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Why Am I So Miserable If This is the Lord's Will?

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Why Am I So
MISERABLE?
If This is the Lord's Will

Anne Reynolds

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Why Am I So Miserable If This is the Lord's Will

by Anne Reynolds

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Introduction

*H*ave you ever found yourself between a rock and a hard place? That is where I found myself not so long ago. It was 2002. Though that is now years ago, the experience I had then was so intense that I have not forgotten any of it; nor do I want to forget it.

The rock and hard place to which I refer is this: not being able to give up my faith on the one hand, and not being able to go on with it either. The crisis of faith came about when I started to feel that due to the circumstances I was in that being a Christian was pointless, joyless, and useless. I couldn't see how what I was doing was accomplishing anything. If you have ever felt that everything was futile, that there was no hope, and there was no joy and no blessing in your life, that is exactly how I felt. Every day was a struggle; tasks were accomplished merely through force of will, which was exhausting. So on top of being depressed and miserable, I became physically worn out. If this does not bring you to the end of your rope, I don't know what else will.

Complicating the whole situation is the spiritual struggle that went on. What I was experiencing at that time was not matching with the God I had experienced in the past. Despite how miserable I was, I knew that God was real and that my salvation was real. I had even experienced His comfort, help and strength in the past. There was no way I could turn my back on God or reject Christ, who I know paid the sacrifice for my sins.

This is what brought me to the “between a rock and a hard place.” I could not tolerate my misery; neither could I possibly fathom the point to it. I could not see why God was allowing the pain I was in, or what could be the point of it. But I did know God and had experienced His love, so I couldn’t abandon my faith either.

By God’s grace I did find a solution to this dilemma. I thank the Lord for His patience with me! For though I could not feel His presence or see Him working in my life at the time of the trial I was in, He kept on working on me and in me. It is by His grace alone that I came through this trial; all that I now understand is only possible by His Spirit. But that is the end of the story; the questions yet to be answered are: How do you handle misery or suffering? How can this be part of God’s will? What is God’s will? How does the answer to these questions affect how we live the Christian life and our relationship with God and others?

“Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ”

–Philippians 1:6

“...this isn’t the life I signed up for! I specifically remember signing up for great parents, a great marriage, and great kids... I signed up for lifelong friendships, thin thighs, and vibrant health. Instead, I find myself in the middle of a life I DIDN’T sign up for.”¹

Chapter 1

Being in the Will of God and Miserable?

*T*he will of God makes you miserable? How does that happen? How can the will of God result in misery? The two being in the same sentence just doesn't seem right or even possible. But whether it should be possible or not, I have experienced it. I can hear someone say: "Wait just a minute—are you sure that you are or were in the will of God?" and "You could only be miserable if you were not in the will of God."

Yet I am convinced that I was in the will of God and found myself in the most miserable state that I have ever been in. This being the case, it is important to explain what I considered the will of God for me was at that time, and how I came to that conclusion. The title of this book asks a question that assumes that I knew what the will of God was for my life. If I did not know, then I couldn't blame my misery on being in God's will. The question also makes a second assumption: that being in God's will should not result in misery.

That being said, how is the will of God determined, and how did I determine that I was in it? Many books have been written that discuss determining the will of God; what I propose to share here is a synopsis of what I believe the will of God is, and how I came to determine being in it.

What is the will of God? I base my definition on the Word of God. His will is expressed not only in direct statements of “The will of the Lord is...” but also in the commands He has given us. Jesus said that the greatest of the commandments was to love God and to love others, which was the sum of all the commandments (Matthew 22:37-40). Passages in which the will of God is mentioned describe both what He accomplishes and what He desires for us to do.

God’s will is given in His Word as:

1. His determination, in which He either causes or prevents something from happening (what He does to fulfill His will); and
2. His desire, to see His children living according to His Word

Five examples of the Lord’s will:

1. Our election: “Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures.” (James 1:18);
2. Our life and plans: “Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.’”(James 4:15);
3. His control over circumstances: “I will return again to you, God willing” (Acts 18:21b);
4. Our resurrection and everlasting life: “And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:40);
5. Our predestination and adoption: “having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will” (Ephesians 1:5).

The Lord’s will is accomplished when we:

1. Give thanks in everything (1 Thessalonians 5:18);
2. Abstain from sexual immorality (1 Thessalonians 4:3);
3. Do not live according to the lusts of the flesh (1 Peter 4:2);
4. Do good: “For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men” (1 Peter 2:15); and
5. Do not love the world (1 John 2:15-17).

God gave us His Word so that we would have guidelines for determining His will. Even if we cannot find chapter and verse stating specifically where we should live, or what career we should pursue, there are principles that we can follow in Scripture. Examples of these principles are:

1. I Corinthians 10:31 “...do all to the glory of God;”
2. “the steps of a man are established by the Lord” (Psalm 37:23, NASB) (God makes the way possible; He opens and closes doors of opportunity);
3. To not be unequally yoked (2 Corinthians 6:14);
4. The use of spiritual gifts, as detailed in 1 Corinthians 12;
5. To marry or remain single? The Apostle Paul gives guidelines for singles in 1 Corinthians 7; and
6. How to select a future husband or wife? Qualities, such as love and submission, to be looked for are given in Ephesians. 6: 22-31 and Colossians. 3:18-19.

But what if we cannot find a principle that addresses the question or situation specifically? How do we know when we are making the right

decision? How do we know we are in the right job or place, or marrying the right person? What if we have used all the standards of Scripture (not being unequally yoked and so forth) and still are not sure?

In situations like those, Scripture does guide us as well, with admonition to pray always (1 Thessalonians 5:17) and to wait on the Lord (Psalm 27:14). A good principle to keep in mind is that if unsure, wait until the Lord makes the way clear. We do not serve a God who plays some sort of guessing game with us. Search the Scriptures regarding whatever situation for any principles or precepts that can be applied and that we may be unaware of. When dealing with situations that are not directly addressed in Scripture, (i.e. what house to purchase) indirect principles such as being wise and prudent (Proverbs) apply. God also will reveal His will by His control over circumstances. This has often been referred to as opened and closed doors.

It is important, however, not to read the Lord's will into every event that happens. An example of this happened to me when going to a job interview. I was seated next to a missionary on the plane who lived near my potential place of employment. She offered to help me find a place to live. It would be easy to think, "This job must be God's will!" That would only be the case if I actually get the job as a result of the interview—I didn't!

Determining the Lord's will, when it is not something expressly stated in Scripture, is something we cannot not be dogmatic about. If we have not married yet; if we are married but have no children; or if there seems to be a lack of God's blessing in our life, people tend to judge where only God is qualified to make the judgment. "You're not married? What's wrong with you? Did you miss an opportunity, have you missed God's plan for your life?" I have been asked these questions by well-meaning people. But any such question implies that God is impotent in some way and is dependent on us to figure out what His will is before it can be accomplished. God is omnipotent. "I am Almighty God" (Genesis 17:1). If there are any limits to God's power, they are only what God Himself has placed there. If God wants

us to do something, He makes it clear in His Word what He expects us to do. We also have the indwelling Holy Spirit that convicts of sin and alerts us to error. If we are not disobeying the Word of God or violating our conscience, then we have not missed the will of God, regardless of our circumstances.

God is always consistent with His Word. Experience or feelings can lead us astray. Both experience and emotion cannot be relied upon because our experience can only be viewed from a fallible, limited human perspective; emotions are not rational and should never be relied upon for a decision. The only truly consistent and reliable guidance comes from God and His Word.

In addition to praying and waiting on the Lord, one of the guidelines that we can use in determining God's will is found in both the Old and New Testaments. Proverbs 20:18 states: "Plans are established by counsel." Seeking Godly counsel and advice from other believers is to decide things in a God-honoring way. 2 Corinthians 13:1 (NASB) states: "Every fact is to be confirmed by the testimony of two or three witnesses." This quote was referring to the instruction given in Deuteronomy 19:15. I realize that the context in Deuteronomy is dealing with a legal matter; but whether it is a legal matter or not, this principle can be seen in action when other believers confirm a course of action or vocation in our lives. In regard to both my occupation and my vocation (spiritual gift) I have had at least two witnesses tell me (unprompted) that I was doing or pursuing what they believed I was gifted in and should be doing.

God also reveals His will to us through His Spirit. Jeremiah tried to keep silent when the Lord had given him a message to speak but couldn't. "Then I said, 'I will not make mention of Him, nor speak anymore His name.' But His word was in my heart like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I was weary of holding it back, and I could not" (Jeremiah 20:9). If God wants us to do something, He will make it clear to us, and He will enable us to do it. (We will be miserable if we don't do it). This is evidenced by the fact that God is the truth (John 14:6), it is Satan that is the liar and deceiver (John 8:44;

Revelation 12:9), and from the many examples of when God wanted someone to do something, He told them. We also know that “He who has begun a good work in you will complete it” (Philippians 1:6).

Based on what Scripture reveals about seeking Godly counsel, having a matter confirmed by two witnesses, and the providence of God in opening and closing doors, I believed that I was in the will of God. I was also seeking to live in obedience to His Word. I knew that I could not be where I was had God not opened the way; I also had more than one person tell me that I ought to be doing what I should be doing. This addresses the first issue, now what of the second?

The second issue or question to be answered is, doesn't being in the will of God mean being blessed? How can suffering (physically or emotionally) be part of His will? This is the crux of the problem that I was facing.

My dilemma was due in part to the fact that as a Christian I attended church, sang in the choir, taught Sunday School, helped with church suppers, and decorated bulletin boards; perhaps involved more than most, not as much as others. I had what I thought was a good relationship with God. I had daily devotions; Bible study also was a regular part of my life. When I prayed, I didn't just list my requests; I shared my heart with God.

Although I struggled with sin and the flesh, I always repented and sought to do God's will. By the time I was in my 30s, I thought I understood what I needed to understand in order to become spiritually mature. Well, I would not be writing all this if I did not have a great deal yet to learn; in fact, I discovered that my whole approach to living the Christian life was wrong. This can be unsettling to say the least. When you have been living your life a certain way for 20 odd years thinking it was the right way when it was not, it is both discouraging and devastating. It isn't just a matter of pride that made me reluctant to accept this kind of error; it was that so much of what I had done in the past had been done for the wrong reasons, and therefore a good

deal of what I thought had value amounted to nothing. My thinking was that a life lived fairly well was not. I was faced with a choice: either I throw in the towel and forget the whole business, or stop doing what is wrong, and start doing what is right (repent). But I am getting ahead of myself.

First, just where did I go wrong? I had been taught to do good, and God will bless you. Do evil and you will not be blessed, but cursed (Deuteronomy 7:9-10). Since I wanted to honor God and be blessed, I sought to do the right things. Even though I had been careful to follow all the rules, I found myself in a miserable state, which I blamed on circumstances. I realized at the time that my circumstances were not the worst that I could have experienced. But for me what it amounted to was: no ministry, no church, no friends, no husband, and a different culture. Part of the reason for this was that I had moved from one state to another and was separated from family and friends. But included in this was that the church I was moving away from was splitting apart. There had been problems there which myself, my family and others had approached Biblically; unfortunately, the person in sin did not repent. Not only that, but there were others in the church who chose to believe the offender, rather than believing those offended, whom they had known for decades. By God's grace, I was able to forgive the offender, as well as those who did not support us. I prayed for all of them. But in moving away, it was with the knowledge that the church I once knew no longer existed. Losing that church was like losing a home. I had had a teaching ministry there, and I was very burdened for the women who still remained there. In losing that church, my hopes for what it could become were lost as well. In all, with the combination of grief over loss of my home church, I wasn't finding a church in my new location, and, therefore, had trouble finding friends outside of work.

I could not understand. I was sure I was where I was supposed to be, doing what I was supposed to be doing. I was sure the Lord wouldn't have led me where it didn't include a new ministry in a local church, among other things. In fact, all of the doors where I had been had closed one by one, and I

interpreted that to mean that the Lord wanted me to get involved in ministry elsewhere. I would not have made the move if I had not prayed over and given the decision a great deal of consideration. I went, filled with peace and contentment, as well as excitement with what the Lord was going to do.

Surprise! What I thought I would find there wasn't there. Initially, I was patient. I thought, "Well it is just going to take time"—only the things I expected (friends, a church family) never materialized. The churches I found were either too liberal in their theology or too legalistic for me to join in good conscience. Though I found places to attend, a teaching ministry never developed. I was puzzled to say the least. In the first couple of months, it was simply discouraging; and it did not take long before I was depressed. I am not talking about the blues here. I was in a deep, dark pit emotionally. I felt betrayed. I cannot remember ever being so low in my whole life. How could I be in so much pain when I had always tried to do the right thing? Was God punishing me? Had I done something wrong?

No matter how much I studied, analyzed, and prayed about it, I couldn't figure it out. As far as I could tell, I hadn't done anything wrong; if I hadn't done anything wrong, why was I in the situation I was in? I believed, and do believe now, that God is in control, and that if He wanted something to change, that He would do it. But He didn't change anything. He did not change my circumstances or remove me from them in some way.

For me, the solution that seemed the most sensible and logical was for my circumstances to change from difficult and painful to easy and enjoyable. Didn't blessing mean good circumstances? If I was supposed to be blessed for doing the right things, then why didn't God provide them?

I thought perhaps it was just a matter of timing. God was going to bless me, but just not yet. It wasn't the right time. So I waited. After five months, I had reached the end of my rope. I reached a crisis point of faith. I was in so much emotional pain that I could hardly see straight; I thought that if this

is what is meant by the blessings found in Christ, who wants it? As much as I couldn't see the point in continuing on, I couldn't give up my faith, for I had experienced God; I had come to know His love, comfort and grace throughout my Christian walk. I was stuck between a rock and hard place. What usual comforts I found through reading, eating or watching TV were of no use altogether.

The solution came only by God's grace. John Piper, in his book *Future Grace*, notes that:

"Since sin always brings misery, and misery is always experienced by sinners, therefore all of God's acts of grace are also acts of mercy, and all of his acts of mercy are also acts of grace. Every act of grace shown to a person because he is a sinner is also an act of mercy because his sin brings misery." ²

It was totally by God's grace and mercy to me a sinner that it was revealed to me the cause of my misery (sin) and its remedy (repentance). My mother gave me *Shattered Dreams* by Larry Crabb to read. I was reluctant to read it. I was familiar with his writings and wasn't in the mood for further analysis. But when I reached the end of my rope, I thought, why not? It couldn't hurt anything. I was surprised when I started reading his book; it wasn't so much psychological in nature as it was spiritual. I won't go into detail about the book, but I recommend it. Out of everything he wrote in that book, one thing in particular stuck in my brain: Christ is better. God wouldn't let me forget it. I knew that it was true; I just did not know how to believe it. How could Jesus be better than what I wanted? As I write that sentence now, the question seems ridiculous. Christ is so much better there is no comparison. But at the time, I was so miserable I could not see it. I thought I knew Christ, that I loved Him. How was what I had with Him better, when the lack of what

I thought I needed and wanted was causing so much pain? Even if I could not understand it, I knew it was true. For the first time, I prayed correctly: I confessed my lack of faith, and prayed that He would increase it.

It is important to note here that God did not answer that prayer right away. I prayed for two weeks before God answered my prayer. This I want to make clear: the faith with which I believed was totally God's gift. I did not come to understand by any mental ability. Neither was it due to an emotional experience. I did not feel anything until God enabled me to believe. It was the understanding and belief that I was given that resulted in an emotional response. I was not able to receive this gift until I had come to an end of myself, until I had completely and utterly laid myself at His feet. This I know: you cannot be filled with the presence of God if you are full of yourself.

God's answer is very hard to describe. He did not speak to me in so many words. It was a combination of a sudden understanding and subsequent belief with an overwhelming sense of His presence. I sat there stunned for some time afterward. It was as if God was saying to me, "You do not think Christ is better? What do you think now?" Not that my situation was anything like Job's, but like Job I wanted to say: "Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer You? I lay my hand over my mouth" (Job 40:4).

Although I did develop some friendships over the next two years, my circumstances did not change. But by God's grace, I did! Praise God. Since that time, knowing Him has been the priority in my life. My passion is to die to self, to walk in the Spirit. It is not to live for what I want, but for what He wants.

God enabled me to believe, and showed me how much Christ is better. He also showed me that circumstances do not make us miserable; we make ourselves miserable when we don't seek God or consider God above everything else. This answers the question that is the title of the book. We can be in God's will, in the sense that we are where He wants us to be, doing what we should be doing, and can be miserable at the same time if we are not finding

in Him what we need. Being in God's will was not what was making me miserable; it was looking for satisfaction and blessing in my circumstances, rather than in my relationship with God. Through this experience, I realized what my sin was: instead of focusing on the Giver (God) I was focusing on the gift (blessings). Instead of serving God, I was serving the flesh or my emotions. I considered pain my enemy, not sin (which separates me from God). Knowing God, knowing Jesus is the blessing, not what He gives; knowing Him is infinitely better than any immediate gratification that this world provides or that our flesh craves.

How I wish that what one comes to understand will be automatically applied and lived! As long as I live, or any of us live, there will always be the struggle with the flesh. What comes automatically is what comes naturally: walking according to the flesh. As we deal with each sin, each failing, and strive to live and walk in the Spirit, we will develop godly habits; there will be more successes in Christ than failures. Walking in the Spirit is only possible by the Spirit. It requires submission, dependence, repentance, grace, faith, trust, and obedience.

One last comment: while it is very true that sin is to be despised, I have learned that what is worse than sinning is not being willing to admit to it:

"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us."
—1 John 1:8-10

It is much easier to think we are alright, that although we're "not perfect" there isn't really any need for revival in our life; after all, we have a relationship with God, and are actively serving Him. We repented at salvation; we have

been following the “rules” and living a life of good repute. What is there to repent of? Plenty!

While it is true that we are washed by the blood of the Lamb, we are still sinners saved by grace; the price for our sin has been paid, but the flesh was not removed. The flesh is ever present with us and we cannot ever forget that. We can never think that we are okay, but must be ever diligent, on guard against the flesh. As we mature in Christ, there will be an ever-increasing awareness of our sinfulness and a desire to be holy as He is holy (1 Peter 1:13-16). “But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption—that, as it is written, ‘*He who glories, let him glory in the LORD.*’” (1 Corinthians 1:30-31)

*“Apart from thee I quickly die,
bereft of thee I starve,
far from thee I thirst and droop;
but thou art all I need.
Let me continually grasp the promise,
I will never leave thee nor forsake thee.” 3*

The crisis point in my spiritual journey several years ago was a turning point for me. Once I realized that I was trying to work out my own sanctification according to fleshly strategies and strength, and not by submission to the Spirit of God, I wanted to begin anew. I sought to understand through God’s Word how sanctification is accomplished, and what the struggle with the flesh was all about. This being said, just how are we sanctified?

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

– Ephesians 2:10

“The ultimate goal of the church is not evangelism, important and indispensable as that ministry is. The ultimate goal is stated by Paul when he wrote: ‘We proclaim him, teaching everyone with all wisdom, *so that we may present everyone perfect [mature] in Christ*’”

– Colossians 1:28⁴

Chapter 2

Sanctification

Sanctification is simply the process in the Christian life by which we are made holy, conformed to the image of Christ. “But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.” (2 Corinthians 3:18)

How does sanctification take place? (What is the process?) Do we accomplish our own sanctification? Do we play any part in it? Given below is an example of how the sanctification process is seen in many believers' lives, and previously in my own:

Salvation → Thankful for free gift → Strive to obtain more gifts and blessings

Living for what God gives you;
believing life is all about you.

If our Christian walk is based on this formula, we do only what we think is required for more gifts or blessings and are puzzled when we do what we think is required and then don't receive them. This presents us with a choice: to get the gifts we