

If God Is So Good: 2. How Does God Work?

Romans 8:31-39

April 18, 2021

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So much hurt. So much pain. What a week it has been. Another black man killed by a police officer. Protests, vigils, and businesses that became the target of anger and frustration. Another school shooting, this time in Tennessee. Eight people killed, another 7 persons wounded at a Fed Ex facility in Indianapolis. Another week of rising COVID cases in spite of the increasing vaccinations. Add to that the range of health, relationship, school, and work issues that come at us unexpectedly – and it is easy to lose hope. Where is God in the midst of all that is happening?

I remember an experience when I was in the eighth grade. The younger brother of a classmate was killed in a farm accident. I didn't know this classmate well, but in a small school everyone knew about everyone. The first day that he returned to school after his brother's death, he was at his locker and I was at mine when suddenly he walked over to me and started beating me with his fists. With tears streaming down his face, he kept asking why his brother died. I didn't understand, but I didn't fight back. I held up my arms to protect myself while another student pulled him away from me. It wasn't until years later than I realized what had happened. In our small town, part of everyone's identity was what kind of work your dad did. Since my dad was the pastor, my classmate's sudden attack was his way of releasing his anger on what he saw as the closest connection he could make to God. Why, God, why? Even when we know logically that God is not responsible for what is happening to us, at an emotional or spiritual level, God can seem absent – even for people with faith. As we heard last week in Psalm 88: **I cry out to you, LORD! My prayer meets you first thing in the morning! Why do you reject my very being, LORD? Why do you hide your face from me?** If such things are not part of God's will, then what does God do?

If God is so good, why is there so much suffering in this world. Today, I want to look at how God works. How can we know God's will? Theologians tell us there are three ways of understanding God's will. The first is called **determinism**. God has pre-determined what will happen in your life before you were born. It is like this book. The story of your life has already been written. You may not know what will happen at 3:00 this afternoon, but God does. It has already been written. Whatever happens will happen because God is in control and since God is in control, God will make sure it happens. You and I have only the illusion of free choice. The problem with this understanding is that if everything happens according to God's plan, then God is ultimately responsible for all the world's torture, rape, genocide, and injustice. And for me, that just doesn't fit with my understanding of a God of love and mercy. And furthermore, what possible pleasure could God receive from watching, especially when, according to this understanding, even the worship of God is not our choice but God's?

There's a second understanding which says God has a **perfect will** for your life and a plan for every day of your life, but God gives you free will. In your free will, you can enter the script and change it. God allows you to stray from God's perfect will, and sin is straying from God's predetermined path. But then God in his grace and mercy readjusts the script. Almost like you GPS which recalculates the direction every time to choose a different turn or stray from the path. You change one page and God adjusts the plan – and every day that's how it goes. And that makes a little more sense to me than determinism, but there's third way to look at God's will.

It's like this journal where all the pages are blank. God says, "I've given you life. I've given you gifts and abilities. I've given you a family of origin, Scriptures to teach you, the Holy Spirit to guide you, and together we will write the story of your life." God says, "You can write it all by yourself, but I make no guarantee that it will be any good. But if you will let me, I will come alongside you and help you, and it will be the story of faith and courage in the face of doubt and danger – the story of grace and mercy and how you prevailed until the end. And the final chapter – that chapter has already been written – and it titled **HOPE**. Every day God will help you, and each day it gets a little easier to see God's direction.

Consider Abraham. The first time the Bible mentions Abraham, he is 75 years old. That's when his story with God begins. He had 75 years that were ordinary – he grew, he married, he worked – and God was alongside Abraham even if Abraham did not know it was God, but then at 75, God says – let's work together on the next chapter. "I've blessed you so you can be a blessing to others. I want you and Sarai to leave your comfortable lives and go to a land you've never been to and I won't even tell you where it is until you get there. And I will give you a child and bless you with descendants and all nations of earth will be blessed through you." Abraham had a choice: he could accept God's plan, or he could have said, "God, I'm 75 years old, my knees hurt, I've got a bad back, I'm tired, and I can't do it." But Abraham said yes, and the next chapter would be his greatest chapter, the one that would change the course of human history. Or Moses – he was 80 when God called him. If you are 80, according to scripture, you are just getting warmed up! God had a plan for Moses – leave your job of shepherd and go back to Egypt and demand that Pharaoh let the Israelites go free. Moses didn't want to do it. He gave God all kinds of excuses, but in the end, God worked through Moses. Remember when the people of Judah were being terrorized by the giant Philistine named Goliath. God chose the least likely person, a shepherd boy named David who conquered the Philistines with a slingshot. Instead of going directly, God sent a person – because God works through people. God uses ordinary people, and through them extraordinary things happen. When God decided to enter the world. How did God choose to come – as the person of Jesus, a baby! Who would have guessed that God could work through a baby? Wherever you are, God is not finished with your story. It may not be a predetermined plan or a perfect will that God constantly modifies, but maybe it is something that by the Holy Spirit, you are writing with God each day.

I want to share this verse with you from the book of Colossians. Paul and Timothy were writing this letter to the Christians in the town of Colossae – one of the first churches that Paul started. And in chapter 1, verse 9: **We haven't stopped praying for you and asking for you to be filled with the knowledge of God's will, with all wisdom and spiritual understanding.** [camera] So where do we find this knowledge of God's will? It's here. It's in the book! But have you tried reading this book? It's not easy. Why can't God just tell us?

When our daughter was living in Los Angeles, I remember one of my first trips to see her. Have any of you ever driven in Los Angeles? I have never experienced traffic as I have in Los Angeles. I rented a car and what saved me as I left the airport parking lot was my GPS. I put in the address of where I was going and without any idea of how to get there, the GPS told me when to turn and even gave me a two-mile notice so I could get in the correct lane. My first night, I met my daughter Bethany for dinner at a shopping mall. We parked next to each other in the parking ramp and after dinner we returned to our cars. Before getting into her car, she asked if I needed directions and I said, "I don't need directions, I've got my GPS!" She drove away and I got in my rental care, entered the address of my hotel, and pulled out of my parking space, but because I was in a parking ramp the GPS could not connect with a satellite and as I left the parking ramp, I had no idea which way to turn. I guessed. I listened to my inner voice and I entered the 405 going north and a minute later the GPS finally caught up with me and told me to

take the next exit, turn around and go south. God's prescriptive will is found in Bible but it's not as easy as we would like. What God has done is give us his will through scripture. We reach the Bible for the principles and lessons that will guide us. Keep reading and you will find God's prescription for your life. It's why we will send you a GPS by email every day of the week. It's why we have Bible studies and why we invite you into Faith Groups. You cannot know God's will apart from the Bible. But when I carry the principles and the lessons of the Bible in my heart, I can know God's prescriptive will ...**so that you can live lives that are worthy of the Lord and pleasing to him in every way.** (Colossians 1:10)

Do you know the story of Rachel Beckwith? Rachel lived near Seattle and when she was age 5, she learned at school about an organization called Locks of Love, which uses hair donations to make wigs for children who have lost their own hair because of cancer or other diseases. Rachel then asked to have her long hair cut off and sent to Locks of Love. "I want to help the cancer kids," she said. After the haircut, Rachel announced that she would grow her hair long again and donate it again after a few years to Locks of Love. And that's what she did. When she was 8 years old, her church began raising money to build wells in Africa through an organization called Charity Water. She wanted other children to have clean drinking water. So for her 9th birthday, in lieu of presents she asked everyone to give \$9 to Charity Water. She set up a website and set a goal of \$300, but Rachel was disappointed when she was only able to raise \$220. Watch what happened next. [video: Rachel died a month later in a car accident but others stepped forward to donate \$1.2 million in her honor] 100 wells have been drilled providing clean drinking water to 60,000 people – all because a 9-year-old girl had a goal of just \$300.

Now I ask you. Where is God's will in this story? Did God will the death of a 9-year-old girl so that all this money could be raised? Or did God will that people in Africa be without clean drinking water so that a little girl's heart would be broken and in turn so many others would give? God did not miraculously heal Rachel even though she was close to the heart of God. But somehow God redeemed her death with life and together a whole lot of people became the hands and feet of Jesus to save a whole lot of children in Africa who will have clean drinking water. Do you see how God's will works when people let God *fill them with the knowledge of God's will, with all wisdom and spiritual understanding.*

The apostle Paul knew the power of adversity. He was once a prestigious member of the Jewish leadership. He had prominence as one who was stamping out Christianity. But one day while walking down the road to Damascus, he quite literally saw the light. A real connection with God was made, and he went from persecuting Christians to being the hands and feet of Christ in the world. In the process, he was beaten, jailed, run out of town, rejected, shipwrecked – but none of this, he says. Not even death itself is capable of interfering with God's love. **I'm convinced that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus our Lord: not death or life, not angels or rulers, not present things or future things, not powers or height or depth, or any other thing that is created.**

There will be difficulties. The sudden, the unexpected, the painful will happen, but they will lose their power to defeat us because God's love is constant and strong – and best of all – it is forever. As I said again to someone who is approaching the end of life: God will never, never, never let go of you. I don't just believe that. I'm counting on it."

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of April 18, 2021

Weekly Prayer: Eternal God, your presence and power is with us. We praise you for never giving up on us, for loving us with a love from which nothing can separate us. Help us to

become ever more aware of your activity and presence, that we will see you more clearly at work in the midst of all the pain and joy of life. Amen.

Monday, April 19

Scripture: Proverbs 3:1-6

My son, don't forget my instruction. Let your heart guard my commands, because they will help you live a long time and provide you with well-being. Don't let loyalty and faithfulness leave you. Bind them on your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you will find favor and approval in the eyes of God and humanity. Trust in the LORD with all your heart; don't rely on your own intelligence. Know him in all your paths, and he will keep your ways straight.

Observation: "Wisdom" (treated as a person—see Proverbs 1:20-21) spoke Proverbs 3. These verses are filled with meaning. "Well-being" in verse 2 is actually *shalom* in Hebrew, a word that means God-given peace and wholeness. "Don't consider yourself wise" (verse 7) was not about healthy confidence, but about self-sufficient pride that saw no need for God's wisdom in deciding what is right and wrong.

Application: Some scholars suggest "Trust in the LORD with all your heart" means to "bet your life" on God's goodness and wisdom. In what areas do you actively trust that God's way really is the best way to live? Are there parts of life where you want that trust to grow?

Prayer: Lord God, I want to praise your name from sunrise to sunset because I genuinely trust that your wisdom is greater than my own. Let my praise to you override my fear about any other realities. Amen.

Tuesday, April 20

Scripture: John 17:13-21

Now I'm coming to you and I say these things while I'm in the world so that they can share completely in my joy. I gave your word to them and the world hated them, because they don't belong to this world, just as I don't belong to this world. I'm not asking that you take them out of this world but that you keep them safe from the evil one. They don't belong to this world, just as I don't belong to this world. Make them holy in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. I made myself holy on their behalf so that they also would be made holy in the truth. "I'm not praying only for them but also for those who believe in me because of their word. I pray they will be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. I pray that they also will be in us, so that the world will believe that you sent me.

Observation: Today's scripture tells us that the night before he was crucified, Jesus prayed as much or more for his followers as for himself. He asked God to sanctify them (make them "holy") through the word of truth, the Bible. 1 Thessalonians 4:3 said, "God's will is that your lives are dedicated to him." So knowing the Bible's principles is a key starting point for living into God's will for us.

Application: Someone described the 18 inches between the brain and the heart as "the longest 18 inches on earth." What have you found helpful in moving your study of the Bible from a strictly intellectual exercise into one that shapes your attitudes and affections? How does that, in turn, change the ways you live out your faith in the world?

Prayer: Loving God, thank you for the power of scripture that is able to shape my heart and give direction to my actions. Help me each day to live into your will for my life. Amen.

Wednesday, April 21

Scripture: Acts 15:1-4, 22-35

Some people came down from Judea teaching the family of believers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom we’ve received from Moses, you can’t be saved.” Paul and Barnabas took sides against these Judeans and argued strongly against their position. The church at Antioch appointed Paul, Barnabas, and several others from Antioch to go up to Jerusalem to set this question before the apostles and the elders. The church sent this delegation on their way. They traveled through Phoenicia and Samaria, telling stories about the conversion of the Gentiles to everyone. Their reports thrilled the brothers and sisters. When they arrived in Jerusalem, the church, the apostles, and the elders all welcomed them. They gave a full report of what God had accomplished through their activity.

The apostles and the elders, along with the entire church, agreed to send some delegates chosen from among themselves to Antioch, together with Paul and Barnabas. They selected Judas Barsabbas and Silas, who were leaders among the brothers and sisters. They were to carry this letter: The apostles and the elders, to the Gentile brothers and sisters in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia. Greetings! We’ve heard that some of our number have disturbed you with unsettling words we didn’t authorize. We reached a united decision to select some delegates and send them to you along with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul. These people have devoted their lives to the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, we are sending Judas and Silas. They will confirm what we have written. The Holy Spirit has led us to the decision that no burden should be placed on you other than these essentials: refuse food offered to idols, blood, the meat from strangled animals, and sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid such things. When Barnabas, Paul, and the delegates were sent on their way, they went down to Antioch. They gathered the believers and delivered the letter. The people read it, delighted with its encouraging message. Judas and Silas were prophets, and they said many things that encouraged and strengthened the brothers and sisters. Judas and Silas stayed there awhile, then were sent back with a blessing of peace from the brothers and sisters to those who first sent them. Paul and Barnabas stayed in Antioch, where, together with many others, they taught and proclaimed the good news of the Lord’s word.

Observation: It was, of course, God’s will that the early Christians share the good news of Jesus far and wide. As they did, there came the almost inevitable day when someone said, “Wait—you’re teaching *that*? I don’t agree with that.” When that happened, they sought God’s will, not alone, but by getting together to pray, discuss and discern as a community.

Application: Instead of choosing sides, what do you think motivated the early Christian believers to come together to work through their differing views? (Not everyone was convinced even after Acts 15—see Philippians 3:2.) When has the wisdom of others helped you in your faith journey?

Prayer: Merciful God, help me to listen so that I can seek to understand. Just as you are approachable to all, let me reflect your mercy and love to others. I want my life to glorify you in all things. Amen.

Thursday, April 22

Scripture: Romans 12:1-8

So, brothers and sisters, because of God's mercies, I encourage you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice that is holy and pleasing to God. This is your appropriate priestly service. Don't be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God's will is—what is good and pleasing and mature.

Because of the grace that God gave me, I can say to each one of you: don't think of yourself more highly than you ought to think. Instead, be reasonable since God has measured out a portion of faith to each one of you. We have many parts in one body, but the parts don't all have the same function. In the same way, though there are many of us, we are one body in Christ, and individually we belong to each other. We have different gifts that are consistent with God's grace that has been given to us. If your gift is prophecy, you should prophesy in proportion to your faith. If your gift is service, devote yourself to serving. If your gift is teaching, devote yourself to teaching. If your gift is encouragement, devote yourself to encouraging. The one giving should do it with no strings attached. The leader should lead with passion. The one showing mercy should be cheerful.

Observation: How do you, as a follower of Christ, live in accordance with God's will for you? One aspect of that, according to Paul's letter to the Roman Christians, is to offer yourself as a living sacrifice. That does not involve elaborate rituals. Instead, Paul described a process of honestly assessing who you are and what gifts and talents you have to use in God's service.

Application: In the ancient world, most people had made a sacrifice to some god. As a rule, that meant killing an animal to the right temple or shrine. What shift in thinking and acting sprang from Paul's call to "present your bodies as a *living* sacrifice"? In what ways are you willing to put your life, yourself, "on the altar" to live daily for God?

Prayer: Good God, you give life. You gave me the one life that I have and have blessed me with this day. Let the way I live this day be my offering of gratitude for what you have done for me. Once again, I give my life to you. Amen.

Friday, April 23

Scripture: Acts 16:1-10

Paul reached Derbe, and then Lystra, where there was a disciple named Timothy. He was the son of a believing Jewish woman and a Greek father. The brothers and sisters in Lystra and Iconium spoke well of him. Paul wanted to take Timothy with him, so he circumcised him. This was because of the Jews who lived in those areas, for they all knew Timothy's father was Greek. As Paul and his companions traveled through the cities, they instructed Gentile believers to keep the regulations put in place by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. So the churches were strengthened in the faith and every day their numbers flourished.

Paul and his companions traveled throughout the regions of Phrygia and Galatia because the Holy Spirit kept them from speaking the word in the province of Asia. When they approached the province of Mysia, they tried to enter the province of Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus wouldn't let them. Passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas instead. A vision of a man from Macedonia came to Paul during the night. He stood urging Paul, "Come over to Macedonia and help us!" Immediately after he saw the vision, we prepared to leave for the province of Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

Observation: This story shows us how the apostle Paul went about doing God's will. He didn't sit passively waiting for God to guide him supernaturally, but moved from town to town as he had planned. He always remained open and available to God. Consequently, God guided him in a special way to new territory for the Christian mission: the Aegean peninsula and the populous cities of Greece.

Application: Here, as in most of Acts, we see how Paul normally went about his business. He visited cities, added Timothy to his mission team, and preached and taught. We don't see Paul mired in indecision or fear because he didn't have a direct sign from God. When Paul woke up each day, how do you think he decided what to do, or where to go?

Prayer: Lord God, grant me the patience to be still enough and patient enough to listen for your nudges and whispers that will guide me in the way that I should go. May I be humble enough to accept your ways above my ways. I want you to be the one I serve today. Amen.

Saturday, April 24

Scripture: Philippians 2:12-18

Therefore, my loved ones, just as you always obey me, not just when I am present but now even more while I am away, carry out your own salvation with fear and trembling. God is the one who enables you both to want and to actually live out his good purposes. Do everything without grumbling and arguing so that you may be blameless and pure, innocent children of God surrounded by people who are crooked and corrupt. Among these people you shine like stars in the world because you hold on to the word of life. This will allow me to say on the day of Christ that I haven't run for nothing or worked for nothing. But even if I am poured out like a drink offering upon the altar of service for your faith, I am glad. I'm glad with all of you. You should be glad about this in the same way. Be glad with me!

Observation: Paul's appeal to his fellow Christians is to imitate Christ's example in their relations with others. The ultimate goal of the work of Christ is to bring honor to God: So live in a way that reflects what you have received from God. God guides; God expects us to make sensible, obedient choices. We pray; we listen; we study the Bible; we ask other Christians to help us discern. And we trust God to guide our steps.

Application: James 1:5 promised, "Anyone who needs wisdom should ask God, whose very nature is to give to everyone without a second thought, without keeping score." Are you where you are today as a result of God's guidance and direction? To be on the best path, we need God, the Bible, our own minds, our experiences, and the help of others to get us where we need to go.

Prayer: Eternal God, your presence and power is with me. Help me to become ever more aware of your activity and presence, that I will see you more clearly at work in the midst of all the pain and joy of life. Amen.