

Romans 8:27 The Holy Spirit and knowing the will of God

1. The difficulties we experience in knowing the will of God

Here in Romans 8:26-27 the apostle touches on one further longstanding struggle experienced by Christians at different stages of their lives. The previous study in this chapter looked at the subject of prayer, but closely related to it is knowing the will of God. This is not a constant predicament or a routine issue. For many ordinary matters, for example, what to eat for breakfast God expects us to use our common sense. It only becomes a moral and spiritual issue to address when a person or couple, or a family in our community has no food available and no means of lawfully obtaining it. Likewise God doesn't take issue with whether we use a particular mode of transport to work, but might have concerns if we are in some way inconsiderate to other road users or other passengers on the bus! It is often in the big issues of life in particular that weigh heavily upon us. What subjects should I choose in the later years of High School? What courses should I apply for at university? What kind of jobs or career should I seek? Should I consciously stay single or pray concerning the possibility of a marriage with that special person God might bring into my life at some point in the future. These are the big issues that admit of no simple or easy answers. Then there is the cluster of issues concerning priorities. All of us know certain behavioural choices are wrong, maybe even sinful or against the law of the land and therefore on principle are excluded from our range of choices. But the challenge comes over making choices between legitimate options that might equally be open to us. Two possible job offers in different kinds of careers, for example, or two offers of places from universities to a high school pupil. Then there is the issue of time management. Most of us could easily fill up the twenty-four hours of our days at least twice over –so what ought our priorities be? These kinds of questions are more likely to be ones that we may genuinely be struggling to know how God would want us to think through and make choices between legitimate opportunities before us. It is, therefore encouraging that Paul writes here: *In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. **We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans.**²⁷ And He who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people **in accordance with the will of God*** (Romans 8:26-27).

2. God's will in general

It is important not to confuse the bigger picture of God's will for His creation or for humanity or even for His Church with His personal plan for our lives or His relationship with us individually.

(a) **God's sovereign purposes** The references to the will of God in the Bible often refer to the bigger picture of God's sovereign purposes rather than to detailed guidance to individuals. In the prayer Jesus taught His disciples in Matthew 6:9-10 we find these words: '*This, then, is how you should pray: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name,¹⁰ Your kingdom come, **Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.***' Here Jesus is teaching His followers to ask God to guide them to want what He wants them to seek from Him. In other words that one of the primary purposes of our prayers is to conform us to seeking after His preferences for our lives, for our families or for our church family or our country. The disciples' prayer does include specific requests, but they follow this overarching principle of asking God to direct us to make choices consistent with His Holy purposes for His children. Paul, in Ephesians 1:11-12 states: *In Him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of **Him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will,**¹² in order that we, who were*

the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of His glory. Although on earth our experience is often like looking at the other side of a carpet or rug where we can see the tangled pieces of material, but it falls short of communicating to us what the other public face of the carpet or rug is like. By contrast, God sees the full colour picture and has arranged the circumstances of history so that in the big picture there is sense and order and purpose in all that He does. In I Corinthians 8:6 Paul makes the same point though he expresses it in a different way: *yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.* These words are intended to provide comfort and assurance to believers experiencing the storms of life. This truth is a source of real joy to God's people in heaven. Revelation 4:11 pictures them singing these words: *'You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for You created all things, and by Your will they were created and have their being.'* No human being or any other creature on earth is here by accident. God ordained your life no matter what anyone else might say. Therefore, you are of infinite value as a creature created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27).

(b) **God's control over the nations** In the message of judgement spoken by Daniel to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon in Daniel 4. Verse thirty-two includes these words: *Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms on earth and gives them to anyone He wishes.'* Without going into the details of that Old Testament story the principle here is that God is sovereign regarding the control exercised over and the boundary markets of any given nation state. Therefore, when we struggle to make sense of the tragedy of Syria; when we are perplexed over how the competing expectations of Israel and the Palestinian Authority can be reconciled; or if we are worrying over how the independence referendum will go in the autumn of this year here in Scotland, this verse is a timely reminder that maps do change; countries and empires come and go; but God is still on the throne. It may appear that Vladimir Putin controls all the options over Crimea, but even there and over the rest of Ukraine God is in control. In his well-known sermon on Mars Hill in Athens Paul spoke these timely words: *From one man He made all the nations that they should inhabit the whole earth; and He marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.*²⁷ *God did this so that they would seek Him and perhaps reach out for Him and find Him, though He is not far from any one of us* (Acts 17:26-27). I doubt very much that some of the world's politicians full of their own self-importance recognise this truth, but whether they do or not God is ultimately in control of the nations.

(c) **God's control over the defining event of human history** (Acts 4:27-28) *Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed.*²⁸ ***They did what Your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.*** The human beings in question acted freely and were totally responsible for the choices they made. They were also accountable to God for them. Yet He in His sovereign purposes ensured that the wicked choices of human beings brought about the perfect will of God in the life of Jesus on earth that appeared to culminate in His crucifixion and death. God had the final word in the resurrection that first Easter. In general terms it is clear to conclude that God's overall purposes and plans for His created order will come to pass because He is sovereign.

3. **God's will for human beings**

(a) **The permissive will of God** This refers to the things that God allows to happen in our lives or in the wider world even though He may not directly approve of them. The reason why He may permit this to take place is due to His desire to accomplish some larger purpose. It is important to explain what is meant here:

(i) Evil permitted for the greater good The most obvious example here is the story of Joseph that covers a large section of the book of Genesis. In Genesis 37:25-28 it states: *As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt.*²⁶ *Judah said to his brothers, 'What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood?'*²⁷ *Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood.'* His brothers agreed.²⁸ *So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt.* Falling out with a sibling is not unknown with even the best of us, but selling a brother into slavery is an appalling way to behave. The act was unspeakably evil. Yet when Joseph reflects on what happens several decades later he utters these incredible words in Genesis 50:19-20. *But Joseph said to them, 'Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God?'*²⁰ *You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.*²¹ *So then, don't be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.'* And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them. In the context of the story Jacob their elderly father had died and the older brothers feared that Joseph would now get his revenge on them. Nothing could have been further from the truth. Instead Joseph displays extraordinary grace towards his brothers and explains to them God's higher purpose in permitting the evil thing that happened to him all those years earlier. A second example came four centuries later in Egypt. Exodus 1:8-11 gives us an outline of what took place. *Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt.*⁹ *'Look,' he said to his people, 'the Israelites have become far too numerous for us.'*¹⁰ *Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country.'*¹¹ *So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labour, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh.* Fast forward a number of years to the plagues in Egypt. Why did God permit the Israelites to suffer such hardship under the Pharaoh? Exodus 9:15-16 gives the answer. *God told Moses to say this to this mighty ruler: For by now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with a plague that would have wiped you off the earth.*¹⁶ *But I have raised you up for this very purpose, **that I might show you My power and that My name might be proclaimed in all the earth.*** A secondary purpose was probably to encourage the Israelites to come together as a people who were willing to leave all the good things of Egypt behind and set off for the land promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Until the campaign of persecution it is very likely that life in Egypt was so comfortable that the majority of Israelites might have said 'no thanks' to Moses inviting them to go on a journey. 'I'm happy where I am'. God can use difficulties to cause us to seek Him in more earnest prayer.

Another example, not of something evil, but a choice that appeared inappropriate concerned the young Philistine woman Samson wished to marry. It was many a parent's concern what happened here. In Judges 14 this impulsive young Jewish man sees a beautiful Philistine girl on a visit to a town in their territory. He returns home and demands that his parents arrange a marriage for him with her. Judges 14:3-4 takes up the story: *His father and mother replied, 'Isn't there an acceptable woman among your relatives or among all our people? Must you go to the uncircumcised Philistines to get a wife?'* But Samson said to his father, *'Get her for me. She's the right one for me.'*⁴ (His parents did not know that this was from the Lord, who was seeking an occasion to confront the Philistines; for at that time they were ruling over Israel.) At the time Israel was under a Philistine occupation. Yet God overruled the foolish actions of a young man requesting a marriage to a virtual stranger and through a sequence of events brought great good for the nation of Israel. It is always better for us to make good wise and God-honouring choices, yet these examples illustrate that out of foolish or even evil courses of action God can work for the good of His people. this ought to be encouraging to us and help us not to

worry about the possibility of making mistakes in the choices we choose on the pathway of life.

(ii) Suffering permitted to keep us close to God Peter's first letter to young Christians in Turkey who were suffering for their faith sought to encourage them to stand firm in it. Peter said: *But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, ¹⁶keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. ¹⁷For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil* (I Peter 3:15-17). Peter went on to say: *Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed. ¹⁴If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.* (I Peter 4:12-14). In the conclusion of that letter Peter wrote: *And the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will Himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast* (I Peter 5:10). The suffering was due to the misconduct of other people. It was not sought, but God wished some good to come out of such an unpromising situation. One of the best known examples of God's people coming to terms with their trials was Paul. In II Corinthians 12:6-10 there is the account of how he came to terms with something that was really tough for him to accept. After speaking of some extraordinary blessings from God, he wrote: *Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹But He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. ¹⁰That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.* In more modern time Adoniram and Ann Judson, American Baptist missionaries who took the Christian Gospel to Burma suffered very serious persecution by the brutal regime. Their outstanding witness has inspired several generations of Burmese Christians to stand for Jesus despite the most horrific violence against them from the evil dictators who rule their country.

(iii) God wants the best for His children We need to be clear that God wants good things for our lives; for us to make the best choices and to be spared unnecessary heartache and difficulties. Just as every sensible human parent wishes the same for their offspring, but we have to allow others, and they us, to make our choices and to live with their consequences.

(a) Bad Choices In I Kings 13 there is an account of a prophet of God who came from the southern kingdom of Judah to pronounce judgement on the wicked northern Israelite king Jereboam at a place called Bethel. God used him to deliver a courageous pronouncement at the risk of his life and it was followed up by an extraordinary miracle which put the fear of God into all the people present at that open-air service. God had given that man one condition to follow that he must not accept hospitality from anyone in Bethel, but immediately set off for home at the close of his ministry there. After declining an offer of dinner from king Jereboam he started off home, but unwisely he did accept an offer of dinner from another prophet. Now setting off home later in the day he had the misfortune to be ambushed by a lion at the roadside which cost him his life. The unspoken message of that story was that had he gone home straight away he would have had a safe journey on that occasion. God had revealed His will to His servant on that occasion, without explaining why, but the man was allowed to make the call of obedience or disobedience to that guidance on that occasion. In the Early Church a couple Annanias and Sapphira made a serious error of judgement seeking to mislead the Jerusalem Church over the matter of a financial gift to the church. God laid down an integrity marker for these first Christians and in the premature deaths of this couple

made it very clear that their dishonesty and similar misconduct on the part of anyone else would incur God's serious displeasure (Acts 5:1-11). Now people can die early for a variety of reasons with out any question marks over their characters or conduct; others can make mistakes and recover their position in life, but there is a price to pay for our freedom –we have times when we make wrong choices that may as here be contrary to God's revealed standards. (b) Good Choices In Numbers 13-14 we have the account of the twelve spies sent out to obtain an accurate survey of the Promised Land, prior to the entry of the people under Moses' leadership. *Then Caleb silenced the people before Moses and said, 'We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it.'*³¹ *But the men who had gone up with him said, 'We can't attack those people; they are stronger than we are.'*³² *And they spread among the Israelites a bad report about the land they had explored (Numbers 13:30-32).* What was God's view on this assembly vote in Israel? Numbers 14:23-24 gives the answer. *Not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their ancestors. No one who has treated Me with contempt will ever see it.*²⁴ *But because My servant Caleb has a different spirit and follows Me wholeheartedly, I will bring him into the land he went to, and his descendants will inherit it.* Caleb and Joshua clearly made the right choice to step out in faith with God. In Luke 10:38-42 the choice is not between the bad and the good, instead between the good and the best options available. *As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, He came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him.*³⁹ *She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what He said.*⁴⁰ *But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to Him and asked, 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!'*⁴¹ *'Martha, Martha,' the Lord answered, 'you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed – or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.'* Stories like this one seek to inspire us to choose the best options for our lives. What would Jesus do? Or what do I think He would want me to do? The right kind of questions to guide and prompt us in a range of situations;

(c) Salvation II Peter 3:9b states: *...Instead He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.* This verse is quite compatible with Jesus' words in John 6:37-39: *All those the Father gives Me will come to Me, and whoever comes to Me I will never drive away.*³⁸ *For I have come down from heaven not to do My will but to do the will of Him who sent Me.*³⁹ *And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that I shall lose none of all those He has given Me, but raise them up at the last day.* We genuinely offer the Gospel to all people –each person has the responsibility for their response to it.

(b) The directive will of God This is not what He only desires but what He decrees will happen (i) In Creation there is the guarantee that the human race will never again be close to extinction through a world wide flood. Genesis 8:21b-22, in the account of Noah, it states: *never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done.*²² *'As long as the earth endures seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease.'* Jesus, in Matthew 5:45, reminded His followers of God's constant care for His creation. *He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.* (ii) In Redemption Peter in his Day of Pentecost sermon linked together very clearly divine sovereignty and human responsibility in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Acts 2:23-24a: *This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put Him to death by nailing Him to the cross.*²⁴ *But God raised Him from the dead...* The salvation of the Church whom Jesus came to save is guaranteed. In John 17:2 Jesus prayed: *Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son may glorify You.*² *For You granted Him authority over all people that He might give eternal life to all those You have given Him.*³ *Now this is eternal life: that they know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent.*⁴ *I have brought You glory on earth by finishing the work You gave me to do.* Our security in Christ as His followers is guaranteed. John 10:28 states: *I give them eternal life, and*

they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of My hand. The return of Jesus is also guaranteed. I Thessalonians 4:16-18: For the Lord Himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. ¹⁷ After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord for ever. ¹⁸ Therefore encourage one another with these words. As is the day of judgement when all will be called to account, as Paul declared in his Mars Hill sermon, in Acts 17:31: For He has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the man He has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising Him from the dead.

(c) **Practical Lessons to learn**

- (i) **God wants us to give thanks in all circumstances** (I Thessalonians 5:18) (note ‘in’ not ‘for’ here);
- (ii) **God wants us to obey the human authorities except when it contradicts God’s Word** (Acts 2:18-20; I Peter 2:13-15);
- (iii) **Our calling is to model a God-honouring lifestyle** (Romans 12:1-2; I Thessalonians 4:3-7);
- (iv) **Our service for God should be wholehearted in each area of our lives** (Ephesians 6:5-8);
- (v) **We must use our time wisely** (Ephesians 5:15-17);
- (vi) **God’s will for us all is to be increasingly like Jesus** (Romans 8:29);

(d) **How can I find God’s direction for my life?**

- (i) **Be patient** I need to say this to myself first of all! God doesn’t reveal all His guidance at once. Otherwise we might be overwhelmed at what lies ahead of us; we might not yet be equipped to handle it; we might not yet have the maturity to work through the issues that will arise; God will reveal what I need to know in His time
- (ii) **Be clear** God is infinitely more concerned with you being the type of person He wants you to be than the work He wants you to do. In God’s eyes it comes in this order.
- (iii) **Be consistent** Always seek to live your life in conformity to the general will of God before He will guide you into the specifics of your personal faith journey.
- (iv) **Be open** God directs us through the guidance of the Holy Spirit (John 16:13); through the Bible (Matthew 4:1-11); through the local church (Ephesians 4:11-13); through family and friends; through circumstances; Where the Bible has clear specific commands our calling is to obey them; where the Bible had general principles our calling is to honour them; where the Bible has no specific guidance you are personally responsible to make the choices as a Christian in a manner consistent with the commandments and principles of Scripture.
- (v) **Be wise** Paul writes: *whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God* (I Corinthians 10:31b). As a follower of Jesus it is sensible to ask before making significant choices: Is it lawful? Is it genuinely good for me? Is it potentially enslaving? Is it consistent with the Lordship of Jesus in my life? Would it be beneficial to other people? Is it potentially for the glory of God?