

Lord's Day 49

January 20, 2019

Willoughby Heights CanRC

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Read: Matthew 26:36-56

Hymn 63:4

During sermon: Hebrews 5:7-8

Text: Lord's Day 49

Amen-song: Psalm 119:30, 62

Dear children of God, brothers and sisters in Christ, and guests, I begin with two situations that will serve as illustrations at various times during this sermon.

Iris was sick. Cancer. She only had 6 months to live, the doctors said. But she wasn't old. Just 55! She wasn't ready to die! She wanted to be healed. Now Iris was a Christian. She knew psalm 31: "My times are in your hands" (Ps. 31:15). And so she prayed: "Lord, I would dearly like to be healed. To enjoy life with my husband, my children, my grandchildren. However, all things are in Your hands. Lord, what have You decreed for my life? Your will be done."

Thirty-eight-year-old Gerard, married and father of five, was an entrepreneur. A successful one too. He was doing well and could live comfortably. He didn't need more. But then an opportunity came for him to take over another business. Expand his empire. He realized doing so would mean being away from home for a week or two weeks at a time. Almost every month. It wouldn't be good for his family. Now Gerard was a Christian. He knew Deuteronomy 6 "Impress my commandments on your children." (Deut 6:7). And so he prayed: "Lord, I have a difficult decision to make. It's so tempting to become richer. And I have the talents to do it. But I know it will do harm to my family. Lord, what would You have me do? Your will be done."

Two people: Iris and Gerard. Two problems: cancer and temptation unto sin. One request: Your will be done. One request, and yet so different. Which of these is the third petition?

Our focus this afternoon is that third petition, "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." What does it mean? What is this "will of God" that has to be "done"? How is it being done in heaven, so that it should also be done on earth? Those are some of the questions we'll be looking at this afternoon.

We listen to God's Word on the third petition with this theme: We pray that God's will may be done. We will look at (1) the distinction between God's hidden and revealed will (2) the *petition* for God's will to be done and (3) what this petition does to us who pray it.

First, God's hidden and revealed will. Or, if you like, God's decree and God's command.

Hidden and revealed. Boys and girls, those are opposites. Something which is hidden, is not revealed. Something which is revealed, is not hidden.

The Bible speaks about the hidden things of God and the revealed things of God. Said Moses to the Israelites: "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deuteronomy 29:29) There are things God has not made known to us, matters He has not shown us. These are the secret things of God, the hidden things. And there are things God has made known to us, matters He has shown us. These are the revealed things of God.

Maybe some illustrations will help us with this.

- We do not know when the Lord Jesus will come back. This is a secret, a hidden thing.
- We do know that the Lord Jesus will come back some day. That has been revealed.

- As a young person, you don't know whether you'll ever marry. A hidden thing.
 - But *if* you were to marry, God wants you to marry someone of the opposite sex and "in the Lord". That has been revealed.
 - We don't know whether we will become rich. This is a hidden thing.
 - We do know that we are to work for our daily upkeep. That has been revealed.
- In Moses' words: "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law."

Now we want to come to grips with the hidden and revealed will of God. How does this will work in our existence, in our every day lives?

The hidden or secret will of God is often referred to as the will of God's decree. This is the will of God about the things that will happen, about God's counsel, about God's plans which He will execute. Without God's will, says Lord's Day 10, no creature can so much as move.

The revealed will of God is often referred to as the will of God's command. That's in part given what Moses said to the Israelites: God has revealed things so that we may do all the words of the law.

God's will of decree is the hidden will, God's will of command is the revealed will. That's how it's commonly put. But there is a bit of a problem with the terminology here. You see, it is not true that the will of God's decree is always hidden. For example, Simeon knew that he would see the Messiah before he would die. This decree of God had been revealed to Simeon. It is not true that God's eternal decree is always hidden. That even applies to the classic example of God's decree, God's decree of election. That's not hidden for everyone. We confess with the Canons of Dort: "The elect in due time ... are made certain of .. their eternal and unchangeable election to salvation." (CoD I.12).

So rather than distinguish between what we do know of God's will and what we don't know, we'll speak of God's will of decree and God's will of command. God's will of decree: that's about God's plans, what God's has decided. God's will of command: that's about God's desires, what God wants.

Now, we're looking at this issue because of the third petition: Your will be done. What are we praying when we utter that request?

Lord, execute your decrees. Do what You've decided to do?

Or: Lord, have your commands executed. Make us people do what You want us to do?

God's will of decree or God's will of command. Which is it? Well, whenever confronted with a choice between two options, always first ask whether the choice is fair. Is the choice a false dilemma? Are the two options mutually exclusive? Do we have to say, it's one or the other?

To consider this, I wish to make use of an illustration from the Bible.

Let's reflect on the role of God's will of decree and God's will of command in relation to the crucifixion of our Lord and Saviour.

The apostle Peter says of the Lord Jesus on the day of Pentecost: "this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God." (Acts 2:23). And the prophet Isaiah had said, centuries before God's Son even walked on this earth as a human being, "It was the LORD's will to crush him, He has put Him to grief." (Isaiah 53:10a). The crucifixion was decreed by God, it was God's plan that Jesus would be crucified.

And yet we know God did not want the crucifixion to happen. We are not allowed to condemn someone innocently to death. To return to Peter's words on the day of Pentecost, he said: "this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men." And he tells his hearers: "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." (Acts 2:40b). And the Lord Jesus Himself prayed that God might forgive those who were crucifying Him (Luke

23:24) - and forgiveness only makes sense if something wrong is being done. So the crucifixion of Jesus was against the command of God.

Do you sense how difficult this is? God has decreed something - the death of Jesus Christ by crucifixion - which He has forbidden man to bring about, you shall not murder! In terms of God's will: God wanted the death of Jesus the Christ but He did not want Jesus the Christ to be put to death.

This doesn't seem to make sense.

Yet, it's not as odd as what we may think.

It happened a few years ago that BC paramedics were on strike. For the longest time. They did not want to be on strike. Paramedics are people that want to help people. But they chose to go on strike, they decided to refuse to limit their assistance to people. They wanted their strike but did not want to go on strike.

There are many examples of this in every day life. The surgeon's knife, the dentist's drill, the game-warden's tranquilizer, the teacher's lines, a government's funding cuts, a parent grounding a child. All examples of things decided to and yet not wanted.

Now to be clear, the two are not *always* at odds. The will of decree and the will of command can go hand in hand. God wanted Israel to live in Canaan and destroy the heathens, and God commanded Israel to live in Canaan and destroy the heathens. It took a long time, but in the end it happened.

Time to take stock for a moment. Thus far we've learned a few things about God's will.

There is a will of God's decree. In general, unknown to us, hidden from our knowledge. It relates to questions such as that of Iris: "will I be healed?"

There is also a will of God's command. It is known, it has been revealed. It relates to questions such as that of Gerard: "what should I do?"

We've seen that these two wills are related to each other. They can be distinguished but should not be separated.

But we still have not got an answer to our question: what do we pray when we say "Your will be done"? Do we pray, God, execute your decree? Or: God, have us fulfil your command? Is it "God, *You* do what You want?" Or "God, make *us* do what You want?"

2) Let's look more closely at our petition, Your will be done.

Cyprian, a church father of the third century, said "We do not pray to God to do what He wants, but to have us do what He wants."

In other words, not the way Iris prayed the petition. "Lord, please heal me. That's what I want. But I realize You decide. If You've decided differently, that's fine by me. Your will be done." Cyprian says, that's not the meaning of this petition. It's the way Gerard prayed it. "Lord, I know what I like. I want to be rich. But I realize You have given me certain duties in life. You're command is that I take my duties as father in my family seriously. Lord, Your will be done."

It's not only Cyprian who said this. During the time of the Reformation this was repeated. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* John Calvin wrote: "Here is not a question of [God's] secret will, by which He controls all things and directs them to their end. ... But here God's other will is to be noted-namely, that to which voluntary obedience corresponds." (III.xx.43) The Heidelberg Catechism is in line with this. We don't read anything in Lord's Day 49 that fits with people like Iris. Rather, it's as Gerard prayed. "Grant that we and all men ... without murmuring obey Your will." The rhymed version of the third petition as we have it in our Books of Praise follows this line too: "May we deny our wilful way, and without murm'ring, you obey."

The conclusion would seem to have to be: if you pray "Your will be done" does not pray "Lord, do

whatever You want. Whether You would have me live or die. I'm fine with your choice" but prays "Lord, help me not to sin but fulfil your commands."

The third petition would then be not about resigning oneself to God's decree but about obedience to God's command.

But it can't be as simple as that. I used to think this way, have even preached it this way. But I've always run stuck on the Lord Jesus praying this petition in the Garden of Gethsemane. That was our Scripture reading. What did the Lord Jesus pray? "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."

Many understand this prayer as follows. "Lord, I'm scared. I wish I didn't have to die. But I do realize You have a different plan. You want me to die. And so I will. I am resigned to Your decision. Don't bother yourself with what I want." This petition would then be about Christ resigning Himself to God's decree. His prayer would then not be related to the third petition.

But take a Bible and turn with me for a moment to Hebrews 5:7-8. Hebrews 5:7-8, there we read this: "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered."

This is clearly a reference to the prayer of Christ in the garden of Gethsemane. And the author of Hebrews not only links this petition to the concept of submission but also the concept of obedience, even of "learning obedience".

It's noteworthy that also John Calvin's commentary on Matthew 26 does this. Calvin first writes "This is the reason why Jesus prays to be spared death, then holds Himself, in check, submits Himself to the Father's command, and corrects and revokes the wish that had suddenly escaped Him." But a little later Calvin writes: "We must hold to the rule that, where we have no certain and special promise, we must not ask anything except on condition that God may fulfil His decree, which cannot be done unless we yield our wishes to His instruction."

First Calvin says "submits himself to the Father's command" and then he says "that God may fulfil His decree".

What does this all mean? Well, maybe we are trying to be too methodical, too schematic about this all. Are our distinctions with respect to God's will not artificial?

Thinking these things through, pondering them, we discover it's even more complex. There are things which God has decreed, but we are not allowed to pray for them to happen. And there are things which God has decreed to not happen, but we have to pray for them to happen.

For example, imagine for a moment the disciples of Jesus on the night He was betrayed. If they had listened well to Jesus, they would have known what was going to happen. That God's plan was for Jesus to be taken captive and to be crucified. Now, would God have wanted, say, the disciple John to pray that evening: "Lord, please have Judas betray Jesus, have Jesus delivered into the hands of the Sanhedrin, have the Sanhedrin deliver Jesus into the hands of the Romans, and have Romans crucify Jesus. Your will be done?" No. That's praying for people to sin!

Or, the opposite. We know that God has decreed that all men will struggle with sin as long as they are on this side of the grave. We know that. And yet we will pray at the start of every day, keep us from sin, Your will be done. We know it won't happen. But we do realize God wants to pray that we do not sin.

Brothers and sisters, when you think through the logic of some of this, you realize it's not simple. I wasn't so sure how best to tackle the topic of this afternoon's sermon, and I can well imagine some of you being totally confused by it all.

But that confusion is probably a good thing. We like to have things nice and tidy and easy to understand. God's hidden and revealed will, God's will of decree and will of command. But it's not simple.

Those who've been listening closely may have noticed I referred to God's will at times in the plural. In the sense of: God has two wills, a revealed will and a hidden will. A will of command and a will of decree. That's actually wrong. God is one. His will is one. With Belgic Confession article 1 we confess that God is a simple being, and His simplicity implies singularity of will. Singularity of will: God only has one will.

Brothers and sisters, forget Iris and her cancer, but also forget Gerard and his business. Those illustrations are actually confusing. They oversimplify things.

We shouldn't get hung up on the word "will". We should focus on the expression "be done."

It's the focal point of what Moses said: "that we may do the words of the law."

We saw this morning, it's the focal point of Christ's teaching. "Those who hear and do."

The third petition is "Your will be done."

You see, when God's perfect will collides with our imperfect world, that's when tension arises. Even when a perfect man, who said that His will is to do the Father's will, finds Himself in an imperfect world, tension arises. It is sin, it is our fallen state and all associated misery, that makes it so difficult. Our imperfect world creates the complexity of this petition.

Now there is a world where this tension does not exist. A place in creation where all is perfect. The third petition itself tells us: heaven. God's decree is always executed in heaven. God's command is always obeyed in heaven. Because there's no sin in heaven. There's nothing which can prevent God's will from being done. The angels are ever-willing and obedient. And there are no circumstances which will stand in the way.

Our world, our planet earth is a very different place. There's sin here. We're sinful ourselves. We don't always know what to do. And even if we did, circumstances in our world can have our own desires clash with those of God.

Your will be done. When we say those words, we ask God to execute His decrees via His commands. See that? It's both. God, do what *You* want by having *us* do what You want. It's both. Not just a matter of resignation to God's will. Not just a matter of being obedient. Both.

3) This brings us to our last thought. What this petition does to us when we pray it.

Our Lord Jesus prayed "Your will be done." This is related to God's decree. Jesus knew God had decided that He would die on a cross. Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53 said as much. Jesus knew it. Anybody could know it. Jesus also knew that this was a command for Him. When the time comes, He may not resist. When Peter pulls his sword to fight for Jesus, Jesus says "Put your sword back in its place...How would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?" (Matthew 26:52a, 54). God's decree includes God's command.

The petition "Your will be done" will first of all be a desire for God's commandments. We're asking God to have us live for Him with heart and soul. Deny our own will and acknowledge God's will for it alone is good. Not wanting to embezzle funds, for God says "You shall not steal." Not looking at pornography, for the Lord says "You shall not commit adultery." Not bullying a classmate, for the Lord says "You shall not murder." A deep desire to keep the law of God, for keeping the law of God is fulfilling the will of God. Not just doing it because you have to. "Well, I'm in church this afternoon because I have to be. Not because I want to be." Those who pray the third petition in fact ask God "Change me. Don't only make me go to church this afternoon but also want to go to church. Don't only make me be faithful to my spouse but make me want to be faithful to my spouse. Don't only make me keep my mouth shut about my neighbour's faults, but make me want to keep my mouth shut." It's not just hands and the head, it's the heart as well. "Conform my will unto your will."

Sometimes we don't know what the will of God is. (Often we do, but we don't want to acknowledge it.

Don't kid yourselves.) But yet, there are times we truly do not know. I have known lots of people like Iris. Some wanted to die. They're still alive. Suffering. Some wanted to live. They passed away, to a newer life. Leaving grieving relatives behind, children with just a mom.

How should we pray? Your will be done. What do we mean? The same as Christ. Say what's on your mind. God listens. God listened, even when the unimaginable happened. When the Son of God, now a human being, admitted that He did not really want what God wanted. And when you've said what's on your mind, act responsibly. Don't be fatalistic and resign everything passively into God's hands. Don't be activist and try to force God to do what you want. Weigh the possibilities God gives, take God's explicit commands into consideration, and go with that. Dare to say and mean 'amen' when you're done praying.

And that, beloved, that attitude will give you peace. Then you will have peace with God's decree. O, sure, what happens will no doubt agitate our old man. We're not perfect, like Christ was. But if we strive for obedience and submit to God's decree, then we will have peace with whatever happens. We will not be held responsible for what ills may take place. No more than Christ was responsible for Judas' sin of betrayal, the wrongful condemnation of the Sanhedrin, or the judicial error of Pontius Pilate.

At bottom, the third petition is a prayer for the new creation, just like the petition Your Kingdom come and the petition Your Name be hallowed. A new creation, in which there is no tension between God's decree and God's command. In which the web of iniquity does not complicate our lives. As in heaven, so on earth. Yes, the third petition is asking God to create heaven on earth.

We pray that God's will may be done.

Iris. Cancer. Confident that God can turn to our good whatever He sends us in this life of sorrow. And doing her best to be obedient.

Gerard. Riches. Confident that God can renew us according to the image of Christ. And doing his best to have peace with God's plans for his life.

Beloved, whatever your circumstances, your questions, your concerns, pray "Your will be done." It's the same message as this morning: Hear and do as Christ teaches. May your request to God incite you to a greater love for God's law. May it increase your faith, your trust in God and His plans for you, as you place your life, your whole being in His hands.

"As in heaven, so on earth." It will happen, heaven is coming to earth.

Amen.