

LET IT GO!

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In a recent series of devotionals, Bob Gass addressed six “hindrances to answered prayer.” They were:

- Prayerlessness
- Lack of confidence
- Sin
- Praying outside of God’s will
- Wrong motives
- Lack of faith

Today, I want to focus some attention on the fourth reason offered: Praying outside of God’s will. If I should wander towards ranting, I ask you in advance to please forgive me, for this is a solemnly serious subject to me.

If I’m to avoid praying “outside of God’s will,” then I must ask, “What *is* God’s will?”

What Do You Want?

We may be inclined at times to think that if we want something strongly enough, we *should* have it and God will be disposed to grant it. If it seems important to us, or might be deemed a “critical need,” or a “really good thing,” then it also seems that God *should* give it to us.

At such times, we will likely find ourselves trying to “sell” the idea to God in prayer. Mustering all our persuasiveness, we may begin by listing the reasons that the thing we want is good or needful or could be helpful to others. We will add to that how it lines up with His Word, at least in some essential feature, or how a particular phrase or verse can be made to encompass what we want. We may suggest that we have seen others enjoying it who are no more spiritual than we, or that it did not prove harmful in the life of someone we know or have heard of. Or we may point to an outcome or by-product of it that is good, as evidence that it is the right thing for us to have.

Eventually, in the course of such argument, we will lose any objectivity we may once have possessed, having at least persuaded *ourselves* that this thing we want is “right for us.” And, in the case where it was clearly *not* right for someone else, we will propose that *we* are different at heart, or in circumstance, or in motive.

Though we would seldom suggest outright that we are deserving, since that smacks of a most un-Christian pride, without using the word (“deserve”) we may actually suggest the same, by enumerating the times we have done without in the past, or were passed by, or suffered some loss or other indignity. When we want a thing badly enough, we will not hesitate to play the “victim card” with God, appealing to His well-known mercy and kindness to the down-trodden.

But for all of our effort and connivance, when we want a thing badly enough, is it therefore necessarily God’s will?

What Do You Read?

God has given us His Word and preserved it for thousands of years with uniquely remarkable precision, though it has been translated into hundreds of languages and dialects. Although colored by the cultures of its more than three dozen authors, it remains thematically united and universally relevant, across thousands of other cultures and eras.

It is common to relate God's will to His Word: "The Bible expresses God's will for our world and our lives." This is true in general and as an ideal. But in the specific, it is not so simple.

We may say, "What God has done for others, He can do for me," and that is true. But to conclude that "what God has done for others He *will* surely do for me," is a logical misconstruction. If this were true, then God would be little more than a machine, cranking out repetitive actions impartially and impersonally. For these facts separate you from those "others": you *are not* the same person, sharing neither the same background, nor the same present, nor the same future; neither are your circumstances identical to theirs, nor your environment.

God does not stamp out cookie-cutter Christians. Each one is a unique masterpiece! Neither are His answers to prayer made on an assembly line to identical specifications.

What God has done for others should *inspire* us and *encourage* us, but it does not guarantee us anything. Unless the promise is pointedly universal (for "whosoever"), to try to wring a guarantee from the words of Scripture is tantamount to twisting God's Word to your own ends.

What Do You Hear?

Much is made today of the "gift of prophecy," both inside and outside of the Church. Prophetic words are taken seriously by millions as direction for prayer and guidance for ministry and life decisions, bearing equivalent weight to (and often greater apparent "relevancy" than) Bible text.

The fact that Biblical prophecy is subject to collective evaluation and judgment of its appropriateness, let alone its accuracy, according to Paul's letter to the church in Corinth, is frequently ignored, and often smugly or angrily contested.

It is the "sacred cow" of charismatic Christendom. "Do not touch God's anointed," they cry.

As a result, self-made prophets abound, as "wanna-bes," imitating the pacing and manner of their current Christian heroes, profess their thoughts to be better informed, more anointed, and therefore more authoritative than others'. In a vain effort to shore up their hollow imaginations, they tend to intone loudly and feverishly in 17th century English, punctuating their speech frequently with the various names of the Lord, and appending a stern warning for those who might ignore their words as less than divine.

In the midst of this frenzy of gloss and posturing, the true words of God are often lost, because He will not fight for His right to be heard. He simply speaks, and as Jesus said, "He who belongs to God hears what God says," or, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."

What Do You See?

Contemporary Western culture has passed through (though not entirely) religious superstition and intellectual rationalization to a post-Christian mentality that hungers again for the experiences of primitive faith.

Many, today, are moving away from what they perceive as stodgy and cerebral Christianity in search of a faith they can see and feel. What the 1960's were to social politics, the 2000's are to spiritual religions.

Only convinced that God is real by falling feathers and gold dust and supernatural peaks of emotion, they pursue a self-absorbed, experience-oriented, subjective religion, often of their own construction. Take it from a child of the 60's, who once followed a self-absorbed, experience-oriented, subjective path toward enlightenment — it's shallow and too soon faded; a dead-end of emptiness and regret, if you ever awaken from it!

Real faith will certainly touch your emotions and motivate you. You should *feel* the presence of God from time to time. But when your faith requires the rush to “stay on track,” you've already left the path, or never reached it.

Don't seek the gifts; seek the Giver. Seek His face, before you seek His hand. Make your spiritual life a relationship, instead of a business deal.

Finding the Will of God

With those questions as our background, I want to offer two examples from the Bible of finding the will of God. And I say “finding” intentionally, because the will of God cannot be known *before* it is found.

All of us would prefer to know it first, but if we *insist* on that we actually prevent its discovery. Jesus said, “If anyone chooses *to do* God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God (expresses God's will) or whether I speak on my own.” We must step out in faith to *do* the will of God before we can *know* it. Knowledge of God follows faith, never precedes it.

St. Augustine is quoted to have said, “Do not try to understand in order to believe. Instead, believe so that you may understand.”

Tale of Three Men

Daniel's book (chapter three) tells a story about his boyhood friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, during their captivity in Babylon. His friends, better known by their Chaldean names — Shadrach, Meshach, Abed-Nego — were appointed as administrators over the province of Babylon (something like county supervisors).

It was during their tenure that the king, Nebuchadnezzar, had a golden statue erected in his likeness that stood ninety feet high. The king then issued an order to all the officials in his kingdom to assemble for the dedication of his statue. They arrived from all over the nation for the celebration.

When the time came for the ceremony to begin, the Master of Ceremonies announced the protocol: When the national orchestra begins to play the anthem, every leader must bow with their face to the ground in homage to the king. This protocol was strengthened with a firm warning: Whoever — re-

ardless of rank — does not bow down before the statue will be cast down into a blazing furnace of fire.

The music began and as one the great crowd bowed on their knees before the image of King Nebuchadnezzar, with a few notable exceptions. Some of his advisors approached the king to report that “certain Jews, whom you have appointed to administrate the affairs of the province of Babylon” refused to bow before the statue, because they only give their worship to God, not men.

Nebuchadnezzar was embarrassed and outraged. “Is it true?!” he asked the men. “Perhaps you didn’t get the memo. I will give you another chance to show your allegiance. But if you refuse to bow to my statue the next time the orchestra plays, there will be no excuses: you will be pitched into the blazing furnace. And don’t give me this God-business — what God can rescue you from my power?”

So far this sounds like the stuff action/adventure movies are made of. But here our story takes a sharp departure from the norm.

With one voice, the three men address the king’s warning: “Your threat means nothing to us. If you throw us in the fire, the God we serve *can* rescue us from your roaring furnace and anything else you might cook up, O king. But even if he doesn’t, it wouldn’t make a bit of difference, O king. We still wouldn’t serve your gods or worship the gold statue you set up.”

This was no self-willed, feel-good religion these men had. They knew what God had done for others and it inspired their faith, but they also knew there was no implied guarantee. They said, “The God we serve can rescue us... but even if He doesn’t, it wouldn’t make a bit of difference.”

Now, that’s real faith! **Whatever God chooses to do with me, makes no difference in what I choose to do for Him.** I choose to honor Him, regardless of what it might cost me, or what you might think of me.

They might have prayed many seemingly appropriate things in the face of that imminent threat, and prayed “outside of the will of God.” But not being sure of what God wanted to do, they simply entrusted themselves to Him. They believed He would do the right and best thing.

As a result, they discovered what God’s will really was. And it was nothing short of an astounding miracle! The men refused to bow and dishonor their God, so they were bound and thrown into the roaring furnace. But they soon emerged, alive, unscathed, and without so much as the smell of smoke on their clothing! It caused King Nebuchadnezzar to humble himself and acknowledge that their God was the Most High and worthy of all praise and honor. And he commanded all of his subjects everywhere to acknowledge the same and praise the One True God.

Legend of Ailing Preacher

When we think of gifts from God, being thrown into a furnace or suffering some other extreme difficulty is not the first one to come to our minds.

But the story goes (2 Corinthians 12), as a preacher recounted his experience: “I was given the gift of a ‘thorn in the flesh’ — a handicap, a messenger of Satan — to torment me and keep me in constant touch with my own limitations.”

I’m sure the “Why?” was frequently on his lips, for we all would like an explanation of the mysterious and perplexing situations in our lives. How did they get past God? Why did He permit this?

And there was also the familiar “What?” — “What are *You* going to do about this, Lord?” Paul wrote, “At first I didn’t think of it as a gift, and begged God to remove it.”

“That’s using your faith!” many would cheer. But Paul records that he “pleaded with the Lord three times to take it away” from him. But God did not. At first, there was only silence in response to his cry. No information and no change. So he continued to pray.

He knew God was *able* to take it away. He knew God had done the same for others in the past. But with no word of assurance — no guarantee — Paul continued to pursue what he thought would be best... until the Lord told him what would *really* be best: “My grace is enough; it’s all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness.”

Grace is the divine capacity to endure what we must and keep a right spirit. It is the strength to persevere in the face of hardship with confidence that God goes with you. Grace is the assurance that your difficult circumstance does not reflect the measure of God’s love for you, nor can it prevent His love from reaching you.

As a result of embracing this word from God, Paul discovered God’s will and accepted it. He discovered the answer to his “Why?”: it was to keep him from getting a big head about the amazing revelations God had shown him. Remarkably, he discovered the answer to another, more important “What?” question: “What shall *I do* about God’s will for my life?”

The answer was to not complain, not whine, not try to twist God’s arm, but to let His will happen. Paul said, “I quit focusing on the handicap and began appreciating the gift. Now I take limitations in stride, and with good cheer. I just let Christ take over! And so the weaker I get, the stronger I become.” (The Message)

Take a Deep Breath

When God doesn’t answer your prayer the way you think He should, take a breath, step back, and look at what He *has* done. You might just discover the will of God for your life. If God says, “No,” then let it go! You can sit and pout, or you can stand and shout, “Blessed be the name of the Lord!”

Don’t make your religion a tool for trying to get your own way. Instead, become an instrument in the hands of God to do what *He* wants. You’ll discover the will of God for your life and it will liberate you, because His grace *is* all you need. It really is.