

God's will includes complex process of making choices

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Q: What is the difference between drifting along in life and letting God do his will in your life? I have not really pursued a lot of my life goals because I love God and I want to please him by doing what he wants me to do in my life. Is this the wrong approach to goals in life and doing God's will?

A: One thing that it sounds like you are getting absolutely right is the concept of "God's will in all things." It is vitally important for us to understand a couple of key things regarding God's will.

The first is that not everything that happens is the result of "God's plan." Sometimes, when tragedy strikes, or a person experiences suffering, or a loved one dies, a well-meaning (but erroneous) person will say, "This was part of God's plan." Again, this is not necessarily true in all senses.

In creating a world outside of himself, God put certain laws in place. He created physics and chemistry and the material world, which operates according to the way he created it.

One consequence of this is that not everything that happens in this world is a result of God's having directly willed it. Because of this, we have to realize that God doesn't "cause" all things to happen. In addition, human beings (and angels and demons) have free will and can choose things that are clearly contrary to God's will.

We need to understand the difference between God's "perfect will" and God's "permissive will."

God's perfect will is when God directly wills a thing to happen or not to happen. This is always immediately and ultimately for the good.

God's permissive will is when God allows a thing to happen. This is not necessarily immediately a good. In fact, God often allows evil things to happen. He does this for a couple reasons (that we know of). First, God allows evil things to happen in order to preserve the gift of free will that he has given us. Second, God allows evil because he knows that he can bring about a greater good.

At this point, it is important to note that God does not cause evil to bring about a good. (That would be evil and impossible for an all-good God to do.) Rather, God allows something to happen that is contrary to his will because he knows he can use this for an even greater good.

Trust in God

If this is true, it follows that we can trustingly submit to everything that happens to us as falling under God's will. Either it is a good that he directly willed or it is an evil that he allowed to happen, and he can bring about a good through this.

For this reason, your having let things in life happen to you is not a bad thing at all. In fact, many people would be greatly blessed if they began seeing the events of their day as falling under God's will more often.

Yet while we are able to say "yes" to God at any moment because of the fact that he is present in all things and either wills perfectly or permissively all things that are, we can also discern direction and goals.

There was an error in some Christian circles called "quietism" or "fatalism." The idea is that we ought not to take any action ourselves but just sit and wait for something to happen to us. The attraction in this posture is that we will never make the wrong decision, because we aren't making any decisions. But not to decide is to decide.

The decision to be open to God's will is a decision, and the decision to choose to accept all things as they come as a gift from God is in no way harmful or negative or a bad idea. But I believe that this decision should come from a place of trust and intentionality, not merely because a person is afraid to choose the wrong thing or doesn't like making decisions.

There is also something very "God-honoring" in the process of making goals. Part of that is rooted in the way that God has created us. He made us to have an intellect and reason. Because of this, we have the ability to discern the good in all of its complexity and to choose one road out of many. We can often choose any number of options, and this is good.

Part of conforming our will to God's will is the beautifully complex process of making choices. We get to cooperate (co-operate) with God, not merely as passive receivers but as active participants.

With this in mind, you could take a step and make a decision.

This decision could be toward or away from a relationship. It could be to discern a religious community or have a conversation with your pastor about being a consecrated single. But in each of these cases, you would be walking with God, using the gifts he has given you and learning even more clearly how to hear his voice.

Even more, in this process, you would be required to listen to God's voice along the way and learn when he is calling you to persevere, when to adjust your direction, or when to stop and go back. Think of how this dynamic interaction would bring an even greater closeness to you and the Lord.