

**WHAT ABOUT GOD'S WILL AND MY PROBLEMS?****1 PETER 4:19, et al**

For several weeks now we've been considering what it means to know God's will for our lives. Does anyone remember Trip-Tiks? Back in prehistoric times (or at least before GPS was invented), they were produced by AAA (as in American Automobile Association) and provided this detailed map for very long road trips. I guess you can still get Trip-Tiks from AAA. It shows you what direction you're going without having to figure out north, south, east, or west. Sometimes the AAA people will even use a colored marker with arrows to confirm the right direction. It tells you about the exact mileage from point A to point B. It has multiple pages you can flip from one to the next so you're given this visceral sense of progress as you travel. It tells you where the major exits are located so you can plan your eating stops accordingly. It gives you information about the region through which you're traveling. Most importantly, it shows you exactly where the rest stops are located so you can manage your bladder!

Wouldn't it be just so great if God gave us a heavenly Trip-Tik to guide us through life? Or a divine GPS – a global positioning system – that told us exactly when to turn right, go there, do this. Yes, God does provide guidance and direction, but it's more like a compass rather than a GPS or a Trip-Tik. It's as if He says to us, "Here's the direction I want you to go. Trust Me with the details. Trust Me during what seems like the detours along the way. I might let you see the next mile in your life, but I'm not going to show you the next 500 miles. Trust Me. Obey Me."

So, this morning I want us to think together about God's will and problems. I've got problems. You've got problems. All God's children got problems! How do they fit into God's will for your life and mine? Let's look at an important Bible verse today. In order to understand the verse better, let's read some of the verses before it. Here's a few observations. Peter made it clear problems are a normal part of life even for Christians. He carefully distinguished between problems we bring on ourselves and those that come as a direct result of being a follower of Jesus. He suggested some problems are simply the result of our allegiance and loyalty to Jesus. And then in v. 19, Peter said something we must not miss. He clearly stated there that sometimes suffering, problems, heartaches, and failures can, in fact, be God's will for you and me. "So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good." (1 Pt. 4:19 NIV)

Let me say it again. Sometimes problems are God's will for us. All too often when a problem or a difficulty comes into our lives, we assume God is failing us or punishing us or that we've moved outside God's will. We think, "I've missed God's will; otherwise, why would I be having this problem?" The existence of a problem doesn't – in and of itself – prove we're out of God's will. On the contrary! God might have a purpose in that problem that's an integral, vital, and necessary part of His will for you and me. Now in my preparation for today, I came across five ways God can use problems to achieve His will in your life and mine. Here's the first one.

**GOD USES PROBLEMS TO DIRECT ME.**

I like what this Bible verse tells us about problems. “Sometimes it takes a painful experience to make us change our ways.” (Pro 20:30 GNT) Do you agree with that verse? Hasn't God sometimes used problems to motivate you, to get you going, to get your attention, or to get you to change an attitude or a behavior? God uses problems to prod us, push us, and prompt us in the right direction. I hate to admit it, but – yes – God has sometimes used a painful experience in my life to get me to change my ways! I had a time in my life before coming to KRBC when I wasn't enjoying my calling as a pastor. I kind of hit a brick wall. I didn't feel effective. I wondered if I ought to consider a different career. It was a painful time. But God began to show me I had become spiritually and intellectually lazy. I wasn't growing and I wasn't putting myself in a position to grow. I needed to change and God initiated change by allowing problems.

Two examples from the Bible. Do you remember the prophet, Jonah? God wanted him to go to the city of Nineveh and tell people there to repent so God wouldn't have to judge them. Jonah refused because he hated the people of Nineveh. He literally and physically went the opposite direction. The Bible says God sent a great fish to swallow him whole then vomit Jonah up on the beach back in the direction of Nineveh. Sometimes God will allow a problem to swallow you up and then “vomit” you out into the right place or the right direction! God can use problems to direct you. Do you remember the famous story Jesus told about the prodigal or lost son? He wasted his father's inheritance. The slop he was feeding pigs – the only job he could get – started to look kind of tasty. Only then did he finally come to his senses. He got up, made the long journey home to Dad, and asked for forgiveness. A problem will never leave you were it finds you. The fact is we rarely change until and unless we get desperate. Sometimes, it will just pick you up and deposit you somewhere else. God uses problems to direct you and me. Here's something else about problems and God's will.

### **GOD USES PROBLEMS TO TEST ME.**

The Bible teaches that on occasion God will allow problems in order to test you and me. Problems have a way of revealing what's going on in our hearts. Here's what Moses said to the people of Israel after God brought them out of Egypt. “Remember how the Lord your God led you through the wilderness for these forty years, humbling you and testing you to prove your character, and to find out whether or not you would obey his commands.” (Dt 8:2 NLT) It's a fact that problems have a way of revealing what's inside your and me. Someone has observed Christians can be like tea bags. You don't know what's really inside of them until you plop them into hot water! Pressure reveals the real you. Problems reveal your character. Difficulties have a way of revealing what or whom you trust in. Someone might ask, “Well, since God already knows all things, doesn't He already know how we're going to act and react to problems beforehand?” Yes, He does. But we don't. God uses problems to reveal our own hearts to us! Problems reveal the depth of our commitment to Jesus. Problems reveal how much and to what extent we truly trust in God. Problems reveal our willingness to be led by the Holy Spirit in all things at all times.

No one in the Bible was tested more than Job. Satan told God the only reason Job obeyed Him was because of all the blessings God had poured out on Job. God allowed

Satan to test Job. He lost everything – all of his children, enormous wealth, and even his own health. Job struggled with why God had allowed all these problems to come into his life, but he also made this marvelous statement of faith, ““But he knows where I am going. And when he tests me, I will come out as pure as gold.”” (Job 23:10 NLT) Job compared his problems to how precious metal is refined. The way you purify gold or silver is to turn up the heat. The heat literally burns away everything that isn’t gold or silver. God uses the heat of life’s problems to refine or purify your life and mine. It can help to burn away the things in our lives we need to get rid of. Problems can even burn away the things in your life and mine that don’t really matter so we can give ourselves to the things that do matter for both this life and eternity. Someone asked a silversmith a question, “How do you know when the silver is pure?” He had an interesting answer, “When I can see my reflection in it.” When God can see the reflection of Jesus’ character in your life and mine, He knows we’re being refined, purified, and completed. God uses problems to test you and me. What else?

### **GOD USES PROBLEMS TO CORRECT ME.**

Someone put it succinctly and well, “Life is a school and problems are the curriculum.” A life free of problems is promised to us in Heaven, but not here on Earth. They’re an inevitable part of human experience. Some problems come to us in life through no fault of our own. They weren’t the result of our sin or being foolish. You get injured in a car accident that wasn’t your fault. Your employer had money issues and had to let you go. Even though they can be painful and difficult, it’s maybe easier to see those kind of problems – ones we didn’t bring on ourselves – as part of God’s will. But what about the problems we do bring on ourselves? Can even those kinds of problems be a part of God’s will? I hope so. If not, I’m in big trouble! No, the problems we bring on ourselves are not God’s perfect will for us, but God is still big enough and capable enough to redeem our stupid mistakes, our sins, and our foolish actions. Somehow and in some way He works even them together for His glory and our good.

David said something to God in one of his psalms that’s thought provoking. “My suffering was good for me, for it taught me to pay attention to your decrees.” (Ps 119:71 NLT) God uses problems to educate us regarding what it means to be His child and in His family. He can allow us to face the painful consequences of sinful choices we make as punishment or discipline. God can most definitely take you or me to the woodshed, so to speak! The Bible says God is like a father who knows how to practice tough love, “As you endure this divine discipline, remember that God is treating you as his own children. Who ever heard of a child who is never disciplined by its father? If God doesn’t discipline you as he does all of his children, it means that you are illegitimate and are not really his children at all.” (Heb 12:7-8 NLT)

If you’re a genuine follower of Jesus but you’re messing up in some area of your life, God will correct you. Count on it. Those verses remind us that if you’re not ever getting corrected, it’s because you’re not really one of God’s children. God doesn’t discipline people who aren’t His kids! I don’t discipline your kids or my neighbor’s kids when they mess up even if they need it. Not my job! But when my kids were growing up and they messed up, did I take care of it? Sure. Maybe that’s why people who have no use for

God – Jesus just doesn't show up on the radar of their lives in any way – seem to get away with a lot of stuff. Perhaps God doesn't move as quickly to correct them because they're not a part of His family! Oh, He will deal with them later as a judge, but not now as a father. If you're really a child of God, He will correct you. God uses problems to correct you and me. Here's another truth about God's will and my problems.

### **GOD USES PROBLEMS TO PROTECT ME.**

Did it ever occur to you God can actually protect you from a greater problem by giving you a smaller problem? The Bible says, "For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil." (1 Pt 3:17 NIV) What Peter – who wrote that verse – was getting at is the fact that in the long run it's safer to do what's right, honest, and good even if you suffer for it than compromising your integrity in the short run. An example. Let's say your boss suggests you do something you know is dishonest or unethical. You know it's wrong, but you're concerned about losing a chance for a promotion or even getting fired if you don't do it. That's a problem. Not doubt about it. If you hold your ground and refuse to be dishonest, you might indeed lose a promotion or even lose your job. But you may well avoid even greater problems down the road such as legal action, lawsuits, or even jail. God can make any problem to be a blessing in disguise to protect you from something much worse.

An example of this truth is Joseph in the Old Testament. You might remember he was sold into slavery by his older brothers. He ended up in Egypt and became the servant of a man named Potiphar. Joseph was a good looking young man and Potiphar's wife began to hit on him. Joseph steadfastly refused to have anything to do with her. Feeling rejected and scorned, she claimed Joseph tried to rape her. Potiphar put Joseph in jail for two long years. Joseph did the right thing, but now he was suffering for it. Like Peter's verse, Joseph is an example of suffering for doing God's will. But prison provided Joseph with the opportunity to get to know some influential people. Eventually, he was released and became the second most powerful man in Egypt after the Pharaoh. God put Joseph in a position of great influence. As a result, Joseph saved himself, his family, and even the people of Egypt from the effects of a devastating famine. Problems can even be a preparation for eventual success. Towards the end of his life, Joseph was able to say to the very same brothers who had treated him so hatefully and shamefully, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people." (Gen 50:20 NLT) How's that for a godly perspective on your problems! God uses problems to protect you and me. Here's a final truth about God's will and our problems.

### **GOD USES PROBLEMS TO PERFECT ME.**

To perfect someone is to help a person reach maximum maturity. God will most definitely use problems to develop you and me gradually into whoever He wants us to be. Each of us resembles an uncut diamond. There are some rough edges and some dull spots in our lives. God uses problems and difficulties to chip away and smooth those rough edges as well as polish up the dull spots so each of us becomes a beautiful spiritual gem reflecting His glory in a dark, broken world. You and I can't be reminded

enough regarding what God wants to develop in our lives ultimately. It's not financial success. It's not having the healthiest body around. It's not a comfortable retirement. It's not even happiness. God originally created human beings in His image, but we broke and distorted that image through sin. God is all about restoring that image. It was perfectly reflecting in Jesus when He walked this Earth. God's ultimate plan and purpose for every human being is developing the character of Jesus Himself fully in each one of us. He wants to see in you and me what He sees in His Son – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

How does that happen? Meditating on God's Word, praying, worshiping, serving in a ministry, sharing our faith – all those help a great deal. But, like it or not (I admit there's much I don't like about it), God insists on using problems to perfect or mature you and me. In fact, God often allows problems to come into our lives that – at first glance – seem to encourage us to act in ways that are the exact opposite of what He wants to produce in us. How does God teach us patience? He deliberately allow problems to surround us that almost guarantee initially an impatient response from us. But how else will we learn patience? How does God teach us integrity? He deliberately allows problems to surface in our lives that demand a clear cut choice between honesty or dishonesty. How else will we learn to be honest? How does God teach us compassion? He will on occasion bring into our lives MGR people. What's that? More Grace Required people! How else will we ever learn how to love unlovely people?

The Bible says this about problems. "When troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing." (Jam 1:2-4 NLT) Here's a suggestion I need to follow, too. When we come up against a problem, let's learn to ask "what" rather than "why." It's natural to ask "Why, Lord? Why is the happening now and to me?" We might never get the "why" question answered this side of Heaven. Let's learn to ask the "what" question instead. "What do you want to teach me, Lord? What do I need to learn? What do I need to change? What is Your guidance for me in this problem? What are You trying to perfect in me?" God builds great character stuff in you and me through life's problems not despite them. Since God doesn't show any inclination to change His methods of perfecting or maturing us, I guess you and I just need to change our attitudes towards life's problems. One place to start is learning to ask "what" rather than "why" when problems surface.

Years ago, V. Raymond Edman was the president of Wheaton College outside of Chicago. I read something he wrote about life's problems and how to face them that continues to challenge me. "Something painful happened to me. This is how I met it. I was quiet for a while with the Lord, and then I wrote these words to myself. First, He brought me here. It is by His will I am in this strait place. In that fact, I will rest. Next, He will keep me here in His love, and give me grace as His child. Then, He will make the trial a blessing, teaching me the lessons He intends me to learn, and working in me the grace He needs to bestow. Last, in His good time He can bring me out again – how and when only He knows. Let me say I am here, first, by God's appointment; second, in His keeping; third, under His training; fourth, for His time." That last sentence is worth

remembering whenever we face any problem great or small. “I am here, first, by God’s appointment; second, in His keeping; third, under His training; fourth, for His time.” God uses problems to perfect us.

If you have children or grandchildren, chances are you’ve done something similar to a little game a father and his three year old son played in a pool one day. They were standing in the shallow end to start. The little boy felt secure in his father’s arms. He placed his arms around Daddy’s neck. Because Daddy was so tall, the little boys feet didn’t even feel the water yet. For fun, Daddy began walking slowly toward the deep end of the pool, gently chanting, “Deeper, deeper, deeper.” The water rose higher and higher on the child. The little boy’s face began to register increasing degrees of alarm. He gripped his father even more tightly, who – of course – still continued to touch the bottom of the pool easily. Here’s what’s ironic about that scene. If the little boy had the ability to analyze the situation, he’d realize there was no reason to become afraid or alarmed. The water’s depth in any part of the pool – even the shallow end – was well over his head. Being safe anywhere in the pool depended absolutely on his father not on the little boy.

At various points in our lives, all of us feel like we’re getting into very deep water. Problems abound. A doctor gives us bad news. A job is lost. A loved one dies unexpectedly. An addiction surfaces. A financial asset disappears. A relationship crumbles. Like that little boy, we become fearful and alarmed. Well, there is no body of water that God is not deeper than it. Like Corrie ten Boom used to say, “There is no pit so deep that God is not deeper still.” There is no problem in which God is not greater than it. Those problems were always bigger than us anyway. Being safe anywhere in life depends absolutely on our Heavenly Father who said He will never drop us, leave us, or forsake us.

What can we conclude today about knowing God’s will and our problems? No GPS. Just a compass. God uses problems to direct us, test us, correct us, protect us, and perfect us. Yes, problems are bigger than us. Always will be. But, no, they are never bigger than our Heavenly Father.