

## GOD WORKS ALL THINGS FOR GOOD

Pentecost 8 Year A

Gn. 29:15-28; Ps105:1-11, 45b; Rom. 8:26-39; Mt. 13:31-33, 44-52 Glad 26/07/2020

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What is God's perfect will for your life? Do you know what it is? Would you like to know what it is? Has God got some great plan for you that you don't know about? Wouldn't it be great to catch a glimpse of God's will for you? Or would it? What will happen if you miss it? Will God leave you on the shelf—remove his grace from your life—harden your heart or perhaps even leave you in the depths of despair? Just how spiritual do you have to be in order to know and carry out God's will for your life? These are questions that Christians have always wrestled with—being able to know God's will for your life in every detail—so that you will always be in his blessing. And isn't that what we all want—to be continually in God's blessing?

For Christians, there is a tension that often exists between those who believe that there is a blueprint or "script" of human events in which we are mere players in some drama, and those who believe that all things that happen are sheer coincidence—a tension between believing that God has a perfect will for your life—that you must discover it and act upon it in order to gain his blessing—and the belief that, throughout our life, we are able to exercise complete freedom of choice in all things. Probably the majority of us would put ourselves somewhere in the middle of these two extremes, believing that we live our lives in some kind of balance between God's will and our own free will.

Haddon Robinson, in his forward to the book, *Decision Making and the Will of God*, by Garry Friesen, writes:

Sacred cows make the best hamburger, but the meat can be hard to swallow. Christians cherish a mythology that—along with their theology—shapes and directs their lives. Perhaps no myth more strongly influences us than our understanding of how to know the will of God.

In the chapters that follow, the author of the book, Garry Friesen, explodes the myth that God has provided everybody with a perfect blueprint for their life—that they must fulfil "to the letter" some pre-ordained plan of God for their life—or else they will be continually out of God's will and therefore will miss out on his blessing, or worse, be eternally damned. And there are many Christians who live their lives with that understanding.

But the belief that there must be a one and only perfect will for your life and that you must seek God's guidance on every single decision you make in life—including small everyday decisions—is not only bad theology, it places an intolerable burden on your life. When you think about it, it's somewhat reminiscent of the Jewish legal system of Jesus' day, which loaded the people with a terrible burden of guilt, because it was impossible to comply 100% with all the rules and regulations they were faced with. (A bit like trying to fulfill "to the letter" all the COVID-19 regulations, that we've been faced with over the last few weeks/months.)

Rather than undergoing the burden of trying to know and follow some illusive "perfect" will for your life, that only a super-Christian could determine and carry out, Paul declares, in his letter to the Romans, that, "all things work together for good for those who love God." (v 28) This doesn't mean that whatever happens to you in life must be God's will, and that you must accept it without question. It doesn't mean that we must accept as God's will all the pain and suffering and loss that so often accompanies us in our journey of life. Rather, what it means, is that whatever happens to you in life—whatever adverse circumstances you find yourself in—whether it is through no fault of your own or through mistakes that you have made (and let's face it, we've all made a few)—God is there and can use those experiences for good—sometimes even for redemption. We all still have to live with the consequences of the decisions we make, but with God, we can move on.

Somerset Maugham, the English writer, once wrote a story about a janitor at St. Peter's Church in London. One day a young vicar discovered that the janitor was illiterate and so fired him. Jobless, the man invested his meagre savings in a tiny tobacco shop, where he prospered, bought another, expanded, and ended up with a chain of tobacco stores worth several hundred thousand dollars. One day the man's banker said, "You've done well for an illiterate, but where would you be if you could read and write?" "Well," replied the man, "I'd be janitor of St. Peter's Church in Neville Square." (Bits and Pieces, June 24, 1993, p 23)

Losing your job, losing a loved one, or having some other misfortune befall you, in itself, can not always be seen at the outset as something good, but God can use the experience to open up new possibilities—as it did for this illiterate janitor. If this kind of thing (and it happens in life a lot) were part of God's perfect plan for one's life, how could we ever get a hold of the script so that we could follow it?

Romans 8:28 is one of the best loved and most often memorised verses in the Bible. Why? Because within those few words is such hope and encouragement for all of us. It tells us that no matter what our situation is, God is present, working for good. It's not just in the pleasant, delightful, anticipated things of our lives—not just in the beautiful sunsets and moving times of worship, that we find God at work. He works for our good in all things.

That doesn't mean he works toward our short-term happiness or delight. He works towards what is best for us, doing what is eternally good in us and for us. In all our experiences of life, even the most difficult and painful, God is still at work doing something good. But there is a criterion. It is those who love him, in whom he works for the good—those who have given their hearts to him—who have been persuaded that he is worthy, kind, merciful and gracious—who love God for who he is and not just for what he has to give.

We also need to realise that it's his *purpose* that defines what good is—not what we want. We're called according to his *purpose*, which is to make us like Christ. All that is true of Christ Jesus—his character, glory, love and authority—becomes true of us. We are made like him. That is God's purpose and that is what good is.

For those who love him, who are on the way to becoming what God intends them to be, who are called according to his purpose, in all their experiences God will work to bring about what is truly good. This is a remarkable promise.

Instead of facing life fearfully, caving in and pulling the covers over our head, crying out—frightened of what we have to experience—we know that God is doing what is best for us. Why? Because he knows us and because he has called us—called us into a new and life-giving relationship with him. Those who respond to the call are cleansed. That's what justification means. We have been justified, fixed and cleansed from all of the sins of which we would otherwise be guilty, from all of the laws that we have broken. And the very end of the process is glorification—the finished course—being like Christ as we were intended to be.

This is the will of God for us. There is nothing true of us that he doesn't know or embrace. There are no days in which we are not his deepest concern. We groan when we look at ourselves and at the world. We still have territory to negotiate and suffering to undergo.

But the gospel affirms that God is absolutely committed to us, and what he determines cannot fail to be accomplished.

What, then, should we say in response to this? What *can* we say in response to this? What better way than to echo in our hearts and on our lips Paul's magnificent hymn of praise to God, saying what it means to him to know that he is in the mind of his Father every minute of every day, and that he is cared for by the triune God. It is one of the most powerful written statements of any kind anywhere in the world.

*What then are we to say about these things? (says Paul) If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,*

*'For your sake we are being killed all day long;  
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.'*

*No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.  
(Rom. 8:31-39)*

What is it like to live knowing God loves you this way? What is it like to walk around in your shoes, in your world, your circumstances?

What then shalt we say to these things? The world in all its hardship, deprivation and agony cannot separate you from the love of God. Whatever befalls you cannot ruin what God intends for you, for God's will for you is not dependent on your circumstances. No created thing in this world will destroy, alter, or weaken God's love for you.

To him be all blessing, honour, glory and majesty. Amen.