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# The Bible Student

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## THE WILL OF GOD

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(Concluded from last issue)

From what has been said concerning the two aspects of the subject dealt with it will be obvious that the whole divine objective and meaning of the revelation of the Will of God is that man may learn both to know and to practise it by coming to know more and more of GOD Himself in—

### Personal Experience

Paul propounded this ideal when he faced the philosophers in the Areopagus on Mars Hill in Athens: he declared that, 'the God that made the world . . . being the Lord of heaven and earth . . . *now commandeth* all men everywhere to repent' (Acts 17:23 ff.). That is His desire and will with a view to man's own eternal blessing and felicity. And He continues today to present man with this challenge to submission—and always, as ever in the past, His appeal is in grace, mercy and love. Paul makes this clear in writing to Timothy—'*God our Saviour willeth that all men should be saved and come to the knowledge of the Truth. For there is one God, one Mediator also between God and men, Himself man, Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all. . . .*' (1 Tim. 2:3-6). And those who are obedient to that appeal are further exhorted: '*Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God that worketh in you both to will and to work for His good pleasure*' (Phil. 2:13). In other words, the 'divine in working' is demonstrated in Christian CHARACTER

CULTURE and CONDUCT: the whole personality is affected and beautified by it in this threefold manner. So important is this aspect that we do well to develop consideration of it somewhat.

1. True *Christian character* has its beginnings in the new birth, by which one becomes possessed of the new life in Christ. The Lord's own statement is: "This is *the will of my Father*, that everyone that beholdeth the Son' (Who, of course is the only Source of Life), and believeth in Him *should have eternal Life*' (John 6:40). In other words, 'Eternal Life is consummated in the restoration to the believer of a *transfigured manhood*'. The foundation is thus laid in the renewed character for the Will of God to become, by our obedience to it continually, the TRUE SOURCE of blessing and power in all life and service for Him. Peter's appealing word is very much to the point here: 'Forasmuch then as Christ suffered in the flesh, arm ye yourselves also with the *same mind*\* . . . that ye no longer should live to the lusts of men, *but to the Will of God*'. Incidentally, 'lusts' here viewed as the principle of the old nature, not necessarily immoral, but *apart from God*, and therefore unresponsive to the divine Will.

2. But character needs to be *cultured*, as is definitely implied in Peter's reference to the mind and its functioning in the above quotation. For the mind is the medium of the Holy Spirit's operations in cultivating a true spiritual growth in character and personality. The apostle Paul definitely emphasises this in the Epistle to the Romans: 'Be not fashioned according to this world (or, *age*); but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect Will of God' (Rom. 12:2; also see v. 1.; and ch. 6:13). Divine Truth presents itself first to the mind; but the heart (affections) and conscience are all thereby affected. Hence the urgent appeal of the Apostle to the church in Ephesus: 'Put away, as concerning your former manner of life; the old man, which waxeth corrupt after the lusts of deceit; and that ye be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new man, which hath been created in righteousness and holiness of truth' (ch. 4: 22-24).

\* 'Mind', *ennoia*: the idea is, 'make this your *intention and purpose*' to live no longer in lusts . . . etc.

It is significant that the apostle again emphasises this aspect in the same Epistle: 'Wherefore be not foolish but *understand what the Will of the Lord is*' (Eph. 5:17). The word 'understand' (Gk. *suniete*) implies a thoughtful and ready acceptance of the divine Will when it is presented to us; not with any idea of refusing it, but in order to yield our whole-hearted obedience to it with all readiness and to the utmost limits, even though we may not understand all the 'why and wherefore' of the purpose behind it. But the unquestioning obedience He expects of us brings its own recompence in fruitful discipline of mind and heart. It is *that quality* of culture God so delights in, and which is so wonderfully illustrated in His intimacy with Abraham: 'Shall I hide from Abraham that which I do? . . . for *I have known him*'—and Abraham knew God! (Gen. 18:17 ff.; cf. Ps. 25:14; Amos 3:7). The Lord's own words to His disciples are applicable to us today: 'No longer do I call you servants, for the servant knoweth not what his Lord doeth; but I have called you *friends*; for all things that I heard from my Father I have made known unto you' (Jn. 15:15).

The resultant of obedience is summed up by the apostle Paul: '*Rejoice* alway; *pray* without ceasing; in everything *give thanks*: for *this is the Will of God* in Christ Jesus to you-ward' (1 Thess. 5:16-18; vv. 19-24 also deserve careful note). The obedient soul grows in 'spiritual quality' by thus cultivating the happy disposition of spontaneously yielding itself to the guidance of God in face of every difficulty. Similarly, by a constant recourse to prayer and the recognition of God's love and mercy in every experience He brings to us, there is the spiritual effect as described in 2 Cor. 3:18: 'We all, with unveiled face, reflecting as a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed\* into the same image from glory to glory even as from the Lord the Spirit'.

3. It follows that there must be a corresponding development of a true *Christian manner of conduct* if the Christian message is still to continue to be the same spiritual dynamic in the world as heretofore. The reality of its power cannot be questioned, but the point is we must see the working out of that divine will in

\* The tense is the present continuous.

individual conduct in daily life. And the first principle of all effective testimony in conduct—as in character and culture—is displayed in behaviour towards others, and specially in the sphere in which we live and move. The man of the world is far more impressed by a consistent *Christian life* than by mere profession: 'For so is the Will of God, that by *well-doing* ye should put to silence the ignorance of foolish men' (1 Pet. 2:15). In this passage 'well-doing' (*agathopoieō*) means conduct which reveals moral excellence of character capable of influencing other lives. Classic Greek makes it synonymous with *kalopoieo* = 'honourable', or 'beautiful', doing (as in 2 Thess. 3:13). Peter, in fact, stresses this in his 1st Epistle (2:12): 'Your conduct among surrounding peoples in your different countries should always be good and right, so that although they may in the usual way slander you as evil-doers yet when disasters come, they may glorify God when they see *how well you conduct yourselves*' (Phillips' Translation). Again in chap. 3:17 even more expressively: 'It is better, *if the Will of God should so will*, that ye suffer for well-doing (*kalopoieō*) than for evil-doing' (R.V. cf. also vs. 15, 16; Tit. 2: 7, 8).

A revealing personal reference of Paul's which also has a bearing on our subject, is found in his Letter to the Colossians: 'Epaphras . . . a servant of Christ Jesus . . . always striving for you in his prayers, that ye may stand perfect and *fully assured in all the Will of God*' (ch. 4:12, R.V.). Note the personal reference to Epaphras: he is 'ever wrestling in prayer' (such is the force of the tense). Here is character *in action*! Note the Christian idealism of his prayer: It is that the believers would prove steadfast against all opposition, and that their consistent behaviour may be the outcome of minds '*fully assured in all the Will of God*': Or, literally, 'in every separate aspect of that Will': the thought is —'the attentive obedience which holds sacred each detail of the Master's orders'.

A most instructive exemplification of this is found in Ephesians 6:5-8. The apostle is addressing, very appropriately in this study, the servants of a household ('bond-servants' may mean household slaves here), and places side by side, (1) the inevitable facts of their earthly conditions; and (2) the true features of their heavenly

standing before God. In *both* he asks for obedience—not merely as ‘bond-servants’ or ‘men-pleasers’, but something far and away greater—as ‘*Servants of Christ, doing the Will of God from the soul (psuches), as unto the LORD and not unto men*’.

The lesson is obvious—any and every sphere in which God has placed us is the sphere in which His Will is paramount; and when obeyed in all humility of spirit we are lifted completely out of the fleshly effects of sordid drudgery, ambitious self-pleasing, or the sheer inertia so commonly experienced.

A fitting conclusion to our study of this wonderful subject of the Will of God is found in the apostle’s prayer for the Christians in Colossae. Epaphras’ report concerning the Christians there had filled him with joy (Col. 1:7,8); and it moved his heart to unceasing prayer (vs. 9,10). It is a beautiful combination of true Christian affection, gratitude, and teaching.

There are three main petitions; but first and principally for an increasing *knowledge of the Will of God*, upon which all the other requests are dependent in some real sense: ‘We do not cease to pray . . . that ye may be filled with the knowledge of His Will in all spiritual Wisdom and Understanding . . .’. It will be observed that what the apostle prays for is not a mere intellectual knowledge, however good in itself that always is, but for a *quality* of true spiritual insight which enlightens and transforms not only the mind as such, but the whole of man’s personality and manner of life, and therefore is productive of the highest type of *Christian Culture*. As if to give additional incentive and value to the attainment of that Ideal, he goes on to pray that they ‘may learn the Mystery of God, *even Christ, in Whom are all the treasures of Wisdom and Knowledge hidden*’ (ch. 2:2). In other words, Christ is the very personification of all that goes to make up the Ideal of Christian Culture in us, in profound contrast to the prevailing types of so-called ‘Culture’ today.

It is no wonder that the apostle himself lifts up his own yearning soul in prayer, ‘that I might KNOW HIM . . .’; and again: ‘I count all things to be loss for *the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord . . .*’ (Phil. 3:10 and 7-9). To know HIM is inevitably to be ‘*filled with the knowledge of His Will*’.

The second clause is for a corresponding development of fruitful *Christian Conduct* within the sphere of our common daily life, where we are to 'Walk worthily of the Lord unto all pleasing, bearing fruit in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God' (vs. 10)\* This aspect has already been referred to in some measure, but an additional point here is important, viz., that of '*fruitfulness*' in personal conduct, service, and testimony. The classic, we might say, on this subject is of course John 15, where we get Christ's own exposition of what true discipleship means: 'ye did not choose Me, but I chose you, and appointed you, that ye should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should abide' (v.16). 'Herein is My Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit, so shall ye be My disciples' (v. 8). As Moule puts it: 'the Christian is nothing if not a fruit-bearer'.

But we shall miss the full meaning of all this if we omit the actual background or foundation upon which the whole discourse in that chapter rests, namely, *obedience to the Will of God*, here termed '*commandments*': e.g., in verse 10, 'if ye keep My commandments ye shall abide in My love; even as I have kept My Father's commandments (or Will), and abide in His love'. Similarly in vs. 12; 14,17.

With scarcely a pause the prayer continues for a corresponding quality and expression of *Christian Character*, which shall be 'strengthened (or, "made powerful", R.V. marg.), according to the might of His glory, unto all patience and longsuffering with joy' (v.11): That is, a development from within, not a mere outward 'veneer'. Moule's comment on that word 'long-suffering' is worth noting: 'The temper indicated is the opposite to that of *haste* of spirit which gives the man no time, under pressure of pain or (particularly) of *wrong*, to remember what is due to others, and to the Lord'.

Such then are the 'constituents', shall we say, of *true Christian*

\* J. B. Phillips' paraphrase (we can hardly call it a 'translation', can we?) is interesting: 'We also pray that your outward lives, which men see, may bring credit to your Master's Name, and that you may bring joy to His heart by bearing genuine Christian fruit, and that your knowledge of God may grow yet deeper.'

*personality* as a whole; the resultant of a Spirit-filled life surrendered wholly to God. And wherever a society of believers possessed of such characteristics is found there will always be seen the additional feature inherent in this 'fellowship of obedience' to the divine Will which lifts it out of the mere 'time element' of the present, namely, its 'age-abidingness', to which the apostle John makes peculiarly significant reference: 'the world passeth away (or better, "is now passing", as in vs. 8 and 1 Cor. 7:31) and the lust thereof; *but he that doeth the Will of God abideth for ever*' (1 Jn. 2:17). In other words, this fellowship of obedience issues in a spiritual maturity of character absolved from all decay and is age-abiding.

The Lord's own word is: '*Whosoever shall do the Will of God, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother*' (Mk. 3:35). Our response should ever be: 'Teach me to do Thy Will; for Thou art my God: Let Thy good Spirit lead me in the land of uprightness' (Ps. 143:10).

The words of Philip Doddridge are a fitting close:

I welcome all Thy Sovereign Will,  
For all that Will is Love;  
And when I know not what Thou dost,  
I wait the Light above.

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## HOW GREAT THOU ART!

O Lord my God! When I in awesome wonder  
Consider all the worlds Thy hands have made,  
I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder,  
Thy power throughout the universe displayed.

Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to Thee  
How great Thou art! How great Thou art!

When through the woods and forest glades I wander  
And hear the birds sing sweetly in the trees,  
When I look down from lofty mountain grandeur,  
And hear the brook, and feel the gentle breeze.

(Continued on page 30)