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## ***Finding God's Will***

*“A breath of air blows wherever it will, and though you hear the sound of it,  
you don't know where it comes from or where it is going.  
It's that way with each one who has been born of the breath of God.”*

—Jesus (John 3:8)

What does it mean, in practical terms, to have faith—that is, to trust in a benevolent power at work in the world?

There was once a young man who went up in an airplane for a parachute jump, but hesitated at the door when his turn came. Just then he had the uncanny sense that his deceased mother was there in the airplane with him. “Mom, is that you?” he said. “Yes, son,” her voice came to him, “you know I watch over you always.” “Thanks, Mom!” he exclaimed, and feeling a new surge of courage he leapt from the plane. At first the fall was exhilarating, but half way down he pulled the parachute cord and nothing happened. Then he pulled the cord on the reserve parachute, but still nothing happened. He watched the ground speeding toward him, then slammed into it full force. “Mom!” he cried out in pain, with broken bones all over his body. “I thought you were watching over me!” “I was, son,” she answered, “I was going to tell you not to jump, but you didn’t give me the chance!”

To trust in a benevolent power at work in the world does not mean you have magic protection for the risks you take in life, it means listening to the one you have put your faith in. Faith can free you from preoccupation with achieving and maintaining security in the world; but before you throw yourself from an airplane, you should stop first and listen. What you are listening for, is some direction. When you put your trust in this benevolent power, you become free of the ordinary concerns of life in order to take on *its* concerns. Put another way, trust in this benevolent power allows the power to use us. Faith, in practical terms, means doing God’s will.

Christianity has always placed great stress on Jesus’ obedience to God’s will, an obedience “to the point of death, even death on a cross.” Jesus called people to enter the “kingdom of God”—as a kingdom is where a king’s will is law, so the kingdom of God is where God’s will is law. By “law” I do not mean a set of rules, although basic moral rules such as the Ten Commandments give us at least a starting point for determining what is *not* likely to be God’s will. But as the apostle Paul repeatedly emphasized in his letters to the early churches, obedience to God cannot be reduced to following rules, and in fact focusing on rules can sometimes get in the way

of doing God's will. God's will is more individualized than a set of rules, as each and every person has a specific role to play in the overall plan. But it is not a matter of having a blueprint delivered to you, so that you can then determine how to go about doing the building on your own. It is not having a vision of your future, or settling on a career, or taking on a particular role in life.

Rather, finding God's will is like crossing a strange river in the dark of night. You do not know how far the other shore is, or where you will end up when you get there. You cannot see ahead of you to tell where you should step. But you have a staff in your hand, and you can probe the bottom of the river carefully, looking for secure footing. All you need is to find the next sure step. When your staff finds a sudden drop off into deep water, you do not step there. When it finds soft mud that you could sink into, you do not step there. When it finds rocks that are too slippery to keep your balance on, you do not step there. You look for a place firm enough for the next step, and you carefully take it. Finding that next step doesn't mean you know which way you will be going next. Your steps might all lead in the same direction, or they may zigzag in unpredictable ways. Occasionally you may have a glimpse of where you are being led, as though a flare went up and you can see momentarily where you are at in the river and where you are heading. But you cannot rely on that glimpse to get you the rest of the way across the river. If you jump to conclusions about what's ahead, you will get careless and instead of testing the next step, you will plunge ahead heedlessly and lose your way. You must still use your staff and probe carefully, finding that next sure step.

I do not mean to imply that safety is the main consideration; the search for the next sure step is a metaphor. There are wrong steps in life, and there are right steps, but telling one from the other is often very murky, like the river at night. You must probe to find God's will for you, and the river you must probe is your own heart. The staff for probing it, is prayer.

Prayer is usually conceived of as asking God for favors, or reciting words learned from some source like your parents or a church or the Bible. These types of prayer are a start, but they are only a start. They are meant to get the ball rolling, to get you used to communicating with a power

beyond your understanding. Real prayer begins when you start probing the deepest parts of yourself—your fears, your hopes, your sadness, your gratitude. When you probe down deeper and deeper, to find the truth inside you and bring it out into the light of your consciousness, then you are truly praying. True prayer requires ruthless honesty, a kind of nakedness before God and the universe of which you are a part. It means reconnecting with who you really are, and getting beyond who you pretend to be.

In the Christian tradition handed down primarily in monasteries and religious orders, vocal prayer should lead to “mental prayer.” Vocal prayer can be thought of as the part of the staff above the river that you hold on to, and mental prayer—meditation—is the part of the staff that probes down beneath the river. Meditation begins with inner reflections, focusing the mind on a particular religious subject, such as a passage from the Bible or other spiritual reading, but eventually should lead beyond the mind. When you find a quiet spot within yourself during meditation, from which passing thoughts and feelings do not sweep you away, you are practicing this deeper meditation. One name for this is contemplative prayer. Contemplative prayer is a prayer of listening, not listening with the ears or the imagination, but listening with the heart. It is here, in the quiet spot of the heart, that you discover the next sure step.

This step will feel “right,” it will draw you onward like a magnetic pull. Your heart will feel at peace with it. Your mind can help by identifying the choices ahead of you, but too much reliance on the mind just churns up the river and makes it murkier. It is the heart that chooses the right step, or even nudges the mind to look elsewhere for some overlooked path to take. The staff of prayer and meditation pushes down deep in the heart, looking for the firm footing that says “this is the way forward.”

You cannot know ahead of time what the next sure step is. The way forward might be to stay in the airplane, not jumping even though you had carefully prepared for it. Or the way forward might be to summon up your courage and jump, never knowing for sure if you will land safely. Faith means trusting that the outcome is in the hands of a benevolent power at work in the world, and obedience to God’s will means allowing that power

to use you as it will in that work—whether it fits your preconceptions of how your life should be, or does not.

*“Not my will, but yours, be done.”*

—Jesus, the night before his crucifixion (Luke 22:42)

### **Suggested exercise**

*Find a time and place in your daily (or weekly) schedule where you can have some privacy, perhaps in your bedroom in the early morning before breakfast, or in the evening after the kids have gone to bed, or in your car while commuting or doing errands, or even while you are in the bathroom. Schedule this time on your personal calendar for prayer.*

*During your prayertime speak aloud (whispering if necessary for privacy) about your concerns, hopes and feelings as though to a best friend. Let yourself speak everything and anything on your mind or in your heart, without judgment or reservation. Swear, cry, or complain if you want to, but be as honest as possible in expressing your thoughts and feelings.*

*When you feel you have said enough for the moment, and nothing else comes to mind, then use whatever time you have remaining simply to allow your mind to be still. Note any intuitions about your life that come to mind during the stillness, writing them down if possible. Give them careful consideration when they seem to shed light on any actions or decisions you must take in the immediate future.*