

Ps 5:4,5  
Hy 1A  
Ps 25:2,4  
Ps 143:5,6  
Ps 40:3; Hy 47:4  
Luke 5:12-16; 9:18-27  
Ephesians 1:1-14  
Lord's Day 49

Yarrow, March 6, 2011

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

What is the will of the Lord for your life? Should I go to university or shouldn't I? Should I pursue a science degree or an arts degree?? Should I get a job in Vancouver or in Prince George? Who should I marry, or should I even marry? Which car should I buy? What's God's will for me?? How can I know?? It's a question that weighs on our minds from time to time, so much so that we'd love a direct answer from heaven.

It turns out that this angst on 'finding God's will for my life' is actually a rather modern phenomenon, one that did not greatly bother Christians of the past. Perhaps this angst has more to do with the self-centred individualism characterizing our day than with true Christian piety. Self-centred individualism says: it's all about me.... True Christian piety says: it's all about the Lord God.... And Scripture adds: the will of the Lord for you and for me is not that hard to determine; God has revealed it in His Word, and Jesus Christ has taught us to pray for it.... And God answers prayer....

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

## **THE CHILD OF GOD PRAYS INTO EXISTENCE THE FATHER'S VISION FOR WORLD HISTORY.**

1. The content of the vision,
2. The sharing of the vision,
3. The answer to the vision.

### **1. The Content of the Vision**

Like you and me, Jesus' disciples had to make decisions day by day. Yes, they were meant to follow the Lord Jesus, and that means that they had to listen to His instruction and internalize it, meant too that they had to observe His miracles and come to grips with what those miracles meant, even had to get out there themselves and preach, teach and heal. But despite that big picture of their daily responsibilities, there were so many questions that teased their minds. How was Peter to look after his wife while he followed the Master? How was Matthew to close his tax office? How were James and John to keep their father happy now that they've walked away from his fishing business? Would it be responsible for Thaddeus to buy new sandals for the road, or was that actually a poor use of his funds?? Thousands of questions, loads of decisions big and small...; that's *life*, for them – and for us....

As the disciples followed Jesus, they one day witnessed the remarkable event concerning the leper. According to the revelation of God as revealed through Moses, a leper was unclean.

Leprosy: we're not to think of Henson's Disease as we see it from time to time in third world countries where the nervous system begins to die so that victims have no feeling in their fingers and toes, can't feel their wounds and those wounds get infected and rotting sets in.... Rather, with the Biblical term 'leprosy' we're to think of any skin disorder that generated spots on the skin – and if those spots were white and more than skin deep, the priest had to pronounce that person unclean *because this person had the colour of death* – white. In the gospel of redemption God's people-by-covenant had received *life*, and through His instruction about leprosy God would drive home for His people that there was no place for death in their midst. That's why a leper was to stay away from other people, and was to warn people of his presence by crying out 'Unclean, unclean' (cf Leviticus 13f). Not nice. And anyone who touched a leper – a living dead-man – thereby became unclean himself and had to make atonement himself for his uncleanness.

A particular leper approached Jesus one day, "fell with his face to the ground and begged Him, 'Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean'" (Luke 5:12). Jesus in reply does the unthinkable; He "reached out His hand and touched the man" – and thereby Jesus became unclean, for He'd touched death. Then He spoke those loaded words, "I am willing," and then added, "Be clean".

Why, congregation, does the leper bring his request to Jesus the way he does? Think it through: it's not the way we talk. We don't say, "If you're willing, let me use your phone." What's the leper mean? Is this the leper's roundabout way of saying, 'Lord, *if you feel like it*, you can do it?'

No, congregation, that's not what the leper means. And getting the leper's meaning right is important because Jesus picks up exactly this same word when He teaches His disciples to pray; it's the third petition; "Your will be done."

To get a handle on what's actually meant by the term 'will' in the third petition (and by the leper in Luke 5), I'd ask you to consider the passage we read from Ephesians 1. The chapter begins with Paul's introductory words, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the *will* of God..." – and there's the same word again. What's that mean, that Paul is an apostle "by the will of God"? The same term appears in vs 5 when Paul writes that God "predestined us to be adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and *will*." And you find the term again in vs 9 and in vs 11.

The point here, congregation, is this. Before Genesis 1, before the Lord God created the world, the Almighty had a plan, a program for world history. This plan, this program, is the *will* of God. It included the fact that He would create a world with two people, both commanded to be fruitful and increase in number. It included the fall into sin, included His plan for redeeming sinners through the atoning death of Jesus Christ. It included *who* would be saved and who would not; that's the force of Paul's words in vs 5 when he writes that God "predestined *us* to be adopted as His sons..." "Us": that's very specific, and refers here to Paul himself as writer of this letter and "the saints of Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus" who receive this letter – and thereby excludes those of Ephesus who do not believe.... This plan of God included also that Saul the persecutor would become an apostle of Christ Jesus; that's the force of vs 1 when Paul writes that he's an apostle "by the will of God". This is God's divine plan whereby He determined (as vs 4 has it) "before the creation of the world" all that would happen in the course of the history He was creating.

This, brothers and sisters, catches also the depth of what's behind the words of the leper the disciples heard. "Lord, if you are willing," he'd said, "you can make me clean." "Lord," he'd

called Jesus, and here's overtones of Jesus' divinity. "If you are willing," and those words catch a sense of what this leper had learned from the Old Testament about the sovereign plan of God for history, a plan that includes what happens to this leper. Is it within the will of God, within the plan of God, that Jesus of Nazareth cleanse the leper, take away the symbol of death that burdened this Israelite, that cut him off from the communion of saints and denied him access to the temple?? Jesus' answer is Yes, it is; "I am willing," and that's to say: My cleansing you is within the eternal plan of God! How is it within the eternal plan of God? Jesus *touches* the leper, and so becomes unclean Himself – and according to the law of Moses uncleanness demanded atonement, demanded a sacrifice – and in the circumstances that meant that Jesus Christ had to go to the cross to atone for sin, atone for uncleanness. His touching the leper to cleanse him demanded Jesus' own sacrifice on Golgotha – according to the eternal will of God!

Some time after this event with the leper the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray. In the prayer Jesus taught them was also the third petition. It was Jesus' emphatic instruction to Andrew and Matthew and Judas and the rest to speak with God about God's eternal plan, and ask God to ensure that the will of God determined since before creation come to pass in the course of the years.

The point? Andrew and Matthew and Judas and the rest have to get their minds off their little selves and the petty bits and pieces of their own lives, need to catch and share the big vision of God for world history! When the apostle Paul says he is an apostle of Christ Jesus "by the will of God" he's saying that he's an apostle *not* because, well, that's how circumstances were..., but he's *connecting himself to the plan of God as the Lord determined it before He created the world in the beginning*. When he writes that the saints of Ephesians were predestined to be adopted as God's sons "in accordance with His pleasure and will" he's again *connecting those particular individuals of Ephesus to the decision God made some 4000 years earlier* before the creation of the world. This is a perspective that we modern people have largely lost; we think of ourselves as individuals born yesterday and gone tomorrow and really not all that important in the big flow of history. So if we want to be big and important, we need to inflate ourselves into being something.... In today's evolutionary manner of thinking, that perception is quite understandable.

But the Lord God, congregation, speaks so differently. Before He created the world He prepared a plan for this world, and in the course of the years He has carried out His will exactly according to this plan. And you, just like that leper and like Paul and like the saints of Ephesus have a place in that plan, in that will of God! It is not by accident that you live today and not five hundred years ago; that is according to God's plan. It is not a fluke of nature that you have the character you have or the parents you have or the job you have. That's all according to the will of God from eternity, and His plan, His will, is never random or purposeless. We need to catch that vision of things, and so think in terms of this plan of God, even see ourselves and the big and tiny events of our world as bits and pieces of this divine will. It gives a glorious perspective as we oversee the details of our lives!

This, now, is the third petition. With the instruction to pray "Your will be done" Jesus teaches us to buy into this vision of God, this plan of the Almighty, this will of God ordained since the beginning, and we're asking God that He unfold this will.

But that raises a question. Won't God's will unfold anyway?? Why pray for the inevitable?? That's our second point:

## 2. The Sharing of the Vision

The creature God fashioned in the beginning to image God is different from all other creatures God made. Man alone has been created with the capacity to think, to take responsibility. As a result, we have our own will, and so develop our own vision and dreams, make our plans, and pursue them. Before the fall into sin, our will lined up with God's will, our plans and vision were in step with God's plans and vision.

But with the fall into sin that changed. Sinful as we've become, we want to do our thing, and do it our own way. Jesus' disciples were as beset by this selfishness as we are, and so Jesus taught them that they needed to deny self and get on board with God's plan. Jesus told His disciples in Luke 9:22, "The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and He must be killed and on the third day be raised to life." "Must", says Jesus, and with that word catches the notion of *divine necessity* – for it was the will of God, according to His eternal plan, that He would send His Son into the world to atone for sin *through His dying on the cross*. Then Jesus adds, "If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (9:23). Jesus Himself *must* walk in tandem with God's will, and as perfect Son of God He can – even as He lives on this broken earth. Those who would follow Christ –and that's the disciples right now– must do as Christ does, and that's also to walk in tandem with God's plan. But walking in agreement with God's plan involves self-denial, simply because in this sin-filled life I by nature want to do what is right in my own eyes; my agenda and goals are not God's agenda and goals.

The disciples want to learn how to pray. They are, says Jesus, to ask God to cause His will to be done. That involves *not only* that the Lord God carry out His eternal plan in world history (including His people's salvation and all the bits and pieces that bring that about), *but also* that the disciples would *walk in step with God's plan*. With that petition, "Your will be done," the disciples are asking for grace to buy into God's vision, to make that eternal plan their own and therefore also to ask for grace to do all within their own power to make that plan of God happen. That means in practice that their manner of living –more, their own vision and plans– needs to *agree* with God's vision instead of *oppose* it. That is why the Catechism words the content of this prayer like this: "Grant that we and all men may deny our own will, and without any murmuring obey Your will, for it alone is good."

And yes, that takes *much* self-denial. Jesus spoke of taking up one's cross. The disciples saw with their own eyes what that meant. They were familiar with the happenings of the city of Jerusalem, how it was that those convicted to crucifixion had to carry their own crosses to Golgotha, even as Jesus Himself had to.... To carry your own cross was no holiday; this involved a lot of suffering – and there was more suffering when you got to Golgotha. To follow Christ, to walk in step with God's eternal will, involved so much denial of one's sinful self, resisting own will, subjecting own feelings and preferences to God's will. Not easy!

Yet how, concretely, could one know what God's will for you was?? What, specifically, did self-denial and following Christ look like? It was for the twelve disciples not so hard, congregation, to figure out what the Lord wanted of them. How so?? The Lord had created them to image God, to reflect what God was like. That to say: they had to live in agreement with His law. God's commands as given in the law of Moses made it very clear to every Israelite what self-denial involved and what walking in step with God's plan looked like. Sure, that involved knowing the Bible well, and it involved knowing the God of the Bible well. That's what parents were to

teach their children. Then God's will in a given situation wasn't that hard to figure out; one was to *obey*. Disobeying God's command was to be out of step with God's will for you; simple.

Yet we all know that life throws so many curve balls at us, and then it's not that easy to know what to do; neither buying *this* car or *that* one involves transgressing against any of God's commands.... But here's the big picture thing I mentioned before; the child of God is meant to adopt for himself the vision, the will, the plan of God as the Lord ordained it from the beginning, and then in the details of life walk in step with that plan of God. Do I go to this university or that one? Do I take this job or that one? Do I purchase this coat or that one? Do I watch a movie or play a game or do something else? On the surface none of those options may compel me to transgress God's commands and so each option may be open to me. But the child of God isn't wanting only to avoid sin; the child of God is wanting to get on board with God's eternal plan for the world and walk in step with God's plan. So you pray, "Your will be done." That is: give me grace to deny my own will and make a decision that is in step with Your will, Your plan for this world. Give me grace to know what to do to be as effective as possible in Your Kingdom, to Your glory. You see, congregation, the result of that prayer may well be that you end up concluding that your money could be better spent on more in the collection bag for the needy than on getting another coat for yourself. The result of such a prayer may well be that you take a lesser paying job in order to be in a position to touch more people with the wealth of the gospel. Thinking in agreement with God's thoughts, buying into God's plan for the coming of His kingdom, can involve much self-denial, taking up one's cross, but *this is what we're here for*. Life isn't about us, isn't about our dreams and wishes, but is about God and His glory. And we're granted the *privilege* to walk through life in step with God's will; how exciting is that!!

Exactly because walking in step with God's will, making decisions that promote His kingdom is such a privilege, I'll make it my business to keep on praying this third petition – for I want to be involved in the unfolding of God's plans and don't want to work in opposition to those plans! So the child of God remains a man of prayer, "your will be done" – grant me grace to deny my own will and cheerfully, eagerly obey your will, never mind cost to myself.

That leaves yet the last point:

### 3. The answer to this vision

After Jesus taught His disciples to pray this third petition, we may freely assume that they did as the Lord had taught them. What, congregation, was the result? How did the Father answer their prayers?

No, all did not go precisely as they wanted day by day. They invariably experienced what we also experience, and that is that life still had its struggles and questions as they sought to walk in agreement with God's plan. Carrying your own cross is never easy.

They were there when Jesus went to the Mount of Olives, and from a distance of "about a stone's throw" they heard His agonizing cry (Luke 22:39ff), "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." Were they amazed when they heard Him pray this?? Jesus' words weren't void of emotion, for the Scripture tells us that the sweat dropping from His forehead resembled blood dripping from your nose (22:44); talk about anguish! But what was this the disciples were hearing? This, congregation, was nothing other than the third petition!! Fancy that: their Master and Instructor, He who taught them the plan of God was Himself *struggling* to walk in step with that plan. To take up one's cross isn't easy, and Jesus Himself agonized to do it, agonized to walk in tandem with the Father. Father, if you are willing, if

it is your divine plan..., take this cup from me.... Father, it's too much.... Yet, Lord, not my will, not my preference, not my dreams, but yours be done. Your will, Lord, is my delight; hard though it is for my flesh, I want to do what furthers your program, makes your kingdom come, glorifies your name. That's the petition the disciples heard Jesus agonize to the Father....

And the result?? Was the Father so pleased with the Son's desire to walk in step with the Father's eternal plan that He relieved Him of hardship?? Not at all! The Father *answered* the prayer of the Son –how?– by sending Judas Iscariot with a troop of soldiers to arrest Jesus (22:47). And then?? Yes, the suffering began for Jesus in earnest..., the humiliation, the mocking, the scourging, the crucifixion itself.... “Your will be done”; grant that we may deny our own will and without any murmuring obey your will ... even to the cross.... *And God gave Jesus the wherewithal to carry out the will of God for Him, to walk in step with the Father's plan* – and the glorious result is salvation for sinners!!

What, then, congregation, are you going to do?? We pray repeatedly the words of the third petition, but will you buy into God's plan for the world, will you cause your thoughts to travel in lines consistent with God's will for you in this world, will you make decisions that promote God's will or frustrate God's plan? Will you accept that all who walk in step with God's plan for the gathering of His church in this world will invariably suffer, will need to give up personal wishes and desires for the greater good of God's name and the coming of His kingdom? It runs against the grain; I know it well. But remember this: the same Christ who taught us to pray this petition prayed it Himself – and the result was not only hellish suffering for Him but *salvation for you!* More, this Christ was received on the throne at God's right hand, then poured out His Holy Spirit on broken sinners – and this Spirit has been given to you too! In His strength you can pray this petition, more, in His strength you can adopt God's vision for the world as your vision and so cheerfully deny yourself in order to serve in God's kingdom any moment of any day.

Yes, as you walk the corn-maze of life you need to make decisions, and knowing what to do can be a challenge. But having God's big picture in mind, more, having that big picture as your own, and then seeking His word for His commands in the questions of life goes so very far in knowing what you ought to do in the intersections of the maze. God's will, God's kingdom, God's glory: that's what it's all about.

And again: that I, a creature, a sinner too, may walk in step with my Father's eternal plan – what glorious privilege that is!!