

The Will of God and Difficulties

Matthew 2:13–23

Isaac Watts was a boy genius. He was learning Latin by age 4, Greek at age 9, French (which he took up to converse with his refugee neighbors) at age 11, and Hebrew at age 13. He was born in Southampton, England, on July 17, 1674. From an early age, he experienced two things very clearly: the will of God and difficulties. He realized that being in the will of God did not mean that someone would not face difficulties.

This was evidenced in the life of his father. His father was not a member of the state church, and he was twice thrown into jail for opposing it. When Isaac was a baby, his mother often carried him in her arms to visit his father in prison.

Like his father, as a minister of the gospel, he would face difficulties as well. He pastored in a city that my wife and I have had the privilege to visit—London. His brush with difficulties was different, however, from his father's. His father faced physical imprisonment, but Isaac faced serious health issues. He was a little man, only about five feet tall, with pale skin and a bony frame topped with a disproportionately oversized head. When you see pictures of him today, he is often in a large gown which acted as an attempt by the artists to disguise his unappealing frame. It is no surprise that he was never married.

His health was very poor all his life, but his church took loving care of him. Because of health issues, he had to pass off more and more of his work to his assistants. Eventually he had to resign.

Isaac Watts was not a big advocate of the music in the church. Early in life, he would complain to his father about singing the versified Psalms. His father said, "If you do not like what we sing, then write something better." He took on that challenge and wrote some of the most cherished hymns today. Although it should be noted that his songs met with much opposition, soon the churches in his day were all singing his "new" hymns. Today, Watts has been called the father of hymn-writing in the English language.

The greatest of Watts's hymns is probably "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." One of my favorite hymns by Isaac Watts is "Am I a Soldier of the Cross?" In it, he pushes back at the common notion that being in the will of God means no difficulties in life. He also pushes back

against the notion that difficulties in life mean you are not in the will of God.¹ The hymn's lyrics are as follows:

Am I a soldier of the cross,
A follower of the Lamb?
And shall I fear to own His cause
Or blush to speak His name?

Must I be carried to the skies
On flowery beds of ease?
While others fought to win the prize,
And sailed through bloody seas?

Are there no foes for me to face?
Must I not stem the flood?
Is this vile world a friend to grace,
To help me on to God?

Sure I must fight, if I would reign
Increase my courage, Lord!
I'll bear the toil, endure the pain,
Supported by Thy word.

Thy saints, in all this glorious war,
Shall conquer, though they die;
They view the triumph from afar,
And seize it with their eye.

When that illustrious day shall rise,
And all Thy armies shine
In robes of victory through the skies,
The glory shall be Thine.²

Transition: As we transition to our text, we find God wedding this truth (the will of God and difficulties) not only in the life of Isaac Watts, but also in the life of Jesus Christ. Here is the first truth we draw from this text . . .

¹ "Isaac Watts," Christianity Today, last modified August 8, 2008, accessed September 12, 2015, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/131christians/poets/watts.html>.

² Amos R. Wells, "'Am I A Soldier of the Cross?': Isaac Watts," Wholesome Words, accessed September 12, 2015, <http://www.wholesomewords.org/biography/bwatts4.html>.

1. The will of God does not circumvent the challenges of life (verses 13–15).

It is at least a year (maybe two) since the shepherds and angels worshipped the baby at the manger. Now Mary and Joseph are in a rented home. The wise men just stopped by for a visit of worship and now they are gone. We are not sure how long transpired between these men leaving and what takes place in verse 13. It could have been a week—maybe only a night.

Mary and Joseph put the child Jesus to bed, and then they turn the lights out for a quiet night's sleep. Those of you that have young children know that these quiet nights are few and far between. Suddenly, Joseph is awakened, not by a crying child, but by an angel—an angel in a dream. The angel told him to **get up** and take Mary and Jesus and head to Egypt. Herod is going to search for the young child and try to kill him.

Their child had just been placed on Herod's most wanted list. In fact, in verse 13 the word for *flee* in our English Bible is from the Greek word *pheugo* (φευγω), which means “to seek safety in flight.” It is the same Greek word that gives us the transliterated English word “fugitive.”³

No doubt, Joseph was stunned. I should flee? Like a fugitive? Okay, where do I go? Egypt . . . When do I leave? Now . . . Why am I doing this again? Because Herod is going to attempt to kill this baby. Where in Egypt am I going? This is not a small place. “Just GO.”

Joseph awoke Mary and quickly told her about the divine warning and left in the middle of the night (verse 21).

- They did not have time to pack all their belongings; this exit was quick.
- They could not plan . . .
 - The best route to take to Egypt.
 - How many bags to pack per person.
 - To take any snacks with them on the trip.
 - On any first century conveniences to make the trip go smoother.
- This was hurried and they were frantic.
- They left friends and family with no time for explanation.

This family who appeared so wholesome now were running for it like a group of

³ Stephen Davey, “Israel’s Most Wanted,” Colonial Baptist Church, accessed September 12, 2015, <http://media.colonial.org/files/PDFs/CBC/Beyond%20Bethlehem%20The%20Boyhood%20of%20Jesus%20Part%20II.pdf>.

renegades. It was seventy-five miles from Bethlehem (where they were staying) to the border of Egypt. If they were going to make it, they were going to have to move now.

Just think about all the possible ways that God could have delivered them.

- He could have sent a funeral to Herod right away and taken care of the problem.
- He could have miraculously had Joseph and his family wake up in Egypt with no traveling at all—just transported miraculously in the night!
- He could have sent a twenty-first-century vehicle to them and made the journey easier.
- He is God. He spoke the world into existence. He could have done anything he pleased to rescue his chosen people, but . . .

God chose to protect them by the very ordinary and un-miraculous means of running on foot or riding on a donkey. Mary and Joseph were facing challenges. Were they still in the will of God? Yes! The will of God meant hardship and suffering for them, but God would sustain them through it. It was the will of God for them to face this difficult time in order to fulfill this prophecy, “Out of Egypt I called my son (Hosea 11:1).”⁴ In other words, as Isaac Watts would put it, Jesus did not come to earth on “flowery beds of ease.” There were challenges. A king was threatening his life.

This is not the first time a king has threatened the life of a child. You may remember in the Old Testament that Pharaoh ordered the death of all the Jewish males; but, as the result of a clever mother and a controlling God, Moses escaped with his life thanks to a basket in the river. Moses would eventually lead his people out of Egypt in an event we call the Exodus.

In this text, we have a similar event with a child escaping with His life. Jesus would escape to Egypt and, as we will see, would leave Egypt and bring His redeemed people to a new home. The author of Hebrews sees this similarity and calls Jesus the greater Moses. Jesus led a second Exodus.

- Moses’ deliverance was temporary and insufficient.
- Jesus’ deliverance was eternal and all sufficient.⁵

Transition: The will of God does not circumvent the challenges of life. And . . .

⁴ It is interesting to note that Egypt is typically a picture of the world in the Bible, but not always. Here Egypt is not a picture of the world; and Egypt will actually be rewarded in the millennial reign of Christ for being a safe place for Jesus (Isaiah 19:23–25).

⁵ Davey, “Israel’s Most Wanted.”

2. The will of God does not eliminate attacks by the enemy (verses 16–18).

Isaac Watts said,

- “Am I a soldier of the cross . . .” He is not in a playground. He is in a spiritual war. He is a soldier.
- “. . . A follower of the Lamb?”—a rhetorical question.
- “And shall I fear to own His cause . . .” Jesus owned God’s cause and knew there would be attacks by the enemy.
- “. . . Or blush to speak His name?”

Historical records which are reliable (but not inspired) tell us that Herod was around seventy years of age and was diseased, crippled, and infected with untreatable venereal diseases so that his intestines were literally rotting. His bodyguards had to rotate frequently because they could not bear the stench emanating from the pores of his skin. His physicians could not heal him; the warm baths could not soothe him. His body was covered with ulcers and his legs were too swollen for him to walk. But no king would have his throne.⁶

This insanely jealous man originally just wanted to put out a quiet hit on one child, but now he puts out a public hit on every male child in Bethlehem two years and younger. Most historical demographics say this would have been about 20 to 30 little boys ripped from their mother’s hands and possibly killed in front of them. These forgotten victims died because they had the misfortune of being born in the same place and at roughly the same time as the Savior. Even amid the joy of the Savior being born, there are those who suffered.

Everything was playing out just as God had designed before the creation of the world, but Satan was still attacking. In the will of God there were tears. Notice verse 18. Rachel is weeping for children. This verse is a dual prophecy. It refers to all the mother weeping during the Babylonian captivity and also to all the mother’s weeping in Bethlehem. The wickedly cruel paranoia of Herod was actually used to fulfill the predictions of God’s word and the purposes of God’s will.⁷

Transition: The will of God does not circumvent the challenges of life, the will of God does not eliminate attacks by the enemy, and finally . . .

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Davey, “Israel’s Most Wanted.”

3. The will of God does not lessen the responsibility of the believer (verses 19–23).

In verse 19, the day people dreamed about came true. Herod died. He caused so much trouble and turmoil, but his life was in the hand of an all-knowing God. Herod is dead; Jesus is still alive. Herod's plan is dead; Jesus' plan is still marching forward.

Joseph had another dream to inform him of Herod's death, and it begins the same way: "Get up." This time the command is not immediate. You have time to think about this. You have time to process what has taken place. Your big problem is gone.

Joseph and his family obeyed and went to the land of Israel. As they entered, they began to see and hear people talking about Herod's death. The people were happy. Herod had been a cruel lord. Then they heard something that struck fear into their hearts. Archelaus, one of Herod's sons, was ruling.

Archelaus was worse than his father. In fact, he inaugurated his reign by killing three thousand Jews in the temple during Passover. His reign was so bad that even Augustus, the Roman emperor, who was no saint himself, finally banished him after nine years of atrocities.

So Joseph had every reason to be afraid. God came to him again in a dream, as we read in verse 22b, and told him specifically to settle in the regions of Galilee. Joseph moved his family and settled down in Nazareth.⁸ Here the third prophecy is being fulfilled—the first one in verse 15, the second in verse 18, and now the third in verse 23.

Nazareth was no special place. It was at the bottom of the totem pole. You will remember when Nathaniel heard Jesus was from Nazareth he said, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Nazarenes were scorned and mocked! Jesus came into this world, into this town, and into scorn so that you could have eternal life.

Conclusion:

Problems will come into your life. Either you will have a fatalist mentality where you just resign in the face of any opposition, or you will see that God's will requires some action on your part. Do not allow your problems to defeat you; let them develop you instead. What steps do you need to take to grow spiritually so that you can fulfill the purpose God has for you in that difficulty.

⁸ Ibid.

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