

A Prayer Before You Begin

Loving God, use all of my life circumstances-the good, the evil; my strengths, my weaknesses, my faith and my sins alike-to further your good purposes in the world today.

Key Scripture

"Then [Joseph's] brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, 'We are here as your slaves.' But Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.' In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them" (Genesis 50:18-21).

Scripture Background

In Genesis 37-45 the story is told of Joseph, favored son of Jacob, who is sold by his jealous brothers to slave traders. Joseph is sold again to Potiphar, captain of Pharaoh's guard. Joseph distinguishes himself as a responsible servant. Joseph is wrongly accused and imprisoned for trying to assault his master's wife while in prison. Joseph interprets the dreams of some fellow prisoners. After one of the prisoners returns to work for the Pharaoh he remembers Joseph when the Pharaoh has some unexplainable dreams. Joseph is called upon to interpret them. Joseph is made a chief officer over the land. When famine comes Joseph is able to save his family from starvation. Joseph comes to see that being sold into slavery has allowed him to preserve a remnant of his people and thus further God's purposes despite the evil done to him by his brothers.

Key Concepts

- God's ultimate will is the goal which God reaches, not only in spite of all we may do, but even through redeeming evil to further the divine plan.
- Considering the ultimate will of God brings up two important truths about God. The first is God's omnipotence: that God's limitless power can achieve every divine purpose for the world. The second truth is that God may choose to limit this power in order to give human beings the freedom to choose to follow God's ways. This freedom is known as *free will*, the ability of a person to make moral choices or express desires and opinions. Free will gives us freedom of choice and

also lays the responsibility for our choices directly on our own shoulders.

- In the New Testament the one who is truly free knows that freedom is given so that we can choose to live in service of God and neighbor. For the Christian, the church is the community of those who freely choose to serve and love God together.

Read the following case study and consider the questions that follow.

CASE STUDY #1 Peter's Story

Peter, a nine-month-old with AIDS, joins the household of Renee—a single foster mom—and a foster brother. These three become a family with a large extended community of caregivers. Social workers, church friends, home care workers, and friends are in and out of their home daily. Every day seems precious since Renee is keenly aware that they may not have many years together. Renee, who two years ago decided she wanted children, now has two sons. Two young boys who needed a loving parent now have a committed mom, each other, and a host of friends.

Considerations

1. Rehearse God's intentional will for Peter as you determined it during Lesson One. Now consider if and how God's ultimate will has been accomplished in Peter's life. How can God's ultimate will be done after a tragedy like being infected with a horrible disease?
2. What if Renee had determined that she couldn't cope with two needy children of similar ages? Would God's ultimate will have been thwarted? If someone disobeys God's intention, does God have an alternative plan? What do you think and why?
3. Does everything have to work out perfectly for God's ultimate will to be

accomplished?

4. Weatherhead writes, "If man is to have real freedom, and if the community is to be bound together in such a close unity that the one suffers for the many, even as the one gains through the many-if, in a word, life is to be on the family and not on the individual basis, then obviously ten thousand things can happen that God did not intend "Since we suffer and gain due to the acts of others, how does Peter "suffer" or "gain" through what he has experienced?"

For further inquiry, look up these scripture verses:

- Genesis 17:1; Exodus 6:2-9; Revelation 4:8 (God's might)
- Mark 3:31-35 (Jesus defines the spiritual nature of family)
- Psalm 68:5-6 (In God's circumstantial will an extended family is provided to care for orphans, the sick, and the lonely)

Read the following case study and consider the questions that follow.

CASE STUDY #2 Trina's Story

After a lengthy separation and several attempts at reconciliation, Ed and Trina divorce. Both complete medical school. Ed joins a general medical practice in his hometown. Trina takes a job in another state as an emergency room physician working with trauma victims, which she loves. Both continue to go to their respective churches, although both feel as outsiders in the church due to their status as divorced people.

Considerations

1. Recall God's intentional will for Trina and Ed as you determined it during Lesson One. Now consider if and how God's ultimate will has been accomplished in Trina's

and Ed's lives? How can God's ultimate will be done after a tragedy like divorce?

2. What if Trina or Ed had dropped out of medical school or if they had decided to stay together even though the abuse did not end? Would God's ultimate will have been thwarted? If someone disobeys God's intention, does God have an alternative plan? What do you think and why?

3. Does everything have to work out perfectly for God's ultimate will to be accomplished?

4. Weatherhead writes, "If man is to have real freedom, and if the community is to be bound together in such a close unity that the one suffers for the many, even as the one gains through the many-if, in a word, life is to be on the family and not on the individual basis, then obviously ten thousand things can happen that God did not intend "Since we suffer and gain due to the acts of others, how do Ed and Trina "suffer" or "gain" through what they have experienced?"

For further inquiry, look up these scripture verses:

- Mark 10:2-12; Matthew 19:4-9 (Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce)
- 1 Corinthians 7:10-16 (God's calling regarding marriage and divorce)
- Ephesians 5:21-33 (Mutual submission in marriage)
- Ezekiel 16:59-63 (God's everlasting covenant)
- Isaiah 54:5-8 (God's compassion)
- Isaiah 43:1-2 (God's presence in times of great trial)

Read the following case study and consider the questions that follow.

STUDY #3 Trinity Church

Trinity Church continues to worship together on Sunday mornings, to run its low cost day care, and to rent some of its classrooms as office space to community groups and other nonprofit groups during the weekdays. They also rent the sanctuary on Sunday afternoons to a new church for non-English speaking Asian immigrants. A shelter for homeless people occupies the parish hall one weekend a month. The congregation remains small but highly active in the community.

Considerations

1. Recall God's intentional will for Trinity Church as you determined it during Lesson One. Now consider if and how God's ultimate will has been accomplished in the congregation and local community.
2. What if Trinity Church had moved to the suburbs? Would God's ultimate will have been thwarted? If a group of people disobeys or disagrees on God's intention, does God have an alternative plan? What do you think and why?
3. Does everything have to work out perfectly for God's ultimate will to be accomplished?
4. Weatherhead writes, "If man is to have real freedom, and if the community is to be bound together in such a close unity that the one suffers for the many, even as the one gains through the many-if, in a word, life is to be on the family and not on the individual basis, then obviously ten thousand things can happen that God did not intend "Since we suffer and gain due to the acts of others, how does this congregation "suffer" or "gain" through what they have experienced?"

For further inquiry, look up these scripture verses:

- John 6:35-40 (the ultimate will of God)
 - Acts 2:42-47 (early church practices)
 - 1 Peter 2:9-11 (the calling of God's people)
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Questions for Personal Reflection

1. Today's lesson focuses on God's ultimate will: the goal which God reaches, not only in spite of all we may do, but even using our evil to further the divine plan. Think of several stories from the Bible (Joseph, David, Ruth and Naomi, etc.). How did the people involved help or hinder God's purposes? Does God's ultimate will prevail?

2. When considering God's ultimate will, we must ask about God's power or omnipotence. In theological terms we are talking about *omnipotence*: the characteristic of God that means God has all power and can achieve the divine purposes for the world.
Weatherhead says: "Power means ability to achieve purpose." Write your own definition of the word *power*.

3. What then is free will? How much power do we have? There is much debate over how much freedom we have. In simplified terms, Calvinists believe that God elects some to be saved and some to be damned-God casts the deciding ballot. Wesleyans believe that God votes for you, Satan votes against you, and you cast the deciding ballot. What do you believe?

4. If God will win no matter what we do, then why not just do as we please? (Read Romans 6:1-14 for help.)