

REMEMBER THE BIG PICTURE!**ROMANS 8:28-32**

Earl Weaver, the former manager of the Baltimore Orioles baseball team had a rule no one on his team could steal a base unless he was given a steal sign. This rule upset Reggie Jackson, one of his star players. Jackson felt like he already knew which pitchers or catchers he could steal a base on or not. So, in one game he decided to steal a base without getting a sign from one of the coaches. He got a good jump off the pitcher and easily beat the throw to second base. As he shook the dirt off his uniform, Jackson smiled with delight. He felt like his own judgment had been vindicated over that of his manager, Earl Weaver.

Sometime later, Weaver took Jackson aside and explained why he'd hadn't given Jackson the steal sign in that situation. First, the next batter for the Orioles was Lee May, his best power hitter other than Jackson. When Jackson stole second base, it now left first base open. So, the other team walked Lee May intentionally taking his potent bat out of his hands. Second, the batter after May hadn't had much success against that pitcher, so Weaver felt he had to send in a pinch hitter to try and drive in Jackson and May and score some runs. That meant the Orioles lacked some bench strength later in the game if they needed it. What's the point of the story? Reggie Jackson saw only his relationship to the pitcher and the catcher. Earl Weaver was watching the whole game and making decisions based on the big picture. You and I only see so far, but God always sees the big picture - the total and complete picture. When He sends us a signal, it's wise to obey no matter what we think we may know.

This morning I conclude a series of messages on knowing God and His will. I've called this series: *Knowing God's Will: Is It Like GPS Or A Compass?* All of us would prefer God's will to be like a global positioning system – very precise, detailed, and crystal clear. Wouldn't it be wonderful if every decision in life, every crossroads, every need for direction, and guidance prompted God to give us explicit instructions? "Do this, then do that, and afterwards, wait exactly this long and then do the following." Perhaps the reason God doesn't reveal His will to us in GPS format is simply because we'd be less likely to walk by faith. Instead, God's will is more like using a compass. He provides the direction we should live and walk in, but it still requires us to stick very close to Him at all times. We still depend on Him for daily guidance. We still have to walk by faith.

Let's read and think about some verses in Romans 8 as we close out this series of messages. The Christian leader, Paul, was a man who thought long and hard about God and His will. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Paul wrote the words we just read. They're God's words spoken into your life and mine. I see three big truths.

THE WILL OF GOD RESTORES ME.

The entire message of the Bible is all about how God is restoring the broken relationship between human beings and Himself. In the very first book of the Bible (Genesis), we read how God had a perfect relationship with Adam and Eve. They'd been created in His image. But they concluded they knew better than God and so they

sinned. Sin destroyed the beauty of that first relationship between human beings and God. Thousands of years later, however, God sent Himself in the person of Jesus to die on a cross and be raised again. That act of sacrificial love opened up the possibility for any and every human being to enter into a new and living relationship with God. At the cross, Jesus paid the penalty for your sins and mine. That made it possible to enter into and enjoy a new relationship with God as our Father whenever we put our faith in who Jesus is and what He accomplished on our behalf.

Now, in the verses we read – particularly vv. 28-30 – Paul made it clear it was God’s will to restore this relationship. God took the initiative. God put the plan into motion. Before you were even born, God had made a decision to love you and make you an object of His wonderful grace so you could enter into an eternal relationship with Him. That’s essentially what the word “predestined” means in v. 30. Before your birth, God picked you to belong to Him forever. Then came a moment in time when He called you to Himself. You began to think about God and seek Him. When you ultimately put your personal faith in who Jesus is and what He did, God justified you. In other words, He declared you not guilty and accepted you as His child. And God will glorify you fully one day in Heaven. To be glorified means to be made perfect, mature, or complete in every spiritual way. When you stop to think about the wonder, the grandeur, the sheer magnitude of God’s love for you, it ought to fill your heart and mine with tremendous joy. God desired to have a relationship with you. Although that relationship had been broken by your sin, God restored that relationship with you.

Now in v. 28 we learn God restored or saved you for a purpose. “For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son.” (Rom 8:29 NLT) God’s great purpose in calling you, pursuing you, and restoring His relationship with you was so you could become like Jesus. More than anything else, it’s God’s will yesterday, today, and forever, that you resemble His Son. A sculptor was asked how he had learned to carve a majestic lion’s head out of a large block of marble. He said, “I just chip away everything that doesn’t look like a lion’s head.” God chips away constantly at everything in you and me that doesn’t point to Jesus – the pride, the lack of love for others, the ungodly priorities, the love of money and the false security it creates, the ungodly desires. He’s constantly shaping, molding, and sculpting us. God is absolutely committed to that task. He’s relentless and never gives up even when we rebel, start to pout, and get upset with Him because that sculpting can be painful. God never gives up or gives in. He never gets discouraged. He never compromises.

Here's an interesting truth. God has an infinite number of methods when it comes to achieving His will for human beings, but He has only one goal for every child of God. He wants you and me – and all of His spiritual sons and daughters - to look like Jesus in terms of our inner character and outer approach to life. Now, how you and I get to that goal will be different. There are different families, different decisions, different spiritual experiences, different joys, different sorrows, different successes, different failures. God works all that different stuff together in all of these different people who are all living different lives. But He has only one purpose, one goal, and one destination for each of us. Be like Jesus. Christlikeness. When we’re thinking about God’s will, let’s

remember the big picture. The will of God restores you. The will of God has restored you, is restoring you, and will restore you fully and finally. A second truth....

THE WILL OF GOD RELEASES ME.

“To find the will of God is the great discovery. To do the will of God is the magnificent achievement.” That’s a grand and lofty statement, but it tells you precious little about how you find out God’s will for those everyday situations, circumstances, and decisions that come our way in life. How can we be sure we’re doing God’s will?

Many of you will say, “Well, there’s the Bible. It tells us a great deal about the will of God.” I couldn’t agree more! There are, in fact, many situations in life where the Bible tells us what is and is not God’s will. For example, it’s always God’s will to love and honor your parents. It’s always God’s will to provide for your family financially and treat your spouse and children with love and respect. It’s always God’s will to share your faith with lost people. It’s always God’s will to help people who are in need in ways that are truly helpful. It’s always God’s will to worship and serve Him faithfully and regularly while you’re in community with others who follow Jesus. It’s always God’s will to discover how God has gifted you spiritually and then find ways to help build His Kingdom. By the same token, it’s never God’s will to lie, to steal, or to cheat someone. It’s never His will to hate, to resent, or to hold a grudge against others. It’s never God’s will to have sex outside of marriage. It’s never God’s will to marry someone who doesn’t share your faith in Jesus. It’s never God’s will to envy or covet what other people have in life. So, in many decisions or situations in our lives, you don’t have to seek out God’s will. He’s already expressed His will clearly in His Word. No, in fact, the real issue many times for any and all of us is not whether we know God’s will, but instead whether we will do God’s will. The issue is about obedience not knowledge!

Nevertheless, the Bible doesn’t speak into every conceivable situation, decision, or extenuating circumstance we might face in life. It won’t tell you to marry Bob or Alice. It won’t tell you to become a teacher or a nurse. It won’t tell you what kind of house to buy. It may not give you specific ways to relate to that overbearing boss, that grouchy relative, or that troublesome neighbor. Instead of giving us explicit instructions for every conceivable situation we might ever face in life, the Bible gives us principles and values that can then be applied broadly to your life and mine by faith and using our intelligence. God then gives you and me the responsibility to interpret those principles and values and apply them correctly to the specific circumstances we might be facing. Is God’s will always clearly and easily discerned? No, absolutely not. That’s when discerning God’s will can leave us frustrated. We’re left with uncertainty which causes anxiety to well up within us because we’re afraid of missing out on God’s will. This is when we really want God’s will to be like GPS! “Do this right now, do that next.” We want explicit instructions as to what, when, where, and how. Instead, God provides a compass. It’s as if God says, “Stay very close to Me. Trust Me. Obey Me. Follow Me.”

“But, Rick, I don’t want to miss out on God’s perfect will for my life!” Is there such a thing as God’s “perfect” will? Each of us and all of us have already missed out on God’s

“perfect” will for our lives. Each of us are sinners and even if you only committed one sin your whole life long, you just missed out on God’s perfect will for you. No act of sin can be nor ever will be God’s perfect will for you. So, in that sense all of us have already missed out on God’s best for our lives. But, since God wants you to do His will more than you want to do it, He will never fail to point you in the right direction if you’re sincerely pursuing and seeking His will. That can be a pretty big “if.” As I said earlier, we can fool ourselves into thinking we want to do God’s will, but in reality we’re far more interested in doing our own will and having God either overlook it or bless it.

Let’s come at this issue of discerning God’s will for specific decisions and situations from another perspective. Let’s assume you sincerely want both to know and do God’s will. If it’s a choice between something good or bad, something right or wrong, or something wise or foolish, discerning God’s will isn’t difficult. But sometimes life will present us with choices between two or more good things. What should we do then? I believe God grants us great freedom when faced with those kinds of decisions. We have a tendency to make God’s will far narrower and more restricted than it is in reality. We think God’s will is just one thing and one thing only. And it’s our job to figure it out like some giant mystery in which we become spiritual detectives looking for clues. A perceptive Christian make this observation, “A Christian is the only person I know who can choose any one of four different directions and have it be right.” (Ted Engstrom).

First, a biblical example of that truth. It’s easy to get mixed up when it comes to the story of the Garden of Eden in Genesis. God never said to Adam and Eve, “Great garden, huh? But you can only eat the fruit of one tree. Every other tree is off limits to you. And you have to guess which is the right tree and the right fruit. If you mess up and get it wrong, tough luck!” No, instead God told Adam and Eve they could eat the fruit from any tree in the garden except one. And He specifically identified the tree to avoid. God revealed His will very clearly to them. “Adam and Eve, My garden is full of trees with many kinds of delicious fruit for you to enjoy. Have a ball! Eat from any tree in My garden you want, but leave the fruit from this one, specific tree alone. Don’t touch it. Leave it alone.” God’s will for Adam and Eve was amazingly generous and broad. We so often assume God’s will is just one thing when it could well be many things. God grants His children an incredible amount of freedom to make many good decisions and choices. There’s just one thing He wants us to avoid – anything that violates His principles and His values – anything we already know will not and can not please Him.

Here’s a second example and it’s a personal one. In my final year of seminary (42 years ago), I was grappling with God’s will. At the time, I was pastoring a small, country church on a part-time basis while working on my degree. The church wanted me to stay on after my graduation and become their full time pastor. They were trying to figure out a financial package they could afford and I could live on. I didn’t know whether to accept or not. I prayed. I pursued God’s direction. I sought out the advice of godly people. God never did speak to me and say, “Leave” or “Stay.” I finally realized God was leaving the decision to me. Ultimately, I declined their gracious offer and went to another church and another ministry. Was it God’s will to move to another church? Yes. But here’s what I came to understand. If I had stayed at that country church, it

would have been God's will as well! God's will was big enough to bless either decision. Did I want a GPS version of God's will at that time? You betcha! Instead, God just gave me a compass and the freedom to make a responsible decision. It's been said, "God does not coerce me, manipulate me, or violate my will. He does not play from a stacked deck. He respects the powers which He has created in me. As one who loves Him and is called according to His purpose, I am free to choose – and God elects my choice to be right." (Stan Mooneyham). The will of God restores me. The will of God releases me. Part and parcel of getting the big picture is to know that...

THE WILL OF GOD REDEEMS ME.

But what about the wrong choices we make in life? What about the sins we commit? Or, what about those things that happen to us through no fault of our own? We didn't do something sinful or wrong. We didn't deserve or earn what happened to us. Tough things. Hurtful things. Life-changing things and not in a good way. How do all those kinds of experience fit into God's will? We love v. 28 (NLT), "And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them." Do you believe that? Everything? Really? That verse is often applied to the very difficult things in life we have no control over or don't bring on ourselves – abuse, illness, accidents, major disappointments, even death.

But can that verse also be applied to the consequences of our sins, our failures, our wrong choices, and our stupid mistakes? Yes. God alone has the ability to take even the consequences of the sins and stupid stuff we do in life and redeem them. But there is an "if" attached. Only if there is sincere repentance and a willingness to get our inner spiritual compass repaired and pointed in the right direction – His direction – again. No, God will not bless or redeem sinful choices or decisions if we persist in rejecting Him. Instead, God will withhold His blessing and favor from our lives. He'll allow us to feel more of the pain that is the natural outcome of our sin or stupidity until we're willing to surrender to Him. But if we repent and allow the Holy Spirit to get our lives pointed in His direction, it's as if God says, "I will forgive you. But my grace will go much further and I will redeem this hurtful thing in your life. I will make something good out of this very bad thing."

Notice that v. 28 is conditional – "... of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them." If you have no intention of keeping the compass needle of your life pointed in Jesus' direction, don't claim the promise about God making everything work together for the good. By the same token, even if we repent and turn away from our sin or stupidity, it doesn't mean we escape all the bad consequences that come from them. If I violate God's principles, there will be consequences. Sinful choices and stupid decisions have painful consequences. While God will always forgive in response to sincere repentance, He may not remove every consequence.

In the Old Testament, we read about King David, a person God Himself described as "a man after My own heart." Despite that awesome title, David committed adultery with a woman named Bathsheba, got her pregnant, and then arranged to have her husband

murdered. He then married her quickly in order to cover up his sin. Did David's sin have consequences? Did it ever. The child itself died. From that day onwards there was constant turmoil and dissension in David's family and among his many children. One son raped his half-sister who was then killed by another half-brother. One of David's sons tried to kill his father and steal the throne of Israel from him. Did God allow any good to come out of David's terrible sins? Yes, but only after David fully repented, renounced his sin, and threw himself upon God's mercy and grace. David eventually got the compass of his life pointed in God's direction once again. Later, David and Bathsheba had another son. His name was Solomon and he succeeded David as king. He earned the reputation of being the wisest man who ever lived. What does that story illustrate? Redemption. God has the ability to bring good out of the bad things that happen to us: both the bad things that are the result of our own sin and stupidity as well as the bad things that happen to us through no fault of our own.

Why is God willing to redeem the bad stuff that happens to you and me? Even more amazing, why is God willing to redeem even our sinful choices and our stupid mistakes when we repent and renounce them? Our Scripture today reveals the answer. God has made an enormous investment in you and me – the life of His one and only Son. "Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else?" (Rom 8:32 NLT) God has simply invested too much in you and me to just let us go. Truly, if God is for us, who then can be against us?

On May 18, 1980, Mount St. Helens in the state of Washington erupted. It was by all accounts a spectacular sight. It was also incredibly destructive. For nine hours the volcano erupted with the force of a Hiroshima atomic bomb every minute. It devastated every living thing for over 200 hundred square miles. At the time, scientists told us it would take a very long time for the landscape to be restored. Perhaps 50 years. They were wrong. Within a few years of the eruption, life started to come back to Mount St. Helens and the countryside around it. Tiny flowers pierced the ash. Little plants took root. Trees began to grow. Birds started to make their nests. Wildlife crisscrossed the landscape. Yes, the scars of the eruption remain, but life and beauty returned to Mount St. Helens. Do you know what that is? Redemption. Before 1980, Mount St. Helens was a picture postcard beauty spot. Today, it's a national monument, a center for research, and a place that attracts thousands of visitors every year from all over the world. It's a place that thrills the geologist, the hiker, as well as the tourist. Artists have even been able to create beautiful glass objects from the volcanic ash on Mount St. Helens that now graces homes around the world.

Volcanoes can erupt in your life and mine. Sometimes they're the result of our own sins, failures, or foolishness. Sometimes they're just thrust upon us. We have no choice but to react to them and their consequences the best we can. Regardless of the causes, the consequences look pretty much the same. Destruction. Devastation. Death. But what God can do with a volcano, He can do in your life and mine. Even in the most impossible of places – whether it's Mount St. Helens or our own lives – God is the God of resurrection. He can and will redeem the bad stuff if you give it to Him. God's will restores us. It releases us. And – praise be to God – God's will redeems us.