

**The Intentional Will of God (revised)
(Matthew 18: 14)**

**Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
August 12, 2018**

For many years, the morning “Today” show featured Willard Scott with birthday acknowledgements of seniors across the country who were 100 or more years old. On one occasion Scott highlighted a gentleman who, as a young man, was scheduled to sail on the ill-fated Titanic, but who was not permitted on board because he had contracted a communicable disease. Willard Scott’s offhand exclamation was “God works in mysterious ways!”

Was it God’s will that this would-be passenger would instead live 100 years?

Was it God’s will that certain others died as the Titanic went down?

I once survived an auto accident in Iowa that might have turned out quite differently. I had spent three days thanking Iowans who had contributed generously to the cause I represented. By the time I departed my final appointment for the four hour drive to Chicago, the dark of night had descended upon the two-lane rural highway. In the moment that I saw the blur of an object off to the passenger side of the car, I smashed into it at 60 miles an hour. As the crystal dust from the deployed airbag settled, I recovered from the shock I had never experienced before, opened the door, and walked away without so much as a scratch.

The car had rammed under the back of a flatbed trailer transporting pigs from one farm lot to another. Hitched to a tractor, the trailer was half off the roadway, and half in the traffic lane. It was not furnished with taillights or warning reflectors. The farmer admitted fault for blocking a state highway at such a slow pace, in the dark, without proper markings on his vehicles. My

rental car was totaled, and it subsequently sat prominently at the main intersection of the nearby village. The accident was the talk of the town for weeks.

Why did my car not bounce into the path of the semi-truck passing at that moment in the oncoming lane? Did my evasive action a split-second before impact make a difference? Or was it the Will of God that I survive?

In daily life and encounters, questions about the Will of God may be real and personal. Death of a loved one...unexpected illness...tensions in the family, in relationships, in the work environment. Any of these circumstances might understandably raise the question: What is the influence of God? What is the Will of God?

And in the life of a congregation, questions about the Will of God may also be very real. In our case, such questions may surface in the context of our relationship to "Hope Partnership for Missional Transformation". Hope Partnership's stated passion is to encourage "new life in a congregation, with the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, by being intentional about discerning God's call for future mission." What is the influence of God in such a process? What is the Will of God?

Thus, our present circumstances inspire a sermon series, the primary source for which is a small volume aptly entitled "The Will of God". It a compilation of sermons seventy years ago by Leslie D. Weatherhead, revered pastor of the City Temple in London. I have my dad's original copy of the book..

First in the series is "The INTENTIONAL Will of God": that is, God's ideal purposes.

Second, next Sunday, “God’s CIRCUMSTANTIAL Will” (how evil circumstances may counter God’s ideal purposes), and “God’s ULTIMATE Will” (how God’s ideal purposes may be realized though temporarily derailed by circumstances. Then two Sundays from now, to conclude the series: “DISCERNING the Will of God” (how do we know?!).

Did God intend that American Pharaoh would be the first horse in 37 years to win the Triple Crown? Did God intend that Justify would do it again so soon? Did God intend that baseball great Roberto Clemente die when his plane crashed in the ocean years ago while on a humanitarian mission to his homeland? Did God intend that a young woman be pushed playfully off a bridge and fall sixty feet to the river—and survive? Did God intend that children be abused in a makeshift New Mexico compound—and be discovered by authorities?

On November 18, 1970, and then incredibly again five days later on November 23, I officiated at the burial of stillborn babies at cemeteries in north central Ohio. Did God intend that the Kinney and Esposito parents would suffer the pain of seeing their children committed to the ground in such diminutive caskets?

You see how profound and personal this exercise can get!

Leslie Weatherhead says that if you want a text for this sermon, it would be Matthew 18:14: “It is NOT the Will of God in heaven that one of these little ones should perish”. He goes so far as to maintain that it was not God’s intention—God’s ideal purpose—that Jesus should go to the Cross. It was God’s intention—God’s ideal purpose—that Jesus would have people follow him, not kill him!

Jesus’ destiny, and Jesus teachings, illustrate the dilemma: We can’t have it both ways.

We cannot say about a death, on the one hand, that IT was the Will of God, if we would say about an unexpected or miraculous recovery, on the other hand, that IT was the Will of God! We cannot say about a certain outcome or result, on the one hand, that IT was the Will of God, if we say about an opposite outcome or result, on the other hand, that IT was the Will of God!

And there are a couple of other pitfalls of which to be wary:

- 1) Do not make the case that we should allow someone to take comfort in assigning tragedy to the unavoidable Will of God, when it is in fact the consequence of an unfortunate accident, terrible mistake, evil action, or natural disaster: a hurricane in Puerto Rico; the murder of an innocent family; the lunacy of a despot.
- 2) Do not make the case that, since suffering may sometimes engender admirable qualities in people, then the suffering in and of itself is the Will of God.

Here is what Leslie Weatherhead preaches about God's Intentional Will:

“What sort of God pours misery, unhappiness, disappointment, frustration, bereavement, calamity, and ill health on beloved children, and then asks them to look up through their tears and say ‘Thy will be done’? We simply must break with the idea that everything that happens is the Will of God, in the sense of being God’s intention. It is *within* the Will of God, in circumstances we have hinted at. But we must come to terms with the idea that the intentional will of God can be defeated by the will of human beings *for the time being*. If this were not true, then human beings would have no real freedom at all. All evil that is temporarily successful, temporarily defeats God.”

Remember that Weatherhead’s reflections were at a time when people were marching off to war, and not coming back. Sound familiar? A time when people were wondering if their

circumstances might be different if they had made different decisions at critical moments.

Sound familiar? A time when people were seeking higher purposes in their lives. Sound

familiar? A time when the world was awakening to new political, cultural, and social realities.

Sound familiar?

What was God's Will for a gentleman ticketed for the Titanic who missed the ill-fated ship?

What is God's Will for a traveler who survived an encounter with Iowa pigs?

What is God's Will in this time, in this place, for Hyattstown Christian Church?

Such pondering leads in turn to consideration of the Circumstantial Will of God, and to

consideration of the Ultimate Will of God. Then, of course, to the matter of Discerning God's

Will. How do we know?

Don't turn that dial. More to come!

Now, a word with our sponsor..