

September 2, 2017 Florida Hospital Seventh-day Adventist Church
Isaiah 30:19-21 Great Question: How Can I Know God's Will? By
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Today we begin a four-part series called Great Question! Here's how it came to be. I got the idea from my friends, Alex Bryan and Karl Haffner who pastor churches next to university campuses. Each of them did it a little differently but the essence is the same. I had Karla send an email out to our collegiate and young adult group called Centered, and solicited questions they would like to have a sermon address. The responses came to Karla so I don't know who wrote the questions, I just get to try and see what the Bible says with regard to finding answers.

In the paragraph for the bulletin, update, website I didn't put the whole of the question but distilled it to the not so simple, "how can we know God's will?"

But to set the context for the message today we need to hear the whole question. The person responding wrote this: "I got together with other FHC young people and we came up with the following: How to choose a college career? Is there a specific one God wants me to choose? How do I know if the person I am with is who I should marry? How do I discover my purpose in life?"

When I read this group of questions what I heard is the question, What is God's will for my life?

Sure there are great cosmic questions theologians have named things like his sovereign will vs his permissive will his authoritative will vs the his commanded will.

But however we study it, however we pray for it, however we seek it at its bottom line for us we simply want to know "What is God's will for me?" In this big decision, in this cross roads moment in my life how can I know specifically and right now what God's will is for me?

There are likely some of you here today and for you pondering that specificity of what God's will is for you terrifies you!!

Some of you might still be in the camp where you imagine that God is out to get you. Your image of God is ogreish. In folklore an ogre was a man eating giant and ogre has morphed into any cruel or terrifying person. Maybe you haven't pushed God that far but you just sort of imagine him as a kill joy. Maybe some of those in your life who have laid claim to him, or identified as "God followers" have modeled this idea of being a kill joy, of raining on every parade, of adopting as favorite words, "Stop that" or "No you can't do that!" and because they are that way and they claim to be God followers it has impressed you that God must be that way too.

Maybe some of you can identify with some of my youthful concerns I had about doing God's will. I remember thinking that if God got full control of my life he might send me to be a miserable missionary. Oh, he might not have intended for me to be that way but where he'd end up sending me, the place he'd choose for me to serve I'd be miserable there so I'd end up a miserable missionary.

Or thinking about a life partner. If I were to give that choice over to God it would be worse than an arranged marriage by one's parents. They might at least try to think about the kind of mate I might like, but seeking God's will could mean a match with someone I was supposed to love but could never like!

There was the thought that if I just went with God's will that I could end up in a career that was a horrible match for me, pure drudgery.

Fortunately for me as I've aged, as I've recognized that Jesus is our best look at God, and come to believe God when he defines himself by love, and then look at the description of love in 1 Corinthians 13, and recognize that God wants me more than I want him I've become less fearful of seeking his will.

What's interesting is that there's a whole big list of things where God has already pulled back the curtain and unequivocally revealed his will. There's a long list of issues, careers, life partner choices where God has made his will really really clear!

Thinking about our career? No need to labor long in prayer to know whether or not it is God's will if we should be a drug dealer, arms dealer, or sell human organs, or sex.

We don't have to ask whether or not to join a gang or an organization involved in crime.

No need to ask God about his will regarding marrying someone who doesn't believe in God.

If we've offended someone and we realize it we don't need to ask God if it's his will for us to try and make things right!

No need to seek God's will about whether or not to idolize something?

No new divine revelation is needed to discover God's will about whether or not we need to have a Sabbath rest.

No need to wonder or not if you can dishonor mom and dad.

Thank goodness that in addition to all the places where God makes his will for our lives clear by describing what we are not to do, there are some really great texts that describe some amazing desires God has for us too. Not just prohibitions but super benefits.

In his first letter to Timothy, Paul begins the second chapter urging Timothy to pray for all the people, to plead for God's mercy upon them. These prayers are to include kings and all others in authority so there can be peace, quietness, in godliness and dignity. Then we come to this grand revelation of God's will "This is good and pleases God our Savior, for he wants everyone to be saved and to understand the truth." 1 Timothy 2:3-4

This may be a contrast with what has been taught and called Christian faith. Some of us may have picture a concept of God more like the one preached by Jonathan Edwards in 1741, in his famous sermon titled "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." He preached words that have haunted our Christian history in America.

“The God that holds you over the pit of Hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked: his wrath toward you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire;...”

I don't know exactly what Edwards was trying to communicate, I don't impugn his motives. But this isn't Jesus, the God of scripture. His will is that everyone be saved.

Again in 2 Peter 3:9 it says “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”

Paul writes that it is God's will that you should be sanctified; that you should avoid sexual immorality. 1 Thessalonians 4:3 His will is our sanctification, our being transformed more and more into his very image.

Part of our challenge in wanting to know God's will is the two realities we live in simultaneously. Paul has this weird and beautiful way of helping us see our reality. In places like Colossians 1 and Titus 3 and 1 Corinthians 5:7 and 2 Corinthians 5:17 Paul makes our two realities evident.

The Good News is that God in Jesus has reconciled us to himself, and simultaneously to being holy and blameless without a single fault in Christ, we must stand in this truth firmly.

Paul writes that he rejoices that the Colossians heard the gospel, believed in Jesus Christ, they came to this wonderful understanding, but then he prays that God will give them a complete understanding.

To the Corinthians he counsels them to get the leaven or sin out but simultaneously says you are unleavened, without sin.

We have two realities complete in Christ and in us we are an unfinished work. Jesus HAS saved us and Jesus IS saving us.

As we seek the will of God for our lives then, God himself has two wills for us. His eternal perfect will is that we be saved and in Jesus Christ that will has been accomplished. By Jesus, God has reconciled all things unto himself. The big important long lasting eternal will of God for your life and my life has been already accomplished in Jesus.

When you open your eyes in the morning before you've hardly had a thought, before you've accomplished a thing because of Jesus you awaken as the beloved of God, and whatever you do following your will or following God's will won't alter God's love for you. Awakening to the work of your day you can rest in God.

At the same time, the reason we followers of Christ seek to know the will of God for our lives is that because God accepts us in Christ and our good eternity is set, then we want live God honoring, God pleasing lives.

So at least part of our problem in seeking God's will for our lives is that for many of us we have too narrow a view. We may be like Barbara Brown Taylor who writes, "Earlier in my life, I thought there was ONE particular thing I was supposed to do with my life. I thought that God had a purpose for me and my main job was to discover what it was."

She writes that this thought heated up while she was in seminary. All around her were other students who knew exactly what they would do when they graduated. She didn't have clue what she would do when she graduated. So she began to ask God to tell her what she was supposed to do; tell her what her designated purpose was on this earth. She wondered how she could discover the vocation that had her name on it.

Listen to the description of her prayer experience in her own words:

“Since this was an important prayer, I searched for the right place to pray it. After a few lackluster attempts by the side of my bed and a few more in various cubby holes around campus, I found a fire escape that hung precariously from the side of deserted Victorian mansion next door to the Divinity School. That same night I crept over there after dark. Stepping over the ‘Danger: Keep Off’ sign at the bottom. I climbed to the top, listening to the bolts creak as I tried to minimize the thundering of my feet on the narrow iron steps. I was so reluctant to take my hands off the rails that layers of old paint crackled under my palms like cornflakes. At the top I had to take a deep breath before I could let go of my handholds long enough to turn around. I did it as fast as a trapeze artist, gripping the rails again as soon as I sat down.

“The fire escape turned out to be an excellent place to pray.... I went up there so many times in the weeks that followed that I no longer remember which night it was that God finally answered my prayer. I do not think it was right at the beginning, when I was still saying my prayers in words. I think it came later, when I had graduated to inchoate sounds....

“Then one night when my whole heart was open to hearing from God what I was supposed to do with my life, God said, ‘Anything that pleases you.’

“What?” I said, resorting to words again. “What kind of an answer is that?”

“Do anything that pleases you,” the voice in my head said again, “And belong to me.” (An Altar in the World, p. 110)

I think it was a good answer.

When we are surrendered to God. Aware of the gospel that he saves us without any space at all for any self-saving. When we are simultaneously committed to allowing God to transform us more and more into his very likeness. And when we can with absolute authenticity pray Jesus’ prayer this is reality. God saying to us, “Do anything that pleases you and belong to me.”

The night before the crucifixion in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prayed. Jesus had said to his followers, "I did not come to do my will but the will of him who sent me." His whole life had been about seeking to follow the will of his Father.

Now he faces spikes to be driven through his hands and feet. Now he faces the humiliation of hanging naked on the cross. Now he faces separation from Father and Spirit with whom he has eternal connections. He knows the plan and he's asking if there's another way. All of his humanity resists what is coming. But in the end he prays the prayer necessary for every follower who is seeking God's will for their life, Nevertheless (in other words, regardless of what I might think I want or need or desire) not my will but yours be done!"

Romans 12:1&2 give us some direction in knowing God's will for our lives. Here is God's message for us.

"And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give you bodies to God. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will accept. When you think of what he has done for you, is this too much to ask? Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. THEN you will know what God wants you to do, and you will know how good and pleasing and perfect his will really is."

In this full, whole body, whole person, all that we are, living holy sacrifice surrender to God we are ready to hear God's will for our life as being "Anything that pleases you!" As a surrendered person whom God is transforming, changing the way we think, when what we want is God's will not ours, then the answer, to what is God's will is whatever you want.

I think it was in 1978 in Atlanta. I was attending my first Youth Specialties Convention and I went to a breakout session that changed my life on this whole topic of knowing God's will for my life. I was

young, still in seminary, curious to know how to make the “right” decision about so many things.

And I heard Fisher Humphreys give a talk on how to discern Gods will for your life, and his talk was life altering and ended up affecting my life and it has been counsel I’ve shared with many through the years.

I’ve forgotten how he started but here’s the part that was indelibly seared into my thinking.

The way to know the will of God is to pray and seek God until we are able to authentically pray the prayer, “God I surrender, I want to do whatever you want.” Come to the place where we can pray in harmony with Jesus in the garden, “Not my will but yours be done.” I was with him, carefully listening, taking notes, and then he hurt my head. He said, “Once you can honestly pray, God I want to do whatever you want me to do, then get up and do what you want to do!

I remember at the time my first reaction was, this is some kind of selfish heresy. A carry over from the hippie era, “Do your own thing!” I found it hard to imagine then that God wanted us to be that in touch with ourselves, to be that happy pursuing our dreams.

He then used this illustration. He said that if he got a call to go be a roving missionary in Mexico he’d hardly need to pray about it. He’d simply decline the offer. No appeal. Not something he had any interest in doing.

But then he went on to explain. What if God really was calling him? What if it was God’s will that he be a roving missionary in Mexico? His position was that if he continually each day got up in the morning and prayed with authenticity, “God I want to do whatever you want me to do.” And then got up and within the frame work of a believer being transformed by grace, did whatever he wanted, that if God really needed him in Mexico that God would direct the moving ship of his life

and one day he'd find himself pulling a trailer around as a roving missionary in Mexico.

Listen God wants you. God loves you. God desires your very best good for you and for kingdom benefit. Whether you rule nations, run multinational organizations, or find your career in the most humble of places, God simply invites you to love him and love your neighbor. To offer to lay down your life, your stuff, your very self to serve and to consistently choose kindness over meanness.

How can you personally specifically know God's will? Offer your whole self as a living sacrifice to God. Let him be at work in you transforming you into a constantly new person, and you will know what God wants you to do, and you will know how good and pleasing and perfect his will really is.

And when we can offer that whole person sacrifice, and say with Jesus not my will but yours be done, then maybe our ears will be tuned and we'll hear the same answer that came to Fisher Humphreys and Barbara Brown Taylor. Maybe God will say, "Do anything that pleases you and belong to me. This is my will for you!"



How big a deal is it right now for you to discern God's will for you?

In what ways are you excited and/or fearful of knowing his will?

How does your picture of God affect your feelings about knowing his will for you?

When you think about God's will do you imagine it to be more restrictive or permissive?

What are your thoughts about the dual reality Jesus HAS saved us and Jesus IS saving us?

How do you resonate with awakening as God's beloved child and that how you do or don't follow his will won't alter his love?

Are you more comfortable with God revealing a specific will for you or are you better with a broader more open will for you?

What's your reaction to the will of God for someone surrendered to him being, "Do whatever pleases you and belong to me"?

How hard is it for you to honestly pray, "I want to do whatever it is you want me to do"?

What are the desires of your heart that match God's will?



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