

Serious Answers to Hard Questions

What's God's Will for My Life? Frankton – 8/17/14

Scripture: Colossians 1.9-10 filled with Knowledge of God's will to live worthy life

Proposition: God's will for us isn't happiness, but faithfulness

We are in a short series of four sermons that I have titled [SLIDE] "Serious Answers to Hard Questions". And the series is really what the title suggests: well thought answers to important questions people have asked me at sometimes difficult times in their lives. Two weeks ago, we talked about why innocent people suffer. We came to the conclusion that God did not cause the suffering, that the natural laws that God set up to sustain this world and also the God-given freedoms that people have in it sometimes cause us harm, even though we are the innocent bystanders. Last week, we talked about God answering prayer and that God typically works through natural laws and through people and that sometimes the answer to our prayer is no. Today we're going to talk about God's will for your life.

A story is told of a farmer who was prepping his fields one day and praying, "Lord, what is your will for my life?" He looked up and saw two large clouds forming what appeared to be letters. As he watched the clouds, the letters "PC" formed in his eyes. He thought about it for a minute and decided that "PC" certainly meant "Preach Christ." A charge ran through his body as he realized that God was giving him a sign to be a pastor. He left his farming equipment in the field, announced to his family and friends that God had called him to preach, and then went out preaching to any church that would have him. However, his sermons were dreadful and his ministry unfruitful. He came back to his farm one year later. His friends asked him about his return, to which the farmer replied, "I finally realized that "PC" didn't mean "Preach Christ"; it meant "Plant Corn." As the farmer found out, discerning God's will for your life isn't easy.

Among Shakespeare's most famous lines are those from his play, "As You Like It": All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players; they have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts. (Act 2, Scene 7) I want to use Shakespeare's metaphor of life as a play as a way of thinking about the will of God. Christians often speak of "God's plan for your life." As it is usually described, God's plan would seem to have been written in advance by God, like a manuscript for a play. And there are a few passages in scripture that seem to support this idea. Psalm 139.16 is one: [SLIDE] *You saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in your book.* [SLIDE] *Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed.*

I want to stop for a minute here. I want to talk about this verse, what it says, and what it doesn't say. And it's kind of a pre-cursor to where I want to go from here. Nowhere in this verse does it say that every moment that was laid out before we were born was exactly what God wanted to lay out for us. It never says that every moment that was recorded in the book was what God would have wanted recorded. It just says that God knew what would happen. It doesn't say God would have wanted it to happen. I think that's important for what I'm going to talk about for the rest of my time up here today.

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The question is: Did God have a perfect and complete plan for your life before you were born? Is everything we do, everything that happens to us, and every decision we make already written down so that we are merely players on a stage? There are people who believe this, but I think there are some logistical problems with this thought. The biggest problem is this: if everything happens according to God's script, then God is ultimately responsible for all the world's rape, torture, genocide and injustice. If God's responsible for those things, there's no Satan? If this is true, all of the evils we see throughout history come from God. Yet this seems impossible if God is merciful, loving and just. Here's another problem with this view: if we are merely acting in a play God has written, then what is the point of life? If every event was predetermined by God, daily life would seem to have no purpose apart from entertainment for God. However, I don't think God would find this entertaining. One last problem is the question of why would God punish us if we are merely following the script he wrote. Where is the justice in God punishing us for something God forces us to do (think Judas)? For these reasons, many reject the idea that God has a plan that is not only predetermined, but that cannot be changed.

Others suggest that God has a perfect plan for our lives, a detailed script if you will, but that God gives us freedom to choose to pursue God's perfect will or reject it. Among the challenges to this idea is that God doesn't hand us the script; we are left to discover it. So, God has a perfect will but seldom makes it so clear that we can't miss it (think of the farmer and the clouds). This idea raises even more questions. If God has a plan for the important decisions of my life, but doesn't give me the script, if I stray from it one time, it might mess up the whole plan. Suppose God's plan was for me to marry Jan and have kids. Suppose when I went off to college at Purdue, I met another young lady and mistook her for Miss Right, when she was really Miss Runner-Up. So I marry Miss Runner-Up, the one God didn't want me to marry, and we have children, children God never intended me to have. So, since these children were not part of God's will for me, they don't even have a plan for them from God. I know this is facetious, but the point is made. The idea of God having a perfectly planned life for us and then letting us stray from it has some logistical problems.

I want to suggest an alternative way of thinking about this whole idea of God's perfect will for our lives. Instead of God having a predetermined plan for our life, even before we are born, rather, **[SLIDE]** what if God invites us to collaborate in writing the story of our lives. I wonder if God has hopes and dreams for the story of our lives but gives us the choice of writing our own story in collaboration with God or writing our story without God. If we use this metaphor, I believe God's plan for our lives is not so much a manuscript already completed, but an idea for a story that God hopes we will choose to follow, filling in the story details with God each day. Every decision, every encounter, every challenge, is an opportunity to collaborate with God in writing our story. And when we invite God to collaborate with us, our story becomes one of redemption, love, and hope.

Let me what I just said in a different way. I'm going to talk about parenting for a minute. Jan and I have two wonderful children, Angela and Andy. We, along with God were responsible for their birth. Both of our children derive their DNA and personality traits from us. We have hopes and dreams for them – what we might call our will for their lives. Our will is that they have faith in God, that they love others, which they are people of integrity and character, and they seek to make a difference in God's world with their lives. We hope they have joy and happiness in their marriages and in their lives. But, as parents, we have not planned out every part of our children's

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lives – who they married and their careers for example. Even the things that are most important to us – that they have faith and trust in God and that they love their neighbors – we can't force them to do. We have given our children tools to make wise decisions, and we have shaped their values, but now that they are adults, the rest is up to them. They have made a lot of decisions that we have celebrated and they made a few decisions that broke our hearts. We continue to offer advice when asked. We have helped them when they need help. **And we always love them.** Part of the joy of parenting is watching your children make decisions. Part of the joy of parenting grown children is having them come to you seeking advice and wisdom.

What if God's plan for our lives – instead of being predetermined – were more like that of a [SLIDE] Heavenly Parent, someone, like an earthly parent, who has some overarching hopes and dreams but let's their children decide? God's will for our lives may have less to do with whether we take this job or that one and more to do with whether in everything we do, we seek to love God and love our neighbor. What if God takes joy in watching us make decisions rather than in making decisions for us? And what if God takes delight in being consulted for advice and wisdom when we, God's children, make decisions. This is what I think the will of God is like. God's intention is that our story be about redemption, love, faith, and courage. There are twists and turns in the story. There are times we take the story in a direction God would have us take, and times we go in a direction God would rather us not go. There are chapters in which we do most of the writing, but the best chapters are those in which we hear God's inspiration and ideas and we write the story of our lives together.

If what I have suggested is true, then God's will for our lives is [SLIDE] more about how we make decisions than about the specific decisions we make. It may be less about whom we marry or what career we pursue than it is about ensuring that we love our spouse and that in our careers we seek to live out our faith. This sense of God's will is sometimes called God's prescriptive will. A prescription is an instruction given by an authority and usually aimed at bringing about an improved state of being. It could be medicine along with instructions on how to take it or it could be a prescription for dieting or exercise all aimed at improving your health. Looking at it another way, your financial advisor may give you a prescription for how to spend and invest your money so you've got money to live on during your retirement years.

God's prescriptive will is the instruction God has given us that will lead to greater spiritual and relational health. A large part of that prescription we can find in our Bibles, but it hardly looks like a doctor's prescription. As we continue to read scripture throughout our lives, we discover various elements of God's will for our lives. Let's look at one of the most basic and familiar of these prescriptions – the Ten Commandments. These commandments help us understand in the broadest possible terms what the prescriptive will of God is for our lives. [SLIDE] No other gods. No idols. No misuse God's name. Honor the Sabbath. [SLIDE] Honor your parents. No murder. No adultery. No stealing. No lying. No coveting. These commandments help us to walk in God's will. Jesus went on to summarize these Ten Commandments into just two commandments: [SLIDE] Love God with your whole self. Love your neighbor as yourself. These two commandments of Jesus help us to know God's prescriptive will for our lives.

Paul talks about God's prescriptive will (he didn't use that term) in this morning's scripture: [SLIDE] *We ask God to give you complete knowledge of his will and to give you spiritual wisdom and understanding.* [SLIDE] *Then the way you live will always honor and please the Lord, and*

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your lives will produce every kind of good fruit. [Col 1.9b-10a] According to this passage, the purpose of knowing God's will is that we might grow in the knowledge of God and live lives worthy of God and producing fruit for God. When we begin to see God's will less as God's specific plan for our lives and more as God's timeless will for how we make each decision and how we face everyday life, I think we begin to understand how God's will works in our lives. In other words, I want us to start thinking less about God's will as his sweating the details of our lives and more of God's will as the overarching how we chose to live our life.

It is helpful for me to remember that mine is not the only story God is collaborating on. I am part of a much larger story of God's love and care for our world. God is working in the lives of the people I meet seeking to collaborate in writing their life stories as well. This helps me remember that the world doesn't really revolve around me. And this is an important part of God's will. When we collaborate with God, we invite God to lead us, guide us, and use us. We invite God to help us pay attention and to say yes in those moments when our story could be a part of God's larger story of redeeming the world. A part of our regular prayer should be that God use us to help other folks agree to collaborate with God on writing their story.

I want to finish with this: Some chapters in our lives are marvelous mountaintops filled with joy. But any great story includes its share of conflict, challenges, disappointments, pain, and struggles. However, the biblical story tells us that **[SLIDE]** the difficult chapters of our story are never the final chapters. Examples abound. Jacob's son, Joseph, was sold into slavery, yet saved his family. The widow Ruth stayed with her mother-in-law, Naomi, went to live in a foreign land, and became the grandmother of Israel's greatest king. The disciples, as they heard of Jesus' crucifixion on Friday afternoon, could not have known that on Sunday morning he would rise from the dead. So here is what I know – God can and will transform our pain, redeem our suffering, and lift us out of the darkest pits. Out of the dark moments, God can write a story of triumph. With God as our collaborator, the dark times are never the end of the story.