

DISCOVERING GOD'S WILL (16)
THE SPECIFIC WILL OF GOD
SEEKING HIS UNREVEALED WILL-PART FOUR
“GOD’S OVERWHELMING GRACE” – Part Two
Sermon 10/07/18

I have a story to tell today; a story of overwhelming grace. But before I do I need to set the stage with a little review.

EXPLICIT AND IMPLICIT WILL OF GOD

I started this series on discovering God’s will by stating that we can find verses in Scripture that tell us both explicitly and implicitly what the general will of God is. For instance, scripture tells us explicitly that it is God’s will for all men to be saved and that His will is for the sorrow we experience because of our sin would lead us to repentance. He also tells us implicitly that we should not worry about anything but rather pray and let our requests be made know so that we may experience God’s peace in the midst of trying circumstances.

UNREVEALED WILL OF GOD - SCRIPTURE

But what about those times when we seek answers to more specific questions such as what house should we buy, what person should we marry or what job should we take. It is in these times that we seek what I call the “unrevealed” will of God. Several weeks ago I gave an illustration of how I sought God’s unrevealed will back in 1976 when my mother was in the hospital with a brain aneurism. I told how God revealed His will to me by using the words of Scripture to give me a direct answer to my prayer for my mother’s healing.

UNREVEALED WILL OF GOD - DREAMS

After that I spoke of dreams and how they can reveal God’s will to us. I used Joseph and Abraham as examples of how the Lord gave dreams and visions that dealt with events in their future and how their dreams prepared them in advance to walk in faith and trust. I also shared how God had given me three dreams that dealt with a future event in my life where I too found comfort in knowing God had already seen the future and prepared me in advance for what was about to happen. The dreams I had concerned my future release from employment at Bank of America after 25 years of service and how God would continue to provide for my family’s monetary needs.

UNREVEALED WILL OF GOD – OVERWHELMING GRACE

Two weeks ago I introduced the subject of overwhelming grace. I used Moses, Saul, and David as examples of people who were called by God to do something which they did not think themselves capable of doing. Moses was tending sheep in the wilderness and had no aspirations to save God’s people from the hand of Pharaoh’s tyranny. Saul and David were also responsible for the family livestock and had aspirations to be the first and second kings of Israel; yet God called them both to do something and be someone they did not think they could do or be.

How did they respond to God’s call - to their moment of overwhelming grace? Moses and David both accepted God’s belief in them and embraced their call but Saul failed to embrace it. Saul continued to hold on to his personal insecurities seeking confirmation for his newfound

position through the approval of his people rather than the One who had called Him. This ultimately led Saul to become so disobedient to God direction that God revoked His calling. From these three men we learned that the response you have to God's overwhelming grace will determine the course of the rest of your life. This brings us up to date and to the moment when God's grace overwhelmed me as I sought the Lord's will for my future employment.

MY STORY OF OVERWHELMING GRACE

You may remember that during the years following my dismissal from Bank of America I said I continued to walk in faith believing that God would provide for my family's financial needs. But several years had passed and I still did not have a full time job. So I posed this question, "Did God provide for our needs, and if so, did He provide before my severance pay ran out?" I'm now going to answer that question.

The amount of time my severance pay lasted was dependent on two things – our own ability to be frugal with our money, and God's ability to provide a job as soon as possible. Since I was given two years severance pay and had no current job prospects we immediately cut back on all unnecessary expenses, saving as much as we could in case it took a while to find a job. We followed the example of Joseph by storing the excess up for future days in case our financial famine grew worse.

As the months of unemployment rolled by I continued to seek the Lord for His will concerning my future employment. I took several odd jobs to bring in some extra income including taking over Royal Oaks Academy, a private school that provides home school families with administrative assistance to ensure they are in compliance with state regulations. I also began to volunteer more often for events in my church, teaching Bible Studies for men, and creating a new song book for our worship services. Occasionally I was given an opportunity to apply for another job at BofA. As easy as it may have been and as qualified as I was, I just did not have any peace about doing that. I not believe God wanted me to go back into that line of work. So I continued to wait upon the Lord.

The remaining months of 2004 went by and 2005 passed as well without a steady job. By the time November of 2006 came, two years had passed since I was let go from Bank. I was still without a viable job but had money remaining from my two year severance pay to help us through the rest of the year and several months beyond that.

As we entered into 2007 for the first time since being laid off, the money in our savings account stopped growing. As each month passed we could see the end of our stored income dwindling. We weren't in any immediate danger of not paying bills, for we still had our odd jobs. But a more permanent solution to my employment was still needed. The Lord would have to answer our prayers for employment soon and let me know fairly quickly what He wanted me to do or our money would run out.

In the spring of that year (2007) the former pastor of this church told the congregation that he was moving and we should begin to look for a new pastor. I was the worship leader of the church at that time but I also took on the duty of leading the prayer team. This team met weekly and was diligent in asking God to lead us to the new pastor before the current one moved away.

During one of our prayer times, approximately three months prior to his leaving, the pastor looked at me and said, “I think God wants you to be the next pastor.” I did not know how to reply to that statement as I had no inkling or desire to be the next pastor. I was happy to continue being the worship leader. But I did find it very curious that I had no negative reaction to his statement. I had no previous intention of applying for the job of pastor nor did I feel qualified to do so. The only part I intended to play in finding the new pastor was to lead others to pray. But now I thought perhaps I should consider it.

Now, normally I would have immediately poo-pooed the idea of being a pastor, rejecting it out of hand. After all I had no official training. Yes I had read through my Bible every year for over 20 years and had learned much through reading it. And yes I had attended Bible studies every Saturday morning and had even led a few small men’s groups on occasion. But I had never sought to be pastor. I had never even considered it. Now suddenly in the midst of our prayer meeting the soon-to-be former pastor of our church was suggesting that God wanted me to be the next pastor.

As I questioned him on what that might entail I started to get a clearer picture of what was required. Soon the other leaders of the church began to think of me as their next pastor as well. I was overwhelmed with the thought of me being a pastor. Not because of what the job entailed, but because God would consider me worthy of that calling. One day while pondering the prospect of becoming a pastor I was overwhelmed with God’s grace. As His grace poured over me I began to see myself through His eyes instead of through my own eyes. I found myself embraced by God’s grace instead of being condemned for my faults or my lack of ecclesiastical training.

The thought of God calling me to be a pastor initially overwhelmed me but it also opened my heart to receive whatever plans God had for my life. As I let this moment of overwhelming grace sink in I began to understand that God was just truly answering the many prayers I had prayed through the years since leaving BofA. I had asked Him to lead me to the next job He wanted me to hold and, as unlikely as being a pastor was to me (for it had never crossed my mind as an option) it now appeared that that was exactly what God had in store for me. I had a choice to make. Would I respond like Moses and David and embrace God’s call, or would I, like Saul, resist it because of my personal insecurities?

As I contemplated my response to this unlikely scenario a verse came to mind from:

LUKE 6:38

“Do not judge, and you will not be judged and do not condemn and you will not be condemned; pardon, and you will be pardoned. Give, and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure – pressed down, shaken together, and running over. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return.”

From this verse I felt God telling me that His grace was being given to me in good measure - pressed down, shaken together and running over; and I needed to increase my personal standard of measuring myself so that I could receive the standard of measurement that God had for me. It was at this point that I stopped resisting the idea and became fully convinced that God wanted me to be the next pastor of his church. So after much prayer and soul searching I became open to the idea of adding the role of pastor to my worship leader duties. A few months later I was officially

asked by the elders of our church to become their next pastor and I accepted. My ordination ceremony took place a few weeks later.

Since our former pastor was leaving in mid-September of that year I was asked to start that same month. That meant I would not receive my first paycheck as the new pastor until the end of September. That presented a slight problem. You see, even after all our diligence in saving money and reducing expenses, our ability to pay our monthly bills would be challenged a full month before my new paycheck. I really needed to start in August and not September so I would keep current with my bills and not miss a house payment.

After several years of trusting in His provision, God honored my faith and provided a new job and a steady source of income. My challenge now was to believe that God would provide even at this eleventh hour. God laid it on my heart to speak to the elders about my situation and ask if I could start my new position a month earlier. When they heard my reasons they agreed to let me start a month early.

I started my new job and received my first steady paycheck exactly two years and nine months after being laid off from BofA. God was faithful and did indeed provide a job before my severance pay ran out. Just as my dreams had foretold I was able to pay my bills and buy food and gas even as my money was running low. The dreams about my crumbling ATM card were faithfully fulfilled during each of the 33 months that had passed since I first had them.

Now I don't want you to think that transitioning from being a project manager at Bank of America, to being unemployed, to being a pastor of a church was easy. It was not. I was constantly telling myself not to worry but to trust God to provide. When God overwhelmed me with His grace I became willing to embrace His call for me to become a pastor; but convincing myself that I was worthy of that call was difficult. It was far easier to look at my own insecurity and lack of training and become discouraged and afraid than it was to fully embrace the call. It was very tempting to think like Saul and seek confirmation from people rather than rely on God's already assigned approval.

The first thing that challenged my confidence was not the Bible study I led after the pastor left but rather when I was invited to attend a monthly gathering of local pastors. As I walked into that meeting I saw men like myself only with decades of experience leading churches full of hundreds of people. I immediately allowed myself to feel intimidated. The more I allowed these emotions to grow the more insecure I became.

I was very glad to leave that meeting and had no desire to go back to another one. Not because I wasn't warmly welcomed. Not because I was made to feel inferior. Quite the opposite; everyone was friendly and welcomed me with open arms. They were not resisting me as a fellow pastor. I was resisting myself as a pastor because I had allowed myself to feel insecure around these seasoned veterans of pastoral ministry.

I fell into King Saul's trap of feeling very small in my own eyes. But God soon showed me the error of my ways by reminding me that these men did not call me to be a pastor, God Himself had called me; And. I should never seek confirmation of my worth through the eyes of men; rather

I should seek my worth through the eyes of God. God's approval was all that was needed and He had already given that to me. His call was all the confirmation I needed.

There was, of course, a learning curve. You do not learn how to be a pastor overnight even with God guiding the way. But I had help from the elders of the church. They took over some of the duties of the former pastor for a while as I got up to speed on what to do. They helped preach once or twice a month for several months as I spent time studying and preparing for future sermons and Bible studies. Then gradually, over the course of several months, they did less and less and I did more and more until I became the primary preacher and teacher.

Under my leadership the membership and direction of this church has changed especially over the past 5 years as God has redirected the vision of our church. This church started out as a small Bible study then grew into a larger church, and has now morphed into a small group of people that minister to senior citizens in facilities like Carlton. Yet regardless of our size or location, God has been in our midst continually guiding and directing His church.

This fulfillment of the dreams God gave me before I left BofA and the confirmation of God's answer to my prayers as I sought future employment have sustained me through the past 11 years of pastoring. Counting my years as the worship leader I have been in a position of leadership in this church for a total of 25 years. Yet being called to be a pastor has been the most challenging. Not because of the duties that are expected of me but because of the internal challenge of continuing to believe in God's call for my life.

Embracing God's overwhelming grace is not a onetime thing. It is a constant thing. You have to constantly remind yourself that God's opinion is enough; God's calling is not a mistake; God will continually provide what you need in order to accomplish what He requires of you. He does not call someone to be someone or to do something which they do not think they are capable of being or doing without also providing the necessary tools to accomplish the task.

The mantra of anyone who has received a call from God, and that includes everyone in this room who has been called out of sin and into God's kingdom, is this:

ZECHARIAH 4:6

Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord of hosts.

Everyone who has believed in Christ and placed their faith in Him has been overwhelmed by God's grace; none of us have entered into God's kingdom through our own efforts. It is our belief in the work that Christ did on the cross that has gained us entrance into heaven. Our own might and power could never transfer us from the kingdom of darkness into the Kingdom of Light. It has been and always will be God's Spirit that sustains and empowers us to overcome this world. No matter what God has or will call you to be or do, remember that it cannot be done in the power or might of your own strength. It can only be done through the power of God's Holy Spirit residing within you.

This was important for me to keep in mind for I have learned that as a pastor you rarely get

any positive feedback for what you do. Like those who are called into any type of ministry, pastors have to get their encouragement from God in order to sustain their ministry. Most people do not understand how many hours are spent preparing a sermon or Bible study and dealing with other people's concerns. In the pastoral world this is a universal truth. It is rare thing for a pastor to hear if they have impacted someone's life with their words. Every pastor I know wonders from time to time if God is still calling them to be a minister of the gospel because there is so little encouragement and so much negativity.

But that moment 11 years ago when God overwhelmed me with His grace and confirmed that it was His will for me to be a pastor, that overwhelming grace has sustained me through the years. I still feel inadequate at times to be standing up here preaching to you. I wonder weekly if I have properly communicated God's word in a way which you can understand and receive. But I do not doubt this is what God wants me to do. And until He tells me otherwise I will continue to follow His lead.

In the major milestones of my life God has confirmed His will to me through dreams, through Scripture, and through an overwhelming sense of His grace. I hope these illustrations from my own life have been of some help for you to recognize the voice of the Lord when He responds to your prayers and your petitions for help. But God is a creative God and He uses many different methods to communicate His will to His people. The still small voice which God used to whisper His will to Elijah in the wilderness remains a very powerful tool which God continues to use when communicating His will to His people. He may whisper in dreams or visions or Scripture or moments of overwhelming grace but He will whisper. You can know the unrevealed will of God. If you earnestly seek after it, it will not remain hidden for long.

Sometimes, however, God speaks in the silence – those times when there are no dreams, no directive words of Scripture, and no sense of His overwhelming grace. These are the times when God seems distant and unwilling to answer our cries for help. No matter how hard we try or how much we plead we cannot seem to hear God's voice directing us to His will. What do we do in those times when we are desperate for His voice but God seemingly remains silent? How do we move forward when there is no clear path before us? I will address this issue next week and will share what I learned from going through such silent times, for God may indeed be silent for a season but He is never far away from those who love and trust Him.

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There were many who came before me who have had similar experiences. I can think of Jeremiah, Saul of Tarsus, Paul, and the 12 disciples of Jesus.

These were ordinary people whom God called to become something they had no idea they could become. Let's look at is Jeremiah first. The book of Jeremiah opens with God's call to Jeremiah to become His prophet.

JEREMIAH 1:5

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations.’ Then I said, ‘Alas, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, because I am a youth.’...

“But the Lord said to me, “Do not say, “I am a youth,” because everywhere I send you, you shall go, and all that I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you,’ declares the Lord...

“Then the Lord stretched out His hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me, ‘Behold, I have put My words in your mouth. See, I have appointed you this day over the nations and over the kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.’”

Like Moses, Jeremiah was unsure he could fulfill the call God's was placing on him. Jeremiah knew that in the culture in which he lived in order to be respected you had to have some years under your belt and be considered an elder and leader among your people before they would listen to the words you had to say. Jeremiah was not yet old enough or experienced enough to fill that role, yet God told him not to use his youth as an excuse, because everywhere God would send him he would go and he would speak whatever God commanded him to speak.

Like God's call to Abraham when he was 90 and to Moses when he was 80, age was not a limiting factor in God's call. God equipped each of these men to do what He had called them to do. He did the same with Jeremiah when he embraced God's overwhelming grace and became a prophet to the people of Israel.

What's interesting about the book of Jeremiah is not only God's call to Jeremiah himself but God's call to the entire nation of Israel. In the book of Jeremiah the Lord speaks these encouraging words to His chosen people:

JEREMIAH 29:11

“I know the plans I have for you...plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.”

God is calling the whole nation of Israel to seek after His welfare for He has a future and a hope waiting for them. These are comforting words but let's place them in context. The entire book of Jeremiah is filled with words of impending judgement against Israel for her many sins against the Lord. God is offering them His overwhelming grace by consistently calling them to repent, yet the people of Israel refused God's offer of grace and continued their worship of idols. So God declares through the prophet Jeremiah that He will deliver Israel into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, who will burn the city with fire and take God's people captive. As history confirms the prophecies of Jeremiah came true and Nebuchadnezzar's forces overcame Israel's defenses and the people were carried off to Babylon as spoils of war.

What happened to God's plans for Israel – those plans for welfare and not calamity? They were still in place, even as Babylon descended upon Israel. God did not want to send Israel into captivity or have them experience the calamity that comes from being invaded. But the people refused the path of repentance leading to that future full of hope and instead chose the path of resisting God's grace which led them straight into captivity. If we want to experience a future full of hope then when God calls to any of us and offers His forgiveness we would do well to heed His call, repent of our sins, and embrace His grace. If we refuse His grace we too may fall captive to the overpowering forces of this world.

Another example of God's call of overwhelming grace is seen in Saul of Tarsus. This man was called to be something which He was actively resisting. He was known as a Pharisee of Pharisees and an ardent follower of the Law of Israel. He was so zealous for the Law that he asked and was granted permission from the religious authorities in Jerusalem to persecute the followers of Christ wherever he might find them. On his way to Damascus, however, the Lord Jesus interrupted his trip, knocked him off his horse, and asked why he was persecuting Him. When Saul asked who was speaking the Lord replied, *“I am Jesus whom you are persecuting, but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do.”*

This must have been quite a paradigm shift in the heart of Saul. He was actively persecuting the followers of Christ because he did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah or that He had risen from the dead. Yet here was Jesus, the risen Savior, speaking directly to Saul out of heaven and calling him to follow Him just as those whom he was persecuting were doing. Here is how Saul, later called Paul, spoke of

himself after that encounter.

ROMANS 1:1-6

“Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which He promised beforehand through His prophets, in the holy Scriptures, concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh...

“ who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for His name’s sake, among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ.”

It is obvious from even these few words that Paul embraced His call of overwhelming grace to become something which He had no intention of becoming. But God saw something in Saul of Tarsus, the enforcer of God’s Old Testament Law that enabled him to become Paul, God’s Apostle of New Testament grace. Like Abraham, Moses, David, and Jeremiah, when God called someone God equipped that person to be who He was called to be. But it would never have happened if the person who was being called had not embraced that calling.

Before I move on I want to mention the disciples. Jesus called twelve men to follow him. Some were fishermen, one was a tax collector, one was a zealot, others possibly tradesmen of some sort; yet all willingly left their livelihoods behind when Jesus called them to follow after Him. Jesus could have chosen His disciples from the multitudes of Scribes or Pharisees or Teachers of the Law available to Him in Jerusalem and the surrounding cities. These people knew the law backwards and forwards yet Jesus knew their hearts were far from the God of grace. So He did not seek after these men but chose instead those whose hearts yearned after the truth. Like David, their outward appearance did not matter to God, only the condition of their heart, regardless of their current occupation or level of learning.

Like the Scribes, Pharisees, and Teachers of the Law, the twelve men God chose were all Jews who had grown up in the Jewish religion and had been taught the Law since childhood. But these men were not learned in the same way as those who held positions of authority within the Jewish religious structure. They were content to work for a living in the marketplace and had no intention of becoming teachers of God’s word; yet this is exactly what God was calling them to be.

Some, like Peter, would become the rock upon which the Jewish church was built. Others, like Paul, would become the foundation upon which the Gentiles would come to faith in Christ. Judas, on the other hand, would abandon God's call, exchanging God's overwhelming grace for thirty pieces of silver. Like Saul, the end result of his choice was despair and death.

Like Abraham, Moses, Saul, David, Joseph and Paul, Peter and the other nine disciples all embraced the overwhelming grace which God extended to them through His call to be His disciples. This call extended beyond the earthly ministry of Jesus, past His death and resurrection, and past His ascension into heaven. The call of Jesus lasted till death as none were unwilling to forsake this call just to save their lives. All except John suffered terrible deaths but none recanted their faith or their call.

They were not the only ones who suffered as a result of their call. I spoke earlier about Jeremiah who was abused by the people and imprisoned by this own king because of his preaching. Paul was imprisoned many times for preaching the gospel and all 11 of the original disciples suffered death at the hands of Rome for their faith.

The Lord spoke these encouraging words to the people of Israel. And yet these words were only a handful of encouraging words placed in the midst of God's impending judgment of Israel for their many sins.

