

Myth #5: *It's All Good*

The fifth in the series: *Urban Myths: Debunking Christian Clichés*
June 19 & 20, 2010

Fathers' Day. Prayer.

Intro:

Do you know what these are? They are examples of gospel tracts: succinct summaries of the steps to become a Christian. Are they simplistic? Absolutely, but they can be useful. *Or they can be misused*: I've talked to waiters and waitresses who have found one of these in place of a tip. *What a nice surprise!* I don't think so! Stiffing workers in the name of Jesus doesn't exactly communicate Christian love; it probably communicates: *I'm too cheap to pay you for your work, and I'm too impersonal and insecure to actually share my faith verbally, so here's my token effort to feel less guilty.*

I've seen tracks left in public places for others to find. While some may be picked up and read, many others are *swept up in the dust like trash*. That gets to me, to see God's Word disregarded. I also don't like seeing Bible verses spray-painted on walls. Is that a responsible and respectful method of evangelism? No, that's *evangelism*.

But used correctly, these tracts fine. Among them, *The 4 Spiritual Laws* has had the most widespread use. About 1.5 billion copies have been distributed. It is available in 144 languages. It starts with this sentence... *Just as there are...* That is true, but not politically correct in this age of relativism. Today people don't want to hear about spiritual laws. They may want to hear the *4 spiritual suggestions...*

I think the tract is well worded. Even so, the first point can be misleading. *God has a wonderful plan for your life*. This is true, but it has been misapplied. A misunderstanding of this phrase can be the breeding ground for inaccurate expectations (*it's all wonderful*) and lead to disappointment when life doesn't measure up. It can also confuse our motive for coming to Christ (*I only bought the box of cereal to*

get the promised prize inside - where is it?). Besides that, the wrong emphasis on God's plan can undermine the initiative we take in living for him (*after all, if it is all spelled out, then I can just sit back and watch the plan unfold*).

When we say that *God has a wonderful plan for your life*, do we mean that *Christians will always be happy* and that *everything is going to be fine* in our lives? Does it mean that we can rest assured that God will carry out his plan and we can just cruise without taking responsibility for ourselves?

The phrase has meant different things to different people. Today we will clarify the confusion it can cause.

1. *If God has a wonderful plan for my life, just how wonderful is it? Is it all good?* Can I expect that nothing bad will ever happen? Will God always protect his children from *natural disasters*, from *the sin of others*, and even from *the consequences of their own actions*? The evidence suggests this isn't so. Apparently *wonderful* doesn't mean *pain-free*. God doesn't guarantee that life will be easy. In fact, he promises us the opposite. Christians can expect to suffer. We have no divine right to pleasant lives.

We misunderstand what wonderful means because we have the wrong idea of what success looks like.

• **How we define success may not align with what God has planned for us.** We think any plan that we'd call wonderful would necessarily involve health and wealth. God doesn't share our thinking on this at all. He doesn't use our definitions. **Is 55:8 - For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways...**

If wonderful doesn't necessarily include popularity, and prestige, *what is God's goal for us?* My wife Annie loves the classic quote that God is more interested in making us holy than in making us happy. **Eph. 4:23, 24 describe God's wonderful plan for us - to be made new in the attitude of**

your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. God has big plans for us. His agenda is our *growth*. This requires stretching and strengthening, which are uncomfortable. Struggling, even suffering is part of the learning process. Ps. 119:71 - It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees. *That sounds wonderful!* This is *not* what we had in mind! But it is what we need if we define success according to becoming Christlike.

Jesus suffered! And we're called to do the same. 1 Peter 2:21 To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. Trouble is guaranteed! Jesus said, In this world you will have trouble (Jn 16:33). 2 Tim 3:12 - everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. Let's get our *expectations in line*. God does *not always rescue us* from painful situations. *God doesn't deliver us out of every difficulty; he strengthens us through them.*

So if your life includes suffering and sorrow, don't assume you're missing out on God's wonderful plan. You won't recognize the right road by its easy, smooth downhill slope, which invites you to just glide along effortlessly. In fact you can be sure that is *not the right path* - it leads down.

I find myself teaching on the cost of discipleship often. What motivates me to repeat this warning is that I've seen Christians promising things that God doesn't deliver. As a *misguided recruitment technique*, we *miss-market the faith in our sales presentations*. When we talk about the *wonderful life available*, we might create the wrong expectations - that the Christian life is a breeze. God does offer a wonderful plan, but it isn't easy or trouble free. It leads along a rocky road up a steep incline. It's hard. But *it is wonderful because it leads up and he is always with you.*

The two most frequently quoted verses about God's good plans (and how they are often misunderstood): Rom. 8:28 - *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.* • **Read it carefully: does it say "it's all good?"** And *Paul's been helping readers know how to handle suffering.* **we know** - *Don't forget this when times get tough.* **that in all things** - *Not in some things, or even in most things. In all things, that includes both good things and bad things.* **God works** - *From the perfect vantage point above; he has the jigsaw puzzle box top. He has an eternal perspective.* **for the good** - *Not for the happiness. Who does this applies to? of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.* *Does this teach that everything will turn out okay? That depends how you define okay. It is a promise that God is purposeful in our lives.* • **Consider the context: what is God's purpose?** 29 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. *His purpose is that we would be like Jesus. This is what he wants for us, and if we really knew what was good for us, it would be what we want for ourselves.*

T - now another **verse about God's good plans that is often misunderstood:** Jer. 29:11 - *"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."* • **Consider the context: to whom was he speaking?** 10-14. He's talking to the nation of Israel, not to an individual. They were going into exile, being banished from the land. • **Learn the history: when was this promise fulfilled?** 10 When seventy years are completed... I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise... *Is it going to be wonderful? Yes, but not any time soon! It will all turn out fine in the end, long after you're dead! We may not see much that is wonderful in this lifetime.*

T - So, it is all good? Certainly not now and not here. We've talked about the way in which God's plan is *wonderful* now let's consider the extent to which this plan is *planned*.

2. If God has a wonderful plan for my life, just how planned is it? *Is it all decided?*

• **Thinking of God's will as all predetermined in detail can ...turn life into a cruel guessing game.**

But God doesn't want us to be intimidated. One misapplication of this idea of God having a wonderful plan for us is to get neurotic about discovering his elusive will. *I'm not sure which outfit to wear! What is God's will for me?* Actually, he doesn't get too specific on this. Modesty is mentioned in the Bible but how to dress for success isn't really covered. *I'd like to say God forbids polyester, but he's actually silent on the topic.* Don't act like every decision is a hunt for God's mysterious specific instructions. He's left a lot up to us. We're responsible to use wisdom and to make decisions according to the principles and promises of God's Word. **Ps 119:9-11** - The whole 176 verses and much of the rest of the Bible tells us to *live by God's Word*. And God's Word has *a lot to say about how to live your life, but doesn't spell out every detail*. It doesn't say if you should live in Stayton or Dallas. It doesn't mention Woodburn or Keizer. *I was going to say it doesn't mention Salem, but it actually does.*

Point: God is more interested in *how* you live than *where* you live. He's said a lot about *how* and nothing about *where*.

Which college has God chosen for you? I don't know, but I do know this: you won't be admitted to a college if you don't fill out an application and have the grades to be accepted. Stop guessing about what you don't know and start doing what you do know you should do!

Which mate is right for you? Step one is to live according to God's revealed will. Don't sit there in sin asking God to lead you. He already has. **1 Thes 4:3 It is**

God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality. Much of God's will is clearly spelled out. He requires us to make responsible choices according to his revealed principles, not according to our superstitious guesses about what is not yet revealed.

Thinking of God's will as all predetermined in detail can also ...mislead us that our choices don't count. But God doesn't want us to be demotivated.

It is a misapplication of this idea *that God has a wonderful plan for us to sit around and wait for it to be revealed - to be inactive until the wonderful part drops from the sky into our lap. If it is all set in stone, then nothing I do makes a difference so I don't have to do anything.* Don't be misled into inactivity.

The classic illustration here has to do with what God wants you to do for work. *I know he has a specific job out there for me. I'm waiting on his will.*

Want to discover God's will for your work? His will is not so elusive as you may think. In fact, you don't need to wait for *a word from God* on what to do, his Word is clear.

1 Thes 4:11 - Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands...

Apparently, some were idle and their laziness was hurting the reputation of Christians in their community. So Paul wrote back and appealed to them to follow his example:

2 Thes 3:8 - we didn't eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, laboring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you.

10 If a man will not work, he shall not eat. This verse doesn't not condemn *the person who is legitimately on unemployment*, but it has something to say to the able-bodied person who *can* work but *won't*. This is not aimed at those who *can't* find work, but at those who *won't* try. This challenge is not for those who are *unable*, but for the *unwilling*. Sitting around waiting and not working, in the

name of trying to find God's will for you, ignores what the Bible clearly says is God's will for all believers: **Eph 4:28** - a Christian ...**must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.** Those in need are the ones who *cannot work*, not the ones who *will not work* but are content to live off of others. Please don't write me saying that I was bashing the unemployed. No, these verses were aimed at those who were *lazy in the name of the Lord*. **Titus 3:14** - **Our people must learn to devote themselves to doing what is good, in order that they may provide for daily necessities and not live unproductive lives.** If you can't find just what you want, do something to cover expenses. Don't look for a sign; look for work. Don't wait on God; the ball is in your court. Take a swing at it. And swing hard. God has said a lot more about his plan for *how* you are supposed to work that *where* you are supposed to work. **Col 3:23** **Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart...** Do *something* and do it well. **Eccl 9:10** - **Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might.** It is amazing how often the word *work* is followed in Scripture by the word *hard*. That is part of God's wonderful plan for his followers.

Don't let the idea that God has a specific job out there for you to demotivate you. His general will has already been revealed. Let's obey what we know, and not sit around disobeying it waiting for what we don't know.

The fact that God's plan for us is wonderful does not mean that we aren't to take initiative. Open nearly any page in your Bible and you will find if/then sentences, appeals, commands, and so on. *Our choices do count* and we are responsible to make decisions and follow through, not just sit back.

Some people just cruise along, pulling up their feet, like a lazy person on the back of a tandem bike. They let God do all the steering and pedaling. Yes, he directs, and yes, he

empowers - he belongs on the front of the tandem - but he also calls you to put our effort in life and to make good and godly choices. There are times when God clearly leads in very specific matters. He did so verbally in the lives of some biblical characters. But he also expects us to obey what he has already spoken in his Word.

The word *choose* is found in 81 verses. The word *chose* is there 45 more times. Some of these refer to God's choices, but others refer to ours. And none of them are a joke. They are real choices with real consequences.

And the most important of all choices is to live life God's way - to dedicate your life to him. It is your choice. **Josh 24:15** - **Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve...** Yes, God is sovereign, and his choice of us is clearly taught, but we are still responsible to choose him. We are invited to do so. We are challenged to do so.

Prayer: team available after.

More Meat: A few more unused ideas:

Is God always directly involved in things?

His will: 1 The 5:18 - "Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

Are we clinging to a misguided idea?

Our choices matter: Conquest of Canaan: *I will drive them out, but you will do it.* Victory was certain if they obeyed. It's the same with the guys we meet in Acts 27. Nothing in 22 and 24 makes the promise of safety look contingent upon their behavior (22 - not one of you will be lost; 24 - God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you).

But in 31 we see that is was apparently an if/then thing (Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be save). In His sov, God has elected to give us responsibility. God has chosen to be impacted by people's faith and obedience. He has made His dealings with us conditional on our responses; seen in Ezek 33:13-15. God says His response will correspond to ours. Jer 19:8 – if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. John 3:10 – When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened.

How can a plan be both eternal and flexible? I don't know. But it must be a matter of perspective. Sign at heaven's gate – Whosoever...and Chosen...

Whenever I talk about personal responsibility, we also have to recognize that the Bible teaches the all encompassing sovereignty of God. Ps. 115:3 – Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him. Dan 4:35 – All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No-one can hold back his hand. What happens is according to His Plan. Acts 4:28 – They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen. He's made His decisions and has the power to implement them. Job 42:2 – no plan of yours can be thwarted. 2 Kings 19:25 – Long ago I ordained it. In days of old I planned it; now I have brought it to pass. Does anything happened just by chance? Pr. 16:33 – The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord. His will is immutable. Ps. 110:4 – The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind...Is 46:10,11 – My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please. What I have aid, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do. He's in control: 2

Chron. 20:5 – O LORD, God of our fathers, are you not the God who is in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. Power and might are in your hand, and no-one can withstand you. Pr. 16:4 – The LORD works out everything for his own ends...RT – So do our choices even mean a thing?

Don't think that mature Christians are exempt from struggles and suffering. Life deals out problems and pain, accidents and illness. Are these things only supposed to happen to other people? What other people and why?

Romans 8:28:

And - *vs 27 says we have help in heaven: the Spirit intercedes for us. In the context, Paul is helping Christians know how to handle suffering. Now he gives even more perspective.*

we know - *Don't forget this when times get tough and you're tempted to feel a different way. Remember your history and the Scriptures.*

that in all things - *We picture God as fielding grounders from a bunch of guys batting at him all at once. He can't stop them all, bouncing all around. "Whoops, that one got by me, come on guys, slow up a little bit." Do some of the troubles in our lives slip by God unnoticed? No. It is in all things that God works, not some things, or even most things.*

God works - *Do we believe this? Or are we Deists? Someone else working for the good might not know what is best. But God has an eternal perspective. The perfect vantage point above; he has the jigsaw puzzle box top.*

for the good - *Not the happiness. His work won't always feel good. But it is all aimed at a purpose. God's not sadistic.*

T - *Who does this apply to?*

of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. *Note that half of this qualifier is our part and half is up to God. Notice that it doesn't say those who love him **and** have been called... as if you could do one or the other, but need to do both. If this is an equation, it is not A+B, but A=B. He's equating the two phrases. Those who love him are the called, and if you are called, you will love him.*

- Does this mean *it's all good*? NO.
- Does this mean *everything will turn out okay*? That depends how you define okay. This is not general optimism; it is really a promise that God is purposeful in our lives.
- So, *what's the purpose he mentions*?

The Bible teaches that we are to work with our hands so as not to be a burden on others. If you're incapacitated, that's one thing, but if you're able bodied, then work.

Philippians 1:29: For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake.

We would opt for ease and don't choose the harder uphill road. But he isn't guided by our shortsighted selfish orientation. He has something bigger in mind.

Jer 29:10 When seventy years are completed... I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. 11 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. 12 Then you will call upon

me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. 13 You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. 14 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.