

Tusculum Hills Baptist Church
Paul Gunn, Pastor

God's Will (1)

Jonah 1:1-17; 2:1-2 and 9-10

September 22, 2013

INTRODUCTION

It's important that we seek God's will in our lives. Hopefully, this is something that you consider regularly. However, I'm afraid that many Christians just don't think about this topic regularly. They don't consider what God's will is. Most people just bumble through their lives from day to day never wondering whether God's will is best, never even thinking about what God would have them to do or say or not to do or not to say. I believe that educating ourselves about God's will is an important step for all Christians. I believe that God has a general will for all people, and I believe that God has a specific will for people.

Today, I want to speak about this topic from the life of Jonah. For Jonah, God's general will was to be obedient, but God's specific will for Jonah was for him to deliver a specific message to a specific people.

In theological circles there's a debate about the difference between God's will and man's free will, God's sovereign will and man's free will. This debate will never end. On the one hand, some people believe that God makes every single thing happen the way it happens. Then, on the other hand, some people believe that God gives man a free will to decide anything. Both of these extremes have theological problems because the Bible stories and scriptures don't follow either one of these extremes entirely.

One truth of Scripture is that God knows the future. I think everyone would agree with that. God knows the future, but we do not. God knows the decisions that we are going to make before we make those decisions. God has vision or foreknowledge of the future, and we don't. God has given us the opportunity to view the present, live in the present, and reflect or remember the past, but he does not give us the ability to see the future like he does.

Not only does God know the future and the decisions we're going to make before we make them, but the truth of Scripture is that God holds people accountable for their decisions. We have plenty of Biblical record for that. In human history, all of us have experienced God's accountability, holding us accountable for our decisions. So, the two truths of the foreknowledge of God and the free will of man seem to create a tension, but these are not contradictory doctrines of the Bible. They're like two rails of a track running side-by-side. It's just that on the human level we cannot understand it completely. We have to leave that to God, and it's okay for us to live in mystery. If we try to figure it all out, and we have it all figured out, then there's no mystery. It's okay to live in the mystery. This holy tension requires us to pray, to be contemplative, and to seek to know God's will.

It would be too easy for us to say that no matter what happened, God made it happen. It would be too easy to blame the results of our bad decisions on God. It would really be a cop-out to say that the shooting this week at the Navy Yard was something God made happen. I don't believe that in God's intentional, perfect will that God wanted that to happen. What a mess the world would be if we believed that man has a God-given right to make all his decisions without ever seeking to know the will of God.

So, do you see the holy tension that I'm talking about? Discerning God's will is right in the middle of accepting the truth of the foreknowledge of God and being responsible for the free will that God has given us. This tension, this search of knowing God's will, is just part of the journey of the life of the believer. The Christian faith is a journey. It's not a blueprint that you look at, and you see the plans. It's a journey. It has a starting point, and it has an ending point, when God has fulfilled what he wants to fulfill in and through us on this part of the world, on this part of reality.

The closer we are to God, the more we will know his will. Hopefully, it will lead us to do his will. However, if we're close to God and we choose not to do his will, then just by the nature of being close to God, we'll already know in advance what the consequences will be if we do not follow his will. Enter the prophet named Jonah. We don't know much about Jonah. We've got these short chapters, a couple of pages about Jonah right here, and then Jesus refers to Jonah, but other than that we just don't know much about Jonah

This is a famous story. It finds its way into most children's stories with little figurines at the bookstore and little books about Jonah. These stories tend to follow along with the creation story and Noah and Jesus and the children, stories that would excite children, but Jonah is more than just a children's story. It is a story of a man who knew God's will and ran from it. Here are the three points of my message:

- God's intentional/perfect will
- God's permissive will
- God's ultimate will

1-GOD'S INTENTIONAL/PERFECT WILL

SCRIPTURE Jonah 1:1-2

The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: ² “Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.”

EXPLANATION

Jonah was a Hebrew prophet. Prophets were God's mouthpieces. Prophets were not real popular people. If you were going to have a party, you probably wouldn't have invited the prophet. If you were going to have a get-together, a fellowship, the prophet would have been the last one on your list because prophets generally did not deliver good news. We have people today that seem to have the same gift of prophecy who point out wrongdoings and try to steer people back in another direction. A lot of times, they're not popular people, but Jonah was a prophet.

God told him that he had a mission for him. Jonah was not afraid of the message of repentance because that was his job. He was afraid of the people where he was going. The Assyrians were known as a terrible and idolatrous people. So, you know what Assyria is today? It's Syria. Their location was northeast of where Jonah lived. They were fierce warriors; they treated prisoners ruthlessly. They would have gladly killed a prophet of the Hebrew God.

Jonah probably didn't want to go to Assyria because the Assyrians weren't the chosen people of God. Jonah and his people were the chosen people, not these vile heathens called the Assyrians. Well, what do we know about God's intentional will for Jonah? God's intentional will was for Jonah to go to Nineveh, which he did not do at first.

This goes all the way back to the beginning, in the Garden of Eden, where God set up this beautiful garden, and he told Adam and Eve what he expected of them and what he did not expect of them. He told them not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and they did. So, they did the opposite of what God told them not to do. From the beginning of human history, we have examples of people avoiding God's intentional will.

The interesting thing is that Jonah, as a prophet called of God who had the message and business of telling people to repent, should have accepted this as a challenge to go and spread the good news because God's chosen people were supposed to take the message to other people and include them in the family of faith. Jonah's reluctance was just following the sentiment of his day, but guess what happened? Jonah went in the opposite direction.

If you have some maps in the back of your Bible, you can probably pick out the Holy Land and to the northeast would be Assyria, and then, far, far west is the city of Tarsus which is believed to be in Spain. That's a long way from Nineveh, and Jonah was about 2,000 miles away by sailboat with rowing oars. Isn't it human nature to go the opposite direction that God wants us to go? See, Jonah didn't just run and hide in his own hometown and ignore the message of God; he decided I'm going to go as far away as possible. In fact, I'm going to show God. I'm going to go to the end of human civilization. Maybe, God will use me there.”

ILLUSTRATION

Don't we tend to be like Jonah many times? I took a group of young people and adults to work at the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in western South Dakota several times. One of the stops that we would make on this trip is at the Badlands of South Dakota. Have you ever been to the Badlands? When you get there and look at it, you realize why they call it the Badlands. There's not a thing growing, but it is a

fascinating view from one of the mountaintops. We took our church vans to the top of one of these mountaintops. As we drove to the cliff, I thought, “Wow, I've got young people here. So, I need to put some limits on where they are to go.” I got out of the van first and I put a couple of soda cans out, and I said, “Don't anyone cross this line because your picture of the Badlands is going to be just as good here as it will be ten feet from here.” I walked back to the van, and I overheard one of the men, one of the young guys, saying, “Where is the place Paul told us not to go?” And he went right down this little trail big enough for two feet and stood there. I won't say what I did, but it wasn't good, but isn't that like so many of us? God tells us not to do something; then, we go do it. God tell us to do something; we'll do the opposite.

Many people never pray to know God's will out of fear of what God might do. Isn't it a shame that we get this idea, that praying for God's will may bring misery upon us? A friend of mine said he always thought when he was a child that if he prayed to know God's will, God would send him to a remote part of the world and give him one of those khaki shirts with all the pockets and make him a missionary. That was a fear he had as a child, but you know God's will does not promote a life of misery. Where he guides you, he'll provide for you. Where he guides you, he will equip you to do the work that he has called you to do. Don't believe the myth that following God's will will bring you a life of misery. What sounds like misery to you might seem like a dream to someone else.

Last week, two men were talking. One man said that he could not think of any job less appealing than running a homeless mission. Another man said he couldn't think of anything more exciting than to get up every day and and go run the homeless mission.

Listen to me. Only you can discern God's perfect will for you. No one else can do it for you. Several times in my life I've had others tell me what they thought God's will was for me. It hasn't happened in a while, but they told me this without me asking for their opinion. I've got two ears, and I want to hear what God has to tell me. I don't want him to have to tell someone else to tell me. While I thanked each one of these people for telling me what they thought God's will was for me, each time they were wrong. Only you can determine what God's intentional will is for

you because God holds only you accountable for that. He doesn't hold someone else accountable for that.

2-GOD'S PERMISSIVE WILL

SCRIPTURE Jonah 1:3-16

But Jonah ran away from the LORD and headed for Tarshish. He went down to Joppa, where he found a ship bound for that port. After paying the fare, he went aboard and sailed for Tarshish to flee from the LORD.⁴ Then the LORD sent a great wind on the sea, and such a violent storm arose that the ship threatened to break up.⁵ All the sailors were afraid and each cried out to his own god. And they threw the cargo into the sea to lighten the ship. But Jonah had gone below deck, where he lay down and fell into a deep sleep.⁶ The captain went to him and said, "How can you sleep? Get up and call on your god! Maybe he will take notice of us so that we will not perish."⁷ Then the sailors said to each other, "Come, let us cast lots to find out who is responsible for this calamity." They cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.⁸ So they asked him, "Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble for us? What kind of work do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?"⁹ He answered, "I am a Hebrew and I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."¹⁰ This terrified them and they asked, "What have you done?" (They knew he was running away from the LORD, because he had already told them so.)¹¹ The sea was getting rougher and rougher. So they asked him, "What should we do to you to make the sea calm down for us?"¹² "Pick me up and throw me into the sea," he replied, "and it will become calm. I know that it is my fault that this great storm has come upon you."¹³ Instead, the men did their best to row back to land. But they could not, for the sea grew even wilder than before.¹⁴ Then they cried out to the LORD, "Please, LORD, do not let us die for taking this man's life. Do not hold us accountable for killing an innocent man, for you, LORD, have done as you pleased."¹⁵ Then they took Jonah and threw him overboard, and the raging sea grew calm.¹⁶ At this the men greatly feared the LORD, and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows to him.

What we have next is God's permissive will. This is a dangerous place to be. Yet, we all probably spend a lot of time in God's permissive will. By permissive I mean that a person is not following God's intentional will, and God is tolerating it. No doubt that we all have a patient God. Aren't we grateful that we have a patient God? Joseph's brothers are an example. I don't believe that it was God's will that Joseph's brothers dug a big hole and threw him in it in an abusive way and sold him off to be a slave, but God used it for the good. Romans 8 tells us that God uses things for the good. God takes the problems that people create when they're living outside of his intentional will and living inside his permissive will, and he uses those things for the good of those who love him. Since God's permissive will is not his intentional will, we should not desire to be there very long. Maybe we do not know what God's will is though, especially if we've never considered it before.

ILLUSTRATION

One day, I was with a group of volunteers working on a church that had been damaged by a storm. A group of volunteers and I were there with some contractors who were doing some work. One of the contractors was a concrete worker who was quite skilled, and he struck up a friendship with one of my volunteers. They were talking, and the volunteer found out that this concrete worker was from another country. He was running from God; he was running from people who talked to him about God. But look where God put him, working on a church, speaking daily with somebody who talked with him about God. Even inside God's permissive will, God will accomplish his will.

For Jonah, the cost of obedience was just too high. It was easier in Jonah's mind to run, to go as far away as humanly possible. Not obeying costs more than obeying. It would have been easier if Jonah just obeyed. Then, he would have been spared the ordeal of the storm. The men who thought they killed him would have been spared all that mess, and Jonah wouldn't have suffered the digestive enzymes of this large fish.

3-GOD'S ULTIMATE WILL

SCRIPTURE Jonah 1:17

Now the LORD provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah, and Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights.

God wasn't done with Jonah. God wanted Jonah to deliver a message, and no one else. He was doing a work in the life of Jonah. God will accomplish what he wants to accomplish, if not through you then through someone else, if not for you, then for someone else. Jonah was ready to commit suicide by telling them throw him over. The ultimate way to get back at God was to commit suicide by drowning. While Jonah was on the ship, he could have repented and said, "God I'll go. I'll go. I'll go right now," but for him death was better than going to Nineveh and delivering the bad news. "God, I'll show you. I won't go to Nineveh. No, siree. I'll drown instead!"

At first, they didn't want to throw him overboard, but then they did. God, in his love and mercy for Jonah, and in his love and mercy for the people of Nineveh sent this fish to swallow him. It was in the belly of the fish where Jonah surrendered to the will of God; it was there that he prayed.

SCRIPTURE Jonah 2:1-2

From inside the fish Jonah prayed to the LORD his God. ² He said: "In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me. From deep in the realm of the dead I called for help, and you listened to my cry.

God could have easily let Jonah die, or he could have just ended the story here, with Jonah being thrown overboard, leaving us to wonder what happened. He could have easily brought another person, another prophet, to the scene to preach to Nineveh. It does seem to me that God works this way many times. If a person refuses God's perfect will, God can just raise someone else to accomplish what he wants done. I've seen it happen in churches. One church isn't reaching its community. So, God's says, "Fine. There's another group of believers to do it." It's amazing how many churches I've seen that started from scratch and exploded in growth while other churches that had been there for years just stayed there because God will accomplish his purpose. Don't you want to be the vessel through which God's purposes are accomplished? We also see this on a larger scale as well. If one denomination of believers begins fighting, God raises up another group of believers to spread the good news.

For some reason that we'll never know, God wanted Jonah to be his prophet. He didn't want anybody else. This is where his ultimate will kicked in. Jonah went in another direction. God sent the storm to chase him. When Jonah was thrown overboard, God sent a submarine to pick him up and take him where he wanted him. Not only was the repentance of Nineveh part of God's will but the transformation of Jonah was also part of God's plan.

APPLICATION

When it finally becomes clear what God's will is and you make your decision to know his will and follow his will, then you will have peace that you have never known before. If you read Jonah's prayer in chapter 2 and you did not know he was in the belly of a fish, you would say this is a prayer of a man who is grateful and at peace.

SCRIPTURE Jonah 2:9-10

But I, with shouts of grateful praise, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. I will say, 'Salvation comes from the LORD.'” And the LORD commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land.

It's rather disgusting, isn't it? God wanted Jonah to be ready to go wherever, whenever. The commentator Matthew Henry said this about Jonah, “God's servants must go where he sends them, come when he calls them, and do what he bids them.” The best way for us to know God's will for tomorrow is to be in his will today. It's so easy for us to look toward a particular event in our future, to say, that's when we're really going to surrender to God. “I'm busy right now. I'm looking for a job. As soon as I get that job landed, as soon as things become stable, then, I will serve the Lord. As soon as I finish work and I retire, I'll have time on my hands to serve the Lord. Then, I will serve the Lord, or I'm sick right now. I've this debilitating sickness, and I can't serve the Lord. When I get better, I'll serve the Lord.”

ILLUSTRATION

This week I heard about a woman who, when she was a little girl, believed that God was calling her to be a medical missionary. She really believed that. She told people, “God wants me to be a medical missionary,” but as a child she was struck with a debilitating illness. She had to have several surgeries per year most of her childhood. She spent most of her childhood in the hospital, and as she got older this illness didn't go away. She said, “Here's what I learned. As a child I believed God wanted me to serve him by being a medical missionary. Now I know that God wants me to serve him by being a good patient.” Whatever life circumstance, God wants us to be in his will whatever it might be. God's will may be difficult for us to discern, but it's up to us to discern it, to seek it, to educate ourselves about God's will. The scripture tells us that God's intentional will is that all know him.

Matthew 18:14 says, “In the same way, your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.” Corinthians 1:18 says, “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”

It's not his will that any should be lost, but God's permissive will is that he allows you to choose. God's ultimate will is that those who are saved are his children. He wants all to be saved; he gives you the choice as he reaches down to you. Redemption doesn't have anything to do with you. It's all about him reaching down to us, but in the end, ultimately, those who are saved are his children.

Where are you in response to God's will? Are you living in God's intentional will for your life, whatever stage of life you're in? Are you living out of his will? Are you seeking to know his will, or are you living in that dangerous area of his permissive will? Let go of that. Come on back in to follow the will that he has for you.

To preachers, teachers, students, and anyone else reading or using this message: I have posted this for all to use as you see fit. There is no need to cite me as the source. You are free to delete sections, add your own, or do whatever you want. There is no copyright. My request is that you do not copyright or sell my work. I am sharing my preaching notes in good faith with you because I know the challenges of putting together a lesson, especially when your week gets consumed with other things. Use it and enjoy!

I use the NIV translation of scripture because of its conversational nature. Feel free to go to Bible Gateway and copy and paste whichever translation you want to use. This transcript has been edited to an outline format that improves readability and therefore may not exactly follow the video edition.

Find me at www.thbc.com. Click on sermons or YouTube channel: Pastor Paul Gunn
Thanks to Jennifer Anderson for her editing assistance.

Sincerely, Paul Gunn
Tusculum Hills Baptist Church
Nashville, Tennessee
USA