

When All Else Fails, What About Plan B

In 1985, Michael J. Fox starred in a movie called *Back to the Future*. The plot centered on the fantasy of time travel. He and his scientist friend traveled back in time aboard their DeLorean sports car to the time when the lead character's parents were teenagers. The story line assumed that if someone could travel 30 years back in time and change the past that the future would be changed as well.

Of course, that was fantasy, make-believe. Yet, it's a fantasy that many of us would like to turn into reality. Imagine what it would be like to step back in time and be able to forever alter the worst decisions you ever made.

What if the convicted murderer could go back in time and unpull the trigger? What if the dropout would return to school or the failed marriage would never have taken place or the crippling accident would be avoided or the addictive drugs would never be taken? Or, what if the family money that was invested in portable typewriters could instead go into Microsoft stock? If only the missed opportunity could be seized.

If you could travel back in time and change just one thing about your life, what would it be? It can be a sad feeling to wish for a life that could have been but never will be.

What if you are a Christian and you missed God's best for your life? God had a plan for you to be happily married, to have a meaningful job, to be a positive influence in the lives of others. God wanted you to live a good and a righteous life. You had your chance and missed God's best. There is no going back and you wonder if there is any hope for Plan B or if you must go to your grave with regrets because of what might have been.

In past studies we have learned about the sovereign will of God, the revealed will of God and the personal will of God. We learned that most of what we need to know is already in the Bible and that God invites us to pray for wisdom to apply his revealed will to our specific situations. We learned, too, that God loves us, God wants the best for us and God has a plan for our lives.

What do we do if we defied God, ignored his will, did our own thing and now it's too late for God's Plan A? What if we have married the wrong

person or followed the wrong career? What if we bought the wrong house or joined the wrong church? What if we made other bad decisions that have turned life in the wrong direction?

Before tackling these very important questions we need to make sure that we do not confuse the difficulties of life with missing the will of God. Too many people assume that life was meant to be fun and easy. When life gets hard we feel cheated and look for someone to blame. Some blame God; some blame others; some blame themselves.

The truth is that life is hard for most people. Everyone has problems and pains. Everyone has disappointments and difficulties.

In some cases, following the will of God is the harder path to take. The truth is that if we had done what God wanted it might have been a far more difficult life than we currently have.

The will of God is more about how we live than about the situations we are in. Don't worry that you may have married the wrong person. The question is how you behave as a Christian married to the person you married? Don't worry whether you have chosen the wrong career. How do you work for Jesus in the job you have? Don't worry that you don't have more money. Do you handle the money you do have in a way that pleases God?

God says little or nothing about who we marry, what we do for a living or where we live, but God says a great deal about how husbands and wives treat each

other, the way we work on the job and how we represent Jesus wherever our address may be.

No matter how great our mistakes and regrets are about yesterday there is nothing we can do to change the past. The call of God is to live Christianly today and tomorrow. One of the greatest opportunities to live for God is seen in how we deal with what we have. Even if your present situation is one that never should have been, what is God's will for honoring him now?

In an extreme example, imagine a murderer on death row who is now a Christian. Yesterday cannot be changed, but that Christian inmate can and should live from today to execution day according to God's will for what is left of his life.

Some people think they have missed the will

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of God and they haven't. A common mistake is to compare to other people rather than truly knowing God's will. Because a sister is married, a brother makes more money or a neighbor has a higher career rating does not mean that is what you should have. It is altogether possible that you are exactly where God wants you and that he is calling on you to live for him in ways that would not be possible if you had a different spouse, different children, a different job or some other circumstance.

With all of that as background, let's focus now on those who have missed God's will for their lives and know it. This is the person who deliberately ignored or defied God's revealed will. As a Christian, he knew he was not supposed to marry a non-Christian, but he married her anyway. She wanted the job so badly that she lied on her resume and got the job God never wanted her to have. They entered a lawsuit against another Christian that God didn't want in a secular court. Someone has harbored a bad attitude against an enemy when God said to forgive. He became rich by taking unfair advantage of the poor: charging high interest rates, underpaying employees, taking greedy advantage of the law in business. Another has damaged health and relationships with alcohol or drugs. He or she has harbored and nurtured a bad attitude and critical spirit that has repeatedly hurt innocent people.

To keep this practical, let's get personal. Is there a specific situation in your life where you have missed the will of God? Keep that area in mind as we consider three steps toward regaining the will of God in our lives.

First on that list is repentance. Repentance is being genuinely sorry, admitting we were wrong and committing to turn around and go in a different direction. Repentance is a change of mind, attitude and actions.

St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians and told them about the tremendous and powerful transforming value of repentance. He said in II Corinthians 7:10-11:

Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done.

We live in a culture that promotes a victim mentality that assumes someone else is responsible. Repentance is taking responsibility for our actions

rather than blaming others. It is much more than being sorry when things turned out poorly. It is saying it was our fault.

Genuine repentance can bring powerful transformation. In past generations the evidence of repentance was lengthy weeping before God. While I don't think it is necessary to cry for three months, those who genuinely repent before God are more likely to lie on the floor and pray with tears than they are to pray a quick prayer to get it over with.

In the United States there are often two parts to a capital criminal trial. The first part is to determine guilt and the second part is to decide the sentence. Juries often look for evidence of remorse when making the sentencing decision. If juries can tell if someone is truly sorry and repents, so can God and so can we.

Jesus told one of his most famous stories in Luke 15:

There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, "Father, give me my share of the estate." So he divided his property between them.

Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

When he came to his senses, he said, "How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.'" So he got up and went to his father.

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

The son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

But the father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast

and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.” So they began to celebrate.

Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. “Your brother has come,” he replied, “and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.”

The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, “Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!”

“My Son,” the father said, “you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”

Jesus’ famous parable of the Prodigal Son is a story about deliberately disregarding the father’s will and then coming to repentance. He came to his senses. He saw things differently. He admitted he was wrong. He was humble. He blamed no one else. He made no demands.

When we have missed God’s best for our lives, we should repent. We should come to our senses and admit that what we have done is wrong. We should be humble and genuinely sorry. We should take responsibility and ask for forgiveness. Decide to go in a new and better direction. And, tell God!

Is repentance hard? Sometimes it can be indescribably hard. Yet, repentance may be the key to unlock the prison door of past sins and enter the freedom of a whole new life with God. Repentance can be revolutionary and good.

Related to repentance is repair. When we have done damage to ourselves and to others we can do our best to fix what we have broken. Sometimes it is as simple as saying, “I’m sorry.” Go to the person who was injured and apologize and ask for forgiveness. The other person may be a parent, former

boss, neighbor, ex-husband or wife, teacher, patient or friend.

If the other person won’t talk to you, send a letter. If a letter won’t work, go through a mutual acquaintance. If the other person is dead, consider going to the cemetery and standing by the grave to say, “I’m sorry. She won’t hear you, but it is symbolically the best that you can do.

Sometimes the repair is restitution - paying back what was taken. Zacchaeus was a first century tax collector who cheated and stole from taxpayers. Then he met Jesus Christ and had a total change of direction. He repented of what he had done wrong and promised to make things right. Luke 19:8 says that “Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, ‘Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.’”

The point here is not that we have to repay 400% of what we have stolen but that we do whatever is necessary to repair the damage that we have done.

What comes to mind for you? Is there anyone you need to go to and make things right? An apology? A repayment? How about repairing someone’s damaged reputation?

Some common sense is needed here. Don’t fix what isn’t broken. You may have harbored evil thoughts concerning someone but that person doesn’t even know it. It’s probably not a good idea to call and say to your best friend, “I’ve always thought you were a first class loser and I never have

understood why I ever liked you in the first place.”

Don’t do something that will make matters worse. If you were unfaithful

to your wife 50 years ago it’s probably not a good idea to confess your sin on your Golden Wedding Anniversary or on a deathbed. Some attempted repairs do more damage than good.

Don’t do what’s easiest for you. Do what’s best for others. Do everything you can to make things right and make things better for anyone whom you have harmed.

Some things can’t be fixed or changed. If you have married someone you never should have married, stay with that marriage and do your best to make it good. If you have run up debts that you never should have entered into, you are obligated

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to pay that money back. If you have murdered someone, you may apologize to the family but you can't bring the victim back.

The principle is straightforward. If we have missed God's best for our lives, we should repent of what we have done wrong and try our best to make it right. When in doubt about what to do, remember the promise of James 1:5, "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him."

After repentance and repair comes renewal. It is time to move on to God's best for the future. Some call it Plan B. That's fine in the sense that it would have been better to do what God wanted in the first place. But, never think that God's present will for our lives is second rate. God has a perfect and powerful will for right now and for the future.

If God wanted you to be a missionary and you chose to be a manager, be God's missionary where you now manage. If God wanted you to remain single but you went ahead and married, build the best Christian marriage you can with your husband or wife. If God wanted you to be honest and you decided to become a thief, even though you may spend the next ten years in jail, live for Jesus Christ behind prison bars.

The most important issue for the present and the future is not what happened in the past but how we do the will of God with what we now have.

Jonah was the Old Testament prophet after whom one of the books of the Bible is named. Unfortunately, he is most famous for an unexpected ride inside a fish. But the story before and after the fish is really more important. God told Jonah to go to Nineveh to deliver his message to a sinful people. Jonah didn't like the people of Nineveh so he headed in the wrong direction – he deliberately disobeyed the will of God. God intervened, gave him a fish ride and had him vomited up in the right direction. God got Jonah to Nineveh. It was Plan B, but it accomplished exactly what Plan A originally intended.

The nation of Israel was repeatedly told to avoid idolatry and disloyalty to God, and yet they worshipped idols and were repeatedly disloyal until God allowed the armies of Babylon to sweep across their country, destroy their cities and take them into cap-

tivity. Plan A was lost; but they pleaded with God for Plan B. They thought that meant going back to Jerusalem and to their homeland. Instead this is what God told them in Jeremiah 29:10-14:

"When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. For 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. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile."

The Prodigal Son was welcomed home by a father who loved him no matter where he had gone and no matter what he had done. The father in Jesus' story was just like God, anxious to make the very best for the child whom he loved.

Hear this loud and clear: God loves us and wants the best for us. If he needs to kidnap us and scare us with a fish to get us where we need to be – God will do that. If he needs to carry us away to some foreign land to bless us there – God will do that. If he needs to welcome us home from a life of total disaster – that is what God will do.

We can totally trust God. If we mess up and miss Plan A, we can repent and repair and be renewed. We serve a God of hope. We belong to a God of second chances. We are followers of Jesus Christ who came to seek and save those who are lost.

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