

“Why Can’t I See God’s Will for My Life?”

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Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Romans 12:1-2; Colossians 1:9-10 Occasion: Why series

Theme: God’s Will, predestination, determinism

Among Shakespeare’s most famous lines are these from *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)

Shakespeare was not the first to compare life to a play. Let’s use this metaphor 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: every word, every event, already pre-planned.

And there are a few scriptural passages that support this idea, like Psalm 139:16: “In your book, o God, were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.”

The question is did God have a perfect and complete plan for your life before you were born? Is everything that we will do, everything that will happen to us, and every decision we will make already written down – predetermined by God – so that we are “merely players” on God’s stage?

Many people believe this is so, often without question. However, there are a host of logical problems with this view. First and most serious is the objection that if everything that happens is part of God’s pre-determined plan, then God is ultimately responsible for all the world’s torture, rape, cruelty, genocide and injustice. All of the evils we see in human history come from God, if God pre-planned everything that happens. This is a logical contradiction if God is in fact merciful, loving and just.

A second objection – what’s the point of life if we are merely acting in a play God has already written? If every event and every line is predetermined by God, daily life would seem to have no purpose apart from entertainment for God. And yet, how could God find this entertaining – millennia after millennia watching human beings do what he predetermined them to do.

A third objection is the question of why God punishes us for doing wrong things and then rewards us if we do the right things, if God has already predetermined what we’re going to do. Where is the justice in God punishing us for something God forced us to do?

For these reasons, I and many others reject the idea that God has a plan that is not only predetermined, but cannot be changed.

Others suggest that God has a perfect plan for our lives – a script that if we follow it, our lives will be lived entirely in God’s will – but that God gives us freedom to choose God’s perfect will, or reject it. Some people find this a compromise to the previous suggestion that we can’t make our own choices.

But there are problems with this theory as well. The problem is God doesn’t give us the script to our life; we have to guess and try to figure it out. God doesn’t send us emails to tell us which guy or girl to date and marry, which school to attend, which career to choose, which community to live in.

So, if God has a perfect plan, but doesn’t tell us what it is in plain terms, we are left guessing. Why doesn’t God make His will more clear if it’s predetermined what He wants us to do? And what happens to that perfect plan if we start making choices that don’t fit His plan? Doesn’t that mess up God’s perfect plan?

Think about this. If I go to the wrong college, meet the wrong woman and marry her, and we have children, does that mean that our children were never meant to be born in God's perfect will?

I used to subscribe to this theory, and I can't tell you how many anxious years of my life I spent worrying about whether I was getting it right or not. I was always second-guessing myself and wondering if God was angry with me and if I was going to be punished for not doing his perfect will. If God has a perfect, predetermined plan for our lives, but doesn't tell us in plain terms what it is, then we're left guessing and wondering. And frankly, that can make a person anxious and neurotic.

I'd like to suggest an alternative to this idea of God's perfect will as a manuscript completed by God before our birth. 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 the story of our lives but gives us the choice of writing our own story without God, or writing our story with God's guidance and assistance. Because we are human, our story is bound to include sin and hard times, conflict and fear, despair and death.

However, if we include God in the writing of our story we will also know forgiveness, divine comfort, the reassurance of God's presence and care for our lives. Apart from God our lives will miss out on the elements of forgiveness, reconciliation, peace, hope, redemption and love. Furthermore, when we seek to write the story of our lives apart from God, our story lacks the beauty and inspiration it might have had.

I believe God's plan for our lives is not so much a completed manuscript that we have to figure out, but an idea and an outline for a story that God hopes we will choose to follow, filling in the outline each and every day with God's divine assistance. God helps us to write our story.

I have two children, Chris and Katrina. As their Dad I have hopes and dreams for them – that they would be happy, that they would find someone significant to share their lives with, that they will include God in their life story. But I love them so much that I would never think of forcing them to do this or that because “father knows best.” I trust their judgment, even when they make mistakes. It’s how they learn and grow to be strong adults.

What if God’s plan for our lives – instead of being a predetermined set of events – was more like that of a Heavenly Parent? God’s will may have less to do with whether we take this job and more to do with whether we seek to love God and neighbor in everything we do.

What if God takes joy in watching us make decisions rather than making the decisions for us? And what if God takes delight in being consulted for advice and wisdom when we, God’s children, make our decisions?

This is what I think the will of God is like. God’s intention is that our story be about redemption and love, faith and courage. There are twists and turns in this story, and there are times we take the story in a direction God would not have chosen.

There will be chapters in which we do all the writing. But the best chapters of our lives are those in which we hear God’s inspiration and ideas, and we incorporate them into our life choices. That way, we write the story of our lives together.

God has given us the Holy Bible with all of its instructions on how to live – Love God and love your neighbor. Do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God. The Ten Commandments. God’s desires for the human race are made known. We read and study, we consult with other Christians, we come to worship to learn and to grow.

And we incorporate God's teachings into the person we become. We read Scripture asking, "Who does God want me to be? What does God want me to do, as a result of reading this passage? We take it all to God in prayer.

This way of understanding God's will is like a prescription written by a doctor. God prescribes this way of living. God doesn't pre-determine each and every event of your life, but God does give us a prescription on the way we are to live and to treat one another. This is God's prescriptive will.

I also know that as I pray, God will often put me in situations where God can use me. Call it a coincidence, or call it a God-incident, but I do believe that when we prayerfully surrender our lives to God, that God will create situations in which God's love and providence are revealed.

Many times have I called someone, only to have them say, "I'm so glad you called, or so glad you visited me. I'm having a tough time and I needed someone to talk to. You are an answer to my prayer." Now, is that a coincident, or a God incident?

Together, God and we write the story of our lives. God gives us the free will to include Him in our daily lives, or not to. I believe the best stories of the human race are those that are written when people and God work together.

My friends, 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 a chance to shape the story. As you do, this is God's will, "that you lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God." (Colossians 1:10) Amen.

This sermon borrows heavily from the book *Why? Making Sense of God's Will*, by Adam Hamilton. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018, pp. 55-75.