

## GOD'S PLAN

Was it God's plan that Jesus had to die on the cross?  
For me, that's the most challenging question of our Christian faith.  
Did God intentionally send His beloved, only begotten Son to be  
beaten, whipped, and gruesomely crucified on Golgotha?  
If so, why? Why did Jesus' crucifixion have to happen?  
Was it really necessary?  
Wasn't there some other non-violent way God could have chosen  
to redeem and save us?

I think most Christians, at some time or other in their lives, find  
themselves wrestling with that sacred mystery.

Some people make peace with the idea that Jesus had to die, that  
there was no way around it because God simply can't tolerate sin, and it  
took Jesus' atoning sacrifice on the cross to pay the harsh, non-negotiable  
death penalty for humankind's transgressions.

Other people are so repulsed by the idea that God wanted, even  
demanded, Jesus' death on the cross before forgiving us, that they don't  
want to be Christians. They refuse to believe in and worship what they  
consider a bloodthirsty divine being.

If it was God's plan that Jesus was destined—you might say doomed—from  
the start to be killed in such a horrific way, it kind of makes you wonder  
what plan God might have in mind for us. Because if Jesus' example is any  
indication, when God makes a plan, anything can happen, and probably will.

Haven't we all thought to ourselves, at one time or another, "I believe  
God has a plan for my life"? We usually don't know what that plan is; we  
can't actually see the strategy God is following; and we can't be certain, as  
events unfold in our lives, that God's plan is really being worked out through  
them.

Nevertheless, we want to believe there's a divine plan for us, mostly because we need to believe there's a plan.

The idea that God causes bad things happen to us but has a good reason for doing it, even if we don't know what that good reason is, is less frightening than the idea that bad things happen to us randomly, for no beneficial and purposeful reason.

If a loved one of ours becomes infected with COVID 19, is placed on a ventilator and eventually dies; or if a family member contracts a virulent type of cancer, suffers terribly and then passes away, we wonder if it was part of God's plan.

We want there to be a reason why this tragedy happened, even if only God understands what that reason is, and even if we disagree with God's reasoning, because it helps us to accept that tragedy.

It gives us a measure of comfort to know that the terrible things that happen in our lives, and all the suffering and sorrow and grief those terrible things cause us, are part of a plan; that God has something more in mind—a divine blueprint—that we finite human beings aren't privy to, at least not yet.

Like the Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, "All things work together for good for those who love the Lord." But we just can't see that good in what happened—at least not yet.

We want to believe that the bad stuff that happens to us will have a happy ending, and because God planned it everything will turn out to be okay. Yes, it's true, sometimes as God's plan unfolds, human beings end up being collateral damage. But we try to accept that God knows what He is doing, and will bless and reward those who were unwitting victims of His divine strategy.

The tricky thing about the plans God makes is that they can end up disrupting our plans. Big time.

You know the old saying, "We make plans and God laughs." Because God holds all the cards, and His divine plan will override our human plans, every time.

And the really interesting thing is, sometimes God overrides His own plans.

For example, in the book of Jonah, Jonah was told by God that God was going to destroy the wicked city of Nineveh.

That was just fine with Jonah because he hated Nineveh. As far as he was concerned, fire away, Lord.

But then, after Jonah preached a one sentence, fiery sermon telling Nineveh what God was planning to do if things didn't change, the whole city repented.

And what did God do? God changed His previously announced plan.

The story of Jonah suggests to me that when we apply the word "plan" to God, we need to make sure we leave room for God to be God. If we believe God has some divine plan for our lives, for our nation, for the world or for anything else, we have to keep in mind that God's freedom and God's final authority gives God the right to change His mind when it better fits into His ultimate divine plan.

It would seem, then, that God sometimes allows our human freedom and self-determination to influence His divine plan—as happened when the people of Nineveh repented of their sins and God decided not to destroy that city.

God created the world, and the human race, not to follow some rigid, unalterable blueprint that God set in stone; but rather, God created the world and us with great love, and left room for us to grow and develop and learn from our mistakes.

God gives us the opportunity to change, and ultimately, when all is said and done, to do better in the end than we, or even God, thought we could do.

So, if it's true that God "makes His plan," as Paul Simon once sang, that divine plan grants us a degree of freedom to respond of our own independent will, hopefully motivated by faith and love.

Another way to put it is that God's plan is wonderfully adaptable and flexible, with various possible paths all leading to the same victorious outcome, and remaining faithful to God's greater, ultimate purpose.

I recently read a story about a man in his mid-sixties who had spent his entire working life as an accountant. The man was talking with his pastor, and during the conversation he said that he was convinced, through the events of his life, that God had really wanted him to go to seminary and become a minister.

There was a sense of great sadness in his expression as he revealed that very personal and emotional part of himself to his minister.

Here was a man who, as he was entering the twilight of his career, believed that his life decisions had been contrary to God's plan for his life.

"And yet," the man said, "as I look back on my life, I'm amazed at how wonderfully and how well God used what I have been. If I had gone to seminary and became a minister, as I believe was God's real plan for me, I never would have been a lay leader in the church and contributed and accomplished the things I did for Christ."

What a beautiful statement of faith.

I believe it's not as important for us to discover and follow God's particular plan for us, as it is for us to discover and follow Jesus Christ.

We don't have to adhere to a particular, unalterable divine roadmap, because the lord is alive, active, unpredictable, and infinitely resourceful in getting what God wants, and can work with any human plan we may come up with.

So, back to the original question I began this sermon with.

Was it God's plan that Jesus had to die on the cross?

Some will say, yes it was. It was totally and absolutely necessary for Jesus to be crucified for the forgiveness of our sins.

Others will resist that idea or outright reject it, calling it barbaric and totally contrary to the loving, compassionate God who doesn't wish for anyone, let alone God's only begotten Son, to suffer and die.

Whether or not Jesus' death on the cross was an intentional part of God's ultimate and unalterable plan of salvation is a matter of theological debate. But one thing we can say for certain is that Jesus freely and willingly offered up his life, believing himself that somehow his act of sacrificial love would establish a new relationship, a new covenant, between God and human beings. And so it did.

So in that sense, yes, it was God's will for Christ to be crucified and die on the cross, because it was Jesus' will; and ultimately Jesus' sacrifice accomplished what God wanted: to redeem and save humankind.

On the other hand, my own personal belief is that God, being the all-powerful, all-knowing God that He is, may have had other possible plans that would have also redeemed and saved us, if for some reason Jesus hadn't died on the cross.

So, why didn't God make sure to use some other plan that didn't have to cost Jesus his life?

Maybe because any other way wouldn't have so clearly and powerfully revealed God's love for us—a love so great that God gave His only Son so that whoever believes in Him might not perish, but might have eternal life.

Maybe it took Jesus' death on the cross to make us pay attention to God's plan of reconciliation and convince us of God's immeasurable love.

So when Jesus told his disciples, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise," I think he was saying to us, and to all of humanity, "God loves you without limit and without end, even to death on a cross. And so do I.

Thanks be to God. Amen.