

The WILL of GOD

PART 1 - Introduction; God's Sovereign Will

What do we mean by the phrase "God's Will"?

We use the phrase "will of God" in several ways. It may refer to something that God sovereignly *decrees* - and we cannot keep it from happening. It may refer to *moral obligations* that humans have - whether or not they choose to obey them. It may even refer to *desires* that God may have, as he relates to us on our level of existence - even if those desires are not fulfilled, because *we* are unwilling to do what is necessary.

This study is divided into two main sections. The first half focuses mainly on the aspect of God's will that is related to his sovereignty - God as *Creator*. We sometimes describe this as God's "*eternal decree*." For this aspect of God's will, we are normally passive in *accomplishing* it (that is, we don't consciously do it), but we should be active in *accepting* it. Our proper attitude can be illustrated by the statement, "*Your will be done*."

The second half of this study focuses mainly on aspects of God's will that are related to us on *our* level - God as *Savior, Lord* and *King*. This includes God's *moral will* - which we have an obligation to obey (even though few people are willing to do so). It also includes God's *desires* - which may or may not be fulfilled, as people choose to obey or disobey his commands. For these aspects of God's will, we are to be active in both *accomplishing* and *accepting* them. Our proper attitude can be illustrated by the statement, "*I want to do your will*."

This interaction between sovereignty and responsibility is emphasized throughout this study, because it is inseparable from the topic "will of God." Furthermore, we need this emphasis, to help us think biblically. The world's distorted perspective is so ingrained into our thinking that it is very difficult to remove it.

Background (language issues)

There are two New Testament Greek word groups (comprised of nouns, verbs, etc.) that are commonly translated as "will," in the sense of "God's will." The main verb forms in these two groups are: *thelo* and *boulomai*. Though there are differences, the concepts conveyed by these two word groups overlap in meaning. At times, the words might have essentially the same meaning. (The context would help in determining this.)

In English, we can use a variety of words to translate these concepts, since there are a broad range of possible meanings. Examples that illustrate this include:

- A "desire" or "wish," something that may or may not be fulfilled.
- A "decree," or "purpose" (such as, God's "purpose" for the world), something that humans have no control over (though their actions *are* related to it).
- A "moral obligation," something we can obey or violate; but our choices will result in consequences that cannot be changed, once eternity arrives.

Some of the specific ways the Greek words are translated into English include:

- The *thelo* group: will, choose, want, pleased (to do something), determine, permit.
- The *boulomai* group: purpose, will, decree, plan, counsel.

In our study, we will focus on the English translation of those words. (For clarity, they will be underlined.)

Watching our attitude

There is a New Testament word related to this study that has to do with being a "counselor" or "advisor." One of the Scripture passages it is found in provides us with a good reminder about the attitude we ought to have - especially when we attempt to study the concept "will of God." It reminds us that *no* created being is great enough (or wise enough) to be *God's* counselor or advisor. *Don't forget this truth!*

- **Romans 11:34** *"Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?"*

Read the whole passage (vs. 33-36). This comes at the end of a section in Romans about the relationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility! How should this passage influence our attitude, when we attempt to understand these matters? _____

We could contrast this to the way the wicked often respond: They use God's sovereignty as an excuse, and then blame God for *their* decision to sin! (This is illustrated in Romans 9:19, which we will examine at a later time.)

God's Sovereign Will or Decree

An introduction to the concept

We often hear of the terms "God's sovereignty" and "human responsibility," and *both* are related to the concept of "God's will." In this section, our focus is on the first of these, God's sovereignty. Some facts about God's sovereign will or decree are as follows:

- For the most part, it is *secret*. This aspect of God's will is unknown to us, except for what God chooses to reveal or make known.
- The elements that *are* revealed were made known either through prophecy (events that have *not yet* occurred) or through history (events that have *already* occurred). Though we can learn about (or even experience) these things, we will not always be able to *understand* them. This is because we cannot see the full picture of how things relate to each other, to the glory of God, and to future events (including the Day of Justice).
- In the past, Christians referred to the outworking of God's sovereign will as "providence." This concept has been largely ignored in modern days. (Most "church-goers" are influenced by the naturalistic philosophy that claims God has no role in what happens in science and history.)
- God's sovereign will does *not* "interfere" with the choices we make (on the "human responsibility" level); rather, it goes along with those choices.
- We need told by God (in Scripture) how to respond to the sovereignty aspect of his will, because as sinners, we normally respond the *opposite* of the right way.

How do the concepts of sovereignty and responsibility fit together? By the very nature of things, our understanding of this will be *limited*. We are not only *finite*, but we are *sinners*, who's very thinking processes have been influenced by our sinful natures. It is only to the extent that we let *Scripture* teach us on these matters, that we will ever correctly understand them. And hopefully, as we look at the issue of God's will, we will be increasingly open to what the Scriptures teach!

Our very existence - and all of creation - depends on it!

There is a mystery to God's sovereignty, because it exists *outside* of us (and outside of all creation). We can comprehend it only to the degree that God explains it to us - explaining its existence, its significance, and how we are to respond to it. We need to be cautious, because we can easily go beyond what God reveals, and fall into misunderstanding and error.

The following verses show us that God's sovereign will encompasses all that exists. Yet much of their emphasis is within the context of salvation, and is meant to encourage those who have chosen to become followers of Jesus. (Only a few "sovereignty" statements are directed toward those who reject the truth - and normally it is mentioned *after* the people have already expressed their rejection, and they are unwilling to accept the truth and respond properly.)

1. The creation of all things.

This is from the scene in heaven (Revelation 4-5) and is spoken directly to God by those who surround the throne.

- **Revelation 4:11** *"You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."*

Why were things created? What was God's "motivating force"? _____

How should we respond? What type of response does God deserve from us? (Consider how those in God's presence respond!) _____

How can you do this in your daily life? _____

2. Even the smallest details of creation were determined by God.

This verse gives us an example, which the apostle then applies to details about eternity.

- **1 Corinthians 15:37-38** *When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body.*

God's sovereign will includes all the details related to what we are. This verse is an example of this fact, as applied to the nature of plants. The very shapes of the plants are part of his sovereign determination. Note the context (15:35-44a): The principle described in this verse is applied to our resurrection bodies! (You will have to read this passage, in order to answer the following question.)

We tend to wonder what things will be like in eternity. Though we have been given a few clues, much remains a secret. What does this passage tell us about the attitude we should have concerning the future?

3. Everything that happens - God works it all in accordance with his will.

- **Ephesians 1:11-12** *In him [Christ] we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.*

God's sovereignty is related to *all that happens*; but Scripture has a greater focus on its relationship to our *salvation*.

The Creator who made us has planned all things to happen in a way that will result in praise, honor and glory to him, and in the good of all who are willing to follow him. Since humans have chosen to sin, we do not deserve this good - and those who continue to reject this good will not experience it in eternity. However, included in God's will is his intention to rescue some of us from the condition we have brought upon ourselves. We call it "salvation," and this theme (our salvation as part of God's will) is mentioned several times in Scripture.

What does this verse say about the relationship between our salvation and God's will? _____

Why did God choose *you* (and not someone else instead of you)? Did you deserve it? _____

If God has chosen to save you, how are you going to respond? _____

4. His purposes do not change.

The context of this verse has to do with salvation, and will be examined again in a later section.

- **Hebrews 6:17-18** *Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged.*

We can rejoice that God's sovereign will, by its very nature, *cannot* change. What God plans to do (in this verse, related to salvation), *will* occur. Yet to give us even more assurance (and encouragement), God has also given us a binding oath (promise) that he will accomplish the work he has begun in us.

How can this encourage you? _____

In future sections, we will look further at how God's sovereign will leads us into salvation and guides our spiritual growth.

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PART 2 - God's Sovereign Will in Our Salvation (1)

We live, make decisions, and act in the realm of "human responsibility." This is the realm in which we are responsible for our actions, and in which we will experience blessing or judgment because of our actions. Yet there is also the realm of God's sovereignty - a realm we cannot experience with our senses, but which parallels the realm we *can* see, and is the basis for it's existence.

God's sovereignty guarantees that our eternal destiny will be the fitting end for our present choices. It also guarantees that, if God begins a change in us - salvation - he will finish what he has started. God has no obligation to save us; but if he sovereignly chooses to do so, we can rest assured that our actions (on the human responsibility level) will be fitting for salvation. (A lifestyle of sin cannot occur in a person who has been changed by God. And a person who has experienced this change wouldn't *want* such a lifestyle, because he has been *changed*. Though he may - and *will* - struggle with sin, he hates the sin, because it goes against the values he now actively strives to live by.)

In this part of our study, we will begin to look at the wonders of God's sovereignty in our salvation. We will start with a reminder that God has *no obligation* to do anything for us who have rebelled against him. Then we will look at the fact that he *has* chosen to save some, even though he has no obligation to do so.

GOD'S SOVEREIGN WILL - Our salvation and spiritual growth depend on it!

The human responsibility aspect of salvation involves repentance, trust and obedience. But in this present section we are looking at the *sovereignty* aspect. From this perspective, Scripture teaches us that our salvation is dependent on God from start to finish. Because of this, there is nothing for us to boast about (Ephesians 2:8-9), except for boasting in God (1 Corinthians 1:27-31)! Our duty is to praise him for what he has done, and to give him the honor and glory that is rightfully his.

God's role in salvation is a comfort and assurance for those who understand it - as seen in some of the following verses - yet it applies *only* to those who's salvation is genuine, as defined by Scripture. *There are many counterfeit "salvations" in the world (and in many churches). The following encouraging passages do not apply to any of them!*

Before we look at the wonderful things God has done for us in salvation, we need to put things in perspective:

A reminder: God has no obligation to save anyone.

We do not deserve salvation, and God has no obligation to save us. He offers mercy to those willing to accept it, but we must remember that mercy is, *by nature*, undeserved. God is totally righteous if he *doesn't* offer mercy! (This should influence our attitude toward God. He is *not* our servant; but we are to be his!)

1. He can have mercy or he can harden.

- **Romans 9:18** *Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.*

This section of Romans shows the contrast between those who receive mercy, which they *don't* deserve, and others who get what they *do* deserve. Those in the first group are willing to accept what Scripture says and respond appropriately; those in the second group aren't interested in accepting what the Bible says; and what they *do* know, they distort.

Each of these groups will respond differently to this issue. The righteous (recipients of mercy) will choose to cling to God's mercy; the wicked will make excuses for their sin, perhaps even using "sovereignty" as an excuse for doing it! (Compare with verse 19 - "*Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?*") Each will receive the eternal outcome that is fitting for his choice; for sovereignty guarantees that the present and future will correspond. (How should the wicked respond? Rather than choosing to sin and blame God for it, they should pursue mercy and repent of their sins. All who do this will find themselves to be recipients of God's mercy!)

We must remember that our choice of action *always* corresponds with what God does. From the human responsibility perspective, God offers mercy to those who are willing to accept it. So if you don't want the second half of this verse to apply to you, then focus on *your* response! Don't talk back to God; rather, repent of your sin (and sinful values) and accept mercy!

How should the fact that mercy is undeserved influence your attitude toward God and salvation?

2. More comments about God hardening a person.

We must constantly stress the Scripture's teaching that sovereignty and responsibility are interrelated, for we live in a world that constantly treats these two concepts as opposites that *cannot* coexist. This is why so many people have a difficult time accepting the Bible's teaching about God "hardening" a person. (From the world's perspective, it would mean that the person had no control over his own actions!) Yet this concept *does* exist in many passages, often in a manner that brings sovereignty and responsibility together. We will examine a few of them here (and more at a later time).

Sometimes Scripture uses "sovereignty" and "responsibility" concepts almost interchangeably. For instance, in the following passages, who hardened Pharaoh's heart? (*Both* of these concepts occur several times in the book of Exodus.)

- **Exodus 8:32** *But this time also Pharaoh hardened his heart and would not let the people go.*

Who "hardened his heart," according to this verse? _____

- **Exodus 9:12** *But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart and he would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the Lord had said to Moses.*

Who "hardened Pharaoh's heart," according to this verse? _____

In some Scripture passages, we read about God abandoning people to their sin *after* they have chosen to reject God. For instance:

- **2 Thessalonians 2:9-12** *The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.*

What did they do *before* God sent them the "powerful delusion"? _____

- **Romans 1:21-25** *For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.*

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator--who is forever praised. Amen.

What did they do *before* God gave them over to their sins? _____

How should these verses serve as a warning to you, as you respond to Scripture? _____

In a future lesson (Part 4 - "Responding to God's Sovereign Will"), we will see additional examples of sovereignty and responsibility working together. This will include examples of both righteous and wicked people; for in both types of situations, the actions of the people work together with sovereignty.

God has chosen to save some people

God saves some people, even though (as we have seen) he has no obligation to do so. This fact should encourage us who have repented, since, because of his unchanging nature, he won't (and *can't*) change his mind!

1. It is an act of his will - and he does not change his mind.

- **James 1:17-18** *Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.*

Shadows formed by the sun change their positions, as the sun moves across the sky. But God is not like this; his character does not change. So when he gives life ("birth") to someone who is spiritually dead, he will not "ungive" it at a later time. (This "birth" refers to the same concept as does "born again," in John 3:7. *Both* passages refer to something that *God* does.)

Considering what v. 17 tells us (God's actions are not like shifting shadows), in what ways can God's choice to save us be a source of encouragement to us? _____

Salvation from the perspective of God's sovereignty is an *unconditional* gift, based solely on God's mercy and not on our works (which could only result in wrath). The end result of this undeserved blessing is dependent on *God*; and God will not change his mind. (There are other promises and blessings found in Scripture that are *conditional*, and the end results are related to human responsibility. When God offers this second type of blessing to us, the end result is dependent on what *we* do.)

2. **His purpose will not (and cannot) change. Take comfort in this! (If it could change, then *nothing* would be guaranteed.)**

We already looked at this verse in Part 1 of this study. For those who are genuine followers of Jesus, it is the foundation for our hope.

- **Hebrews 6:17** *Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath.*

God has given us many promises related to salvation. If he were able to *change* his mind about saving us, how much encouragement would such promises be? _____

What does this passage in Hebrews say about the nature of his purpose (or plan) for us? _____

In what ways should this fact encourage us? _____

3. **Those he saves are predestined to salvation.**

Even before the creation of the world, God had already planned a wonderful destiny for those who are recipients of his mercy. (See Ephesians 1:4.) We might not fully understand *how* "God's predestination" and "human choice" work together, but that shouldn't hinder us from accepting what God says as true! If we don't understand it, a good way to respond is this: 1) don't *worry* about it; 2) accept it, realizing that God understands it; and 3) rejoice in it!

- **Ephesians 1:5-6** *[In love,] he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will-- to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves.*
- **Ephesians 1:11-12** *In him [Christ] we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.*

What do these passages say about God's role in salvation? _____

Just think about it... God actually *planned* your salvation!

In the next section, we will look further at how God's sovereignty relates to the wonderful gift of salvation.

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PART 3 - God's Sovereign Will in Our Salvation (2)

Part 3 continues our study of the relationship of God's sovereignty to our salvation and spiritual growth. As we look at these things, we must not forget that human responsibility goes right along with sovereignty. This second issue is the topic of a future lesson, which focuses on how people respond when God is at work in them. (We will see that they pursue a way of life that is compatible with the eternal destiny of a saved person.)

Some of the things God does to save us

All of the following verses show us that, from the sovereignty perspective, it was God's choice. We should find this encouraging; for without God choosing to save us, *nobody* would ever be saved.

1. The Holy Spirit "blows" life into us.

Just as we previously learned that God has mercy when he pleases (Romans 9:18), so also we read here that the Holy Spirit does his work when he pleases. Both passages show us that God has no *obligation* to save us. When he does so, it is an act of *grace* (undeserved kindness).

- **John 3:8** *The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.*

Jesus uses the wind to illustrate how the Spirit works. What do we learn from his illustration? _____

What the Spirit does is shown in the previous verses. According to v. 5-8, what does he do? _____

The concept "born again" has often been distorted. This is *not* something that *people* do! It is the work of God, and focuses on the "sovereignty" aspect of salvation. It's true that a person must be "born again," in order to be saved. But you can't *command* God to do it!

Later in the chapter, in the famous verse John 3:16, Jesus shifts his focus to the human responsibility aspect of salvation. If you are willing to do what this verse tells you to do - put your trust in Jesus (and all that is implied by this concept) - you can rest assured that the Holy Spirit is working in you.

2. The Son reveals the Father.

- **Matthew 11:27** *"All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."*
- **Luke 10:22** *"All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows who the Son is except the Father, and no one knows who the Father is except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."*

From the sovereignty perspective, how do we receive knowledge of the Father? _____

The Son is qualified to reveal the Father, because the Father and the Son know each other exhaustively. (There is *nothing* in either that is not known to the other.) We can begin to know the Father (a knowledge that will grow for eternity), if the Son reveals him to us. This is not just "fact knowing" (which even the devil has), but includes experiential or relational knowledge.

After making this statement, Jesus had something to say to the *crowd* (people who *weren't* his followers), as well as to the *apostles* (people who *were* his followers).

- **To the crowd** (in the Matthew passage): Immediately after Jesus addresses the sovereignty issue (about him *choosing* to reveal the Father), he turns to the responsibility issue, inviting all to come to him and to *learn* from him! He offers them the opportunity to know the Father! (See vs. 28-30.)
- **To the apostles** (in the Luke passage): Instead of this invitation to come and learn (which all the apostles, except Judas, had already accepted), Luke points out the fact that the apostles, having already begun to know God, were *blessed* because of it. (See vs. 23-24.)

3. The Son gives life (as does the Father).

- **John 5:21** *For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son gives life to whom he is pleased to give it.*

Both Father and Son give life in the same way. (Note the phrases "just as" and "even so.") What factor determines who Jesus gives life to? _____

4. The Son paid the penalty for our sins.

- **Galatians 1:4** *[... the Lord Jesus Christ] who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, ...*

We live in an age controlled by evil - including not just *acts* of evil, but the entire *value system* of the world around us. Jesus died not only to rescue us from sinful *actions*, but from sinful *values*.

Who's decision was it for Jesus to rescue us? _____

In a future study, we will see a number of verses that focus on Jesus' willingness to do the Father's will.

God will keep us saved

Salvation, if *genuine*, is secure, because of sovereignty. Fakes with false hopes abound. Scripture warns us about this, and shows how to distinguish between the fake and the genuine. Unfortunately, fakes rarely examine the Scriptures to find out. They go their merry way "feeling assured"; so the judgment that awaits them is not what they expect.

In the following verses, sovereignty and responsibility are shown working together. Because of this, the verses can apply only to people who have *genuine* salvation: those chosen by God (= the sovereign perspective, as already seen), who have repented, trusted and begun to obey him (= the human responsibility perspective, to be examined in a future lesson).

1. None will be lost.

- **John 6:39** *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.*

Read v. 37-40. In v. 37, we learn that the Father *gives*, and that people *come*. Verse 39 tells us the Father's *will* or *purpose* concerning those who have been given. This is followed by verse 40, which mentions the human responsibility aspect - the need for people to believe or trust Jesus (and all that is implied by that concept).

According to this passage, how many of those given to the Son will lose their salvation? _____

What does the Father want Jesus to do for them? _____

This is not mere "wishful thinking" by the Father, but something Jesus accomplished by his resurrection from the dead. Today, our future resurrection is *guaranteed*.

2. Those who trust in the Son are guaranteed eternal life (sovereignty/responsibility working together).

- **John 6:40** *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 will happen to those who trust Jesus? _____

This is not merely a "wish" on the Father's part. It is a sovereign choice by God, which Jesus will accomplish for those who, from the human responsibility perspective, look to the Son with an attitude of trust.

God will provide gifts that will grow us in our salvation

When Scripture talks about spirit-given gifts, the emphasis is on the *group*, rather than on isolated *individuals*. Spirit-given gifts are for spiritual growth, and this growth normally occurs in the body of Christ as a *group* of people.

1. He arranges the "body."

- **1 Corinthians 12:18** *But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.*

The analogy in this passage compares the "body of Christ" to a physical body - many parts, but one body. All parts are needed and must work together.

Who determines the way the parts are to fit or work together? _____

How should that influence our attitude about different people's gifts? _____

How important are you in the body? How important is everyone else? (Consider what the whole chapter teaches.) _____

2. He distributes gifts.

- **1 Cor. 12:7, 11** *Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. [Verses 8-10 lists various examples of gifts.] All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.*

Who is given gifts? _____

Why, or for what purpose? _____

How should this influence your attitude about your gifts? About other people's gifts? _____

Even the miracle gifts that were given to the apostles (and to others who were with Jesus) were distributed in this manner. Consider the following verse:

- **Hebrews 2:3b-4** *This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.*

3. Example: Paul was called to be an apostle by God's will.

Paul did not decide he wanted to be an apostle, and then demand that God "cooperate" with his desire. Consider what he emphasizes in these verses:

- **1 Corinthians 1:1** *Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, ...*
- **2 Corinthians 1:1** *Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, ...*
- **Ephesians 1:1** *Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, ...*
- **Colossians 1:1** *Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, ...*
- **2 Timothy 1:1** *Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, according to the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus, ...*

Who chose to make Paul an apostle? _____

Some people make *demands* that God give them gifts of their own choosing. What should your attitude be? Who has the right to decide who gets what gift? _____

Consistent with what we have already seen in 1 Corinthians 12, we see that Paul used his gift for the common good - just as *all* of us have an obligation to do with our gifts. We are *never* given gifts for selfish purposes!

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PART 4 - Responding to God's Sovereign Will

GOD'S SOVEREIGN WILL - How should we respond to it?

In previous lessons, we learned that our response should include: 1) being careful about our attitude (Part 1), and 2) trusting God and rejoicing in our salvation (Parts 2 and 3). Here in Part 4, we will look at our need to acknowledge God's sovereign will in *all* of life.

Acknowledge God's sovereign will in all of life

This includes: 1) aspects of our life that we try to control (our plans and the things we choose to do), as well as, 2) aspects of life that are beyond our control (the actions of other people, the forces of nature, etc.).

We like to be able to control things. But *many* things in life are beyond our control - and some of them make absolutely no sense to us! Yet come what may, we can rest assured that, when all the "loose pieces" are brought together in the end, the final result will be for the glory of God and the good of those who love him. (In this matter, Romans 8:28 is a good verse to consider.)

1. Acknowledging God's will in our plans: "If God wills."

Planning is good; but ultimately, we know that plans don't always work the way we want them to. God's sovereign will *might* or *might not* include the things we plan. But either way, this verse applies.

- **James 4:15** *Instead [of boasting about your plans for the future], you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."*

Consider how all-encompassing this is. How much of life is included in the phrase, "this or that"? _____

How should God's sovereignty influence our plan-making? _____

We don't always think about it, but when we make plans, we normally assume we will *live* to do them! Yet even *life* is not guaranteed! The parable of the rich fool illustrates this - Luke 12:13-21.

In addition to this command in James, Scripture also uses the apostle Paul's travel plans as an example of how this "if God wills" attitude applies in life situations. In the following verses, note that, 1) in at least one instance, Paul's plans did *not* succeed; and 2) two of the verses show that *prayer* (individually, as well as in a group) should be an integral part of making plans.

- **Acts 18:20-21** *When they asked him to spend more time with them, he declined. But as he left, he promised, "I will come back if it is God's will." Then he set sail from Ephesus.*

- **Romans 1:10, 11a, 13a** *I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you. / I long to see you ... / I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now).*
- **Romans 15:32** *[Pray that] by God's will I may come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed.*
- **1 Corinthians 4:19a** *But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing, ...*

What condition, common to all these verses, would determine whether or not Paul's travel plans would succeed? _____

2. Acknowledging God's will at other times (an example)

Many things *don't* happen the way we want them to. We often face situations in which our desires conflict with the desires of others; and when things don't go our way, we end up being greatly disappointed. How should we respond when such things happen? We accept it as part of God's sovereign will.

This truth is illustrated by the response of Paul's friends, when he was about to do something that they thought would bring him great harm.

- **Acts 21:10-14** *... a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. Coming over to us, he took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, "The Holy Spirit says, 'In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.' "*

When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, "Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, "The Lord's will be done."

When appropriate, we can *try* to change the situation. But what should our final response be, whether or not we succeed? _____

We live in a world in which many undesirable things occur. Think about some of the situations in your life. How might you apply this principle to them? (This does not cancel the "human responsibility" aspect of decision-making, which we will examine in greater detail later.) _____

3. What if God's will includes unjust suffering?

We should be aware that God's sovereign will may include suffering. This is a topic we would rather not think about, but it's a real issue. We need to face the issue and respond properly!

Because of the effects of sin in the world, pain and death occur. These things are an unavoidable "fact of life," and are often quite unpredictable. Much of it is *not* unjust; for we, the human race, brought much of it upon ourselves when we chose to sin - collectively in Adam, as well as every time we sin by our own choice.

Even so, some suffering *is* unjust. The following passage looks at the issue of suffering when doing *good*. (Doing good is one of the "fruits" of being a genuine Christian.) This may seem like one of the most unjust types of suffering; but in this present world, it sometimes happens. This passage shows us how to respond, if, in God's sovereign will, it happens to us.

- **1 Peter 4:15-16, 19** *If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. ... So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.*

What are the two types of suffering mentioned in this passage? _____

Verse 19 applies to which one of these two types of suffering? _____

How should you respond when you are suffering this way? _____

Based on what you know from other passages in Scripture, how should you to respond if you are experiencing the *other* type of suffering? _____

We tend to get quite upset when we suffer unjustly. Perhaps (before we start complaining) we should consider the example of unjust suffering that was experienced by someone much greater than us. (Read John 18-19.)

Regarding the topic of suffering (especially the unjust type), there are many Scripture passages that show us how to respond. Examples include: Romans 5:1-5; 8:18-39; the books of James and 1 Peter; John 15; Hebrews 11 (especially v. 35b-40 and 12:1-13); Psalm 73; Job (especially chapters 1-2 and 32-42); and Luke 16: 19-31.

Follow Jesus regardless of what happens

The gospel of John illustrates this principle in an event that occurred some time before Jesus ascended into heaven. At that time, Jesus commented that the apostle Peter would suffer a painful death. Peter's immediate response was to look around and ask about the first person he saw nearby (the apostle John) - "What about him?" Jesus' reply is quite instructive, not only to Peter, but also to us:

- **John 21:21-23** (v. 18-19 - Jesus tells Peter how he will die.) *When Peter saw [the apostle John], he asked, "Lord, what about him?" Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me." Because of this, the rumor spread among the brothers that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?"*

It's so easy to compare ourselves with others and to say it is "unfair," if our lot in life is worse than theirs! Yet how are we to respond? _____

Contrast all this to the response of the wicked: They sometimes use sovereignty as an excuse for their choosing to sin!

God has promised that he will use all things that occur to accomplish good in the lives of those who love him (Romans 8:28). The wicked (a category that includes *all* people who do not love God) have no such promise. If they were willing, they could make the promise applicable to them - they just need to repent and follow Jesus. But most *aren't* willing to do this.

Scripture shows us that the wicked tend to *make excuses* for their sins. Consider this verse:

- **Romans 1:32** *Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.*

And if that weren't bad enough, they may even try to shift the blame for their sinful conduct to *God!*

- **Romans 9:19** *One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?"*

Note how their argument treats sovereignty and responsibility as *opposites*. From their perspective, the two concepts *don't* work together, but fight against each other, instead!

The apostle's answer to this blame-shifting is seen in the verses that come next in the passage:

- **Romans 9:20-21** *But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?' " Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?*

(Part of verse 20 is based on two Old Testament passages, in which Israel was expressing the same evil attitude: Isaiah 29:16; 45:9.)

Note the way Paul places sovereignty and responsibility side-by-side. "Talking back to God" focuses on human responsibility; the rest of the verse focuses on sovereignty. The two go together, cooperating, rather than fighting against each other.

The only thing God *deserves* credit for is our *righteousness*. Though human responsibility is involved even in this matter (i.e., our *choice* to follow Jesus), we know that such choices go *against* our sinful human nature, and are possible only because of the graciousness of God. Sin comes naturally to us; righteousness doesn't.

How do *you* respond: like a righteous person, or a wicked person? What do *you* give God credit for in your life? _____

The WILL of GOD

PART 5 - Sovereignty and Responsibility Working Together

Deuteronomy 29:29 tells us, "*The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.*" Though the full significance of this verse goes beyond our main focus here, its emphasis is quite relevant to our study of various aspects of God's will. Though certain aspects of God's *sovereign* will are known to us, most of it is "secret." Most of what we *do* know about God's will involves those aspects of his will related to *human responsibility* - "the things revealed."

God's "Moral" (or "Revealed") Will

In future lessons, we will be focusing on God's interaction with us on the *human* level. (This is the only way that humans can *actively* interact with him.) From this perspective, the term "God's will" normally refers to the moral precepts or obligations that we have a duty to obey. These are a reflection of God's holy and righteous nature; and to *not* do them is to reject God and all he is. (There are also a few verses in which God expresses his *desire* for our good. This is an expression of his love, but can be experienced by us *only* if we obey his moral precepts. To *not* obey is to reject the good that God desires for us.)

God's moral precepts are sometimes described as "God's *revealed* will" - in contrast to his "*secret*" (sovereign) will. However, in some circumstances, the word "revealed" could be confusing. After all, *everything* we know about God's will - even his sovereign will - is "revealed." Otherwise we wouldn't know about it! So when using this term, we can minimize confusion by using different words to describe these two issues.

- **God's will "*made known*"** - We can use the term "make known" (or something equivalent), when describing the fact that God gives us knowledge of his will. In this sense, *any* aspect of God's will can be "made known" to us, if he wishes to do so.
- **God's "*revealed*" will** - We can use the term "revealed will," when describing the moral obligations we have been given. This aspect of God's will focuses on human responsibility, and will often be used in *contrast* to God's sovereign will (though not in *conflict* with it). This concept can also be used to refer to the verses which express God's desire for our good, since this good can be attained *only* through following God's moral will.

In this study, we will use the term "moral will"; but it is good to know that both terms are often used.

Contrasting "sovereign will" and "moral (revealed) will"

God's *sovereign* will is *always* accomplished. In contrast, God's *moral* will might or might not be accomplished, depending on how we respond - i.e., the *choices* we make.

We may choose to obey God's moral will; we may reject it. But either way we choose, there will be unavoidable consequences, *based on our choices*. God has decreed (= sovereign will) that our eternal destiny will be *consistent* with our response to his moral will (= human responsibility). So when we reject his moral will, we deprive ourselves of the eternal good that is associated with it - a good that God wishes ("wills") all to have.

Here is a comparison of these two types of "will":

Sovereign Will

(Also called "God's *secret* decree.")

How God interacts with us:

- God interacts with us as the *Creator* over his creatures.
- We cannot fully comprehend this relationship, since we cannot experience what it is to be *uncreated*.
- We can learn something about it from the "potter and clay" analogy that Scripture gives us - Romans 9:21; Isaiah 29:16; 64:8.

What it includes:

- We can observe it in the historical facts of Scripture, in prophecy (facts that haven't yet occurred), and through observation of world history.
- Except for prophecy, God's sovereign will is *not* made known to us, until *after* it happens.
- When it involves prophecy, it will not always include all the details we *want* (to satisfy our curiosity), but only what we *need*. It will reveal enough to show us that God is in control and that we can *trust* him, but will not answer all our questions.
- When it involves world history, it must be interpreted based on the teachings of Scripture. Historians can make mistakes.
- Many events in history will not make sense to us, because we cannot see the full picture (including the future Day of Justice, which will resolve the issue of evil and injustice in the world).

How/when it occurs:

- It occurs no matter what happens.

How we are to respond to it:

- Our response to it is *passive*.
- When it occurs, we should acknowledge and accept it. (Examples of *how* we are to respond have already been seen in previous sections of this study.)
- In a few instances in the past (such as Jesus' fulfillment of prophecy), the response would have been *active*. (But the responding would still have taken place within the realm of human responsibility.)
- Key word to govern our conduct: *Accept*.

Moral Will

(Also called "God's *revealed* will or precepts.")

How God interacts with us:

- God interacts with us on our level ("person-to-person").
- We find this relationship much easier to understand, since this level is where we exist.
- We can illustrate this interaction several ways (depending on the situation) - like a king interacting with a servant, a friend with a friend, a parent with a child, etc.

What it includes:

- It includes: 1) the commands and obligations found in Scripture (as understood within their context), and 2) God's expression of his desires for our good.
- God's moral will has been made known to us; but we must *choose* to obey it, since our choices will determine whether or not it is accomplished in our lives.
- The moral obligations are associated with consequences for one's choice of action. We can decide if we want to obey; but either way, there will be consequences that we cannot control.
- God's moral will governs all aspects of life. Many of the commands are "open-ended," allowing for a great amount of *freedom*, provided that we don't choose to do evil (which results in *slavery* to sin).

How/when it occurs:

- It occurs only when we choose to do it.

How we are to respond to it:

- Our response to it should be *active*.
- We should obey it (if a direct command) or choose in a way that is most fitting (if a general expression of God's desire for our good).
- If we are unwilling to do it, it will not occur. But consequences for our choices will later occur that we *cannot* choose.
- God's revealed will gives us a great amount of freedom. But the way we exercise this freedom must be influenced by the effect our choice has on us, as well as the extent to which it expresses love for God and neighbor.
- Key word to govern our conduct: *Choose* (to obey).

Sovereignty and responsibility work together - illustrated in Jesus' life

Scripture contains many verses that illustrate sovereignty and responsibility working together. Such verses should be a source of encouragement to us, since (contrary to what the world teaches), these two perspectives work together without conflict. As followers of Jesus, we have nothing to fear!

For example, from the "sovereignty" perspective, those who receive salvation will grow in their salvation - for God has determined it to be that way. However, from the "responsibility" perspective, those who receive salvation will be *willing* to do the things necessary for growth - for the response of a saved person to the saving work of God will be *active*, not *passive*.

We don't have to worry about *how* "sovereignty" and "responsibility" work together in this matter. We just need to do what God tells us to do (our responsibility), and let *him* "worry" about the sovereignty aspect of our salvation! (This attitude would also apply to *every* other area of life.)

Jesus' life is filled with examples of sovereignty and responsibility working together. Two examples, expressly related to the will of God, are given below. From these, we can see that both good and evil choices made by people will fall into place within God's sovereign purpose.

The first example is related to *Jesus'* actions.

- It involves his willing *choice* to live in a way that showed love for God and neighbor. He made choices as a *human* (though he was aware of his deity) that would result in prophecy being fulfilled - things that God sovereignly *willed* to happen.
- It was an act that resulted in the greatest good: our salvation.

The second example involves the leaders who rejected Jesus.

- When they chose to sin, they *also* fulfilled God's sovereign will by their willful choices.
- It was an act that resulted in the greatest evil: Jesus' crucifixion.

Both of these involved human choices (= responsibility); yet both were related to God's sovereign decree.

Jesus chose to do what God sovereignly decreed

This is an example of sovereignty and responsibility in action, working together.

1. **You don't want sacrifice, but a body... "I have come to do your will..."**

The author of Hebrews quotes an Old Testament passage, and shows how it was related to Jesus' choice. In this passage, we see that Jesus' willing obedience brought about a salvation that *no* animal sacrifice could *ever* accomplish.

- **Hebrews 10:5-10** *Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, 'Here I am--it is written about me in the scroll-- I have come to do your will, O God.'" First he said, "Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them" (although the law required them to be made). Then he said, "Here I am, I have come to do your will." He sets aside the first [sacrifices, etc.] to establish the second [his will]. And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.*

The passage quoted is from Psalms 40:6-8, and focuses on willing obedience. The author of Hebrews paraphrases this passage (patterning it after an early Greek translation of the Psalms) to show the specific way that Jesus fulfilled this obedience. Through the incarnation (Jesus taking on human flesh, a *body* - as described in Philippians 2:5-8), Jesus demonstrated his willingness to do God's will. His obedience was to the point of death (Philippians 2:8) - and ultimately resulted in his resurrection and our salvation.

The sovereignty aspect of this passage is seen in verse 7. Not only did Jesus *choose* to do God's will (human responsibility), but what he chose to do was written about in Scripture, centuries before he did it. His actions were prophesied (an expression of sovereignty), yet when Jesus came, he fulfilled the prophecies by *choice*.

What did God *not* desire? _____
(Such things were necessary because of sin, but they were only of temporary value. God desired something much better: something that would result in the *permanent* removal of sin.)

The wicked leaders chose to sin; their actions also fulfilled part of God's sovereign decree

In previous lessons, we saw some verses that showed one way that sovereignty and responsibility work together in the lives of the wicked. (Example: God has sovereignly decreed that their eternal destiny will be appropriate for the choices they make in this life.) In the verses listed below, we see a different focus: God uses the actions of the wicked to accomplish *good* for people who love God. We must remember, however, that it was not the intention of these wicked people to do this good; and they will be held accountable for their decision to do evil.

These verses demonstrate how sovereignty and responsibility come together. The event described is the greatest evil that people have ever committed; yet it is an example of sovereignty and responsibility working together ("God delivered / you did...").

- **Acts 2:23-24** *This man [Jesus of Nazareth] was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.*
- **Acts 4:27-28** *Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.*

What did the humans do? _____

What did God do? _____

Those involved in killing Jesus were not thinking about sovereignty when they were making their decision to kill him. They were doing what they wanted to do, the result of their choices. Yet in all of their wickedness, God was accomplishing his sovereign purposes.

The WILL of GOD

PART 6 - Learning God's Will (How God Makes It Possible)

The emphasis in this section is on *God's* role in enabling us to know his will. But since sovereignty and responsibility work together (as always), we have a responsibility to search for God's will, to learn it, and (if it involves moral obligations) to live it. We will be judged based on our willingness to do this.

What can we know about God's will?

Everything we know about God's will, whether sovereign or moral, is known to us *only* because God has made it known to us. But there are great differences between the various aspects of God's will, as far as *what* we can know and *how* we can learn it.

Of the two, God's *sovereign* will is the most mysterious. Most aspects of it are not given to us beforehand, and we learn about it only *after* it occurs - as history unfolds.

God's sovereign will

Scripture tells us that God is actively at work in the world, upholding all things, and guiding all things in such a way that it will ultimately bring honor and glory to him, and good for all who love him. This activity is often called "providence." All things that occur - including all human activities and things that occur in the natural order of things (the "laws of nature") - have a place in God's providence. Even human sin and all its horrible consequences accomplish God's providential purposes - when taken together with the end results that will occur at the Day of Justice.

Because of this, history can be described as "the outworking of God's providence." There is *purpose* in the events of history, though at the present, much of this purpose cannot be understood. At the present, the events that occur in this world often make no sense to us - evil often seems to triumph over good. Even so, God is in control, and will resolve all issues at the Day of Justice. This is the reason we can have hope.

Prophecy is the *future* aspect of God's sovereign will, just as history is the *past* aspect. Scripture tells us many things about this future aspect of God's sovereign will. This does not mean we have direct prophecies that we can personally *choose* to fulfil, the way Jesus did (Hebrews 10:5-10; Matthew 26:51-56; Luke 24:44; etc.). Rather, the main purpose of prophecy is to encourage us, to give us a glimpse of God's glory, and to show us that there *is* a coming day in which all things will be made right. And though there is much we can know about the future, many of the details will remain a mystery until its fulfillment takes place.

There is an aspect of God's sovereign will that we tend to overlook. This is the *power* that belongs to it. Not only does God "will" for things to happen, but the very act of God "willing" something is enough to *cause* it to happen. God's sovereign will has no competition; there is no enemy (such as Satan) who can hinder what God wills. As seen in the previous lesson, the greatest evil that Satan can do will only succeed (against Satan's intentions) to accomplish God's sovereign will. Since God's sovereign will is holy, righteous and good, we who are willing to submit to his rule have nothing to fear - and everything to rejoice in!

God's moral will

In contrast to the mysterious or "hidden" nature of God's sovereign will, God's *moral* will (sometimes known as his "*revealed*" will) is clear and capable of being understood. God has embedded the basic aspects of his will - the moral law - in our consciences (Romans 2:14-15), so that even those *without* Scripture are capable of understanding something about right and wrong (even though their understanding may be imperfect, and though they may deaden their awareness of it through repeated sinning). However, the fullest expression of God's moral will is given to us in *Scripture* - and we have the opportunity (and duty) to learn what it says.

The Bible *in its totality* communicates God's revealed will - sometimes through direct statements (such as commands and prohibitions), and sometimes indirectly (such as general principles, examples, etc.). What it says encompasses all of life, showing us whether a matter is required, forbidden, or a matter of personal preference (taking into consideration circumstances, abilities and interests). What it teaches comes in two forms:

- *Facts* - Taken within context, these are to influence our values and how we think.
- *Commands* - When the context shows they are applicable, these are to influence our actions, choices and conduct. (When *not* applicable, they are to be treated like facts, influencing our values and thoughts.)

We must respond rightly to what Scripture says, for our eternal destiny will be related to our choices. God has sovereignly decreed that what happens to us in eternity *must* be in accordance with our responses! (This includes our need to respond to the good news, by repenting from our sins and trusting Jesus for salvation.)

Two methods of revelation

This series of lessons focuses mainly on God making his will known through *Scripture*. This is sometimes called "special revelation," because it comes directly from God, is totally without error in *all* matters without exception, and is to be the foundation for all we think and do. (Jesus Christ, the "Word of God" - John 1:1 - could also be described as "special revelation" from God. But since Jesus is not *physically* present at this time, all we have at the moment is the Scriptures, also called the "Word of God" - Hebrews 4:12 - which the Holy Spirit uses to guide us.)

There is a second method of revelation, which is sometimes called "general revelation." Since all creation is revelatory of God (Psalm 19:1-3; Romans 1:20), and God *providentially* accomplishes his purposes in creation, certain aspects of his will can be understood through the world around us. However, we can understand it accurately *only* to the extent that we build our understanding on the foundation of *Scripture* (special revelation). Otherwise, because of the effects of sin on creation (including its effects on the way we think), we *cannot* interpret creation the way God intended.

Even *before* sin entered the world, the first two created humans needed a basic framework for interpreting the world (general revelation) correctly! This is the reason for the instructions that God gave them in Genesis 1-2. When the humans chose to go *against* those instructions, only then did sin and its consequences enter the world - creating a barrier to understanding that only the grace of God can overcome.

Our perception of science and history is imperfect. We *cannot* see the full picture, and what we *do* see is impacted by the effects of sin in the world. Because of this, the full significance of these things will not be understood until after the coming Day of Justice. Until then, we should not be surprised if there are times when our perceptions don't seem to agree with Scripture - especially if we reject Scripture before we even begin to start!

Here is a summary of the ways God uses these two methods of revelation:

- **Sovereign will:**
 - *Through special revelation, we learn:* 1) how God worked in the *past* (historical portions of Scripture, often with an explanation of the event's significance); and 2) how God will work in the *future* (prophecy).
 - *Through general revelation we learn:* God's works in history (i.e., events as they happen), as interpreted by Scripture.
- **Moral will:**
 - *Through special revelation, we learn:* 1) moral commands and prohibitions; and 2) principles, teachings, and illustrations.
 - *Through general revelation we learn:* 1) a basic understanding of the moral law (embedded within our consciences by God); and 2) circumstances that may influence how we apply Scripture principles (in matters of freedom, where there is no direct command or prohibition).

God makes his will known to us

All Scripture is an expression of God's will, but here we will look at three New Testament passages that directly mention the concept of God making his will known - with a greater emphasis being on his *sovereign* will. (Future lessons have a greater focus on God's *moral* will.)

In these passages, we learn what God is going to accomplish in the future (two passages, focusing on sovereignty), and the means God has used to communicate his will to us (one passage, encompassing both sovereignty and responsibility).

1. God tells us his will for the future, and that he will accomplish it through Jesus Christ.

The hope of all creation is centered in Jesus Christ. God has been pleased to tell us about this hope: We have a wonderful future, one *guaranteed* to happen, because it is part of God's sovereign will.

This hope is part of God's eternal plan. In the following passage, we learn that this plan was part of God's sovereign will *even before the world was created* (Ephesians 1:4). But certain details were not yet known to people until after Christ came to earth - which is why it is described as a "mystery."

- **Ephesians 1:9-10** *And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment--to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.*

What is God going to accomplish in Christ? _____

In the verses that follow this passage, the apostle reminds us about God's role in our salvation:

- **Ephesians 1:11-12** *In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory.*

This shows us that God's eternal plan includes our salvation. Our future is directly related to what God plans to accomplish in Christ! Ultimately, it will result in the praise of his glory (v. 12). (We have already looked at v. 11-12 in Part 2 of this study, which focused specifically on God's role in salvation.)

2. God tells us his will for the future: what he is going to accomplish for his people.

When God called the apostle Paul (Acts 9), one of Paul's duties was to proclaim to us "the Word of God in its fullness" (Colossians 1:25). Because of this, we now have the fullest expression of what God has revealed in his Word. As with the Ephesians passage, the details were not known in previous centuries - which is why they are described as a "mystery." These things are now made known to God's people (the "saints"), including the Gentiles (non-Jews) who were originally excluded from God's blessings (Ephesians 2:12).

- **Colossians 1:25-27** *I have become [the church's] servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness-- the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*

As seen in this passage, it was God's will (desire or choice) to reveal these things. They are part of his sovereign will, and are directly related to our future in Christ.

Because we (God's people) are "in Christ," we have a *hope* (something to look forward to) that the world does not have. What is it? _____

Other Scripture passages describe this glory. It encompasses all that God has in store for us in the future - a time when we will be in God's presence, and sin and all its effects will be gone. It is a glory that was attained by Jesus, through his death and resurrection; and we look forward to it with great anticipation (our "hope"). Though our present circumstances may involve sharing in Christ's *suffering*, we know the day is coming in which we will share in his *glory* (Romans 8:17-18; 1 Peter 4:13; 5:10); for we have become *united* with him ("in Christ," v. 27).

We may ask, "What about the wicked? Are they hopelessly lost, since the things described in these verses do not include them?" To answer this question, we need to look at the *human responsibility* aspect of the issue. These things *can* apply to the wicked, if they become willing to repent of their sin and trust Jesus for salvation. (This is what *we* needed to do, in order for these verses to apply to *us*!)

3. God made his will known to Paul, so that Paul could tell it to others.

God chose specific people to make his will known to others. In this passage, we read about God's choice to make his will known to Paul, and then (through Paul) to other people. This included aspects of God's *moral* will (such as the command to repent, which requires a response from us), as well as certain details about his *sovereign* will (such as what he is going to accomplish through Jesus Christ).

- **Acts 22:14-15** *Then he [Ananias] said [to Saul (Paul)]: "The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard."*

In Acts 20:27, Paul summarized his ministry by saying that he carefully proclaimed "the whole will of God." In that passage, the term "will of God" probably referred to *everything* that Paul taught, including the need to repent and to trust Jesus Christ for salvation. (See Acts 20:20-21.) Here, in Acts 22:14-15, the emphasis is on the fact that God *chose* to make his will known. It is because God did this, that Paul knew what to say.

The WILL of GOD

PART 7 - God's Moral Will for Our Lives: What is it? (1)

When a person asks about God's will for his life, he is normally asking about moral obligations - God's moral or "revealed" will. Response to such questions involves *human responsibility*. In this matter, we have an obligation to *do* or *obey* what God wills.

This aspect of God's will is unlike God's *sovereign* will, for there is no guarantee that it will be done. The person might be unwilling obey; and in this case, God's will - his revealed moral will - would *not* be accomplished. (As observed in previous lessons, a person's response would have no effect on God's *sovereign* will. His response would fit with God's sovereignty, regardless of what his choice might be.)

Why We Need God's Moral Will

God desires our good; and the moral law shows us how we can experience it. Though sin and injustice causes this good to not always be *immediately* seen, in the long run, people who do these things *will* experience the good - the blessings - that God promises for all who love him.

We can choose to live a different way, if we want. We can violate God's moral will, and the results may even seem rewarding for a while. But in the end (if not sooner), horrible consequences will occur. Why is this? Righteous conduct *must* be rewarded, and sin *must* be punished, because God is holy and righteous. Even if events in life don't seem to happen this way, it will occur at the Day of Justice; and we will experience the consequences for our choices.

All of us have sinned. We have abandoned the righteous way that results in blessing, and have gone our own ways - ways that *earn* death (Romans 6:23a). Yet God, in his mercy, has offered forgiveness (through repentance and trust in Jesus), and has shown us his will, so that we can live. The very fact that God has given us his will - providing us a way to *not* receive the punishment we deserve - is an expression of love. God is love, but by the very nature of things, people who reject his *will* have rejected his *love*. Though God's love is freely offered, those who reject his will and refuse to repent *forfeit* that love.

What is God's Moral Will? (The general concept)

All of God's Word (taken within context) can be described as the "will of God." Yet we can summarize all our obligations in ten basic commandments (Exodus 20:1-17). These ten basic commandments can be further summarized by the two greatest commands, "Love God" and "Love neighbor" (as described in Matthew 22:37-40; also in Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18).

Paul described what he taught as being "the will of God"

Many Scripture passages show us that Paul used the Old Testament (as did all the other apostles), when proclaiming the good news about Jesus. We also learn about what he taught in the book of Acts and in his writings (nearly half of the New Testament books).

In Acts 20:20-21, Paul summarizes his message, beginning with a *general* statement about what he preached, followed by a *specific* statement about the content of the good news (about salvation):

- **Acts 20:20-21** *You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.*

A few verses later, he summarizes all this in the following statement:

- **Acts 20:26-27** *Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.*

The previous verses (v. 20-21) explain what this "whole will of God" was.

What made Paul innocent? _____

What is implied if we *don't* teach the whole will of God? _____

Obviously, we don't need the phrase "will of God" attached to a Scripture passage to know that it is God's will! But below are some specific passages that *do* include that phrase (or something equivalent).

What is God's Moral Will? (Some specific examples)

The following passages include the phrase "will of God" (or equivalent). They illustrate some basic principles about God's will.

Righteousness, instead of sin

In this section, the basic focus of the commands (expressions of God's will) is "love for God."

1. **Holiness, not sexual immorality**

As you read this passage, remember that the word "sanctified" refers to the process of becoming *holy*. As we see later in the passage, God saved us for the purpose of becoming holy, not for indulging in sin. (This passage focuses on sexual sin; but Scripture, as a whole, says the same thing about *all* types of sin.)

- **1 Thessalonians 4:3-8** *It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit.*

This passage is quite pertinent in today's society, when we consider the typical attitude people have toward sexuality, and the way they dissociate sexual conduct from issues of holiness and morality. (See also 2 Peter 2.)

Many people *don't* consider holiness and sexual immorality to be incompatible opposites - and their actions show it. But what does Scripture say? _____

2. Genuine godliness, not pretension

- **Revelation 3:16-18** *So, because you are lukewarm--neither hot nor cold--I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. [etc.]*

The church at Laodicea had everything a church might want, as far as external appearances were concerned. But God could see their hearts; and like the religious leaders of Jesus' day (Matthew 23:27-28), what *people* saw on the outside did not match what *God* saw on the inside. Jesus' counsel ("will") for such people is for them to receive *from him* everything that is necessary so that their lives can become a *genuine* reflection of Christ's life, rather than pretension and superficiality.

Today, this problem is characteristic of *many* churches. It is easy to point this out; but we need to evaluate ourselves, and see if there is any wicked way within *us*. Then, having dealt with our own sins, we will be able to encourage others to deal with theirs.

Take a few moments to consider these things and how you might benefit from what this passage teaches. (There can be value in considering what it says, even if the passage *doesn't* fully apply to you.)

Godly values

In each of these passages, two things are contrasted. *Both* things described are *good*; and in most situations, both are important and needed. But here we learn that there is a necessary order of priority in which they are to be done. In each case, one of the things takes precedence over the other (even when *both* are being done).

Giving one thing precedence over another is a reflection of *values*. Normally, there is no conflict between the values illustrated in these verses. However, if a conflict *does* occur (as illustrated by the second group of passages), the higher value would take priority over the lower.

1. Giving one's self to God is to be done before giving one's possessions to help others

- **2 Corinthians 8:1-5** *And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will.*

Their attitude was the result of God's grace working within them (verse 1). Their giving wasn't by force; it was a voluntary expression of *love* on their part. As for priorities, they were so much "in tune" with God's will, that the apostles were surprised! (They had grown in their "spiritual maturity" more than the apostles realized.)

This passage illustrates the relationship between the obligations to "love God" and "love neighbor." Love for neighbor is important, and should not be neglected. But love for God should come *first*. Then love for neighbor can be done in a way that is sincere (not hypocritical) and honoring to God.

What can we learn from their example? How should it influence our conduct and our giving? _____

2. Mercy takes precedence over religious activities (ceremonial duties, religious practices, etc.)

We need to emphasize the fact that "love for God" is *not* the same as "love for religious activities." Love for God is expressed by our moral conduct (a desire for holiness), and by the way we respond to the Word of God. Religious activities can have value, but they can easily be done with a pretentious spirit.

Love for God is the greatest of all commands (Matthew 22:37-38). It must have the *highest* priority in our lives, taking precedence over love for neighbor. In the following passages, we discover the principle that love for neighbor takes precedence over the performing of ceremonial rituals, religious duties, etc.

- **Matthew 12:1-2, 7-8** *At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry and began to pick some heads of grain and eat them. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to him, "Look! Your disciples are doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath." ... If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent. For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."*

The religious leaders had just condemned the apostles for picking some grain to eat on the Sabbath (a holy day). Jesus showed them that they were *exaggerating* the intent of the religious ceremonial law (v. 3-6), and told them that love for people ("mercy") took precedence over religious duties.

When people elevate religious activities to the level of "love for God" (failing to make a distinction between the two), it is quite easy to develop a self-righteous attitude of superiority over others, as illustrated by the religious leaders described here. Consider also the following passage:

- **Matthew 9:10-13** *While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?" On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners."*

These "tax collectors and 'sinners'" needed salvation; and Jesus was there to bring it to them! Surely this was an expression of "love for neighbor"! (The parable of the good Samaritan, Luke 10:25-37, also illustrates this. Two of those who passed by thought that their religious duties were more important than love for neighbor.)

Consider how you can demonstrate the right priorities when you are involved in activities related to love for God, love for neighbor, and various types of religious activities. (Do this on a separate paper.)

In the next lesson, we will look at more examples of God's will, focusing on our response to unpleasant circumstances.

The WILL of GOD

PART 8 - God's Moral Will for Our Lives: What is it? (2)

In Part 7, we saw some Scripture verses that illustrated two basic principles about God's will. These included:

- **The need to pursue righteousness.** This is a concept related to our love for God. We have an obligation to live a holy life (rather than living in sin) and to have a *genuine* godliness (rather than superficial pretension).
- **The need to have godly values.** This is a realization that certain moral obligations take precedence over others. Normally, moral obligations do *not* conflict with each other; and all can be obeyed. If they *do* conflict (because we live in a world influenced by sin), there is an order of priority that shows us which obligation should be obeyed first. We learned that "love for God" takes priority over "love for neighbor," and "love for neighbor" takes priority over "religious activities and duties." (We also saw that religious activities are *not* the same as "love for God.")

Here, in Part 8, we will look at: 1) the basic attitude we must have in *all* of life, and 2) some specific issues related to *suffering* (with an emphasis on suffering for Jesus' sake).

The basic attitude we must have in all of life

Certain attitudes are to characterize our lives at *all* times. Consider the following passage:

- **1 Thessalonians 5:16-18** *Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*

These three commands are related; and the phrase "this is God's will" applies to all of them.

- The *first* command ("be joyful always") focuses on what is happening in our lives.
- The *third* command ("give thanks in all circumstances") focuses on what God is doing.
- Between these is the *second* command ("pray continually"), the link that connects what is happening in our lives and what God is doing.

Some initial considerations

We tend to think that it is more difficult to obey these commands when life's circumstances are *bad*. In reality, it can be just as difficult to obey them when circumstances are *good*; for we tend to forget about the God who gave us those blessings.

How about you? What are *your* tendencies? How often do you remember to obey these three commands, when life's circumstances seem pleasant? _____

How about times when life's circumstances are difficult? _____

In obeying these commands, we need to consider the issue of motives. All three commands can be obeyed in a way that honors God, or in a way that is pretentious, self-centered and self-serving. This would influence the

reasons we rejoice or give thanks, as well as the nature of our praying. Wrong motives related to two of these commands are illustrated in one of Jesus' parables, as expressed in the prayer of a religious leader:

- **Luke 18:11** *The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector."*

A look at these three commands

As we look at these commands, our main focus will be on our attitude during *unpleasant* situations - the types of situations we have the greatest tendency to complain about. But as we consider how to apply them to life, we should also consider how to respond in *pleasant* situations.

1. "Be joyful (= rejoice) always" (v. 16)

This joy is not based on external circumstances, but on what Jesus has accomplished on the cross. It is part of the "fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22), so it is a characteristic or trait that will be present in those who follow Jesus. This joy is not merely an "inner feeling," but affects the *whole* person; so it is natural for it to find expression, and to be shared with others.

In the New Testament, we observe two recurring themes related to this joy:

- 1) It can continue in the midst of suffering.
- 2) It is connected to our future hope.

These two themes are related. Our *future* hope goes beyond our *present* circumstances. This is the reason we can have joy, when situations in life seem hopeless. God is at work in our lives (as implied in v. 18), so we can rest assured that there is *purpose* in the things we presently experience. Our present suffering (which is temporary) is linked to future glory (which is eternal), so even physical *death* cannot undo the hope we have!

Consider these passages, related to joy, suffering and our future hope:

- **2 Corinthians 6:10a** and **Colossians 1:24** [Related to the persecution Paul experienced, for proclaiming the good news about Jesus] ... *sorrowful, yet always rejoicing... / Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you ...*
- **Matthew 5:11-12** *"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."*
- **James 1:2-4** *Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.*
- **1 Peter 4:13** *But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.*
- **1 Peter 1:6-7** *In this [looking forward to what God has in store for us] you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These [trials] have come so that your faith--of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire--may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.*

2. "Pray continually" (v. 17)

This command is like a "bridge" between our rejoicing in our circumstances (v. 16) and our thankfulness for what God is doing in those circumstances (v. 18).

This command does *not* mean we must be constantly mentioning prayer requests to God! It refers to an attitude of the heart, in which we desire what God desires. It involves a constant awareness of God's presence, and an ongoing fellowship with him. Perhaps we could compare this attitude to the way two friends can be walking together, drifting in and out of actual conversation... except that fellowship with God is *more than* just being with a friend!

Part of this ongoing attitude of prayer would include a reflection on what God has said to us in his Word.

3. "Give thanks in all circumstances" (v. 18)

This command tells us to express appreciation or gratefulness for what God is doing. This is a thankfulness that rises *above* circumstances.

Obviously, it is not always easy for us to see what God is doing - especially when we are going through trials. But we know that God *is* at work, because he has told us he is! This is the reason we can say with confidence:

- **Romans 8:28** *We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

From the "human responsibility" perspective, we must acknowledge that these three attitudes *are* God's moral will for us; and we need to learn to do them. From the "God's sovereignty" perspective, we must acknowledge that these things come as the result of God's work of salvation in us. Such attitudes don't come *naturally*, but are the result of the Spirit being present in us!

At times, we may find it difficult to obey these three commands, because our old way of life (being led by the "flesh" or sinful nature) constantly fights our new way of life (being led by the Spirit). But it is no less an obligation for us (and for *all* people). All three of these commands are part of God's moral will.

Responding the right way, when life's circumstances include suffering

Here are a selection of verses related to God's will (sovereign and moral), as it pertains to suffering - with an emphasis on suffering for the sake of Christ (such as when experiencing persecution).

1. The need to do good at all times, and especially when others oppose you.

It is God's *moral* will that we should do good *at all times*. If God's *sovereign* will for us includes suffering, we must make sure that our suffering is *not* because of any wrongdoing on our part! When the suffering is due to people's opposition to us, because we are followers of Jesus, our *good* words and conduct may have a positive effect on the situation.

- **1 Peter 3:15-17** *But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in*

Christ may be ashamed of their slander. It is better, if it is God's will [sovereign will], to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

- **1 Peter 2:13-17** *Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will [moral will] that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.*

2. A reminder that even suffering has a purpose for the follower of Jesus.

How does God's sovereign will fit in into all of this? God has a purpose for *all* that happens in our lives, *including suffering*. The following passage gives us a surprising example, one of many ways that God may use suffering to accomplish good: God may use it to *reduce* our tendency to sin! (In this passage, note the contrast between "living for the will of God" and "doing what pagans choose/will to do.")

- **1 Peter 4:1-3** *Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin. As a result, he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God. For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do--living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry.*

God's use of suffering to accomplish his *good* purposes in our lives (Romans 8:28) is something we often fail to understand until later, *after* the good purposes have arrived. During the suffering itself, things normally make no sense to us! Consider the experience of Job, and the final outcome of his suffering:

- **James 5:10-11** *Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.*

Job's suffering was definitely not pleasant! But what does Scripture say was the end result of that suffering? See also Job 42:12-17. (The end result *we* experience may be different, and might not arrive until eternity. But it will also be good.) _____

Finally, here is a reminder that God's purpose includes an ultimate *end* to our suffering. Whether now or in eternity, it's end is *guaranteed!*

- **1 Peter 5:10** *And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.*
- **Revelation 21:4** *He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.*

Considering all these things, how can you respond to suffering (as well as to life in general), so that your attitude and actions will be in accordance with God's will? Consider some specific ways that are appropriate to your own situation in life. (Use a separate sheet of paper.)

The WILL of GOD

PART 9 - Doing and Desiring God's Will (1)

Simply *knowing* God's will is not enough. We must *do* what he wills. More than that, we must *desire* to do it. This is what *genuine* Christianity is all about!

In previous lessons, we saw some examples of what God's will is. Here we will look at our *need* to do (obey) his will and the *power* we have to do so. Later, we will see some examples of people doing God's will, which proves that it *can* be done. (It's not an impossible "ideal.")

Our obligation to obey God's moral will

All people need to do the will of God. Why? Because it's a *moral* obligation. His will is totally *good*; and to pursue any other option is to pursue *evil*. Furthermore, God *commands* those who *aren't* doing his will to repent of their sin and begin to do it. We are warned that the Day of Justice is coming!

- **Acts 17:30b-31** *[God] commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed... [= Jesus Christ].*

As explained in Part 7, *any* instruction God has given us in the Bible (each passage taken within its context) is an expression of his moral will. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul could say that this included *everything* he preached, which included: 1) anything that was helpful (illustrated by the content of the epistles he wrote), as well as, 2) what people must do to be saved. Because he preached these things, he could claim that he had proclaimed "the whole will of God."

- **Acts 20:20-21, 26-27** *You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus. / Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.*

In Scripture, every statement that describes the will of God *implies* an obligation to obey. We don't need a direct command telling us to obey his will. Even so, some passages *do* give us such a command, as shown below.

God's will must be the basis for how we live

Below are two passages from the book of Ephesians. The first passage shows us *indirectly* our need to live according to God's will; the second gives us a *direct* statement.

1. A general statement

Here we learn that we need to *understand* God's will, so that we can live wisely (which is a moral obligation for us). The *need to understand* God's will implies a response - specifically the *doing of God's will*, so that it determines how we live.

The very way Scripture uses concepts such as "wisdom" and "understanding" also shows us this need. These words don't simply mean "fact knowing"; rather, they focus on taking that knowledge and applying it to one's life. So "understanding," as used here, includes the *application* of those facts to the way we live (v. 15) - in other words, it includes the application or *doing* of God's will.

- **Ephesians 5:15-21** *Be very careful, then, how you live--not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. / Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. [This is followed by three specific examples that illustrate and define what is meant by "submission."]*

The context further affirms this need to do God's will, by its emphasis on *conduct* (not merely on a comprehension of facts). It contains a variety of instructions that show us how we should live, as well as our need for a right attitude and godly thinking. It focuses on *action*, based on the firm foundation of "understanding the Lord's will." This shows us that "doing the will of God" is applicable to *all* of life.

What are some things you can do, in order to better understand the Lord's will? _____

After the passage mentioned above, three examples are given that explain various principles related to our interaction with other people. Each of these principles has applications that go far beyond the specific relationship mentioned in the text. Here is an example of this:

2. One of the examples of how to do it

This is the third of the three examples given in the Ephesians passage. It illustrates the basic obligation described in the Ephesians 5 passage, and was chosen because it includes the phrase "will of God."

- **Ephesians 6:5-8** *Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.*

This verse describes a situation in which a person might be tempted to *not* do the will of God, or even to claim that it doesn't apply! Even so, it *does* apply. The phrase "from the heart" shows us that obedience to the will of God is *not* merely a set of physical actions. One's attitude is a very important part of it. (In the Bible, the concept of "heart" refers to both emotional and intellectual aspects of a person.)

Some may object that this passage *doesn't* apply to us today. But we need to realize that the New Testament concept of "slavery" is *not* the same as the modern stereotype of slavery that many people have been taught. In the Bible, it includes a wide variety of situations in which one person did work activities for another. Modern-day employer-employee relationships are included in this concept; so instructions such as those found in this passage are relevant even today!

If you are an *employee*, what does this passage teach about your obligations? _____

If you are an *employer*, you need to read verse 9. What does that verse teach about your obligations? _____

What are some other ways you could apply this principle - ways that may be specific to your own situation in life? _____

The evil of NOT doing God's will (and a warning against hypocrisy)

To know the will of God and fail to do it is a *serious* matter. Your sin effects not only yourself, but many others as well.

The following passage was originally directed toward *Jews*. But there are many *non-Jews* who have a similar attitude; and the same results occur. Paul's condemnation applies to them as well.

- **Romans 2:17-24** *Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and brag about your relationship to God; if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth-- you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."*

We could summarize this passage in this way: "If you know God's will, then you had better do it!"

If you *don't* do God's will, your ongoing lifestyle of disobedience *proves* that you are not a follower of Jesus. All that your willful disobedience accomplishes is to increase the wrath of God against you, *even though you may claim you are saved*. Furthermore, your claim to be a follower of God may end up turning others against God - thus incurring further guilt (and wrath) for your sin.

Down through history, some of the worst enemies of Christianity have been individuals who were at one time exposed to people who claimed to be Christians, but who denied Christ by their actions.

How might you be tempted to commit this sin? _____

What can you do to avoid it? _____

The power to obey God's moral will

We have a moral obligation to accept and to obey the revealed will of God. However, the sinful nature we were born with is corrupt, and there is *nothing* it can do that has eternal benefit. Because of this, we are powerless on our own; we *cannot* succeed in doing God's will if we rely on our own strength. Instead, we need to rely on the strength that *God* offers to give us.

God, in his mercy, makes obedience possible. He gives those who trust him the Holy Spirit. The Spirit works in us, to give us the *desire* and the *ability* to do God's will.

In the end, we give *God* the praise and glory for the good we do. Though *we* did it (from the "human responsibility" perspective), we can also describe it as something that God did in us (from the "sovereignty" perspective). As always, sovereignty and responsibility work together.

The "sovereignty" aspect: God's role in accomplishing his will in our lives.

People tend to focus on their responsibility to obey, and to overlook the sovereignty aspect of obedience - an aspect which *guarantees* that the obedience will be present in those who belong to God. The following verse combines these two concepts. It tells us our obligation; but it also tells us that God is at work in us, enabling us to do what pleases him. He makes possible not only our *obedience*, but also our *desire* ("will") to obey!

In this passage, the focus is on *our* will (and what God does to direct it), not on *God's* will. Rightly understood, this passage will leave us filled with praise to God and with an attitude of humility.

- **Philippians 2:12-13** *Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed--not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence--continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.*

For a genuine Christian, is obedience a *past act*, or an *ongoing lifestyle*? Explain. _____

How should this passage influence your attitude, when you have done God's will? _____

The "human responsibility" aspect: We need a renewed mind

This second passage looks at the "human responsibility" perspective, and shows us what *we* must do, in order to know God's will (and thus become able to do it).

- **Romans 12:1-2** *Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will. (The verses that follow instruct us to use our gifts for the good of *all*.)*

Even from the "human responsibility" perspective, we need to rely on God. We must *choose* to submit to God, in order to correctly understand and do his will! Our "minds" - our values and perspectives on life - need changed ("renewed"). By submitting our thoughts to what Scripture teaches, we will get renewed minds - and thus become able to "test and approve what God's will is." (This change in the way we think is a part of the *ongoing* aspect of repentance.)

What are some ways you can obey the command given in this passage? _____

The WILL of GOD

PART 10 - Doing and Desiring God's Will (2)

GOD'S WILL CAN BE DONE/OBEYED

Throughout Scripture, we find examples of people who did the will of God, and other people who chose not to. We will be looking at some examples in which the word "will" (or equivalent) is specifically mentioned. This will include two examples we can follow, and one to avoid.

Jesus' example of obeying God's will: He teaches us how to respond

In Part 5, we looked at one aspect of Jesus' obedience, when we examined the interaction between God's sovereign will and human responsibility. Now we are going to look at another aspect: Jesus' willingness to follow God's will in everything he did. Part of this obedience involved a willingness to fulfill prophecy, but the "road" to that fulfillment involved *day-to-day choices of doing what was right* - the same types of choices we must make. (This makes his example very relevant to us.)

We must strongly emphasize that, though Jesus was fully God, he made these choices to obey as a *human*. He did not exercise some kind of "divine power" that we do not have. He experienced the temptation to *not* do God's will, the same way we do - except that he did not sin (Hebrews 4:15). Jesus provides the example for us to follow - not only in his willingness to *do* the will of God, but also in his ongoing *desire* to do it. This was his consuming passion - and it should be our's as well, since any other option is sin.

1. His ongoing desire to do God's will

- **John 4:32, 34** *But he said to them, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about." ... "My food," said Jesus, "is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.*
- **John 6:38** *For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me.*

This is the example we should strive to follow. Though we aren't "sent" from heaven, as the above verses say of Jesus, we are "called" by God to follow Jesus' example. Part of this "calling" includes the need to be *holy* (1 Thessalonians 4:7; 1 Peter 1:14-19).

Unfortunately, as Ecclesiastes 7:20 reminds us, *"there is no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins."* We may not want to admit it and confess our sins to God; but we *need* to. The first step to becoming more like Christ is the willingness to admit the truth about our sin!

Moving from "the way we *are*" to "the way we *need to be*" requires a struggle or fight against sin (something that the apostle Paul was well familiar with - Romans 7:14-25). It is a necessary aspect of spiritual growth (perhaps like "growing pains"), and will take effort on our part. Let us not be like those who choose to enjoy their sin, who call it a "struggle" mainly when trying to appease their consciences (since their consciences remind them that it *is* sin - Romans 2:15).

The Bible (which *defines* the will of God) was the foundation for all that Jesus did, *including his response to temptation*. When he quoted Scripture to resist temptation (see Matthew 4), he wasn't simply reciting "religious teachings." Rather, he was admitting the truth about God and righteousness, and choosing to live by it. (He did not live the lie that considers sin an option.) Furthermore, he prepared for temptation *before* it happened, learning Scripture and submitting to it; so when temptation arrived, he was ready to resist it. (He also maintained fellowship with God through prayer - which is another thing we should be doing.)

What can you do so that you might be more like Jesus, in choosing to do the will of God? _____

2. Doing God's will even in the most difficult of situations

As a human, Jesus had to *learn* obedience (Hebrews 5:8). This involved a lifetime of choosing to do God's will. Had he not done this, he would have failed at the time of his greatest trial - his death on the cross. The following verses are from his prayer, just before this time of testing. They serve as a reminder of how we should respond in *our* difficult situations (none of which will be as severe as his was).

In this time of agonizing prayer, Jesus admitted that doing God's will (which, for him, would include torture and death) was not the choice that he (as a human) would naturally desire. But because he was committed to doing God's will, he chose to do it, *no matter how unpleasant it might be*. Injustice was about to occur, but as 1 Peter 2:23b tells us, "he entrusted himself to him who judges justly."

- **Matthew 26:39, 42** *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." / 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."*
- **Luke 22:41-42** *He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done."*
- **Mark 14:35-36** *Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."*

It's easy to *daydream* that we would faithfully do God's will, if we were to experience severe persecution or trials. Peter thought the same, just hours before he denied Jesus! But to be strong in difficult situations, we need to begin by practicing *now*, in the day-to-day decisions we make. What are some things you can do?

David did God's will: Though he was not perfect, it characterized his life

When we read about the life of David, we realize that he was not *sinless* (see Psalm 51). But when he *did* sin, he repented of it and forsook it. Over all, his basic *way of life* was characterized by a willingness to do God's will.

1. David was praised by God for his willingness to do God's will

- **Acts 13:22** *After removing Saul, he [God] made David their king. He testified concerning him: 'I have found David son of Jesse a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.'*

Scripture describes an instance in which David sinned grievously (2 Samuel 11-12); but this was not his normal way of life. The event described in that passage shows us that sin can never be taken lightly. Even if forgiven, it can have horrible consequences. This serves as a warning for people who think they can deliberately choose to sin, and then make everything OK by praying "a quick prayer" (often based on a distorted view of 1 John 1:9). On the other hand, it also shows that there is *hope* for those who have sinned and have truly repented of it.

2. **David did not die until after he had accomplished all that God willed for him to do**

God's will for our lives includes not only obeying the commands and teachings of Scripture; but it includes the right use of our gifts and abilities, and the choices we make that are related to our unique circumstances in life. *All* of this can be done for the glory of God. If we do this, then we will be able to say that we "served God's purpose" (as was said of David), when our life comes to an end.

- **Acts 13:36-37** *"For when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his fathers and his body decayed. But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay. [= Jesus Christ.]*

At the end of your life, will you be characterized as one who chose to do God's will? If not, what changes can you begin making, which would make it a more fitting description? (Like David, repentance may be one of the steps you must take.) _____

The religious leaders did not do God's will: Don't follow their example!

In a previous lesson, we noted that "loving God" and "doing religious activities" are *not* the same thing. In fact, they can sometimes be complete opposites! The religious leaders of Jesus' day were some of the most religious people on the planet; but they were living proof that a person can reject God's will and *still* be deeply religious. Many other passages show us that they were pretentious, and had replaced *God's* law with their own teachings. (Consider Jesus' comments in Matthew 23; Mark 7:1-13; etc.)

This passage is an important lesson and a stern warning. What these people did is *not* an example we should follow!

- **Luke 7:29-30** *All the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus' words, acknowledged that God's way was right, because they had been baptized by John. But the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John.*

Religious leaders may look quite impressive to us; but natural abilities and impressive character traits do not guarantee a godly *heart*, as Jesus warned his followers:

- **Matthew 7:15** *Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.*

It's easy to find others who are guilty of this - many such people exist today. But we need to consider our own actions; for at the Day of Judgment, we won't answer for *other* people! In what ways might you be tempted to become like these religious leaders, and what can you do to avoid it? _____

DESIRING GOD'S WILL

We have a moral obligation to desire God's will. But how do we "create" this desire? It seems that there are a lot more Scripture passages related to "obeying" God's will, than there are for "desiring" it! This is not because desiring it is less important than obedience - for obedience without the right attitude is incomplete. But the very nature of "desire" indicates a need to pursue it in a different way. Unlike the action of obedience, we can't simply "do" a desire!

As in all matters, God's sovereignty and human responsibility go together. As we have already seen, God works in us to give us the desire ("will") to obey him (Philippians 2:13). But we dare not forget that there is a constant interaction between God's sovereignty and human responsibility. Our actions *do* matter!

To change our desires, we must first change our *values*, for values are the foundation for one's desires. We must be willing to *submit* our thinking to the teachings of Scripture; and as we do this, the Holy Spirit will use those Scriptures to make changes in our values. This is related to the "renewed" mind, described in Romans 12:2.

Spiritual maturity involves *growth*. This growth will often involve struggle, as our old "self" fights against the changes. So how should we respond if we *don't yet* have a burning desire to do God's will? First, we shouldn't give up the struggle; but we also shouldn't *pretend* that our desires are right, if they aren't. (We should openly confess the truth to God, who already knows everything about us!)

Then we should at least start by: 1) *doing* what is right (the will of God), and 2) giving the Bible a more important place in our lives, so that the Holy Spirit can use it to change us, and 3) maintaining open communication with God (prayer). If we do these things, then we can trust God to work on developing the right desires within us. Though change may take time, we can take heart, when even *small* changes occur within us.

Meditating on God and his Word is a valuable tool for changing one's values. This is because meditation (as *Scripture* defines it) involves not just *learning facts* about Scripture, but applying those facts to one's life. Psalm 119 is a highly recommended passage that focuses on this issue. Here are some of its features:

- It shows us the *worth* of meditating on the Word of God, and gives us examples of what to think about - the goodness of God, the wonders of his works, the value of his Word and the moral law, etc. When such concepts are embedded in our hearts, the Holy Spirit can use them to change us.
- It sets before us our *goal*: Having an intense desire to follow God and to do what pleases him. It also shows us that this is a realistic (though difficult) goal. The human author of Psalm 119 attained it!
- Indirectly, the psalm teaches us about *prayer*; for many of the verses *are* expressions of prayer to God.
- Concerning our attitude: Some verses focus on having a willingness to obey; others on having a heartfelt desire to do so. There is also an emphasis on having a constant dependency on God; for without him, we can do nothing.
- Finally, the psalm gives us *hope* when we are in the midst of suffering, because it reminds us that God will use that suffering to accomplish good in our lives. (We also know from other Scriptures that God uses difficult situations to distinguish between the genuine followers of God and the fakes. See Matthew 13:3, 5-6, 20-21, for example.)

To what degree are godly desires present in your heart? Based on what you have read (in this lesson, as well as in Psalm 119 and other Scripture passages), write down some things you can do, which God may use to increase your desire for godliness and for doing the will of God. But don't forget your dependency on God! You need to remember that *all* your ability to do these things came from him! (Use a separate sheet of paper.)

The WILL of GOD

PART 11 - Desiring Good for Others

There is no such thing as "good" that goes against God's moral will. Any such "good" would be superficial and short-lived at best, and eternally damning at worst. To claim that something contrary to God's will is "good" is to say that it's God's will to *withhold* good from people - a claim made by the serpent in the garden (Genesis 3:1-5). In reality, it is the same as calling evil "good" and good "evil" (Isaiah 5:20).

God's desire for people's good

God desires good for *all* people. It is *we*, not God, who have placed a barrier between us and the good he desires us to have. Because of this, the *only* way to experience that good is by the removal of the barrier. This is the first step necessary for people to be able to experience the *vast* amount of good that God has to offer. We call it "salvation." Below are some verses that describe God's desire for this barrier to be removed.

As we have noted in past lessons, God relates to humans on two levels. In terms of *sovereignty*, we know (based on what Scripture teaches us) that many people *will* perish. But this is *not* the realm in which our interaction with God occurs.

The verses listed below express God's will for people as he interacts with us on *our* level of existence. In them, we discover that it is *not* God's desire or wish that anyone perish, but that all be saved. Yet since God does not violate our ability to choose, what he *desires* for people does not always occur. It is possible only if we repent. Because of this, God's will, as expressed on the *human* level, does not always correspond to his *sovereign* will, or "decree."

1. He does not desire that anyone perish

- **Matthew 18:12-14** *"What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.*
- **2 Peter 3:8-9** *But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, ...*

2. Instead, he desires that all repent, be saved, and come to a knowledge of the truth

- **1 Timothy 2:1-4** *I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone-- for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.*
- **2 Peter 3:9b** *He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*

This is what God desires for all people. Do you desire this for yourself? If so, what are you doing about it?

Do you desire this for others? If so, what are you doing about it? _____

God is not happy when people perish, but is very grieved. How grieved? Consider this: Though he is the God of the universe, he sent Jesus Christ (God in human form) to die in our place, so that we could be with him and enjoy him forever! Nevertheless, God will not *force* upon us a righteousness (= "good") that we are unwilling to accept.

Humans *choose* to do what they know is sin. Even when they haven't heard the Word of God, they know it is sin, because their consciences testify against them (Romans 2:14-15). Though it's not God's desire ("will") for people to perish, a person's *rejection* of God's moral will *must* result in consequences that make God sad!

In the end, justice *must* occur. For it to *not* occur would require God to *cease* being holy, righteous and good. Sin and evil would have to become *acceptable* to him - and this would be a denial of his very nature. Since justice *must* happen, people who have chosen to *not* follow God's will in this life - who have chosen a path contrary to the moral will of God - will have to experience the consequences of their choices. By choice they didn't delight in God's will in *this* life, so they will lose any opportunity to do so in the *next* life. The only way to avoid this is through repentance and trust in Jesus Christ for salvation.

3. Jesus wants those who are saved to be with him

Salvation has past, present and future aspects:

- ***The past aspect of salvation*** (also known as "regeneration"): The time we initially turned to Jesus in repentance and trust, and God declared us righteous. We can describe this as the time we were saved.
- ***The present aspect of salvation*** (also known as "sanctification"): If our salvation is genuine, we are presently growing in our walk with Christ. We are "working out" our salvation (as God is working in us to make the "working out" possible - Philippians 2:12-13).
- ***The future aspect of salvation*** (also known as "glorification"): We look forward to the day when we will receive the goal of our faith, the salvation of our souls (1 Peter 1:9; also Romans 13:11; etc.). This refers to the future, beginning at the resurrection, when we will be in Jesus' presence for eternity.

In the following verse, Jesus expresses his desire (or "will") that those who have begun the "journey" of salvation will be able to complete it. This verse is like those we just looked at, being an expression of God's desire (or "will"). But there is a major difference between them: God's desire for the *salvation* of people *won't* always be fulfilled; but Jesus' desire for the *spiritual growth* of those saved *will* always be fulfilled!

- **John 17:24** *Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.*

Note the phrase, "*those you have given me.*" This prayer applies *only* to those who have begun the process of salvation. From the human perspective, if we have taken that first step, this verse can be an encouragement to us! From the sovereignty perspective, *God* has begun a good work in us. Consider the following passage, which we examined when learning about God's *sovereign* role in our salvation:

- **John 6:39-40** *"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."*

Scripture also reminds us that God will make sure that what he started will be successfully completed!

- **Philippians 1:6** ... *he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*

Consider what Jesus prayed in the John 17:24 passage. If you have taken the first step of salvation, what is going to happen to you? Why? _____

From the human responsibility perspective, what must you do, to make sure that this verse applies to you?

Our desire for God's will to be done - expressed in our prayers

We who are followers of Jesus - children of God - will want to desire what God desires. We will desire good for other people, just as "our Father in heaven" does (Matthew 5:44-48). We will want people to be saved. And because of this, we will pray for God's will to be done - not only in our own lives, but also in the lives of others.

The following verses focus on some of the ways our prayers can express this desire for God's will. The first verse is a general statement that is familiar to most Christians (and many non-Christians). The other verses focus on some specific issues we may pray about, for those who have turned to God for salvation.

A general statement concerning all things

1. A general prayer for God's will to be done

This is a general pattern that we are to apply to *all* aspects of life. This prayer expresses the submission of our will to his, and a desire for God to accomplish his will in all the world (as well as in our own lives).

- **Matthew 6:10** "... *your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*"

What are some ways this prayer can apply to situations in which you find yourself? _____

What are some ways this prayer can apply to situations in which you find your friends and other people?

Some specific issues to pray about

The following verses are examples of praying that God will enable people to know and do his will. The prayers are about other people; but they imply the need to desire these things for *ourselves*. It would be sheer hypocrisy to pray such things and to *not* apply them to ourselves! (We looked at this issue in a previous lesson. Romans 2:17-24 shows us that hypocrisy can have *horrible* consequences.)

Since it is God's desire to do the things mentioned in these prayers, we can rest assured that he will not fail. Our biggest "hurdle" will be ourselves! We need to be willing to trust God and then to obey him! (We tend to rely on our *feelings*, which often lie to us, instead of the *facts* - the truth of Scripture and God's promises to us.)

- If such desires *aren't* in you, then pray that God will send the Holy Spirit to use the following Scriptures to convict and change you!

1. Prayer to KNOW God's will

- **Colossians 1:9-10a** *For this reason [because we heard about your love in the Spirit - v. 3-8], since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way ...*

Since the Colossians were genuine followers of Jesus, they had the fruit of the Spirit - one aspect of which is love. Paul's prayer was that the wisdom and understanding that come from the Spirit would lead them into a better knowledge of God's will. This knowledge would show them how to live in a way that is pleasing to God in every way. The *source* of this "knowledge of his will" is the "wisdom and understanding" that comes from the Spirit ("spiritual"). The *results* of it are seen in the way we live - worthy and pleasing to God. (The verses that follow in the context give some examples of how we are to live.)

2. Prayer to STAND FIRM in God's will

- **Colossians 4:12** *Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.*

A constant willingness to do the will of God will result in a *stability* in life that cannot be attained any other way. It is the foundation for spiritual maturity.

3. Prayer to DO God's will

Our obligation to do God's will is all-encompassing. But so are his provisions, which enable us to do it!

- **Hebrews 13:21** *[May the God of peace...] equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

It is through our prayers that the sovereign God has chosen to accomplish his purposes, the "work" he plans to do in us. In this prayer, we are asking God to do the very thing he delights in doing - i.e., to enable us to do what is right! Ultimately, we become able to do his will, and he is pleased by what we do.

Since doing what is right is also *our* desire (as followers of Jesus), we are grateful for what God has done for us. He makes doing what is right possible; and we want to give him the honor and glory in all that we do.

Taking into consideration the various emphases in these prayers, what can you do to apply them to your life?

What can you do to encourage others to grow in these various matters related to God's will? (Obviously, prayer would be one thing to do.) Think of some specific people you interact with, when answering this question. _____

The WILL of GOD

PART 12 - Blessings or Judgment - Your Choice

We have already seen God's desire for all people to enjoy the good he freely offers. Since human sin has formed a barrier between people and the good that God offers, the first step to receiving this good is to accept his offer of salvation through repentance and trust in what Jesus Christ did on the cross. Though we deserve a terrifying judgment because of our sins, those who have turned to God can now begin to experience the good things that God offers us. Most of this lesson focuses on these things - we call them "blessings."

Obeying God's moral will results in blessings

There is value in doing God's will: Those who do it are blessed by God in many ways - both now and forever. Even so, getting blessed is *not* the ultimate motive of those who do it. When we consider the fact that even our *desires* come from God (if they are godly desires), there is no room for a self-centered attitude! These desires from God (expressed as love for God and neighbor) will *define* our ultimate motive for what we do. When experienced in this context, the blessings we receive are both glorious and godly.

The difference between eternal and temporary blessings

The verses in this section focus on what we often call *spiritual* blessings, which are available only for those who have become followers of Jesus. These blessings are eternal; yet many of them can be experienced even *now*. In contrast, the *physical* blessings of this present life, available for saved and unsaved alike, are *temporary*, and will come to an end at death. In eternity, they will be replaced by other physical blessings - *but only for the follower of Jesus*. (What those blessings are has only been partially revealed.)

In this present life, there are many *temporary* blessings that God offers to both saved and unsaved people. For example, "*He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous*" (Matthew 5:45b). *None* of these blessings are inherently deserved, and if we *don't* experience them, it is not to God's discredit (since sinful humans deserve *only* judgment and wrath). But in these expressions of kindness, there is an opportunity for people to recognize God's kindness for what it is, and to desire more of it (which is only possible through salvation). The ultimate goal is that some will look to God and be saved (which would open wide the door to much greater and *permanent* blessings. As Scripture says, "... *God's kindness leads you toward repentance,*" (Romans 2:4b) and "*God did this [various acts of kindness] so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us*" (Acts 17:27). Sadly, most will close their eyes to God's acts of kindness, and will *not* repent.

Eternal blessings already experienced by those who are willing to do the will of God

1. Eternal life

- **1 John 2:15-17** *Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world--the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does--comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.*

Most people wrongly think that eternal life doesn't exist until "eternity" arrives. Scripture tells us that the followers of Jesus *already have eternal life*. In this passage, the one who *does* the will of God *lives* forever. Both of these words are ongoing *present* tense verbs; they refer to "now." (See also John 3:36; 5:24.)

In a sense, what you pursue *defines* your life: If you pursue what is temporary, then your life will be temporary, followed by eternal death. If you pursue what is eternal (based on God's instructions in the Bible), then your life already *is* eternal.

If you already *have* eternal life, what does it matter if your present body dies? _____

2. Being part of Jesus' family

- **Matthew 12:50** *For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."*
- **Mark 3:35** *Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."*

In this sense, what you *do* defines who you *are*. If you do the will of God, you are part of God's family. Other Scripture passages show us that this entrance into the family of God occurs by means of *adoption* (Romans 8:15; Ephesians 1:5; etc.).

Who are you? How do you know? _____

3. Heard by God; when we talk to him, we will not be ignored!

- **John 9:31** [Spoken by the blind man, whom Jesus healed.] *We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will.*
- **1 John 5:14-15** *This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us--whatever we ask--we know that we have what we asked of him.*

When we make requests to God, the nature of the answer may vary. But whatever the outcome, we know that God has heard and listened to us, if we ask according to his will.

- When our request matches his will, as described in the above verses, we will receive what we ask for (though the answer might not come at the time we want or in the way we expect).
- If our prayers are incomplete or misguided, the Holy Spirit will "translate" our request into something good, and God will answer (though it may be different from what we expect) - Romans 8:26-27.
- In contrast, if we do *not* ask according to his will, we have no guarantee that we will get what we ask for. If our motives are evil, God may refuse to give us what we desire - James 4:3.

There is more to prayer than just asking for things! What is your attitude toward prayer? _____

Eternal blessings to come in the future, for those willing to do the will of God

We need to *persevere* in doing the will of God - a concept that focuses on human responsibility. Yet this does not nullify what other Scriptures tell us about God's work in the life of a genuine follower of Jesus, empowering him so that he *can* persevere. We *will* persevere; and in the end, will give God the credit for what he has done. We will affirm that salvation - from start to finish - is from the Lord. (Compare to Jonah 2:9.)

1. Receiving the promise - the fullness of eternal life

- **Hebrews 10:35-36, 39** *So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. ... But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved.*

Because of the nature of salvation (which changes a person, all the way to the very core of his being), genuine followers of Jesus *will* persevere. Commands such as this are part of the means that God uses to keep us in the right path. They also help to distinguish between the genuine and the fake Christians: Those who are genuine will choose to obey this verse (though obedience may come with a struggle); the fakes will sooner or later quit (often making excuses to "justify" their quitting).

2. Being welcomed into the kingdom of heaven

- **Matthew 7:21** *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ..."*

This passage describes what will happen to those who *do* God's will. The verses that follow (v. 22-23) describe the fate of those who *don't* do God's will. (See below.)

Many people who call themselves "Christian" do not obey God. What does Scripture say about them? What does Scripture say about *you*? _____

Concerning those who do *not* obey God's will

Just as there are consequences for those who *do* God's will, there are also consequences for those who *don't* do it - both immediate and eternal consequences.

What they may experience in this present life

The wicked who *don't* repent of their sin may still enjoy physical blessings for a while. But since they refuse to rightly honor the source of those blessings (they do not give God the credit he deserves), those blessings will one day come to an end - and they will end *forever*.

The wicked (which includes *everyone* who does not do the will of God) may also experience the consequences of sin *now*, before eternity arrives. In addition to the pain and sorrow that sinful choices often bring, sin effects the very *nature* of a person. *Even now*, choosing to sin results in a hardening of the heart and a corrupted view of reality. From the sovereignty perspective, Scripture tells us that God "gives them over" to the choices they want - which, in effect, hardens them in their sins. But we need to connect this statement to the "human responsibility" fact that they *choose* to do their sin, their *choices* become enslaving habits, and the consequences they reap are appropriate for their *choices* (Romans 1:18-32; 2 Thessalonians 2:10-12; etc.).

The eternal consequences of not doing God's will

Scripture tells us that "unbelievers" will not enter the kingdom of God. But in the following passages, Jesus warns us that even *religious* people ("believers") will not enter the kingdom of God, if they do religious activities, but not God's will. (The two are often different, as seen in Part 7 of this study.)

1. They will be excluded from the kingdom of heaven

This passage shows us that *anyone* who doesn't do the will of God will be excluded from the Kingdom of heaven. Even "doing religion" is not enough to guarantee entry. At the Day of Judgment, many religious people (even "miracle workers") will be cast out of God's presence.

- **Matthew 7:21-23** *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'"*

2. Those who are religious "believers" will receive the judgment of "unbelievers"

The servants in the following passage can be compared to people today who call themselves "Christian" - some of whom are genuine followers of Jesus and some of whom are fakes. As in the parable, they all have an opportunity to know the master's (God's) will; but some choose to ignore it. This parable shows that the fakes will experience the same judgment as the "unbelievers," except that the judgment of the fakes will be more severe (since they knew God's will).

- **Luke 12:46-48** *The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers. That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.*

God is not unjust. Each person will be judged based on what he knows. The religious person, who has the opportunity to know a lot, will be judged severely. The person who has *never* been exposed to God's Word will still be judged, though less severely, because he still knows *something* about God's will. (This is because *God has embedded that knowledge deep within his conscience* - Romans 2:14-15.)

In what ways can you take heed to these warnings? _____

The wicked response: making excuses for sin, sometimes even talking back to God!

Scripture is filled with examples of people making excuses for their sin - beginning all the way back with Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:12-13), and continuing into the future, when people stand before God and are judged (Matthew 24:41-46). In the following passage, they use God's *sovereignty* as an excuse for their sin. Rather than looking at human responsibility (which is the actual basis for their conduct), they point to God's sovereignty and blame *God* for their actions!

- **Romans 9:19-21** *One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?' " Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?"*

How do you respond when you sin? What does your response tell about you? _____
