

When God's Will Isn't Perfect

Has God let you down when your circumstances self-destruct?

- Discipleship Journal Feature Article
- Published in the March | April 1988 issue
- Written by Judith Couchman

I picked up the glass on my office desk and hurled it at a wall several feet away. As shattered bits spread across the carpet, I choked, "This is insanity! Is this what I get for following You, God? *Is this it?*"

I slumped to the floor and sobbed. My dreams were smoldering, and I wanted to join the ashes. Just a few nights before I'd driven to the ocean with thoughts of wading in permanently. But imagining a grief-stricken family and greeting my own cowardice stopped me. So there I sat, in a dim office late at night, angry and afraid.

Eventually the tears dried into a silent moan and I pulled myself upright. And in my exhausted, mixed-up thinking, I felt more alarmed by a fresh dent in the wall than by my death wish. Dropping to the floor again, I shakily picked up bits of glass, hoping to destroy any evidence.

As pieces plunked into the wastebasket, I thought, *This is how I feel, Lord Broken. Do You shatter everyone who serves You?*

GOOD INTENTIONS

I had started with such good intentions. Several years before, I'd resigned a great secular job and, convinced of the Lord's leading, left family and friends to enter Christian work two states away. Believers surrounding me gave unanimous support: the move wonderfully combined my talents, training, and desire to serve God. I left for the new job grateful, excited, purposeful.

Soon after, life crumbled. I hated my new job and apartment. It was tough finding friends outside work. I'd taken a salary cut and money dwindled. My car disintegrated at the rate of a few hundred dollars each month. A potential romance fizzled. I developed health problems. And I felt intensely lonely.

Numb and depressed from disappointment, I began questioning: *Hadn't I felt God's definite leading? Hadn't I sacrificed to obey Him? Wasn't this His perfect will? Then why was I so miserable?*

Several times I asked God to confirm whether this life change had really been His will. Each time He clearly and poignantly answered yes. So I trudged forward, but not without lingering, accusatory questions.

After a few years, circumstances improved, although they never became ideal. And I began to mentally formulate—and ask God for—my dream job. The hope of that ultimate goal had helped me persevere, and now that I'd "paid my dues," I felt certain God would answer my request and bless me. After all, I had obeyed and survived—even thrived.

Finally, the position I'd searched and struggled for came along, and I sensed the heavenly go-ahead. Although it meant another move, another set of adjustments, I was willing. This would be God's good and perfect gift.

And this was what dropped me to my knees, scuttling for broken bits of glass. Because eventually circumstances—and my ability to deal with them—worsened. And after eight months of employment, my position terminated because of the company's financial status.

I was stranded: no job in sight, no money or family to fall back on, no emotional reserve to cope, no trust that God would rescue me.

IMPERFECT PERFECTION

Growing up, I'd been taught that God had a perfect plan for my life. I'd believed that idea, rallying with it when I sought God's direction, when I wanted a friend to believe in Christ, when I gave my testimony and didn't know what else to say. In effect, it became my perfect pat answer: succinct, memorable, indisputable.

But I'd never really tested it. I'd never delved into adult disappointments. I'd never faced the "what ifs" and "whys" badgering me. I'd just believed in my "perfect plan" as the ultimate answer, even though I didn't understand it.

So when circumstances struck hard, that respectable cliché spun out of my hands and left me searching for bits of a relationship with God. At first I considered it His cruel joke. Now I call it severe mercy. Because with each jolt, He's stretched and challenged me into a greater understanding of the world, His ways, myself.

Now I view my journey with God more as "imperfect perfection." Because while His ways are perfect, mine are not. Melding the two of us together creates a wide margin of error—with the mistakes mine. Forces within the world—seen and unseen—constantly muddle my perspective. So the sooner I accept certain facts,

the more assuredly I can discern the Lord's footsteps and plod behind Him. And the less I expect God's perfect will to produce equally perfect circumstances.

SPIRITUAL ADJUSTMENTS

With these ideas, I've adjusted my unrealistic expectations about following the Lord:

God's will is perfect; people are not. A close friend of mine defected from the faith several years ago. Occasionally the subject surfaces and we discuss why she left Christianity.

"I just couldn't stand the people," she explains. "They were critical and wanted to stuff me into their mold."

"But Christians aren't God," I reply. "Don't think He's a bad guy because some of His children aren't so great."

So far I haven't convinced her. But I still believe that too often we confuse the Creator with the creatures. We rail against God when Christians wrong us, forgetting that we all possess a free will. Despite God's guidance and warning, we can do precisely what we want to do. And that means hurting each other, even when we've followed God's leading for our lives.

In *The Fight*, John White explains to new Christians:

Your brothers and sisters in Christ are not perfect. After the first happy glow, during which you will idealize them, you will be shocked to discover bitterness, bickering and overt hostility in the Christian family.

You will discover that some Christians are stupid, ornery, tactless; "stuffed shirts," prudes, hypocrites and so on. Some will be bigoted advocates of totally unacceptable political positions and others will slurp their soup or have bad breath.

[But] you must be charitable enough to admit that there may be unattractive features in your own personality. You don't wear robes and sandals yourself!

With so much human imperfection, we dump truckloads of mistakes into that "margin of error" between God's ways and ours. Yet many times we question Him instead of ourselves.

Bad circumstances are produced by a sinful world. We are not living in the environment our Creator intended for us. Earthquakes, sickness, war, financial depressions, and other tragedies weren't included in His original, perfect plan.

This doesn't mean God won't intervene and redeem painful situations. But neither will He completely exempt us from them. We are in the world but "not of the world" (Jn. 17:16, *NASB*) because our sights are set on Heaven, not because we're sheltered from earthly adversity. When we were "bought at a price" (1 Cor. 6:20) there were no warranties against pain, no guarantees that following God's will would produce a specified number of miracles. In fact, Christ promised us tribulation (Jn. 16:33).

In Paul Scott's novel *The Jewel in the Crown*, blind Sister Ludmilla describes a conversation she once had with God. They talked about the old woman's disabilities:

"I'm sorry about your eyes," He said, "but there's nothing I can do unless you want a miracle."

"No," [she] said, "no miracle thank You. I shall get used to it and I expect You will help me.

"Anyway, when you've lived a long time and can hardly hobble about on sticks and spend most of the day in bed, your eyes aren't much use. I would need three miracles, one for the eyes, one for the legs and one to take twenty years off my age!

"Three miracles for one old woman! What a waste! Besides . . . miracles are to convince the unconvinced. What do You take me for? An unbeliever?"

Earlier Sister Ludmilla had directed and funded a hostel for the poor. She'd nursed the sick, the dying, the hungry. And it hadn't occurred to her that because she followed the Master's way, she'd be shielded from affliction. She simply kept believing and serving.

We're really in a war. Choosing to follow God's will means enlisting in spiritual battle, even if we don't acknowledge it. And if the Enemy can't destroy us, he'll at least try inflicting wounds to bog us down. Circumstances, weaknesses, relationships—any of these can be targeted for sometimes subtle, sometimes overt warfare. They can make us feel God's will isn't so perfect; that perhaps He's made a tragic mistake.

Yet more often than not, we battle ourselves and other people, forgetting that our struggle isn't just against the "flesh and blood," as Paul mentions in Ephesians 6.

He reminds us to wear "the full armor of God" and to fight an unseen world of "spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (v. 12).

It's important to remember that warfare is active, not passive. When we brandish "the sword of the Spirit" and "pray at all times," we're to fight aggressively. For example, praying "Lord, make this better" doesn't make the Devil flee. But resisting him does (Jas. 4:27), especially when we use the name of Jesus.

Suffering renders us useful. During a bout of despair, I once complained to a Christian friend: "My life is so painful, what can I say to my unsaved friends? Asking them to follow God feels like inviting them to suffer!"

While my friend sat quietly, the reality of my words sank in. Because according to the Apostle Peter, *suffering is precisely what Christians are called to do.*

In 1 Pet. 2:20–21, he wrote to persecuted Christians: "But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps."

Peter's readers suffered primarily because they were believers living in a pagan culture. Ironically, many of us suffer because we're Christians living like pagans. We're in pain from the sins of our parents, the sins of community, the sins of ourselves. And Christ, longing to create His likeness in us, allows the suffering. He knows that if we bow to its swordlike presence, we become more useful in His service.

Since hitting the wall of hardship, I'm a better listener, less driven, more sensitive to people with problems, less given to "easy" answers and self-pity. It's embarrassing to admit these as problem areas for me, but I'm encouraged over the progress I'm making. So are my family and friends.

And now I realize that for me, spiritual progress comes from the difficulties of following God.

MYSTERIOUS HOPE

"Why are you in despair, O my soul?" asked the psalmist. Then skipping the answer, he admonished himself: "Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him for the help of His presence" (Ps. 42:5, *NASB*).

Despite our quest for answers, our orderly lists of explanations, the psalmist has probably been the wisest of all. He realized that apparent "reasons" for our trials

often don't exist. Even if we're in God's will. Or spiritually mature. Or obedient in everything.

So eventually we're forced to skip the answers, to trust in God. For He—not a list of explanations—is our only hope. And we "praise Him for the help of His presence" because the God of our difficulties is also the God of our deliverance.

It is, indeed, a mystery.

Recently I rearranged the glasses in my kitchen cupboard. When I noticed one glass missing, it took a few moments before I recalled its demise against my office wall. *How could I have forgotten that?* I chided myself.

And then, like the psalmist, I skipped the answer and thought of the Lord's presence throughout six imperfect years. And that despite my sin, wrong motivations, doubts, complaints, wounds, and willfulness, He has eventually and continually delivered me. From my circumstances, from myself.

And that's a mystery I can live with.

Copyright 1988 Judy C. Couchman (Judith). Permission is granted to copy and distribute this article for small groups and church settings, as long as no fee is charged. All other uses need permission from the author.