

What God Wants From Us — Jeremiah 29:11

Sometimes the choices we have to make are between wonderful alternatives. It's time to change jobs, and you're ready to move to a new location. Two job offers come your way. They both triple your present salary. But the choice has to be made between living in Aspen and Maui. Or, your car has really high mileage and it's time to trade it in. The choice you find yourself making is between a new Mercedes and a new Lexis. And then you get a voice mail from your travel agent saying, "You're all set on your trip to London. You have first class, but you need to call back immediately to let me know whether you want a window or an aisle seat." How are you going to make all these important decisions in life?

But sometimes we must choose between painful alternatives. Should I take the job far from my family or stay near those I love with less than adequate pay? Should I have surgery that means I will never have children or risk losing my life to cancer?

Sometimes we have no choice at all. Our child is afflicted with a chronic behavior problem that has no definite diagnosis or treatment. My husband or wife is leaving the marriage and there is nothing I can do. The judge's verdict was unfair and there's no option but to suffer the consequences.

We ask ourselves, "Where is God in the midst of life's most important decisions?" "Does God even care what kind of car I drive?" "Does it matter to him that all my alternatives seem to be bad?" "Does he care about the tragedies in my life?"

As Christians we want to discover the will of God. We want to do what is right, but how can we do what is right unless we first know what is right. Knowing the will of God is the cornerstone to all of life's important decisions.

Unfortunately, we often skip the most im-

portant step to discovering God's will. We want to go right to the answer. We want to know who to marry, where to work, how to invest or what to decide.

But we must start at the beginning by answering a simple but very important question. That question is do you believe that God is good? If we get the answer to that question right, then all the rest of the process relating to discovering God's will begins to fall into place. Our answer will shape our entire approach to discovering and doing God's will in our lives.

Don't answer too quickly. Think about the huge disappointments in life. How do you reconcile the goodness of God with the death of a child, teen suicide, chronic pain, violent assaults or broken dreams? How do you reconcile a God who is supposedly good with things that are terribly bad?

It takes faith to believe that God is good when we often face evidence that God may not be as good as he's supposed to be.

Before you decide that God is not good or before you abandon God in anger or disappointment, think about the alternative. If God is not good, we have no hope. If God is not good, we are on our own. If God is not good, evil is the ultimate victor.

The cornerstone in discovering God's will is to believe that God is good and that he desires good in our lives. If we can truly believe in the goodness of God for our lives, everything else begins to fall into place. It is far easier to trust and obey a good God. It brings hope, encouragement and perseverance through chronic calamity when we are completely convinced of the benevolence of Almighty God.

One of the most amazing teachings in the Bible is that God loves us. It's not because we are so lovable, because we're not. God loves us because he's a lover at heart and he chooses

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to love us.

There are two unhealthy but common misunderstandings about the love of God. Some people refuse to believe that God loves them because they see themselves as too unlovable. Some interpret the circumstances of their lives as proof that God is an unloving enemy rather than a loving friend.

Other people take God's love for granted. They consider the love of God to be a basic human right. They interpret love as always making them happy. They think that God works for them and that God's job is to make life fun and easy.

The simple truth is that God really loves us. He loves us whether we love him or not. He loves us enough to always seek the best for us, even if that is hard and harsh. He loves us every day in every way. His love is the most amazing gift anyone could ever believe or receive.

My mother-in-law died unexpectedly this year. Her death became a time of reminiscing and storytelling. I learned some things about her that I had not previously known although I had known her all of my life.

Lillian Alles grew up in a difficult family situation. Her parents had an unhappy marriage. There was a lot of sadness and dysfunction and chronic problems with alcohol in her family. When she reflected back on the time when she became a Christian she said, "I never felt loved until I experienced the love of Jesus Christ."

She was transformed because she was loved. Just for who she was. She may not have gotten it from her parents. She may not have gotten it from her family. But she got it from God.

I John 4:9-10 says:

This is how God showed his love among us: he sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. I'm the father of four children. While

it is unimaginable to me that I would sacrifice the life of one of my children for you, let there be no doubt that if I would do that for you, I would do anything for you. It should be obvious. If God loved us enough to give his Son, God loves us enough for anything else.

I John 4:16 says, "We know and rely on the love that God has for us. God is love."

As Christians, we want to know God's will for our lives. As Christians, we assume, we believe, we are convinced, we completely trust and we rely on the love that God has for us. In every agony and in every ecstasy of life, we always begin with the premise that God loves us.

We know it's a fact. And that fact leads to the experiential feelings of another great truth about God: he wants the best for us. God is always on our side. God always seeks our good. God always understands what we are facing. God always desires the best options from which we may choose.

There are days when this is difficult for me to believe. Those are the days when I'm stressed, when it seems as if everything is going wrong, when I'm scared, when I feel alone. I can wonder if God wants the best for me.

There are days when I wonder about the problems faced by other people. I remember my friend with terminal cancer. I think about the missionary shot down and killed when her plane was mistaken for that of a drug runner. My heart breaks for the couple with infertility. What about the hard worker who can't get a good job, or the single parent who gets ripped off by an unscrupulous salesperson? Where is God when a child is abused and scarred for life? Does God care about the parents who are bankrupted emotionally and financially by their child's chronic problems? Is it really God's will when the honest politician loses the election, or when the innocent defendant is convicted and sent to prison? Where is God's best on those days in those lives? If God really wants the best for us and the worst happens, does that

mean that God doesn't care or that God can't do anything about it?

I know the usual answers because I've said them a thousand times. The answer that some good purpose will result from this that you just can't know now. Or that everything will work out later in wonderful ways you can't foresee. Someone will come to Christian faith as a result of what has happened. Or that God will use this to teach you some lesson that you would not otherwise learn.

I've said these very words. I believe them – I wouldn't have said them if I didn't believe them. Yet, they somehow ring hollow and inadequate when the pain is more than morphine can dull or when someone you love with all your heart has just died.

We need something more. We need to believe first of all, and most of all, that God wants the best for us. We admit that we don't understand how that works. We admit that our belief in God's goodness doesn't always line up rationally with what we experience. It is a matter of faith. As Christians we believe that the Bible is telling us the truth in Philippians 2:13 when it says, "It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose."

This is the same truth when we are seeking God's will for present and future decisions. When God tells us we should honor our marriage vows, be content with what we have, forgive our enemies, pray for others, give generously, avoid lawsuits against other Christians and don't get drunk – God wants the best for us. God is never playing games with us, never trying to hurt or harm us, nor is he withholding good from us. God always, always wants the best for us.

When seeking God's will on the college to attend, the person to date, the investment to make, the career to follow, the house to buy, the path to pursue – always begin with the assumption that God is on your side and direct-

ing you to his very best. "It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose."

So Assumption #1 is that God loves us. Assumption #2 is that God wants the best for us. And, Assumption #3 is that God has plans for us. In other words, God has thought through what is best for us. He doesn't just love us and want the best for us, he has figured out what our lives should be like. He has laid out the way he wants our biography to be written. He is the architect of our souls and lives.

Jeremiah 29:11 says, "I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord. Plans to prosper you and not to harm you. Plans to give you hope and a future."

This wonderful promise from God is frequently quoted and often memorized. It was originally spoken to the Hebrew people when they were a defeated and captured nation in Babylon. If you read the entire chapter of Jeremiah 29, you learn some interesting things.

The people of Israel had gone through terrible tragedy. Their nation had been conquered, Jerusalem was devastated and most of them

were forced to relocate cross-country to Babylon. They yearned to go back home. This is what they

wanted. This is what they prayed for. This is what some false prophets predicted was soon going to happen.

God's plan was different. He planned to keep them in Babylon for seventy years, which was more than the life expectancy of most of them. God told them to settle down, build houses, pay taxes and pray for the prosperity of Babylon as long as they lived there. God had it all figured out. He planned to leave them where they were, not where they wanted to go.

God told them: "I know the plans I have for you . . . plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

God is never playing games with us, never trying to hurt or harm us, nor is he withholding good from us.

God has plans for us as well. He has a schedule that reaches into the future. He has a design to bring together the parts and pieces of our jobs, our homes, our relationships and our dreams. God's plans are good plans because he loves us, because he's a good God, because he wants the best for us. His plans are never to harm us, but always to do us good. His plans for our future are filled with hope.

In the future we will study more specifically how to discover the will of God. We will talk about exactly what God does and does not want us to do. We will discuss the difference between specific direction from God and wisdom from God to make right choices. We will consider how to make decisions on important issues.

But all of this is built on what we first believe about God. If we're not convinced about his invariable goodness, we will never trust his direction. If we truly believe that God is good and that God wants us to know and do his will, we have already taken the first and most important step to knowing and doing the will of God.

Whatever the decisions are that you are now facing, do you believe that God is good? Do you believe that God loves you? Do you believe that God wants the best for you? Do you truly believe that God has plans for you, plans to give you hope and a future?

If all your answers are yes, you are ready to know and to do the will of God in your life.

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