

THE DIFFICULT WILL OF GOD
How To Know The Will Of God
Part 3
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Tonight, the third night on the Will of God. The first Sunday night especially addressing the theme of the General Will of God. Certain things we need to put into focus in our lives which unless we put into place it doesn't do any good to make the right decisions because we may be doing the right thing and be in the right place but still be out of God's will because we're not becoming the person he seeks.

Last week we looked specifically at the theme of the specific will of God. How to make decisions as it pertains to guidance for our lives.

Tonight I speak on the theme, the Difficult Will of God. I realize that as I speak this evening that this word for some of you will immediately have a more profound impact. It will sink to a far deeper level in your experience than others who are here. Simply because you right now are at a difficult point in your life and the Holy Spirit will allow this word to be a healing guide for you. For others of you I believe that what I share this evening is a way of preconditioning a response. For all of us sooner or later are going to experience some difficult elements in regard to the will of God for our life. It is a good thing to build the word of God into us as a preparatory experience before we hit those moments and become surprised by them as though expecting that the Christian life should never involve an encounter with the difficult will of God. The first thing I want to say this evening is addressed to this very point. That the difficult will of God is a common experience to all God's people. All of us in this room at one point or the other in our Christian experience if you haven't experienced already you will at some point as the Lord continues to tarry, but all of us have experience, are experiencing, or will experience some difficult phase of the will of God for our lives. Some moment that we encounter that stretches our capacity to understand God. Stretches our endurance to keep pursuing our walk as a Christian. Some difficult moment that makes us wonder whether or not we've stepped out of God's will and seek as we can to find out where we might have stepped out of God's will we are not able to find it. Some moment of doubt that comes into our life that says, Does God really care for you after all? Some difficult moment.

I want to say to you right at the beginning. Don't be alarmed at this. This is part and parcel of the Christian experience. It's part of living for Christ. You're going to encounter it.

I'll cite to you some scriptural examples.

The first from Jeremiah. The whole book of Jeremiah is an example of a person living in the difficult will of God. Jeremiah is called upon the prophecy to his people that they're going to go into captivity to the Babylonians and nothing is going to save them. He is a person who is called upon to in effect counsel the United States President to surrender to Russia because ultimately they're going to take the world anyway so why fight them. We might as well surrender now.

The reason why he was called to do that for his ancient land was that his people had sinned and rebelled against God and God said, You're going to be chastised for your sins and the Babylonians are going to do it.

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Jeremiah saw a difficult day coming upon God's people. He had this profound word. Jeremiah 12:5 "If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out how can you compete with horses. If you stumble in safe country how will you manage in the swelling of the Jordan." Two metaphors of contrast. One if you've run on foot and worn out how will you compete when you're running against horses. Indicating the times are going to become more difficult. If in the will of God now you are not persevering, how will you then have the strength to persevere when it becomes more difficult. If you've fallen down in safe and level country, how will you do in the swelling of the Jordan? In other words if the Christian life now in a time of normalcy is not being lived on a level of inner relationship with God how then will you do when you're really rocked and torn by life? It's an admonition to make sure that our relationship with the Lord is intact in a day that nothing really is coming loose. So that in the day when everything is shaken our faith in that time might not be.

Another example of a person for whom the difficult will of God was an experience was of course Job. He received dreadful tidings of disaster. His response was simply this, "The Lord gives and the Lord takes away." He had already I think sort of set his heart that he would be faithful to God even in the midst of a disaster and in the moments of the disaster that initial response sprang forth.

Another person familiar with the difficult will of God as a common experience was the prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel 24:15-18 one of the experiences that God called upon Ezekiel to go through was this. "Son of man behold I'm about to take the delight of your eyes away from you in a single stroke. Yet you shall not mourn or weep nor shall your tears run down.' So I spoke to the people in the morning and in the evening my wife died." Here is a man who loves his wife, who calls her the delight of his eyes. Yet he's commanded by the Lord as a sign and symbol to the people of God they're going to captivity that their grief is going to be so profound that they must shut it up and not even show normal emotion. So he is commanded by God not to shed a tear on the death of the delight of his life. He said in effect I'm going through my normal course of duties. In the morning I spoke to the people and in the evening my wife died.

Hosea knows the difficult experience of the will of God. Hosea is a lover. Nothing would be more desired by Hosea than to settle down and find that gal he could really love and relate to. He's told by the Lord, "Hosea, you want to marry? Fine. But you must go marry a prostitute as my sign that you will understand what it is for me to be to be married to this prostituting people. Hosea knew the difficulty of inner turmoil that came because he had a marital relationship that was anything but ideal. The difficult will of God.

Jesus knew the difficult will of God. Time and again we see it several occasions in his life. After his baptism when the Spirit of God came upon him immediately the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness and he was in the wilderness forty days tempted by Satan and he was with the wild beasts. He knew what the difficult will of God was like in that extreme period of testing in the desert after great blessing. Sometimes we are surprised that after great blessing from the Lord we should immediately be launched into trial this certainly was the pattern with Jesus.

Another occasion in Jesus' life that shows this difficult will of God as experience is that two thirds of the way into Jesus' ministry as he's heading to the cross he brings his disciples to a critical moment at Caesarea-Philippi and he says to them, "Who do you say that I am?" and Peter says, "You are the Christ." Then all the gospels, the synoptic especially, tell us "And Jesus

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then began to teach the disciples that the Son of man must suffer many things and be rejected by the chief priests elders and scribes and be crucified and after three days rise. He never spoke plainly about his death and about his sorrow until they had come to that break through experience of realizing who he really was. After their confession of him then they were told of the cross.

This again is many times our Christian experience that the Lord holds before him some great revelation of himself, some revelation of his will for us and then once we have passed that, once we have come through the exhilaration of spiritual breakthrough he lets us know that there's a cost involved with that. The cross is next.

Jesus on another occasion is the story he directed to us. About the difficult will of God as a common experience. He closed the Sermon on the Mount with the story of two builders. We know that story as the man who built on the rock and the man who built on the sand and forget though the location of where that story occurred. That it is the end of a sermon. I like to close sermons with an illustration, a story. A story, an illustration has a way of putting it all together and closing not simply on a cognitive note but on an emotional note because we see a story a people unfold before us as a consequence of what has been taught.

So the Lord tells the story to close the Sermon on the Mount. Three chapters in the gospel of Matthew – 5, 6, 7 – where he lays out what it means to be a disciple of his. Where he lays out what it means to live in the kingdom of God. He finally sums it all up by saying there were two builders. I think as I look at this story I see some similarity between the two builders. Both had the same desire. They wanted to build a house. Both lived in the same general location for the storms that came tested both. It was in the same area. Both of the houses looked alike. Both experienced the storm. And the storm was an awesome storm. Jesus said the rains floods and winds. This to me speaks of tremendous testing that came to the houses that were built. The rains symbolized the testing that came from above. The floods the testing that came from beneath. And the winds the testing that came from against. From all sides – top, beneath, against. The storm came. That storm tested these two builders who had built with the same desire the general location, the same look alike kinds of houses, the same storm.

The Lord is indicating in that story that everybody is going to be tested. The person who builds on sand and the person who builds on the rock. There are some differences though between the two builders. The differences are in their foundation and the difference is in their finish.

The foundation of the one is on the rock. He took time to make sure that he was building on the right kind of thing in his life so that when the storms came his house could stand. And Jesus doesn't mean anything else by this story except that the whole of his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is if a person will live by it, if a person will embrace it and take it into their life, if they will start out by developing the characteristics in the general will of God that we talked about the first night – the eight beatitudes. Go on to develop them, the spirit of obedience to Christ both in terms of how we relate to other people and how we relate to God. If we will build on that kind of foundation when the storm comes Jesus says you will stand.

But he says if you hear this whole message and you don't hear it. If you simply take it as beautiful words but don't act upon it in your life when the storm comes then there is no foundation and the house collapses. There's a difference in the foundation. There's a difference

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in the finish. If the foundation isn't good the finish isn't good. If the foundation is good, the finish is good.

Two men, one writer has said, lived in the same village, went to the same synagogue, sat in the same pew, listening to the same services. One day some kind of gale flew into their lives a fearsome storm. In the one case everything collapsed and in a moment there were some fragments tossing upon wild waters and then nothing at all. For that unhappy soul had built upon sand and in his day of need everything was undermined and vanished. But the other thought he too had to face the emptiness, the loneliness, the pain. But he came through it all braver and stronger and mellower and nearer God. For he had built upon the rock. If the small ills have frayed our faith and temper what will we do in the swelling of the Jordan?

Common experience the difficult will of God. Let me cite two others in the scripture as common experience.

Acts Paul, 21-28, the last eight chapters in the book of Acts. Here is a story of a man on his way to imprisonment. If I were writing apostolic history I would not have concentrated that much time on telling the story of one man who's going into imprisonment. I would have devoted a lot more chapters to miracles, to the spread of the gospel. I would have traced the gospel going into Egypt. I would have traced the gospel going into North Africa. I would have taken whole chapters to tell of the work of the Holy Spirit at Ephesus and Corinth and other centers. But Luke is very lean with his words and he chooses to take over 25% of his book of Acts and devote it to the story of a man who is being cut off and experiencing the difficult will of God. In hastening toward imprisonment and arrest. In being shipwrecked and himself waiting in house arrest for two years. It's an incredible saga. It's an expression within the New Testament of someone experiencing the difficult will of God.

The last example that I'll use of the commonality of the difficult will of God is in the early church. The early church expected that when they came to Jesus Christ that there would be moments to go through that would be difficult. After the first missionary journey when Paul had founded churches in what is now the center of Turkey, the province of Asia Minor, he went back with Barnabas to the places where they had established churches. This is what Paul gave as counsel to the other Christians. They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said.

We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God. Isn't this again a contrast to those who in the body of Christ who falsely began to tell the body of Christ is that there is no hardship to being a Christian, that it's all a matter of getting your mind in proper working order. Through many hardships.

Where am I leading you? Am I leading you into a machochistic* desire to be punished? I realize that I have this tendency of so glorifying suffering and seeing it as part of the Christian life that I can begin to set myself up and begin to set you up for a feeling of "If what the pastor is saying is true, God cause some suffering in my life so that I can be more greatly perfected." I shared about the oyster. It's when he gets a grain of sand in him that he can begin to develop the pearl.

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The statement of the difficult will of God is a common experience to us as believers. It is not meant to induce for us a false sort and sick sort of psychological thirst for things to go wrong. As though now we revel things have finally gone wrong, we're finally in the difficult will of God, so we must now be in the center of the will of God. Things couldn't be worse so praise God I'm in his will!

That's not what I'm trying to do. I think the focus of that and the balance of that is in the prayer which the Lord teaches us to pray in the Sermon on the Mount where he says to us "and lead us not into temptation but deliver us. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever." Lead us not but deliver us.

It seems to me that there's sort of a gentle interaction there. Our attitude as believers is to pray steadfastly that we might avoid that place of testing. That there is a backup prayer. In the event that we get in a place of testing then we begin to pray, Lord deliver us. I don't want to through my own blind ignorance and stumbling bite off places of testing of my own choosing. If I'm going to be tested in my Christian experience I want the Lord to have the freedom to choose the test. If I am praying, Lord, lead me not into the place of testing, lead me not into temptation, and all of a sudden after I've been praying that and meaning it sincerely with my heart and been guarding my life and having the Holy Spirit guard me then I still find myself in that place of testing I can in that moment have the confidence that I didn't get there through my own ignorance. I didn't get there through my own sinful rebellion. I am there and I am there in God's time and God has a purpose in it and he has pledged in that moment that I can pray the back up prayer: deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.

The difficult will of God, a common experience. All of us now or past or future will experience it.

How do we understand the difficult will of God? Let me share with you three preliminary considerations to understanding the difficult will of God.

We're going to be looking at the theme of Why? Why do things happen? Why do we have these incredible defeats in our life that we can't really understand? What are some preliminary considerations of that?

One preliminary consideration is that knowing can help fortify us. I think it's ok to ask why. If we can learn the reason why it can give us great strength for it can give us purpose in going through that difficult will of God.

It's ok in the scripture to ask why. Job is the ever lasting response of God to the human heart that asks God why. God says it's ok to ask why. He also on occasion will choose not to tell us immediately what the answer is. But on other occasions we'll find the reason why. Why? Knowing why can help fortify us.

Another preliminary consideration I'd like to share with you is that the words What now, are far more important than Why?

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When the difficult will of God hits me my human response is first of all to ask why? God, why did you allow this to happen? The why takes often a little bit longer to answer. But the, what now can bring a very immediate answer. We're going to be talking later in the message about the, What now? But it operates on the presupposition that there are some things I don't know why at this point but on the other hand scripture teaches me some ways to respond even when I don't understand. The scriptures for example counsel me against bitterness, against apathy, against resignation, against grumbling, against anger. They counsel me toward joy and practicality and thanksgiving and other kinds of things we'll look at in just a few moments this evening. But what now is more important than why.

Abeyance is great word. You will find that so frequent when you ask God why? You will not when you first ask that question most of the time have an immediate answer why. You'll simply have to put the thing in abeyance. God you're going to have to bring me more information.

The real problem spiritually is in that interim period when you don't know why the great problem is to begin to really accuse God and say, "God you should have never allowed that to happen. If I were you I would not have made that choice." And not really ever to wait for God to answer the question because we're so angry with God for what he is allowing us to go through that we do not wait long enough to get all of the information that he's providing. Abeyance. Simply saying "God, I don't know. But in the interim while I don't know what are you calling upon me to do? What do I know to do at this present moment?"

One other preliminary consideration we'll look at. What happens in you is more important than what happens to you. That is a truism. It's a theme that the Lord has put within me in relationship to circumstances. It is far more important what is happening in me than what I happening to me. If some outward circumstance can jar my peace and my relationship with the Lord and my thanksgiving then I am really blaming what is happening with me on something outside of myself rather than seeing as being located within me. The scripture will teach us that with Christ's help we have authority in our life even over our own emotions and our responses to things. That somehow no matter how devastating the circumstance what is happening in me at that moment is far more important than what's happening to me. Unless I respond with a positive spirit in the way God wants me that thing which is happening to me on the negative side will over swamp my life and do me in. It will sink me. That event as difficult as it is cannot sink me except it get inside me. As someone has said, all the water in the world cannot sink a boat unless the water gets inside the boat. That's when the boat's got problems. What is happening in me is more important than what is happening to me.

With that in mind let's look at how to understand the difficult will of God. Some reasons why we go through difficulty and trials and defeats. Five reasons. We're looking at the question Why? There may be more answers to the question of Why than what I give. I'm open to that possibility. These are simply five answers that I have found from the scripture that has satisfied my heart when I walk through times of why. I must share with you that the message this evening on the will of God has not been something I've cooked up because I've had to preach and I need a sermon outline. I must reveal to you very candidly that especially in this series I am honestly sharing with you principles by which I'm trying to live my own life. Principles which the Lord has showed to me through the scriptures that I believe are tried and true principles that when I get in a circumstance that I ask why I immediately go to these kind of things as a response in my life.

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First of all as an answer to the question Why that there are trials and defeats that are sent to us as corrective measures in our life. That is why sometimes we experience the difficult will of God. Because simply we need discipline in our life. Hebrews 12:7 “For what son is there whose father does not discipline.” We get stuck there if that was the only answer to the question, Why. But sometimes we experience reverses and defeats because the Lord is using that in our life to correct us for disobedience.

Not all financial reversals are sent as corrective measures. But one of the first things I want to look at in my life when something dark happens to me is, is this being sent as a corrective measure?

I want to balance that with something else. There are some people who believe for example a family loses a child. They say to themselves, “We must have failed God therefore God took our child.” They begin to blame their own failure and their own sin that it was so gross before God that he said, “I’m going to take the apple of your eye. The little child in whom you delighted so that you will come back into a relationship with me.”

I want to be very careful to say that of course God is free to do anything he wants. But I think God if he want to correct us the scripture is filled with indications that he can accomplish his means by less severe measures. And that God does not delight in killing babies.

We must remember from the Old Testament perspective that God told the children of Israel that they were not to adopt the heathen practices in the country to which they were going that involved child sacrifice. If God in the Old Testament who said he abhorred child sacrifice really meant that it would seem to me that the God of the New Testament is the same God as well would have abhorred child sacrifice as a way of getting people into right relationship with him. Child sacrifice has always been condemned. While I understand and appreciate the grief and the remorse and the guilt of parents who say I was disobedient to God and God took my child I’ve never been content with that as a reason intellectually. I’m not content with it in scripture. I realize that they may hold it. It may be very real and psychological to them. But I cannot embrace it from the scripture. I think there may be other things that are involved. I find it difficult to see that as a corrective measure.

We must remember that the God whom we serve is a consistent God. The God who balances justice and love together. Some people have a really dark, dark view of God which really doesn’t square with his identity.

Some trials and defeats are corrective measures. Another thing we need to say about trials and defeats is that some trials and defeats which come to us are simply designed to precede victory. Our whole purpose is to illustrate by way of contrast. To paint the black before the white. To paint the night before the golden sunrise. The contrast. The storm at sea in Mark 4 is this kind of a thing. Jesus it ends to still the storm. To win a wonderful victory. But how would we know that he ever had won a great victory unless we had been in great peril. It’s like a roller coaster ride that we get on that we think doesn’t have an end. But the Lord knows it has the end and he says I’m going to let you go through the thrill before you reach the end. It’s the great victory that follows the tremendous trial.

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God brought us to the point of appreciating the tremendous struggle in order to really apprehend the great victory that he doing. You can think of moments in your own experience in life. Before God has granted great victories he's allowed us to go through great storms.

A chicken is never more active in its life than the moment when its head is cut off. Never so active when its head was on. Cut its head off and it was tremendously active – but it was dead. I think some trials are like that. Never have they been stronger but they're going to hit the ground soon. They're dead. Active but dead.

A third response to the question Why is that there are trials and defeats which permit us to go new directions. If we didn't have them we wouldn't go in new directions. There are plenty illustrations of this in the scripture. One that's always meant a lot to me is Paul's second missionary journey. He wants to start the journey by revisiting churches he'd founded on the first journey. Then he has a mind of going west from central Turkey over to the shore. He wants to go to the province of Asia, which is around the city of Ephesus. The spirit says no then he wants to go to Bithnia and the Spirit says no. But he finally would up in a place called Troas where a man of Macedonia in a vision said "come over to Macedonia and help us."

What strikes me out of that is that Paul wanted to go first one place and then another. Both times God said no. But the no's God called close enough to keep going in the direction he wanted him to go. In other words the no's became a means of guidance. The striking thing about the Holy Spirit saying no to Paul is when he said No he didn't say, "No, you can't go there. But here's where I had in mind for you to go." He simply said no. So often as with the case of the Lord he'll tell us no and then for a while he won't tell us what he's really up to. He just says no. It was a terribly difficult time for Paul in his life as he struggled with the will of God. But the trials and the defeats, the No's in his experience allowed him to get to the place where God wanted him. He probably wouldn't have arrived at that without it.

In answer to our prayers God may say Yes, No, or Wait. If he says Wait it is because he's working out some deeper purpose that we do not at this present moment see. We would like it always to be clean and crisp, yes or no. Sometimes he says wait.

Sometimes God will use a goal as a means not as an end. You'll find this with situations in your life. You believe something is the will of God for you. And God is saying, I've got to let you have that goal because if I don't let you have that goal you'll never get to where I really want you. But that will get you half way." There are sometimes goals that God has in mind for us that are goals that are simply means to a better end that he sees for us.

In the little town of Enterprise, Alabama around the turn of the century they were a one crop economy. A cotton crop economy. There was an invasion for a number of years in a row of boll weevils. As you know boll weevils destroy cotton crops. Enterprise, Alabama was devastated by the boll weevil. The economy of the entire region was wrecked. For a number of years in a row the economy was wrecked the farmers began going to crops other than cotton. For example peanuts. They developed diversified farming. After a few years of diversified farming the farmers in that area became far more prosperous than they were in the days prior to the boll weevil when they just had the one crop economy. So in Enterprise, Alabama in the main center of town there is a monument that they have erected to the boll weevil. On the monument it says something to this effect: to the boll weevil who is responsible for our present prosperity.

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Someone has said, Erect a monument to your plague. The trial and defeat means you can go in another direction. Some things which have happened to us we thought were no's and God's simply saying, "I've got something else for you. Don't take it so hard. Look around the corner."

A fourth response to the question Why is the fact that there are trials and defeats which become examples to fortify others.

2 Corinthians 1:4 Paul writing says "God, who comforts us in all of our afflictions so that we may be able to comfort those in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." There are some persons whose passing through suffering gives great fortitude to the body of Christ.

Acts 21-28 for example. The years that Paul spent in imprisonment at the prime of his career. Some five years of his life is cut off. Why did this happen? So that he would be an encouragement to those who would shortly be going through suffering. The Lord knew that on the horizon in 64 A. D. there loomed the emperor Nero with his bloody persecution of the saints. The church had not yet undergone anything like that. So the Lord knowing that persecution was coming to the whole church allowed the finest person in the whole church, the Apostle Paul to personally go through persecution and survive it and stand the test with a mellow and gracious and thankful spirit as a pattern for the whole church when itself went through trials might be strengthened and fortified.

We learn in the midst of our affliction that we are comforted most by people who have gone through the storm and have had the grace of God minister to them in the midst of that storm. That's why Corrie ten Boom in the modern setting has been such a great inspiration. When we talk about the need for forgiveness, when we talk about enduring suffering you can go to a person like that and you can drink in and realize that God has allowed that person in the body and their experiences to fortify the entire church of Jesus Christ.

A fifth kind of response to the question Why. There are trials and defeats that have no apparent reason. I would not be so foolish as to stand before you and say we can always tell what God is doing. Or sooner or later you will always ascertain what God was up to. There may not be an answer this side of heaven. Part of faith is living with that as a possibility. "God, I don't know why. I may never know why until I see you and have the chance to ask why."

I think a prime scriptural example of this is in Acts 12. James, one of the inner three, the brother of John, a man who had been with Jesus on the mount of transfiguration, who had been with Jesus when the other two disciples in the room with Jairus, who had been with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. James one of the inner three is suddenly imprisoned and executed by Herod. No reason given. Just imprisoned and executed. I look at that and say, "God, what's going on? James is one of your most key men. You only had twelve to begin with. You lost one with Judas. Now you allow one of the inner three to be gone. Are there not sermons for him yet to preach. Are there not yet miracles for him yet to perform? He's a young man! So much before him."

Then to add the paradox to the whole thing, in the same chapter where James was killed Peter is imprisoned. Herod is embolden because he executed James so he arrests Peter. An angel of the

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Lord comes to Peter at night and releases him. If God could send an angel to release Peter could he not have sent an angel to release James? Yes. I have to believe that the same church that was praying for Peter was praying for James as well. Why did it happen? Why is James taken and why is Peter left behind? I don't know. It's never explained. We're never told in scripture why that occurred. We're just left with the awesome mystery of it. There are trials and defeat we just don't know. We literally do not know and we'll drive ourselves nuts if we try to find out. It's just not going to be revealed to us.

Part of living with God is being content with living with some degree of mystery.

Idolatry is to remake God in our own image. Not allow God the freedom to be God. It's to say, "God, here is how we would do it if we were you. Now would you please get with our program!" That's idolatry. There are trials and defeats, which have no apparent reason.

How do we get through the difficult will of God? I said earlier that what goes on in you is more important than what happens to you. How do you get through the difficult will of God? Let me share with you some things to avoid. I perceive these things in my own life when I go through the difficult will of God that are temptations for me and I must avoid them at all costs and you must too if you're going to come through the difficult will of God on the other side victorious.

The first two go hand in hand – blame and self pity.

Blame is a word, which I would say that simply says, God, you shouldn't have done that. It is your fault. Or blame may be directed at another person. You were responsible. You were careless and that's why that happened and I can never forgive you for what you did.

Self pity is getting in that chamber of isolation and becoming so overcome with grief you lose focus. For a moment you become unbalanced in the spiritual flow in your life and you become in need of all consuming attention. You begin to adopt a stance that no one has quite known what I'm going through. Therefore no one can possibly understand or minister to me. That can be then coupled with a strong feeling that others let you down. And in many cases that's the truth.

I want to illustrate in the early church how this was at work. After the apostles had preached and 5000 men in Acts 4 had come to faith in Christ the apostles, Peter and John, are thrown into prison. I think that as a key moment because at that moment they could have said to God, "I don't understand you. We're faithful to you. We're doing what you tell us to do. We just had 5000 people born into the kingdom of God. And you allow this to happen. What kind of a God are you anyway? Don't you take good care of your servants? Haven't you promised us that we would be protected, that we preach your word signs would follow? Now this is happening. What kind of a God are you to let us down." Then begin to feel, "Look at the other ten apostles. They're not in prison. We're being called upon to suffer more or Christ. Nobody knows what we're going through."

I would submit to you that blame and self pity at that moment would have frustrated the work of God in their lives and in the early church as much as it will frustrate the will of God and the work of God in our own lives and this church as well. Blame and self pity.

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I recognize that these are normal and very human temptations. I do not say this as a word of condemnation at all but simply as a spiritual diagnostician at this point to say, Watch for these things. They are a part of the difficult will of God and part of the trap of sin into which we can fall so very, very easily. And understandably. It's very understandable that we would have blame and self-pity when we're walking through a difficult moment.

Let me relate one other thing that I think it's important at all costs to avoid. That is the word "passivity." Passivity is simply saying, "I'll never lift my hands again to do anything. I'm going to crawl in this corner. I'm going to retreat. I'm going to be in a hole. God knows my address. When he wants to find me that's where I'm at. He can look me up!" The spirit of resignation. Which replaces the spirit of ongoing triumph and a spirit that says I don't know why it has happened but I know that God is going to work in me through it.

I think again of several examples in the apostle Paul's life. His experience at Philippi for example. He has been called on one side of the ocean while he is at Troas "Come over to Macedonia and help us." When he gets over to Macedonia to the city of Philippi there's no man there to meet him. There's no mayor of the city to hand him the key and say, "You're the apostle Paul. We were warned in a dream [even as Cornelius had been warned to in a dream] to be ready for you. The whole city has been gathered together for some hours now awaiting your arrival. We are now ready for you to preach the word of God to us." None of that. He walked into the city. Nobody had been looking for him.

He has just walked on the other side of the body of water, in Asia. He had just walked in that whole region about 600 miles with two companions. They've all along been asking him, "Where are you going, Paul? What's the will of God?" And he's been saying, I don't know. Then he's got this revelation: Come over to Macedonia and help us. He gets there and nobody's there. No Macedonian is there. I think at that particular point if I had been Paul I'd have gotten very teed off and said, "God, I've gone as far as I'm going to go. I'm tired of you playing games with me. I'm going to check in to the Howard Johnson's in the city of Philippi and when you're ready to send somebody to my door then I'm ready to speak to them. But don't give me this 'man of Macedonia' business. Unless there's a man of Macedonia to meet me. Doesn't an apostle deserve a welcoming committee?"

What does he do? He doesn't find a man of Macedonia. And he doesn't even find a synagogue in the town. So he does a thing that a good Jew would know to do. He goes outside the city on the Sabbath day in a spot where there's likely to be a congregation of Jewish people. If there were less than 10 Jewish males they couldn't form a synagogue so they would generally worship outside of town by a river somewhere. He finds a group of women worshipping. Had he been a chauvinistic evangelist he would have said, "No possibilities here. Just a bunch of women gathered together for worship." No man of Macedonia in the congregation. Just group of women. But he stops at that riverside and begins to share the message of Jesus Christ. One of them named Lydia opens her heart to the Lord. First convert on the continent of Europe. She opens her heart to the Lord and then she opens her home and they all had a place to stay.

Before long the power of the gospel begins to pervade Philippi and then Paul is thrown into prison. And again, instead of adopting this passive attitude (God this has been a horrible missionary trip. Nothing good has happened on this trip including this most recent experience. I'm tired. I'm going to go back to Antioch where people love me.) None of that but he's singing

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praises to God. The roman jailer then opens his heart because of an earthquake to the Lord. The whole key to that experience is Paul never went passive. He never went limp. He kept resisting. He kept fighting. He kept walking. He kept plodding. Avoid passivity.

Even in his last imprisonment, the 2 Timothy letter, when he really knows he's facing martyrdom – it's evident in the letter – he is saying to Timothy “Bring the books and the parchments.” Here he is getting ready to die. He's saying I want to read before I die. He could take the attitude, What's the use of reading. I'm going to die in a few days anyway. Might as well sleep.” No, “Bring the books, especially the parchments [the scriptures].” That ongoing refusal to give into circumstances. Avoid passivity.

What to embrace? Embrace thanksgiving. Philippians 4:6-7 “Do not be anxious about anything but in everything by prayer and petition with thanksgiving present your requests to God and the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” What's the secret to the prison letters? It's thanksgiving.

I'm not the kind of person who can look at a disaster and say, Thank you God, that I'm financially bankrupt. Thank you God that my mother died. I don't believe scripture calls for thanksgiving in that kind of fashion. But I believe the scriptures do give us occasion to say, “Thank you God, for the lessons that I'm learning in this bankruptcy. Thank you God for the mother you gave to me and for the processes you're working out in my life and or the lessons that I have learned because of her life. Thank you for that. Thank you for the promise of eternal life. The guarantee of eternal union. Thank you for that.”

It is approaching the difficulties of life and finding in them that for which God can be truly thanked. Thanksgiving is the great antidote to bitterness.

Another thing to embrace is what I would call interior rather than exterior change.

By this I mean something like when you're going through the difficult will of God the temptation is to pray, “God, change the circumstances!” And God may on an occasion do that. That's part of the defeat before the victory kind of syndrome. But interior rather than exterior change always has the possibility of a prayer that says something like this. It's not, “God change the circumstances,” that would be exterior change. But it's “God, change me in the midst of the circumstances. Change me.”

Again a scriptural example. Acts 4:29-30. The early church has had the experience of the apostles in prison. They have been released. They are gathered together with all of their friends that had been praying for them and they report what's happened to them. Then they turn to the Lord in prayer. It's striking what they don't pray. And striking what they pray. They do not say, “Put scales around the eyes of the Sanhedrin so that they cannot see us when we preach. Create an invisible shield around us so that when the soldiers come to march against us they march their noses flat into an invisible wall. Send 10,000 angels around us to protect us, to grant us covering so that not a hand can be laid on us again. Stop their mouths so they'll quit scaring us with all their mean and nasty threats.” None of that. It is “O sovereign Lord, grant us boldness to speak thy word.” They don't pray for the circumstances to be changed. They pray that their behavior in the circumstances will be radically changed. “God grant us boldness.”

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One of the scriptures says that when they had got done praying the place as shaken. God changed the circumstances when he had them changed on the inside.

Inner rather than exterior change.

A third thing to embrace is something we dealt with Sunday morning a week ago. Faith/perseverance. It is believing God in the midst of the difficulty and persevering. Persevering is the active, ongoing side of faith.

One of the great scriptures of the Bible “Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” That’s a significant statement because for so many years Abraham did have any evidence that God was working through all the difficulties. But he continued to believe in God in the midst of all the difficulties and ultimately his belief was credited to his account as righteousness. He persevered and had faith.

I hope that my faith in God will never be confined to faith that God will act in a particular way that I’m calling him to. So many people’s idea of faith in God is “God, here is my order and if you do it I will have faith in you.” Their faith is really not in God but their faith is God come through in this moment and then I’ll believe in you stronger. Faith in God ultimately gives God the freedom to act as sovereign Lord. It comes to him and says God I have an active faith that you can change these circumstances but even if you don’t my faith is in you. And I’m going to persevere in that faith.

Paul writing to the Philippians (4:11) says after he has reviewed these circumstances of his imprisonment, “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.” I’d underline the word “learned”. I really don’t believe that the kind of thing which I am talking about – living in the difficult will of God – is something which you get overnight. There may be special gracious from God which allow us to go through particular tough moments but I have learned, indicates that there is an ongoing process of development o our life in the difficult will of God. It’s a matter of day to day education. God doesn’t give us the strength today that we’ll need for tomorrow. He only gives us the strength that we’ll need for today, today. In that we learn to be content.

Our father, we come to you this evening conscious of the fact that you yourself provided us an example that we should follow in your steps. Your steps included the way to the cross. You yourself said, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life would lose it. And whoever loses his life for my sake and for the gospels will save it.” I think Lord of the words of my friend who said, The difference between the Christian and the non-Christian is not that the non-Christian has accidents and the Christian doesn’t. Accidents happen to the Christian and non-Christian. But the difference is this. That the Christian in the midst of the auto accidents has Jesus Christ in the midst of his problem. When we are in the storm on the sea of life we remember that we are not alone in the boat. You are in the boat with us. Albeit sometimes we think you are a sleep. But you are there. You will no more let us sink in the waters than you let the disciples go down into the depths. You will with a way of testing provide an avenue of escape. We’ve looked at your words this evening Lord to seek out counsel from you and how to respond to your difficult will. There are some in this room who are going through right now in their own experience a very difficult journey. We want

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to thank you for what suffering produces that it produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope. We trust` in you without knowing or understanding all that you're up to or the why that something's occurring. But we leap up in faith and prayer to embrace you and say to you, Lord, thy will be done. Have your way in my life. No matter what happens my purpose is to serve you with a joyful and glad heart. Teach me. Help me to learn to rely upon you. To lean upon you in the moments when I am terribly weak and when I do turn away from you in anger and hurt, help me in that moment to come anew to you, to confess, to be restored, to get on with thanksgiving, with seeing what you're at work doing in my life, the new possibilities you're opening up to me, the places where you want me to erect a monument of my plague. Do that Lord. According to your great power which is at work in us beyond what we ask or think or say. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.