

God's Plan for You

Romans 9:11

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

Have you ever been to a funeral and had to say something to the person who lost a loved one? If you have, you know that it can be a very awkward moment if the person who died was not close to Jesus -- and therefore, is really dead. It is very difficult to know what to say. I have shared with you a conventional comment that they created in Ireland. It is terrible, but they always said it as they came through the door, "Well, his time had come." By that they meant that some power beyond us had set the day of this person's death and when this person arrived at that day, they died.

If you have been following Anwar Sadat's interviews over the past few weeks, you will remember quite a startling expression of it -- when they were asking Sadat and his wife about their early life. Sadat explained how his wife would worry about him when he was out on those violent demonstrations in Cairo against the British. Finding her worried and anxious as he came home to her one day, he said, "You are going to spend the rest of your life worried and anxious about me if you worry because of the demonstrations and the violence. Don't you believe in God? Don't you know that no one can take five minutes from my life, and no one can add five minutes to my life?"

All our hearts rise in some kind of respect for the man when he shows that kind of faith, yet, there is something about it that does not seem quite right. We use the same terminology ourselves when we talk about a "bullet with our name on it"; or when we come up against some disappointment in our lives, we tend to say things like, "Well, it wasn't meant to be."

That kind of belief in some power beyond us having overriding control over what happens to us does bring great contentment and a sense of peace. There is no doubt of that. It gives you a feeling that whatever the future holds, it is going to be all right. And yet, don't you agree that this belief is carried to excess when people say that every event in their lives is controlled by this power beyond us? It becomes fatalism, "Que sera, sera; whatever will be, will be." When that belief in an overriding providence is carried to a point of fatalism, it produces passivity.

Any of you who have been to India or the Middle East can see that the fatalism found in Islam and Hinduism has produced a paralysis in the people. They become utterly overwhelmed by the sheer burden of preserving life day to day. Public life as a whole tends to drift into chaos and disorder -- which in turn produces death and disease in cities like Calcutta.

So obviously, there is some middle path that you have to walk: somewhere between the IDEA that there is an overriding power that controls all your future -- and that you CAN do something about it. During these next weeks we will be studying this. To what extent is your future under the control of some other power greater than yourself, and to what extent is your future under your control? This whole subject of will, the will of God and our own wills, comes up in today's verse: "... though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad, in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call." (Romans 9:11).

It is to be understood that a choice was made. In other words, who really controls the future? I would not tell this to many people -- I want to let you in on a secret -- I control the future! You

want me to prove it? Okay! I will make a prophecy about the future that will show you that I have absolute control. About five o'clock this evening -- for those in Minnesota in December -- it is going to get dark. How's that for starters? Now, I will make another one. Around May, here in Minnesota, all the snow will be gone and little yellow daffodils are going to spring up out of the earth. Now I think I am going to finish the sermon here, and you can check this out. You say, "That proves nothing about you controlling the future. Any of us could have made those prophecies. We could make many more prophecies along the same vein."

Why is such foreknowledge as that possible? It is because it always gets dark around five o'clock in Minnesota during December, and we always have springtime about May with the snow disappearing and the daffodils coming forth. These things have happened for years. That is why you can know that they are going to happen again this year. They happen in a fixed order that is set and reliable, year after year. And so, foreknowledge is possible because of this fixed order of events in the past. It does not matter what Jimmy Carter does, or what Brezhnev does or what the terrorists do. It is always going to get dark around five o'clock in Minnesota during December. The flowers are always going to come up around May in Minnesota. Human beings cannot influence this. These are things that go on and on whatever we human beings do. And of course, the facts back that up.

The revelation of our Creator in the Bible backs this up. After the catastrophic flood to which all geology attests, Jesus' Father explained it this way: "While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease" (Genesis 8:22). God decreed that as long as the earth remains, summer and winter would keep coming, day and night would keep coming, and cold and heat would keep coming. Those seasons and daily events would take place as long as the earth remains. Our God, the Creator, decreed it. It will happen irrespective of what men do, irrespective of how the babies kick against the playpen, irrespective of how the babies try to tear apart the ozone layer that protects them. It will happen irrespective of what human beings do. Our Creator has decreed that certain events will keep happening -- whatever.

Perhaps that is the first fact we should see plainly: our God has decreed that certain things will keep happening whatever we do, and that the stability of the universe depends on those natural events that keep on coming. You notice that they happen to everybody. It does not matter whether you are good or bad, or whether you believe in God or do not believe in God. Those events keep happening. It is pointed out again in another verse: "So that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:45).

So you can see, there are certain events in our futures that are guaranteed for all of us. That is why those events usually connected with natural laws are called "common grace" by the theologians. They are common or general because they come upon all men and women, whether you are Mohammedan or Hindu, whether you love God or hate God. Everyone experiences the common grace or generosity of God in the sun always rising. The sun will always set -- and sometimes here in Minnesota we wonder if it has gone completely and wonder if the snow will be here forever! With substantial and considerable regularity, the seasons will follow one upon the other.

Loved ones, those seasons are fixed by God. Here at the beginning of this complex subject of predestination -- God's will and man's will -- could we just agree now together that there are some events that depend purely on God's sovereign will? The stability in our universe comes from the reliability of those events. In these days, when men's hearts can fail them from fear, it is important for us to see that there are certain events that men can do nothing about -- God, Himself,

will guarantee these. That's the first step: that there is a sovereign will that governs some things in our lives whatever we do.

The second important fact is that we see the other side. We human beings CAN exercise our wills against God in many, many, different ways, and we can actually prevent his plan coming about in our lives. We can frustrate his will. Here is a verse that shows that plainly, Matthew 23:37: It's Jesus speaking, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" Do you see the words, loved ones? Jesus is saying that he wanted often to gather us, his children, but we would not. That is an instance where God wanted one thing and the human beings in Jerusalem at that time wanted another. They were able to frustrate God's will.

That is the second big fact that we should see as we begin the discussion. We human beings are able, in certain situations, to frustrate God's plan and will for us. You will never finally be able to say that God governs all things by his rule and will, nor that men govern their lives by their will alone. Loved ones, that truth is held somewhere in tension between the two. Every theologian, and in fact, every human being who has tried to solve it has had to come to the conclusion that there is the fact of God's will and man's will. The truth lies somewhere between the two and our job is to try to find out where it lies.

Look at the verse we are studying: "... though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad, in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of his call." (Romans 9:11). Who were they? They were Esau and Jacob, the sons that God had given to Isaac and Rebecca. A choice was made between them where the older one was put last, and the younger one was put first. Jacob was chosen over Esau. He was chosen while they were still in their mother's womb, before they had done anything good or bad. The verse goes on to say that God's "election" (and it is just a non-political word for "choice") should not depend on their works, whether good or bad, nor on whether they had chosen to follow God or to reject him. The choice that God made would rest only on God's will or God's call. It sounds almost like the verse in Matthew where Jesus speaks of the rain falling on the just and the unjust. It has the same kind of emphasis. It does not seem to matter whether they are good or bad, whether they have exercised their will or not. The language sounds the same. God chooses one man over the other whether he likes God or not.

That is the question I would put to you. Is this choice more connected with God's common grace -- which he uses to preserve our lives here on earth -- or is it connected with God's choice of one for salvation and another for damnation? Is this choice more connected with God's preservation of the universe -- and of his common grace -- or is it actually connected with choosing one for heaven and one for hell?

I think the answer is plain, loved ones, if you remember what God said to Rebekah during her pregnancy: "And the Lord said to her, 'Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples, born of you, shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger.'" (Genesis 25:23). God seems to be laying emphasis on the fact that these two men would head up two different nations. Esau would head up the nation of Edom, and Jacob would head up the nation of Israel. That is what the choice was about. The choice was not, "Esau, I choose you to go to hell; Jacob, I choose you to go to heaven." The choice was about nations and who was going to be the next patriarchal leader of the Israelites after Abraham and Isaac. God chose Jacob before he had ever been born while he was still in his mother's womb.

Loved ones, the choice had nothing to do with their personal destinies. You can see that plainly if you look at their lives later on after Jacob had deceived Esau and they were meeting fact-to-face: "Esau said, 'What do you mean by all this company which I met?' (For Jacob was afraid and had sent all kinds of presents on ahead.) Jacob answered, 'To find favor in the sight of my lord.' (So you see that in their personal relationships it was actually the other way around, with Jacob calling Esau 'my Lord'). But Esau said, 'I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.' Jacob said, 'No. I pray you, if I have found favor in your sight, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God, with such favor have you received me,'" (Genesis 33:8-10). So, Esau was far from being one who did not know God or did not like God.

In other words, loved ones, we are not talking about the personal destinies of Esau and Jacob. Both are probably in heaven at this moment. It is God choosing one to lead his people Israel and the other to lead his people Edom. It is a bit like the Arabs and Israelis. Have you noticed how alike they are? Their physical features are very much alike, because they have a common father, Abraham. Both the Arabs and the Israelis came from Abraham. You remember that God chose Isaac instead of Ishmael to lead the people of Israel. Ishmael became the leader of the family that ended up as Arabs. And Isaac became the leader of the family that became the Israelites or Jews. That did not imply that Ishmael was not favored or not loved or not forgiven by God. You remember that verse where it says that "God was with the lad." The indication is that though Ishmael was rejected as being the head of the people of Israel, he was not rejected by God in regard to his own personal destiny was concerned.

We need to see that there is an election for service and an election for salvation. God needed a nation in whom his Son Jesus could be born. He had to form and carve that nation of Israel out of this chaotic world by giving it leaders that could hold it together. He chose leaders right down through history, so that those Jewish people would still be alive in the first century A.D., and so that Jesus could be born among them.

You can see that Israel is more concerned with the preservation of life here on earth than it is concerned about hell or heaven. The existence of Israel as a nation is more like the existence of the sun, rain, and the seasons; something God ensured would remain in this world in order to provide the rest of us with an opportunity to receive him or to reject him. It says nothing about whether Jacob, the individual, will accept or reject him. It is simply God ensuring that there would be a group of human beings who would have a knowledge of him and his laws, and that his Son could be born among them, living long enough to reveal to us what his Father was really like.

You see, there is an election for service. There is a choosing for service -- for ministry or for work -- that is not the same as choosing for heaven or hell. Jacob experienced that choice. In other words, God was interested in Jacob's vocation. He had Jacob's vocation planned for him. He knew that he was going to be the leader of Israel.

Now, what about your vocation? A lot of us do not take God seriously when he implies that he treats us all alike. We say to ourselves, I know that Jacob was outstanding in the unique piece of service God had for him. I can see how God chose him from his mother's womb. Loved ones, there is something more about it for us. It's in Job 31:15, "Did not he who made me in the womb make him? And did not one fashion us in the womb?" Your God saw you when you were a little baby inside your mother. He gave you certain abilities, character and aptitudes. All psychologists, all medics and all theologians would agree with this true statement: "There is nobody like you in the whole

universe."

You know that this is true, even though our wretched society tends to make you feel that you are just one of the crowd. You actually know that you are a unique combination of physical and mental characteristics found in no one else in the whole universe. God saw you when you were inside your moms and he determined the job you were fitted to do in his world -- whether it be a secretary, banker, teacher, policeman, carpenter or nurse. Whatever you are, God has a certain job for you involved with the preservation of this world from chaos. He has given time for each of the four billion of us to know him.

You have a certain job set by God that you are fitted for. God has determined your vocation, your job. Loved ones, it is not just a matter of thrashing around to find some job. That is lacking the dignity that God has given you. It is not true to what God has planned for you and it makes a mockery out of the fact that God sees every sparrow that falls to the ground. God has everything under his supervision and under his oversight. He has put you in this world to do a certain job.

Now, how do you find it? It's truly easy if you see this: Stop depending on your job for security. That is how a lot of us get into medicine who should not be in medicine at all. The money is good. That is how a lot of us get into insurance who should not be in insurance. We govern our determination of what we are going to do in life by our need for security, significance and happiness. Some of us like to lord it over 30 miserable little kids, so we go into teaching when we should not be teachers. Some of us like to water-ski, so we become water-ski instructors when we should not be.

Stop depending on your job for your security, significance and happiness. Do what comes naturally! That is really it. Trust God for security, significance and happiness -- then do what comes naturally. You all have abilities. Develop them! Start using them! Do not get all caught up with whether the money is good or bad. Do not get all caught up with whether the job is important or not, whether your parents will like you doing it or not, or whether you will enjoy it or not. Do what your unique combination of abilities enables you to do. Do that and you will be doing what God has put you here to do.

Now, the second thing is this: Do not govern your location by your vocation. The first part of your life has been made to help preserve the world from chaos -- to hold the world back from chaos while God begins to get into all our hearts. But, the second part of your life is far more important. Govern your location by the position you have in Jesus' body and the responsibility you have to express his life to others. Why? It's in Acts 18:1-4, "After this he (Paul) left Athens and went to Corinth, and he found a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, lately come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to leave Rome. And he went to see them; and because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and they worked, for by trade they were tentmakers. And he argued in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded Jews and Greeks."

Now, Paul did not look in the want ads to see that Corinth was short of tentmakers. We go to Phoenix because there is an opportunity to teach, or we go to New York because there is an opportunity in the insurance business, or we go to Texas because there is an opportunity in banking. Don't you see that it's all upside down? God does not want you to govern your location by what you do for tent-making or by what you do for a vocation, though that is precious and that is a glory to him. He wants you to govern your location by where he wants you to express his life in his body.

That of course, is why I have encouraged you all to begin thinking of: Why not live in Rio, Paris, Africa or someplace where there is so little expression of Jesus' life? Do not disregard your vocation. It is precious and has been fixed by God. You are the only one who can do that job. Use that job as a method of getting into the place or position where Jesus' life is most needed.

So, it is good to see that God has fixed some things. During the coming weeks we will get into more of the details of in what sense our future is under our control and what is under His.

Let us pray. Dear Father, we thank you that we are not flotsam and jetsam on the stormy sea of life at the mercy of vocational guidance counselors, or at the mercy of the SAT or ACT tests. Lord, we thank you that you placed us here because we are unique and there is a job that only we can do – and you know what that job is. We thank you that you made it so easy for us to find it by getting free from all of the wrong motives for choosing a job: security, significance and happiness. Instead, we are looking to you and saying, “Lord, what did you put me here to do? What can you use these abilities for? Let me develop them so that they can glorify you.” But then Lord, we thank you most of all that we are not here just to build tables or build houses. We’re not here to balance bank accounts. We’re not here just to teach children. Lord, we’re here to express the life that you have given us in Jesus. You have a place in this world where loved ones are waiting for us to come to live. Lord, we trust you that you will show us that place so that our lives would be what you planned them to be from the beginning. We ask this in Jesus’ name. Amen.