

“YOUR WILL BE DONE” LORD’S PRAYER 4

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I’ll start with an ancient Chinese story: A farmer had a horse that he used for tilling his fields. One day, his horse escaped into the hills. When one of his neighbours heard about what had happened, he sympathized with the old farmer over his bad luck. “Bad luck? Good luck? Who knows?” said the old farmer.

A week later the horse returned from the hills followed by a herd of wild horses. The neighbour congratulated the old farmer on his good luck. “Good luck? Bad luck? Who knows?” said the old farmer.

The farmer’s son attempted to tame one of the wild horses. He was bucked off and broke his leg. Everyone agreed that this was very bad luck. Not the old farmer! “Bad luck? Good luck? Who knows?”

A month later, the army marched into the village, and rounded up every able-bodied man to go and fight in a bloody war. When they saw the broken leg of the farmer’s son, they let him stay home. Everyone was very happy at the old farmer’s good luck. “Good luck? Bad luck? Who knows?”

It’s a good story, isn’t it, even though it doesn’t have a conclusion? We don’t know what is going to happen. We think we can see a little bit in front of our noses, but we don’t usually know the big picture. Who was prepared 4 years ago for the death and destruction of the COVID pandemic? Despite the warning by epidemiologists about SARS and then MERS, I don’t know of any government in the world that had made serious preparations for a pandemic.

That Chinese story about luck reflects an important topic in Oriental culture. In a Western cultural context, the story might have the old farmer wondering whether an event was according to the will of God or not.

In the third petition of the Lord’s Prayer we ask that God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven. This leads me to ask, “What exactly is God’s will?”. I have heard many and varied responses from Christians over what constitutes God’s will.

For instance, a teenage girl who was a member of the neighbouring parish when I served at Tamworth was diagnosed with a brain tumour when she was 15. She was well loved and a devout Christian. Her family, her friends, and the church prayed that her medical treatment was successful. Instead, two months later she goes blind, and then dies. Was it God’s will that she died? Someone said at her funeral that it must have been.

A mother and father are worried about their teenage son. He is mixing with the wrong crowd. He’s lost interest in school and refuses to look for a job. Then he pinches the family

car and writes it off while he is drunk, underage, and unlicensed. When the police start investigating, he threatens his parents about what they are going to tell the police.

The parents are beside themselves with fear for their son's future and totally confused about what they should do. Surely it can't be God's will that their happy, smiling little boy has morphed into a danger to himself and a threat to society?

Now to a less serious example: I'm hurrying to get to the pharmacy before it closes. I race to the shopping centre and arrive 2 minutes before closing time. "Whew! I'm going to make it! Now where is a parking spot that's close? Good, there's one!... Oh no! It's a disabled park!... That spot looks empty!... Drat! There's a motorbike parked there! Shall I run over it? No. Better not! I'm running out of time! God, please help me find a park in time. Hey, there's one! Thanks God!"

How do you understand God's will? Is everything that happens – from COVID to teenagers dying of brain tumours, to children going off the rails, to finding a parking spot all part of God's will for the world? And if everything is according to God's will, are we simply to accept what happens, good or bad, and get on with it, because there's nothing we can do about it? If everything is God's will, why bother praying at all, because God knows everything that will happen anyway?

There's too much in these questions to deal with in one sermon. On another occasion I will offer some thoughts about suffering and God's will. For today, I'll reflect on God's will as it applies in the Lord's Prayer.

God's will include what God wants to do for us, and what God wants us to do for him. Let's look at each of these. God's will for us is clear. One of the many simple expressions of God's will in the Bible comes from 1 Timothy 2:4, "God our Saviour wants everyone to be saved and to come to know the truth." That's what God wants, so God put into action his plan of salvation, by sending his Son into the world as an innocent sacrifice to pay for our sin.

That's what God wants, but there is more to the picture. In his Small Catechism, Luther writes about the devil, the world, and our sinful selves as being totally opposed to God and his plans. The devil, for instance, appeals to our sense of pride by suggesting that instead of wanting to bless us, God is trying to control and restrict us.

The devil wants us to swallow the lie that freedom is to be found in doing whatever you want whenever you like. Not your will but mine be done!

Because of these enemies all around us in the world, in my view we should be a little cautious about regarding every sadness and disaster as simply God's will. Likewise, as for the old farmer in the story, I am cautious about regarding every instance of apparent good luck as simply the will of God. Many people's fervent desire each week is to win the big prize in Powerball, but winning the big prize can be just as easily the work of the devil as the work of God.

So, in this petition we are asking that God hinders and defeats these enemies and their evil plans. Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, we are asking for a little foretaste of heaven, where God's will is accomplished perfectly.

Now to what God wants us to do. God wants us to live as his children, gladly serving and obeying his commands. We are asking God to help us to live up to his way of life, the sort of life that Jesus lived.

I'd like to talk now about what's in our hearts when we pray this petition. We can say "your will be done" with the words on our lips, but in our hearts there can be anger, resentment and bitterness towards God. This may be the heart of the person who knows they can't do anything about their bad circumstances. Parents for instance, might bear a child severely disabled, and spend the rest of their lives hating God for what happened. When they pray every Sunday in church "your will be done" it is through gritted teeth and with an angry heart.

Conversely, we can learn to pray this petition with complete trust in God. We place ourselves in God's hands, because that's the safest place to be. Children from a loving home do this without thought. It comes naturally for them. But for adults, with our desire to be independent and our pride, it is a struggle.

Consider this analogy: which is more dangerous, driving your car one kilometre, or flying one kilometre in a large passenger jet? In the USA in the last 12 years of available figures, the death rate per 100,000,000 passenger miles was over 9 times higher for cars than for buses, 17 times higher than for passenger trains, and 1,606 times higher than for scheduled airlines.

So why are people generally much more scared of getting in a plane than getting in a car? Is it because in a plane you are just a passenger? There is no steering wheel in front of you, whereas in a car you have the controls, or at least can see the controls?

This petition invites us to remember what God is like. Firstly, God is wise. God always knows the big picture. He is the big picture. We can only see what's in front of our noses, so we are always making judgements from a very limited and ignorant view.

God is loving, as well as wise. Imagine a parent deliberately handing their only child over to a slow and excruciating death, all to save a bunch of people who weren't even the least bit grateful. If you can imagine that you have grasped an inkling of God's love.

Because God is both wise and loving, we can entrust our lives into his hands. We can say, along with St Paul, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him. When we pray "your will be done" we are declaring that we trust our wise and loving heavenly Father.

The trust we place in God will be tested at some stage in life. Praying the Lord's Prayer is not a guarantee that we will automatically be saved from all strife and grief. It is very important that we reflect on this. The time to prepare for a storm is when the weather is calm, not when the wind is howling and the roof is being blown off.

Remember Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane? He prayed for release from his coming ordeal, and then he prayed “Not as I will, but as you will.” He was not released. Instead, his Father gave Jesus the strength to persevere. Luke writes in 22:43 “and there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him.”

When we pray this petition, it may be that we, too, are not released from a coming ordeal. God’s will may be that we face the ugly or terrible situation, and when we do, he gives us the courage to persist and overcome. Naturally we want to grow and mature without the hard bits, but that’s not the way it works.

So, let’s summarize: we pray for two things in this petition: for what God wants to do for us, that is, save us so that we can be with him. But that’s not what the devil, the world, and our sinful selves want, so in this petition we ask for protection. We also pray for what God wants us to do for him – not just submit reluctantly to his will because we think we don’t have any choice, but to actively learn to trust that he is perfect wisdom and total love, so that whatever happens is finally for our good. Lord, your will be done. Amen.