
INTRODUCTION

SEEKING GOD'S WILL

*“Our Father in heaven
hallowed be your Name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.”*

WHETHER CHRISTIANS PRAY ALONE or gather together for worship, they often recite “The Lord’s Prayer.” These words serve as a statement of faith for them, naming who God is, how God acts, and who they are in relation to God. The prayer begins by addressing God as father, “our Father.” Then the prayer asks that God’s kingdom and rule be established throughout the universe. In the opening lines, God is imagined to be like a male parent and also like a king.

Then the prayer states that God’s “will be done, on earth as in heaven.” Those who pray these words desire God’s will, which rules in heaven, to direct human existence on earth as well. God’s will—seeking to know it and desiring to live according to it—is at the heart of Christian faith and prayer for so many people. They not only imagine God as a father and king ruling all things, but also believe God *is* father and ruler of the universe. God’s will directs; it will prevail. Christians pray for that dominion.

Sounds simple and straightforward. Yet wars have been fought and churches divided over what God is believed to want and to will. My

goal in this book is to get inside these assertions, images, and beliefs in order to explore what is being said about who God is and how God acts, especially in light of conflicting claims made about God and God's will in the world in which we live.

I invite readers to reflect on such questions as: Who is the God to whom Christians pray and whose will Christians seek? What is God like? How does God act? What is meant by God's will? What kinds of claims are made for it? How is God's will an expression of who God is? This introduction opens up such questions by looking at different meanings of God's will.

When Bad Things Happen

One afternoon in February 2005, twin sisters, Kayla and Rachel, fourteen years old, went out on horseback at a riding club in southeastern Massachusetts. Kayla's horse reared back, threw her off and then fell on top of her. She was pronounced dead soon after being taken to the hospital. Rachel was unharmed. Two sisters, equally accomplished, engaged in the same activity but experienced a very different outcome. *The Providence Journal* article reporting this tragedy quoted the twins' mother: "It was just a freak accident. . . . There's no rhyme or reason to it. It just happened." Toward the end of the same article, the young girl's godmother, her aunt, is quoted: "God must have needed another angel . . . that's why he took our Kayla."

Mother and godmother offered very different interpretations of the same event. One emphasized the tragic nature of the accident and its random nature; the other gave the death a reason and a purpose. She claimed it to be God's action. The mother suggested there was no answer to the question "why"; the godmother believed that God's will was the answer.

In December 2004 an earthquake in the middle of the Indian Ocean generated a giant tsunami that hit islands and the coastlines of numerous South Asian countries. More than 175,000 people died as a result. Many, many more were injured, left homeless and bereft. People the world over asked why this terrible thing had happened. How could God let such a

tragedy befall so many innocent people? Others wondered what God was saying to the world through this mighty act of destruction.

Similar questions were raised in 2005 when Hurricane Katrina swept over the Louisiana and Mississippi coastlines and submerged much of the city of New Orleans. As some observers suggested, was this event, life shattering for tens of thousands of people and immensely destructive, evidence of God's judgment?

Americans experienced September 11, 2001, as a day of terror and horror. Many people died in the attacks on the World Trade Center and the collapse of its twin towers. More people were killed in rescue efforts, as well as in the attack on the Pentagon and in the downed airplane in Pennsylvania. Survivors, in recounting their ordeal, reported praying to God for deliverance and thanking God for being spared. They spoke of "miracles" that put just the right person in the right place at the right moment to help them down the stairs or to lead them to an open passageway. No doubt many of those who died prayed to God as well. Why would God intervene to spare one person and not the other? What does it mean for a survivor to claim that God worked a miracle on his behalf, when God did not act to save the person in the next office or on the next floor?

A friend dies of cancer after several years of fighting for her life. In all the ups and downs of the disease, she prayed to God. Each hint of remission was perceived as a gift from God, a possible miracle. Each setback brought questions about God's intent and why this was happening. Upon her death, mourners attest to her faith and courage. They also try to find comfort through such expressions as: It was God's will. It was her time. She is in a better place now.

From the point of view of the central characters, each of these events and stories is about suffering and death, undeserved and untimely. Perhaps for as long as human beings have walked this earth and had thoughts about their lives, they have asked the question why. This question seems especially to arise, to borrow Harold S. Kushner's book title, when bad things happen to good people.

All the world's religions, including Christianity, address the question of suffering in some way. Each religion—whether a major religious tradition such as Buddhism or an indigenous or popular religious practice

such as Voodoo—offers answers and ways to deal with suffering and loss, tragedy and death. Those responses include attention to the feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness evoked by suffering and loss.

Christianity, along with Judaism and Islam, assert there is one God who is supreme and mighty. These religions turn to that one God for answers. They draw upon ideas about the sovereignty of God in order to respond to unjust suffering, untimely death, and tragedy. God's will is often at the center of any such responses. It is key to understanding why bad things happen and why people suffer. God is the shield against the potential chaos and meaninglessness of existence.

The sovereign God is both present and active. Among God's attributes are power and goodness. God is all powerful, as well as all good and all loving. Therefore, we can trust that everything is in God's good and mighty hands.

In Rabbi Kushner's title, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, there is no one directing the action, no agent. Bad things occur; no one seems to be making them happen. However, many people who ask questions in such moments, especially those who do so from within a religion such as Christianity, tend to put their questions in the active voice and add in an agent: "Why does God make or allow bad things to happen to good people? Why did God give me cancer? Why did God cause a tsunami that killed so many people?" God is the one willing and intending, acting and guiding.

God's Will for the World

In many strains of Christian thinking, God's will is manifest not only in times of suffering or disaster but in everything that happens in the world and even in the universe. All that exists and everything that occurs is an expression of God's will.

This idea is rooted in the basic affirmations of monotheism: that God is the creator, sustainer, and redeemer of the world. Beginning with creation, then continuing with God's providential care, as well as God's work of redemption and of bringing all things to completion, God's guiding will is at work. All that exists, including time and history,

originate from God. God directs history and creation toward their God-intended ends. God is the beginning and the end. God's will is always good, always right.

Those who live within such a narrative and belief system are able, therefore, to understand their lives and what happens in them as meaningful and purposeful. Life events are not random occurrences in a chaotic universe. They are God's own doing.

The song, "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands," offers such an image: God holds and cares for each and every person and all of creation. But God's hands are not only images of care and support. They also signify action and direction. God's "hands" shape and mold, intervene and cause change. The book of Exodus states that God's mighty hand parted the waters of the Red Sea so that the Israelites might escape from slavery in Egypt. The prophetic literature claims that God is able to make a way for Israel to return from its exile in Babylon. For many Christians the chief evidence of God's power and care is the resurrection: God raises Jesus from the dead, and God will also raise all who have been saved.

Within the biblical story, testimony is offered again and again not only to such mighty acts of God but also to the specificity and expanse of God's knowledge and providence. God is present just as much in the details. God knows the number of hairs on people's heads; no sparrow falls without God's awareness and involvement. Even on this minute level of detail, God's presence and intent is manifest.

God's will, God's purposeful activity, is thus an overriding and underlying message of the Jewish and Christian faith traditions that claim the biblical story as their own. In those traditions, faith in God means confidence in God's power, including the power of God's actions and God's will. God will prevail. God's purposes will be realized. God's will not only acts in and through human lives but it is effective throughout time and space. The affirmation that God is an able agent who is powerful and good seems to be a bedrock of biblical faith.

To be faithful means to seek and follow God's will. For thousands of years people of faith have searched for God's will in their lives and asked God to order their lives according to that will. Faithfulness was marked by conformity to God's will.

For all those years, religious and political leaders have been concerned with God's will in and for the world. They make public claims for God's will and declare that they are following God's will. For example, some of the founders and architects of America thought God was at work in what they were doing. The "doctrine of manifest destiny" holds that America has an intended purpose, determined by God. America is destined to be a beacon of freedom and democracy for the world. It is a world power, directing and leading other nations who are not so richly blessed. The doctrine of manifest destiny also implies that power and success are signs of God's favor. America is God's chosen nation and American politicians profess their actions as aligned with God's purposes for this country.

Such American claims do not go unchallenged. Other peoples and nations also believe that God is directing them to accomplish God's will. Even though it is difficult for many to imagine, those who planned and executed the attacks of September 11 believed they were following God's will and fulfilling God's purposes. To consider oneself the chosen of God, whether as a person or as a nation, produces a sense of mission and of having a special status. One's actions are justified and even blessed because their source is God's own intent. How then should such claims, especially when they are in conflict, be evaluated and assessed?

"God Willing"

Thus far I have described God's will in relation to moments of suffering and crisis and in relation to major events in people's lives, in history, and even in the universe. For those who seek to be faithful to God, concern about God's will is also an everyday matter. Many of the forms of daily prayer, such as "The Lord's Prayer," reflect this attitude of living in the presence of God, directed by God's will. When people thank God upon arising in the morning or when they say grace at a meal or when they ask God to keep them safe through the night, they are recognizing all they do and all that happens as under God's guidance and care. Attaching the phrase "God willing" to plans to meet for lunch next Wednesday

or to getting all one's daily tasks accomplished is an expression of this living in and by God's will in the everyday.

In the modern and postmodern world, many people go about their daily lives with a more secular sensibility, which is to say they are not consciously attentive to God's presence and action in every moment, every undertaking. This lack of constant awareness of God is a key aspect of secularity. In medieval times the church was the center of communal life. As peasants worked in the fields, the church bells would sound several times a day. The bells were a call to prayer. Workers would stop what they were doing in order to turn their attention to God and to God's presence and purpose in their lives. They would acknowledge God as the one to whom all things belonged. Everything was God's domain. All was under God's dominion.

Today, people's lives are different. Even if they pray each day, those days are no longer marked by the call of church bells. People may even turn their thoughts to God several times a day, but unless they live in a religious community, their days are not structured around those times. However, whether people pray daily or not, or in whatever form, if they maintain that God is the one directing their lives, they understand God's will to be guiding and determining. And when something happens to disturb their everyday lives, they wonder why. They wonder what God might be up to.

People seek for God's will for their lives not only in moments of uncertainty and turmoil but also in times of transition and decision. They may ask God whom they are meant to marry. They may look for God's guidance about a job offer or a career choice. They may search the scripture for clues or meditate quietly or look for some sign in unfolding events.

People also ask God to give them what they want and need. In praying for a safe and successful operation, they want God to direct the skill of the surgical team. In praying for guidance in a decision, they want God to make the outcome a good one for them. People's requests often are straightforward. They petition God: Heal my child. Find me a job. Make my marriage better. Help me hit a home run. Whether a prayer focuses on a matter of life or death or on what might be considered a

trivial request, the desire expressed is that God's will be the same as the will of the one praying. People want God to fulfill their wants.

People not only pray for themselves but ask others to pray for them. And they pray for others in turn. Prayers may be offered for loved ones but also for strangers or for those continents away. In such cases people are not praying that God's will be manifest in their own lives but in others' lives. The gesture of praying for others suggests that God's will extends broadly. God's care embraces the whole world and all that is in it. God holds everyone in God's hands.

Whatever people pray for—whether it be for good health or home runs, for themselves or for others—they do so assuming that God hears and answers prayer. What does such an assumption suggest about who God is and how God's will operates? Because prayer is at the heart of how people relate to God, this book explores the different ways in which people approach God in prayer and what expectations and assumptions about God they bring to that activity.

The Flow of the Book

There is no one way to imagine God, no one way to understand God's will. To be sure, to propose that God has a will would seem to mean that God is like a person, most often imaged as father or lord. Expressions, such as “the guiding hand of God” or “the commanding voice of God” or even “the mind of God,” all suggest that the divine operates like a human person. They imply that God has hands and a voice and a brain and that God exercises agency. These ways of talking about God reflect an anthropomorphic view of God, that is, God imaged in human terms. What kind of person is God? Does God have to be imaged as a person? Or as father? What happens if we understand these ways of imagining God as metaphors?

A basic assumption of this book, which will be explored in the next chapter, is that what we know and imagine about God is metaphorical, which is to say it is more approximation than actual description. Even the concept of God's will is a metaphor. Another assumption is

that Christians, in the past or present, have employed a variety of ways to imagine God, but some of these have received short shrift. This book seeks to explore a wide range of metaphors and images. It asks of these ways of imagining God: What is God like? How does God relate to us and to everything that God created? In particular, what kind of power does God exercise and how does God exercise it?

Chapters 2 through 8 of this book are each devoted to one approach, one understanding of who God is, how God acts, and how God's will is perceived. The chapters flow in a particular direction, from views of God's will that emphasize God's power as commanding and determinative, through views that soften God's use of power and seek to imagine it more in harmony with human power, to views of God that are less anthropomorphic and less directing. My own preference, as will be evident in the argument of the book, is for a view of God as energy for life. This God desires what is life-giving and promoting but does not will things per se.

- Chapter 1 orients the reader to what it means to talk about God and God's will as metaphor. It considers the tasks of theology and the nature of language about God.
- Chapter 2 is devoted to examining a monarchial view of God as king and lord. God's will is all powerful and all determining.
- Chapter 3 examines a patriarchal view of God as a commanding and ruling father. God's will orders and directs all of life.
- Chapter 4 focuses on the patriarchal God, as fully powerful, but more prone to mercy. God's will is expressed in compassion, as well as justice.
- Chapter 5 turns to attempts to soften the force of God's will as determinative. God the father is more like a nurturing parent, whose will is to coach us through persuasion and to support our freedom.
- Chapter 6 attends to views of God not as intending suffering but as present in and with suffering. God suffers with us and cares for us in suffering. God's will is expressed as compassion, companionship, and resistance.

- Chapter 7 explores the nature of God as relational. This God shares power and expresses power through us. God's will seeks cooperation.
- Chapter 8 moves away from a personal God to a view of the divine as the energy of connection and life in the universe. This God is no longer characterized by notions of personal agency or a guiding will.
- Chapter 9 reviews the movement of the book and discusses the implications for how we might live if we reimagine God and God's will.

I invite readers to join in this exploration. May readers find resources in this book for their own journey with God. May they feel moved to give voice to their experiences and to examine their views. And may they grow in knowledge and wisdom.