

Guidance
Have I Missed
God's Best?

James C. Petty


P U B L I S H I N G
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

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Rick was a talented graphic designer I met some years ago. He worked for a successful advertising agency, but he chafed at the cutthroat competition, the low moral tone and the heavy pressure to produce. He dreamed of beginning his own firm, where he could set his own hours and be more involved in ministry. Yet he also had a wife and three small children. If he failed, everyone would suffer. He might lose his house and savings.

Rick prayed to be shown the plan of God for his life. He asked God whether he should start his own firm or stay put. But as he did, a disturbing thought surfaced in his mind. He was not sure, but he feared he had missed God's plan for his life back in college. He had gone to the Urbana Student Missionary Convention and signed up to pursue missions, but once he got back to school, he was talked out of it. What would have happened if he had used his skills to spread the gospel instead of creating ads? Perhaps he was now so far from God's will for his life that it was pointless to try to get back to it, much less ask God to guide him within his current, "disobedient" plan.

Rick's problems in seeking guidance from God are common among Christians. For many,

their understanding of the plan and will of God has never been sharpened by biblical concepts. One of Rick's major problems was confusing two very different uses of the term "the will of God" in the Bible.

In Scripture, the phrase "the will of God" can mean either the *plan* of God or the *commandments* of God. Theologians describe them as the two wills of God. The plan of God is his "decretive will" and the commandments of God are his "preceptive will" (Hodge 1865, 1:405). The *decretive* will of God refers to God's sovereign decrees and the way they direct everything that happens in the world. The *preceptive* will refers to God's precepts and commands and our responsibility as human beings to apply them to our lives. That is the proper focus for seeking guidance from God. Since the Bible uses the phrase "will of God" in both these senses, it is easy to confuse them. That leads to confusion in our search for guidance, which was one of Rick's problems.

The Will of God: His Plan

Scripture often uses the phrase "will of God" to refer to God's plan. God's sovereign plan is referred to in Ephesians 1:5 where Paul says, "He [God] predestined us . . . in accordance with his pleasure and *will*." Every believer in Christ should have the comfort of

knowing that he or she was chosen by God before creation to inherit salvation. Paul continues the theme in Ephesians 1:11 where he declares, "In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will."

James 4:15 exhorts us not to make plans with a spirit of self-assurance (to go to a city, live, and make money there) but rather to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." James does not condemn planning; he condemns planning that does not leave room for God's plan. He tells us not to set our heart on our plans because our life is a vapor, here today and gone tomorrow.

In Romans 15:32, Paul asks the Romans to pray "so that *by God's will* I may come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed." Paul recognizes that he can come to the Roman Christians only by the providence and plan of God; that is, if God has already ordained it.

Peter uses the phrase "will of God" in this sense in 1 Peter 3:17. "It is better, *if it is God's will*, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil." Peter is noting that suffering comes through the plan and permission of God; that is, "if it is God's will."

Rick confused the two terms, and his confusion entangled him in what I call the "Plan

B Syndrome.” His logic went like this: If God has a fixed, detailed plan for the life of each believer and he wants us to follow that plan, what do we do when we stray from it? Well, we drop down to Plan B and have to take it from there.

Let me illustrate. Every year I agonize over which plan I will choose for the service contract on my ancient oil burner. Plan A, according to our friendly fuel oil dealer, will rid me from all cares. Under that plan they will fix everything but, of course, it costs more. Plan B is more reasonably priced, but only covers common problems. Plan C gives me an annual cleaning but no repairs whatever. If I have some money in the bank, I tend to choose Plan A. If I am short on money, I choose C, and that, of course, is the year that the repairman might just as well camp out at my house.

In the same way, we tend to think that while God has a “best” plan for our life, he also has some other, “cheaper” plans for people who miss the best. We remember certain foolish or sinful decisions we’ve made and, because of the consequences, see ourselves on a permanent “Plan B” regarding God’s will for our lives. Each time we make another bad decision, we drop down a notch to Plan C, Plan D, and—being the sinners that we are—we soon run out of letters in the alphabet. We think of “what

could have been” if we hadn’t married so-and-so, hadn’t gotten pregnant before marriage, had not turned down the job that would have made our career, or had not blown up at our teenage son.

But for those who are in Christ, there is only one plan, Plan A. This plan holds despite all our stupid mistakes and sins. It reveals the wonder of God’s shepherding care, the detail of his love through his decreed plan for our lives. It is a truth that is awe-inspiring, deeply comforting, and yet sometimes intimidating for us, God’s proud creatures.

One Sovereign Plan

The Bible teaches that (1) God does have one specific plan for your life and (2) the events and choices of your life irresistibly work that plan in every detail. Contrary to Rick’s view, one cannot “flunk out” of God’s plan. It accounts for all your mistakes, blindness, and sins in advance. These truths are included in the doctrine of God’s providence, which helps us think clearly about God’s daily involvement with our lives.

The doctrine of providence was brilliantly summarized in 1648 in the Westminster Confession of Faith (a document foundational to the theology of English-speaking Congrega-

tional, Reformed, Presbyterian, and many Baptist churches). Chapter 5 is entitled "Of Providence" and begins as follows:

God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by his most wise and holy providence, according to his infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.

This summary statement affirms that God works every detail of life "according to the immutable [unchangeable] counsel of his own will." This has far-reaching implications for Rick as he evaluates his career alternatives. He does not have to climb out of the hole he dug for himself to get back into God's will for his life. His history, and the decisions that created it, were *within* God's redemptive plan for him.

This validates the decision-making he must now do. He is not stuck in some second- or twentieth-best situation. He stands on the platform of the perfect and wise decrees of God's providence. This provides significant hope as we make decisions about our lives.

But before we proceed, we must ask, “Is this doctrine really true?” What about human responsibility and freedom? What about the problems caused by our sin and stupidity? What about the problem of evil in the world? Does that make God the originator of evil? Some key biblical passages help us understand providence’s implications for many important areas of our lives.

Circumstances

Does God control all circumstances in all situations? In Matthew 10:29–30, Jesus says that “not one of them [sparrows] will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered.” Jesus uses this extraordinary level of care and control by God to allay his disciples’ fears when facing persecution and testing. Things that seem accidental do not take place without the permission of God. He says, “So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows” (Matt. 10:31).

Notice the purpose of Jesus’ teaching. He did not give it to establish an abstract principle to be applied in any direction we might fancy. He gave it to minister to the fear of loss, death, suffering, and abuse among his people. It clearly establishes God’s total control over life,

but for a pastoral purpose that must be respected.

Some might ask, "How can I receive comfort from a doctrine that teaches that everything is determined and implies that there is no use to prayer or human effort?" Non-Christians might say, "Why should I accept a view that makes God the cause of evil?" Their mistake is to look at the doctrine as an isolated truth that can turn any way the logic of their minds leads them. The doctrine of God's sovereign control over circumstances is *never* used in Scripture to discourage prayer or human effort but rather the exact reverse. *Because* God can intervene, we should pray and we should work. It is *never* used to establish God's authorship of evil. That is explicitly denied in James 1:13 and many other passages. Satan and mankind's own sin are identified as the causes of evil.

The purposes for which this doctrine is used in Scripture are to induce humility in us (Rom. 9:20), to inspire praise for God's love for sinners (Eph. 1:11), to assure believers of the indestructibility and practicality of God's love (Rom. 8:28), and to warn enemies of the futility of resistance and rebellion (Ps. 2:9–10; Dan. 4:34–35). It highlights the facts that our individuality and circumstances are ordained by God (Ps. 139:13–16). David reflects on the personal value of knowing that God constantly

had thoughts of him. He says, "How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand (Ps. 139:17–18).

How many of us really believe that God is that aware of our circumstances? David says that we could not even count God's thoughts, much less pay such detailed attention to our own lives. I weep for Christians who conclude that they cannot enjoy this confidence in God's care for fear of implicating him in evil.

We may have had experiences with some who misuse the doctrine of providence. They are like the man who fell down a long flight of stairs one morning. "Fortunately" the stairs were carpeted, and he was able to dust himself off and hobble to the breakfast table. He sat down, looked at his wife and said, "Boy, am I glad that's over." While in a logical (and humorous) sense that response might be appealing, it only diverts attention from this man's duty to figure out what went wrong and take precautions against future mishaps. God did not reveal the reality of his providential care to excuse us from being stewards of our lives.

A beautiful illustration of God's providence is recorded in Genesis 50:20. Up to that point, Genesis tells the story of how Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery, how Joseph was falsely accused of rape and unjustly impris-

oned, how he rose to great power in Egypt, and then saved Egypt and his family from starvation. After all this, in Genesis 50:20 Joseph tells his brothers why he will not take revenge on them for their treachery. He says, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” Every action of the brothers, of Joseph, of Pharaoh, and even of the weather that brought the famine, was under God’s sovereign control. There is, in short, no circumstance—from the numbering of the hairs of our head to the movements of nations—that does not in every respect work out the plan of God.

If this is true, what about the results of humanity’s evil acts? The story of Joseph previews the answer.

Good Men, Evil Men, and Politicians

Is God’s plan worked out by the free and responsible actions of men and women, whether good or evil? It is the question evoked by Hitler, Pol Pot, and the thug who assaulted your child. It is the question of Bishop Wilberforce and Martin Luther King Jr., who fought for the rights and dignity of those of African descent.

This is a natural question in view of the Last Judgment, which clearly holds every man,