

Why? – 3. Why Can't I See God's Will for My Life?

Colossians 1:9-19

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There's a story of a farmer who was trying desperately to know God's will for his life. Everyday, as he was out working the fields, he would ask God, "What is your will for my life? What do you want me to do with my life? Please tell me. Give me a sign!" Then, one day, when he was in the middle of praying, he noticed this cloud formation that moved overhead and seemed to linger and take the shape of the letter P. Hmm, he wondered. Is that my sign from God? After a while, he noticed another cloud formation move over head and linger and it seemed to take the shape of the letter C. And so the farmer wondered, PC, PC? What could that mean? Is God trying to tell me something? All of a sudden, like a bolt of electricity shooting through his body, it came to him. "Preach Christ! God wants me to preach Christ!"

And so, he sold all of his farm equipment and leased out his land and set out to preach Christ. He told all of his friends what God had told him to do and he sent letters to all of the churches in his county letting them know that he was available, and called by God, to preach if their pastor was sick or on vacation. So he went out to any church that would have him. Even though he had never been to seminary he knew this is what God was calling him to do.

And so, the next Sunday, he preached his very first sermon. And he was terrible and he was so embarrassed. So, he set out to learn more by reading books about preaching and watching YouTube videos of famous preachers. And soon, he was invited to preach his second sermon, and it was even worse than the first one! And this continued over the course of most of a year until he no longer received invitations to preach because the word was out on how bad of a preacher he was.

Eventually, it became obvious that he could not support his family by preaching so he went back to what he knew best, farming. He bought back all of his old equipment and regained use of the land. When spring rolled around, his friends all noticed that he was farming again and they couldn't help but ask, "What happened? We thought you were called to preach Christ." The farmer said, "I finally realized what PC meant. It wasn't preach Christ, it meant plant corn." As the farmer found out, discerning God's will for our life is not always easy.

Over the last two weeks, we've been wrestling with some of the big WHY? questions of our faith. Two weeks ago, we started with the question of God and suffering and asked, is suffering a part of God's will? I pleaded with you to rethink the things we tend to say when terrible things happen, things like, it must be God's will or everything happens for a reason. There are a whole lot of things that happen in this world that are not a part of God's plan. And so we should reexamine our assumptions or expectations on how God works in this world. And then last week, Pastor Bethany, helped us look at the question of unanswered prayers. How we pray over and over for something to happen that never comes to be and so we become disappointed in God. Again, part of that is our assumptions on how God works in this world and how prayer works. Today, we're going to wrestle with the questions, "Why can't I see God's will for my life and how specific is the will of God?" One of the resources I have found helpful in this preparing this sermon is a book by Adam Hamilton titled, *Why? Making Sense of God's Will*.

So, let's start today by looking at three different schools of thoughts or beliefs that Christians hold when it comes to understanding God's will. The first is called *determinism*. This assumes that God has a perfect and complete plan for our lives that was written before our lives even

began. There is a book of my life titled, *Tami Luckhardt, This is Your Life*. Everything I do and say, everything that has happened and will happen to me, every decision I will make has already been decided for me, predetermined by God, and recorded in this book that we do not have access to and cannot be changed. By the way, there is a book with your name on it too! And if this is true, we all end up being merely characters in God's script.

That line of thinking presents some challenges, at least for me. First, if everything happens for a reason and according to God's will, then that means God is ultimately responsible for every murder, rape, torture, and every act of injustice in this world. But if God is merciful, loving and just, as we read in scripture, this just doesn't make sense. Second, if every event, every decision, every conversation we have has already been predetermined by God, then our daily life would seem to have no purpose, for us or for God. It is for reasons like these that many reject the idea that God has a plan that is not only predetermined but cannot be changed.

Another line of thinking is that God has written a perfect plan for our lives but also gives us free will that allows us to stray from this plan. And we know that straying from God's plan for our lives, or missing the mark, is to sin. And I only need to stray from it once to throw off the entire rest of the plan. This is called God's *permissive will*, things that are not a part of God's plan but that God allows to happen. But again, you only need to stray from it once to throw the entire prewritten plan out the window.

For example, let's assume in God's perfect predetermined plan, when I was in the 4th grade and given the choice of what band instrument to play, I was supposed to choose the saxophone. But what actually happened in real life, was that I chose the trombone instead. Years later, Jerry and I met in college playing in the trombone section at EPCOT and three years later, we got married. We are now the parents of 3 children and 5 grandchildren. Because I didn't follow along with God's predetermined plan, that I play the saxophone, does that mean none of what actually happened in my life was God's plan? That I should have never met Jerry or married him, had our kids? And then there's the trickledown effect for God's will for Jerry's life, and our kids' lives and our grandkids' lives. I'm being a little dramatic here but I'm trying to make a point that logically, this line of thinking just doesn't seem to make sense.

And so, continuing with that same metaphor of God as the author of the story, it makes me wonder if it might look something more like a journal. What if God, in giving us life, invites us to collaborate in writing the story of our lives? I wonder if God has an outline for our story but gives us the choice of writing it without God or writing it in collaboration with God. And because we are human, our story will certainly include sin, conflict, fear, despair, and death. And if we turn from God, our stories will miss out on God's forgiveness, redemption, peace, hope, salvation, and love. I believe that God's plan for our lives is not so much a prewritten manuscript but an outline for what God hopes will happen in our lives. And then we are invited to fill in the details day by day in partnership with God. Every decision, challenge, every encounter is an opportunity to collaborate with God. And God's story is one of redemption, grace, and love.

Jerry and I are parents to three children. Throughout their lives, we have had hopes and dreams for all of them, you might call this *our will* for their lives. That is that have faith in God, that they love others, that they are kind and generous, people of integrity and character, and that they seek to live their lives in a way that makes a positive impact in this world. But as parents, we have not planned out every part of their lives like, we didn't choose whom they married or even their careers. Even the things that are most important to us, like loving God and loving their neighbors, we can't force them to do. We have tried our best to give them the tools they need to make wise decisions. But they are adults now and the rest is up to them. If they ask us, we offer

our advice, and we are always here to help them if they need it. Part of the joy of parenting is having them to come to us for advice and wisdom and then watching them as they make their own decisions.

So, what if that is like God's plan for our lives? Instead of our lives being predetermined with a set of specific events and actions, what if God is like a loving parent who takes delight in being consulted for advice and wisdom and then takes joy in watching us make decisions rather than making all the decisions for us? If this is true, then God's will is more about how we make decisions than about the specific decisions we make. It is less about who we marry, or what career we pursue and more about ensuring we love our partners and families well and that our lives and our careers seek to honor God. This line of belief is called God's *prescriptive will*. You can compare it to a doctor's prescription, the doctor's advice on how to improve your health and well-being. It might be a prescription for a change of diet or a new exercise program. Or perhaps the prescription may be from your financial advisor on how to spend and invest your money that will bring you to an improved financial well-being.

And we can find God's prescriptive will throughout the Bible. We see it in the Old Testament in the Ten Commandments. We see it in what Jesus said was the greatest commandment that, "you must love the lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and love your neighbor as yourself. (Luke 10:27) and, "do to others what you would have them do to you." (Matthew 7:12) And so, this is one of the reasons we encourage you to read your Bible every day to seek God's timeless will for your life. This is why we will email you a daily devotional, we call it our Grow, Pray, Study Guide, (GPS) every day. It is an invitation to read your Bible every day. We put scripture into your hands. That is why we also urge you to be in a faith group or Sunday School class, where you're studying God's word and listening and waiting for God to speak.

And in today's scripture passage, Paul tells us about God's pre-scripted will. According to Paul the purpose of knowing God's will is that we might "live lives that are worthy of the Lord..... And grow in the knowledge of God."

Because of this, since the day we heard about you, 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. We're praying this so that you can live lives that are worthy of the Lord and pleasing to him in every way: by producing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God. Colossians 1:9-10

This helps us understand God's will as less of a specific plan in every situation and more of God's timeless will for how we make decision and face life each day. And one way of discerning God's will for your lives is simply paying attention, noticing what's going on around us and then offering yourself to be used by God. Perhaps it's that moment in the grocery store line where helped pay for someone else's groceries, or that conversation where you lingered just a little longer so that the important conversation could take place. Maybe you've seen the devastation caused by Hurricane Ian and you feel called to help in some way.

I want to make one final, and very important, point about God's will and plan for our lives. Many Christians have the idea that following the will of God will translate into happiness, comfort, convenience, and safety. That is the Prosperity Gospel that we talked about 2 weeks ago. It's the belief that good things happen to good people, but the will of God is not for our happiness but for our faithfulness.

“Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.” Matthew 7:13-14

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says there are two paths in life; a wide, broad, easy way that leads to death... and a small, narrow, harder road that leads to life. God’s plan and will for your life will not be the easiest path. In fact, doing God’s will may actually lead to hardships and difficulties. But there is joy found in hardships when you know you are in doing God’s will. I know the best chapters of my life have been when I said, “yes” to God. Saying yes to being your senior pastor is one of the greatest joys of my life, but it is also one of the most challenging chapters of my life.

When we are faced with big decisions or struggling to discern God’s will for our lives, God gives us tools to help us.

We have the gift of scripture.

We have the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, that still small voice or gentle nudge that guides us in our decision making.

We have other Christians to do life with, those we are in faith groups with us through whom God speaks.

We have our pastors and church leaders who may help with discernment.

We have our God-given intellect and common sense.

I know I have used all these tools at times in my life to help me discern the will of God. I bet you have too.

In all of our lives, we are all going to have chapters of mountain top highs; weddings, graduations, new babies, new jobs, getting into the college of your choice. But we are also going to have chapters that are filled with heartache and pain. All great novels have conflict, challenges, struggles and pain. But the authors know how each story will end. And right now, you may be walking through one of life’s difficult chapters. Perhaps you are preserving through the death of a loved one or trying to find hope when you’ve been out of work for months. Maybe your marriage has ended, or you or a family member is facing a frightening illness. You do not yet know what the next chapter will bring but you trust that there will be a next chapter. Sometimes it is really hard to see God when we are passing through those awful chapters or those difficult seasons of life. Sometimes we cannot begin to imagine how in the world things will work out. But when we look back over our lives, in hindsight, we can see how God moved the storyline forward, enfolding us into God’s redeeming love. Here’s what I believe with all my heart because I’ve experienced and seen it happen over and over. God can and will transform our pain, redeem our suffering, and lift us out of the deepest darkest pits of despair. Out of our darkest moments, God writes a story of triumph. And with God as our co-author, the worst thing is never the last thing.

So, your story is not complete. The remaining chapters are yet to be written. God’s plan for your life is not set in stone. You have the opportunity to shape your story, *“to lead a life that is worth of the Lord, fully pleasing to God as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.”*

Let’s pray:

Lord, I offer my life to you.

Help me to walk in your way.

Make me the person you want me to be.

Help me to do your will,

When I am scared, help me to trust you.
I invite you to write the story of my life with me.
And when I come to the end, I hope to meet you face to face
And hear you say, well done!
Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of January 22, 2023

Weekly Prayer

Lord God, sometimes I face tough choices and hard situations, and I wish you would step in and live my life for me—or at least write me a message in the sky! I shrink from the hard work of finding options, weighing them against your values, making decisions. But your grace frees me to be creative, try things, and “live out loud,” trusting your love. If I go off track, you catch me and set me on my feet again. Thank you for trusting me, for giving me room to fail, for teaching me to trust myself—because I trust you and your will. Amen.

Monday, January 23

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 packed with meaning. “Prosperity” in verse 2 is actually shalom in Hebrew, a word that meant God-given peace and wholeness. “Do not be wise in your own eyes” (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 writers say “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

God, as I seek your God-given peace and wholeness, help me to trust in your ways discerning right from wrong today and every day. Amen.

Tuesday, January 24

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

The night before he was crucified, John says, Jesus prayed as much or more for his followers as for himself. He asked God to "sanctify" them through the word of truth, the Bible. 1 Thessalonians 4:3 said, "It is God's will that you should be sanctified." 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 this GPS study 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, open my heart to your will so that my life might be pleasing to you. Amen.

Wednesday, January 25

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. Farewell. 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

The Bible also tells stories of people who challenged, even defied, their faith community (e.g. Job, Jeremiah, and yes, Jesus). What guidelines do you believe can help clarify when it is better to listen carefully to, and learn from, the insights of other believers? What do we lose when we try (or are forced) to make our journey alone?

Prayer

God, you gave me two ears and one mouth for a reason. As I seek to live in community with others, help me to be a better listener before I open my mouth to speak. Amen.

Thursday, January 26

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 Christ-follower, live in accordance with God's will for you? One aspect of that, Paul wrote 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 "offer 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

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.
Amen.

Friday, January 27

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 "stayed tuned," however. God guided him in a special way to new territory for the Christian mission: the Aegean peninsula and the populous cities of Greece.

Application

Until this time, Paul's work had been limited to Asia Minor. Now God blocked him from two places he planned to go (the text does not say how) and sent a dream of a man calling Paul to

preach in Macedonia. How can you stay alert for the unusual times when God guides you directly? Have you ever had such an experience?

Prayer

Lord, I offer my life to you. Help me to walk in your ways. Make me the person you want me to be. Lead me in your path so that others can come to know your grace, power and love. Amen.

Saturday, January 28

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

In *The Message of Philippians*, commentator Alec Motyer wrote, "There is a worker in each of these verses: the Christian 'working out' in verse 12, and God 'working in' in verse 13. This points to a blend of commitment to what we have to do and reliance on what God is doing." 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, "If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you." How have you learned to be both actively engaged in living your life of faith and trusting in God to do work in you that you cannot do for yourself? In what ways do you believe God has given you greater wisdom for living a life that steadily follows God's will?

Prayer

Lord, be at work in my heart today so that I can be at work in this world to share your love and grace. Amen.