

The Deciding Power

In the book, Messages to Young People, pages 151-154, we find some of the most important concepts relating to our personal salvation that have ever been written. "Pure religion has to do with the will. The will is the governing power in the nature of man, bringing all the other faculties under its sway. The will is not the taste or the inclination, but it is the deciding power, which works in the children of men unto obedience to God, or unto disobedience." Notice that the will is not our emotions or our fallen nature. It is the deciding power, the switch, that determines which way our thoughts will go.

The statement continues with a warning. "You will be in constant peril until you understand the true force of the will. You may believe and promise all things, but your promises or your faith are of no value until you put your will on the side of faith and action....But you need not despair. You must be determined to believe. Believe, although nothing seems true or real to you."

This is precisely where the will is different than the emotions and feelings. When Jesus was dying on the cross, were His feelings positive or negative? One of the most amazing inspired statements I have ever read says, "Hope did not see through the portals of the tomb." (DA 753) Christ felt like He was never going to live again. What did He have to do? He had to turn a switch on in His mind--the switch of His will--which said, I will believe although nothing seems true or real to me. Even though I feel like I will never see My Father's face again, I choose to trust Him to do the best thing.

Inspiration adds, "You cannot control your impulses, your emotions, as you may desire, but you can control the will." Until we understand this principle, we truly will be in constant danger, because we will keep hoping and promising and we will continue failing. When everything seems impossible and our feelings are out of control, what are we to do? When we wake up feeling discouraged and down, we must remember that emotions and moods are not reliable. Our business at that point is to turn on the switch of the will. Emotions may not be under control, but the will can be controlled. By steadfastly keeping the will on the Lord's side, every emotion will be brought into captivity to Christ.

Who can control the emotions and impulses? I simply don't have that much power. But God can move in both to will and to do. Before that can happen, however, I've got to decide that I want His power more than anything else. My will--my determined choice--is the springboard for everything else. Even when I decide--I won't do anything, I'll just do whatever comes naturally--that is a decision of the will which will direct what happens next. Everything we do--positive or negative--results from decisions of the will. This is why sin--the sin for which we will be lost--is not just a state of being because of our birth inheritance. Sin is always an act of the will, and I am always responsible for my choices.

God promises, "By steadfastly keeping the will on the Lord's side, every emotion will be brought into captivity to the will of Jesus." There is God's promise to all of us who are hassled constantly by our emotions and impulses. If we surrender the will to Jesus, He will take care of our feelings. "You must remember that your will is the spring of all your actions."

Jesus says, 'Yield yourself up to Me; give Me that will; take it from the control of Satan, and I will take possession of it.' Could it be that many of us are trying to give our will to Christ without realizing that since the fall of our first parents, the will is under the control of Satan? We want to think that we are in control, that we are the captains of our own ships. Do we stop to think that if our will is not in Christ's hands, then Satan is controlling us? Since none of us can keep our hearts beating and our lungs breathing, then we must acknowledge that we are subject to higher powers. Our will of necessity will be controlled either by Christ or Satan, and our only choice is who will have it. We must first choose to take the will out of Satan's hands and give it to Christ. We must openly say, I take this will that you have given

me out of the hand of Satan. He has no more right to it. I choose to submit my will to the control of Jesus Christ.

Surrendering the Will

Exactly how do we go about activating the will so that it can be controlled by God alone? There is something very basic that must happen if we want God to work in our lives. "All should guard the senses, lest Satan gain victory over them; for these are the avenues of the soul. You will have to become a faithful sentinel over your eyes, ears, and all your senses if you would control your mind and prevent vain and corrupt thoughts from staining your soul. The power of grace alone can accomplish this most desirable work." (Adventist Home, p. 401)

Our thoughts are largely the product of the information that enters the mind through our senses. The first and most basic task of the will is to decide what we will see and hear. God cannot make these decisions for us. Because of the inviolable principle of free choice, God will not make choices for beings created in His own image. But when we choose His way, He has permission to enter our lives with power, to do for us what we have no power to do. This is why it is so important for us to be faithful sentinels over our eyes and ears. If the will has any chance to operate correctly, it cannot be constantly bombarded with Satan's sensory inputs. We must absolutely refuse to allow Satan access to our minds. Of course Satan will be furious with this decision, and he will work doubly hard to break down our resolve. Here is where we need to pray without ceasing for grace and power from God to carry out our good intentions and choices.

In Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing, pp. 61,62, we find some basic steps to follow if we desire to use the will correctly. "Our will is to be yielded to Him, that we may receive it again, purified and refined, and so linked in sympathy with the Divine that He can pour through us the tides of His love and power." First we must take the will from Satan's control, and consciously give it to Jesus. We can verbalize our decision by saying, I give my will to you, Jesus. I choose to give my decision-making process into your hands. Then Jesus has permission to do His purifying and refining work in us. When He is finished, He gives our will back to us, in much better shape than when we gave it to Him.

Here is where willpower enters the picture. We can't manufacture willpower out of our own grit and determination. When we give our weak will to Christ, He gives it back to us with His power. Our will + Christ's power = Willpower. Now the will can be a faithful sentinel over the senses. The steps are basic and there are no shortcuts. 1) Take the will out of Satan's hands. 2) Give the will into Christ's hands. 3) Christ gives our will back to us filled with power to carry out our good decisions.

"In order for us to reach this high ideal, that which causes the soul to stumble must be sacrificed." Now we're getting to the hardest part of the whole process. This is where self fights desperately and furiously to stay alive. "It is through the will that sin retains its hold upon us. The surrender of the will is represented as plucking out the eye or cutting off the hand. Often it seems to us that to surrender the will to God is to consent to go through life maimed or crippled." Does this sound like the popular gospel of today which says, All you have to do is to believe that Jesus died for you, and you are assured of a place in heaven?

Right here is the heart of everything I want to share about the will. Here lies the secret of being a victorious Christian, of overcoming sin, of changing our lives from failure to victory. It is very simple, but very hard to put into practice. Since the will is naturally evil and inclined to follow Satan's suggestions, it is going to urge us to quibble, to doubt, to rationalize, to excuse, to blame, and to do anything in the world to avoid taking responsibility for our rebellious heart. If we do not see ourselves as rebellious and evil human beings, there is nothing that God can do for us. This is so hard for us to admit, because we

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spend most of our lives trying to project a good image of ourselves to others. After all, we don't do those awful things we hear about constantly on the news.

But just take away the veneer of society's pressures and the need for job security and the approval of our peers, and I will be right there with the soldiers pounding those nails into the hands of Jesus. I must see myself as I really am--an evil, rebellious human being. I must see myself as totally out of harmony with heaven's way, totally unfitted to be happy in God's presence. It is hard to see ourselves as we really are, to rip off the facades we use to fool people. The hand and the eye are both precious parts of our anatomy, aren't they? We will do almost anything to preserve them. Yet we are told that surrendering the will to God will feel just like cutting off the hand and plucking out the eye.

Are we really serious about surrendering the will? If we are, it will mean that we must go through the rest of life maimed and crippled. The eyes can no longer see what they want to see, and the hands can no longer do what they want to do. What fun will my life be? How can I ever enjoy life again? I'll be a straight-laced fanatic. I'll be an extremist, with no friends. I just can't live that way.

Until we come to grips with this fear of self-mutilation and loss, it will be totally impossible to surrender the will to Christ. We must realize how deep sin is within us; how much sin and selfishness and ugliness control us. And then we must ask for the surgeon's knife. To voluntarily ask for that knife to carve away on our minds and egos is not easy. But if we do not ask, the cancer of selfishness will destroy any chance we have for eternal life. Self must be cut away from the character, or it will take the soul itself to hell.

We have all built our bridges to Satan's world. We don't travel over them all the time, but it is comforting to self to know that they are there, and can be accessed when we feel the need to satisfy some impulse or need. Surrendering the will to God means that all of those bridges must be burned, with no possibility of rebuilding them again. And that looks like an awfully dismal future. How can we go on if these bridges no longer exist? All religion can do for us is to maim and cripple us.

Right here is where we need to agonize with God. I guarantee that it will be painful and difficult beyond anything we have ever attempted in life, because self dies very, very hard. The struggle over surrender will be intense, and it will seem like life itself is coming to an end. But when we are willing to give up the ugliness of selfishness, and are willing to let God burn all the bridges to Satan's world; when we are willing to abandon all those precious idols that made a humdrum life worth living, then the whole battle is over. Oh, there will be skirmishes to fight in the future, but this is the battle. The battle is not about Sabbath keeping, it is not about dress, it is not about diet; the battle is about the will. When the will is surrendered to Christ, the other things can be managed in harmony with God's will. God will show us how to obey. When we no longer quibble and question and rationalize, the battle is over.

This principle has a direct application to soul winning. It does no good to present lifestyle changes to a person who is not converted. All we will hear is objections--reasons why change is not really necessary. We must be sure that people are genuinely converted before confronting them with testing truths. Conversion is the issue. When conversion is settled, all of the other lifestyle changes will come much more easily.

We have the same problem as individual Christians. Many of the issues that we debate about are not the real issue at all. The real issue is the heart and the will. Once the will is surrendered and the bridges are burned, then all of those difficult issues will be easily resolved. The Lord will guide us in knowing what is right and what is wrong, and we will eagerly follow His plan for us.

Breaking Satan's Power

Now we are ready to examine the results of surrendering the will to Christ. Satan... knows better than we do the limit of his power and how easily he can be overcome if we resist and face him. Through divine strength the weakest saint is more than a match for him and all of his angels. (Testimonies, vol. 5, pp. 293,294) All victory over sin really demands is that we be willing to resist and face Satan. As long as we are compromising with Satan and tolerating his presence, we will continue to fail and be discouraged. How we need to treasure promises like this. We see Satan as more powerful than he really is. We think that his temptations are so overwhelming that we cannot resist them. We need to focus on what God's power can do in the weakest of us, His children.

The climax of our study of the will is the classic statement in Steps to Christ, page, 47. "Many are inquiring, 'How am I to make the surrender of myself to God?' You desire to give yourself to Him, but you are weak in moral power, in slavery to doubt, and controlled by the habits of your life of sin. Your promises and resolutions are like ropes of sand. You cannot control your thoughts, your impulses, your affections. The knowledge of your broken promises and forfeited pledges weakens your confidence in your own sincerity, and causes you to feel that God cannot accept you; but you need not despair.

Isn't this exactly where we have all been? We promise, we resolve, and we fail. We think that we can work up enough willpower to control our thoughts and feelings. There is really no hope for us until we recognize our deep sinfulness. We have been born with fallen natures into a fallen world where Satan has dominion. When we fully face our helplessness and turn to Christ for help, the door to victory is opened.

If we are not to despair, what is the way out of continued failure? "What you need to understand is the true force of the will. This is the governing power in the nature of man, the power of decision, or of choice. Everything depends on the right action of the will. The power of choice God has given to men; it is theirs to exercise. You cannot change your heart, you cannot of yourself give to God its affections; but you can choose to serve Him. You can give Him your will; He will then work in you to will and to do according to His good pleasure. Thus your whole nature will be brought under the control of the Spirit of Christ; your affections will be centered upon Him, your thoughts will be in harmony with Him.' Please notice how much depends on the right action of the will. Everything--happiness, peace, true success, eternal life--will be determined by how we use our will.

God originally created mankind in His own image. Six thousand years of sin have almost obliterated that divine image. Virtually the only part of the image of God that we still have is the power of choice. That is how we most resemble God in our natural condition. The power of choice was God's gift to Adam and Eve, and He has not allowed Satan to take that away from the human race. And because we still have that gift, all eternity is open before us.

Please notice that we cannot give the affections of the natural heart to God. We do not naturally like doing things God's way. We think it is demeaning and restrictive. Humility and modesty and submission are not desired by the natural heart. But although we do not like doing things God's way, we can choose to serve Him. We can pray one prayer at any time. "Lord, make me willing to be willing. I don't really like what I'm doing, but I'm not able to let go of my old ways. Make me willing, Lord." We may have to pray this prayer many times, but let us persevere. Let us take the will away from Satan and give it to God.

Look at the incredible results of surrendering the will to God. "When we submit ourselves to Christ, the heart is united with His heart, the will is merged in His will, the mind becomes one with His mind, the thoughts are brought into captivity to Him; we live His life. This is what it means to be clothed with the garment of His righteousness." (Christ's Object Lessons, p. 312) Our whole nature is brought under the

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control of Christ, and our affections and thoughts will be in harmony with His. I think that this is another way of saying 'victory.' Our twisted and deformed character is brought under Christ's authority. We can love as Christ loves, because the will belongs to Him. Our attitudes and desires are the same as those of heavenly beings. When we actually walk on the streets of glass, we will find it natural to live like the angels, because we have learned to think as they do.

The one thing that we must do now is to submit, and then everything follows like railroad cars follow the engine. God does the hard part. He transforms my old nature; He causes me to enjoy the things I once hated and hate the things I once enjoyed. My part is to give Him my will so that He can purify it. We can say, "Lord, I cannot keep from doing this thing, but I choose not to do it. I cannot keep myself from doing it, but I choose not to do it." The young man on the beanbag couldn't overcome sin because he was depending on his own willpower. His will had to be surrendered to God and empowered by God.

We must say, "Lord, I take my will from Satan and I give it to you. I am willing to let you burn all of my bridges to Satan's world. I am willing to reject the way I have been throughout most of my life. I want to be born from above. More than anything else in the world, I want You." Then it is our privilege to watch what God is able to do with almost worthless material. Besetting sins that have plagued us all our lives will be overcome; evil thoughts are not allowed in the mind; the hold of evil habits is broken. Wrong tendencies are turned in a right direction. Wrong feelings are changed, and there is born a new creature in Christ Jesus. As we continue to say "Yes" to God and "No" to self, an entire transformation of our character takes place. The Lord will cripple all our human efforts and make us totally dependent on Him, as He did to Jacob so long ago.