

The events leading directly to the crucifixion of Jesus begin in a garden, just outside the wall of Jerusalem. That makes sense--when you consider that all the trouble began in a garden. In the one I'm thinking of, Adam and Eve sacrificed a beautiful life ordered by God for slavery to sin and death.

On this Passover night so many years later, the Last Supper is now behind Jesus and the disciples. They've sung the final hymn and departed for the Mount of Olives, site of the garden of Gethsemane. It's on the way that Jesus tells the disciples, "All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written: 'I will strike the Shepherd, And the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee." There's a lot of "wills" in that statement, and they're worth paying attention to. When Jesus says that something will happen, it will happen.

When it's part of the plan for salvation, "I will" from Jesus lips means "I purpose this to happen, and so it is going to happen." Jesus' will has not been enslaved by sin; whatever He purposes to do, He is going to get done. On the other hand, when He speaks of the sins and failings of man, Jesus is not willing them or causing them to sin, but He is starkly honest in telling them what will inevitably happen, how they will fail. As surely as objects dropped obey the law of gravity and fall to earth, the disciples will be scattered. Even now forewarned, they're going to run away.

So it will happen: the Shepherd will be stricken but will later meet them in Galilee, because this is God's plan for salvation. The sheep will be scattered, stumble and forsake Him, because that's what sinners do.

The disciples don't like it very much. Why would they? No one likes to have their courage and loyalty called into question so definitively; and predictably, it's Peter who leads the charge with bravado: "Even if all are made to stumble because of You, I will never be made to stumble." Unfortunately, a "will" spoken by Peter doesn't mean the same thing as when Jesus says it. When Peter says, "I will," he means, "I fully intend." He means, at best, whether he realizes or not, "I'll try." He may believe himself completely, that he will keep his promises. But Peter is a sinner, and his will is anything but free.

To Peter, Jesus says, "Assuredly, I say to you that this night, before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." Another "will"--another "it's going to happen." Peter is going to deny Jesus: Jesus says it will be so. Peter responds with a "will" of his own: "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You!" All the other disciples join in on the sentiment, but sentiment is all there is. As the next hours unfold, they're going to fail miserably.

They arrive at the Garden, and Jesus proceeds to pray. Note the words of His prayer: "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will." While Jesus does not desire to suffer death and hell for the sin of man, He still submits to His Father's will. This sacrifice for salvation will take place.

Meanwhile, the disciples who have promised to die before leaving Jesus have abandoned the realm of consciousness and are fast asleep. Jesus awakens them, instructing them to watch and pray. They will not. They cannot will their way out of exhaustion. Jesus diagnoses, "The spirit

indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." He returns to prayer, praying that His Father's will be done. The disciples keep sleeping. The scene is repeated twice more, until the soldiers arrive.

Where the disciples chose sleep over Jesus' Word and will for them, the soldiers galvanize them into wakefulness. When Jesus is seized, it's Peter who jumps into action, seizes a sword and lops off a man's ear. He's going to make good on his promise after all...but this action is not God's will. Jesus stops him, heals the man, and says, "Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword." Another truth, another "will" of God: those who seek salvation in violence will perish.

It's a test of wills in the Garden that night. When the sinless Savior says, "I will," it is going to happen, no question. He will be arrested. The disciples will stumble, deny and flee. He will see them in Galilee. Those who live by the sword will perish by the sword. These will happen, guaranteed. When sinful man says, "I will," there's no guarantee. It's a weak "I'll try."

Life is a test of wills. On a daily basis, people are caught in a struggle to see who will get their way. Customers and salesmen barter. Children and parents argue. Teachers and students seek to own the classroom. Board members and CEOs clash on long range plans and direction. Soldiers battle insurgents to determine who will hold ground. Each day, you are trying to accomplish your goals, often in conflict with the goals and intentions of others.

In the course of a given day, you have things to do and things that you intend to do, and for a whole host of reasons, you don't always accomplish what you have willed to do. What it all comes down to is this: by nature, we want to pray, "Lord, not Thy will, but mine be done."

For Christians, this battle is waged constantly. In Christ, you are a new creation; so on a daily basis, the old self goes nine rounds with new you. The older I become, the more I appreciate St. Paul's words in Romans 7: For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice (Ro. 7:19). What was true for the apostle is true for each one of us. In other words, as Jesus said, the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.

But the will of the Lord is certain, and that is what this Passion of Jesus is about; so remember and give thanks for what the Lord does here; Peter and I are better at talk than actual deeds; and by my failure to fulfill my intentions, my will is shown to be empty.

The Lord Jesus, on the other hand, remains resolute and faithful: where I stumble, He has not. He has gone purposefully to the cross in order to redeem you from sin: He has willed His way through scorn and scourge for your salvation. Where I, with the disciples, grow sleepy and negligent in the face of dangerous sin, the Lord remains awake and prays for my salvation. Where you and I choose the easy path over one of sacrifice, Jesus follows His Father's will: He seizes the cup of wrath that is poured for you and drinks it to the bottom, suffering our judgment on the cross. Where you still slumber in the face of grave threat, He continues to rouse you by His Word, to warn you of sin and grant you His grace.

This grace and peace with God, and indeed eternal life, is yours because your Savior goes willingly to the garden, to trial and to cross. His will remains holy and certain, and this is where comfort is found.

For when Jesus says, "I forgive you," He in no way means, "I will try to forgive you," or "I meant to," or "I hope to get around to it." His perfect will is sure. He gives His accomplishments to you.

After the supper, Jesus and the disciples sang a hymn; in the standard liturgy of the Passover meal, it is nearly certain that they sang Psalm 118 before departing for the Garden. Among the verses that Jesus sang as He approached His Hour was verse 17: "I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the LORD." Facing ultimate darkness, He knew that He would be raised up by His Father for your salvation. It was His Father's will, and so it was certain.

That is the Father's will for you: for the sake of Jesus, He wills to give you faith and salvation, because you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.