines and stepped on the controls that nosed the plane into the water, on the cockpit recorder he can be heard saying, in a "calm manner", "I rely on Allah, I rely on Allah".

Jesus did not accept the will of God so serenely.

The text says **“He began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, ‘My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death’”**.

Jesus did not say, “Well, if God wills it”.

Jesus struggled with accepting God’s will.

Jesus was fully human as well as being fully God.

And remember his struggle was not sinful and neither it is for us.

Most of all he talks to the Father.

He relates his own personal, very human, desire – **“My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me.”**

Jesus was no masochist.

He would like to have avoided the suffering.

But Jesus knew that his suffering was not all that was going on there.

He and the Father had determined in ages past that Jesus would bear the sins of his people and take their punishment.

What he would go through would be God’s judgment against sin.

But that judgment would be the very salvation of his people.

His human nature loathed the judgment but Jesus loved the salvation it would bring.

The liberation of the world was at stake.

The decision was not abstract but very concrete – what Jesus did in those next few hours would make all the difference in the world and the world to come.

Jesus certainly struggled with the idea of the suffering he would encounter but the far deeper struggle was **that he was tempted to let his will, conditioned by present circumstances, get in the way of his Father’s far better will.**

And so in his struggle he said; “Yet not as I will, but as you will.”

Jesus didn't like the process he had to go through but he loved the promised outcome.

Jesus didn't say "Your will be done" through clenched teeth with a sense of resignation but instead he said it with expectation.

He did not surrender fatalistically to the inevitable he chose salvation for us.

He is not passively surrendering; he is very actively participating.

And he got up, woke up his disciples and resolutely headed to the cross.

He made his decision; the cost would be great but the outcome would be worth it.

And he dared to go because he trusted his Father.

You and I may face seemingly impossible situations; we may look ahead and see nothing but darkness, no light to tell us what will happen.

We can easily imagine the worst and have no evidence that it won't happen.

And then in the very midst of it we recall Jesus' words, "This then is how you should pray, Father your will be done."

We find ourselves resisting that.

We aren't certain of God's will.

And so we resist it, until finally beaten down we yell "uncle", "I give up God", "You've beaten me", "Go ahead and do whatever!"

But we say it with frustration or even anger.

We say it fatalistically, resignedly – crushed and bowing to the inevitable.

That's not what Jesus is calling us to.

It's not what he did.

He calls us to embrace the will of God.

He calls us to trust the Father.

We are often afraid to pray, “Your will be done” because we fear what God will make us do.

We wrongly think that God’s will has most to do with making us comply with a set of life-killing restrictions; thou shalt nots.

But hard as his road was, Jesus showed us that God’s will is about life-giving not life-taking.

The whole prayer is controlled by the opening words: “Our Father”.

The will of God is not an “anonymous destiny” (Lochman 70).

The will of God is the desire of our Father in heaven who loves us and has made a covenant with us.

The God whose will we pray for, is the Father who lives in dynamic relationship with us.

Jan Lochman wrote, “He is not hard necessity to which we must adjust.”

God dialogs with us, he changes his mind, he pardons our sins, in some measure his will can be defied, and our prayers to him make a difference.

I don’t fully understand all that but the Bible affirms it.

His will has to do with our relationship with him – not a static but dynamic relationship.

We shouldn’t be afraid of God’s will because as Helmut Thielicke wrote, **“Everything that happens to you, whether good or bad, must first pass muster before your Father’s heart.”** (Thielicke 75)

“And if the Father’s dealing with you appears to be utterly horrible, cruel, and incomprehensible, then let your tormented gaze find rest in Jesus’ compassion...”

Even the darkest places in your life must be seen in this light, in this Christ-light. And only because you see him there as he really is, can you love him, - can you love him in return.

Then afterwards, perhaps after long years of inner growth, you may also learn to love and affirm what is now so bitter and cruel. For the Father’s hands transform and hallow the destinies that flow through them.

He who is reconciled to the Father is also reconciled to his lot. For whomsoever the will of God has lost its terror (and this it has for

all who know the Father of Jesus), for him the darkest night of the valley of life has lost its specters and it shines with light.” (Thielicke 75)

Missionary stateswoman Elisabeth Elliott Leitch told of an experience she had in North Wales.

She was visiting a shepherd and his wife by the name of John and Mari Jones.

The Jones had a dog named Mack who assisted in the herding of the sheep.

Leitch wrote, “It was a marvelous thing to see him circling to the right, circling to the left, barking, crouching, racing along, herding a stray sheep here, nipping at a stubborn one there, his eyes always glued to the sheep, his ears listening for the tiny metal whistle from his master that I couldn’t hear.”

Leitch asked the shepherd’s wife, “Do the sheep have any idea what’s happening?”

“Not a clue! (Mari) said.

“How about Mack (the dog)?

“The dog doesn’t understand the pattern – only obedience.”

Leitch said, “I saw two creatures who were in the fullest sense ‘in their glory’ - A man who had given his life to sheep, who loved them and his dog, and a dog whose trust in that man was absolute, whose obedience was instant and unconditional. The dog didn’t know what the shepherd was up to **but he knew the shepherd.**” (Elisabeth Elliott Leitch in World Vision magazine April 1977 p12)

We dare to pray “your will be done” because we know the Shepherd. And our Father is unfailingly gracious – even through and beyond the worst of circumstances.

The struggle is no less painful but the Father won’t fail.

Again from Jan Lochman, “This means that if we pray ‘Your will be done’ to a God of this kind, our prayer is not to be confused with prudent resignation or pious capitulation... It is more a matter of the cry of those who pray to God that he would establish his declared will – his kingdom – among us. Seen in this way, the petition does not drug the devout. It does not make them ready to accept without question anything that might come. It is not a spiritual anesthetic or opiate to reconcile them a priori to circumstances. On the contrary, it encourages them constantly to orient themselves to the true will of God, which means... to confront circumstances with (God’s) promises.” (Lochman 71)

We know that our Father’s will is the very best for us and the world.

It’s not fatalism because He’s our “Father”!

“Our Father...Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”