Pulling Weeds, Growing Flowers: How to Choose God's Best

Practical Lessons from the Spiritual Gardens of Women of the Bible

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INTRODUCTION

Living the Christian life is a lot like a planting a rose garden. We dig the holes for the bushes, then plant, water, and fertilize them. Our hands get scratched on the ugly, thorny stumps. Then we wait, and wait. We get discouraged, and wonder if it's worth all the effort. But then one morning we see a new bud on our favorite rose bush. Before long we have a vase filled with fragrant roses. As we look at the beautiful flowers, we scarcely remember the hard work or the scratches. We are too busy marveling at God's creative handiwork. Like a rose garden, the Christian life is a joint effort—ours and God's. We need to do our share, but we also need to let Him do His part. Part of the secret is learning to discern the difference.

Sometimes we are too busy with the details of life to smell the roses.

FINDING FERTILE GROUND:
Willing to Do God's Will
Naomi (Ruth 1:1-3, 6, 16, 20; 2:20)

- **The first step in choosing God's best is a willingness to do His will.**
  - It's not hard to <u>know</u> God's will. The hard thing is *doing* it.
  - We pray, "Lord, show me your will." Then say, "Did you have a plan B?"
  - Barbara Bush at luncheon with President Bush and brother Jeb.
- **Is our heart like fertile soil—a willing receptacle for God to reveal His will?**
- **For Naomi, the answer was no. She had become bitter as a result of suffering.**
  - The suffering in her life was so intense that it overshadowed the blessings.
  - She had lost her husband and her children while living in a pagan country.
  - For years she had mourned. She cried out to the Lord. But He didn't seem to hear.
  - She felt abandoned by God. So she cried alone—a stranger in a foreign land.

A. Making logical or emotional choices instead of godly decisions (1:1-5).

- Travel to Moab to during famine to save lives of sons
- Famine was the result of punishment for Israel's disobedience.
- The promised land was the place of God's blessing, yet they left.
- After he death of her husband, Naomi's suffering intensified with death of her sons.

B. Rejection of the witness of others (1:16). Naomi's greatest blessing was her godly daughter-in-law, who professed her faith in the God of Israel. Naomi was smart enough to stop arguing, but not wise enough to trust the Lord.

C. Naomi's response to suffering was bitterness (1:20).

- Naomi's response to suffering was bitterness. She blamed God for her suffering.
- Job's response was the opposite—worship (Job 1:20-22).

D. Turning Back to God by focusing on His blessings (2:20).

- Naomi saw God at work in the life of her husband's relative, Boaz.
- Naomi is blessed with a grandson, the grandfather of King David. (4:14).

OUR WILLINGNESS TO DO GOD'S WILL IS BASED ON OUR VIEW OF GOD!

Finding Fertile Ground: Quiet Time

"For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13)

To work means to "energize" or "provide enablement." Is your heart fertile ground for God's leading? Are you allowing Him to work in your life?

The goal of doing God's will is to achieve His good pleasure. But the result is also that we will be blessed. Both divine enablement and human action are in involved in accomplishing God's will in our lives.

a. Write down anything in your heart or life right now that may be keeping you from God's will?

b. Ask God to work in your heart to prepare you to do His will.

c. Thank God that He loves you enough to want His will accomplished in your life.

Selecting The Seeds:
Making The Right Choices
Deborah (Judges 4—5)

- **Deborah bloomed like a fragrant rose in a field of overgrown weeds.**
- **She judged Israel in a time known by cycles of evil and deliverance.**

  - The people of Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua's life (Jud. 2:7).
  - The next generation forsook the Lord and worshipped pagan gods (Jud. 2:10-12).
  - The Israelites provoked the Lord. He delivered them to their oppressors (Jud. 2:14).
  - The people cried out to the Lord in repentance. He then raised up judges (2:16).
  - God delivered Israel. When each judge died, they returned to their evil ways.
  - Each generation became more corrupt than the last (Jud. 2:19).

A. Time of Rebellion against God (Jud. 4: 1).
- "Then the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD . . ."
- "So they forsook the LORD and served Baal and the Ashtaroth" (Jud. 2:13)
- English philosopher Edmund Burke said, *The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.*

B. Discipline resulting from Israel's disobedience (Jud. 4: 2-3).
- "And the Lord sold them into the hand of Jabin king of Canaan
- . . . and he oppressed the sons of Israel severely for twenty years.

C. A Faithful Woman of God (Jud. 4:4-5).
- The prophetess Deborah "was judging Israel at that time."
- Her life was a picture of peace as she is depicted sitting under a palm tree.
- Here is a *woman* judging Israel. Where are the men?
- The male leadership of Israel was established by God is the selecting of men as heads of the people (Exo. 18:25), priests (28:41), and kings (1 Sam. 16:12).

D. God's command and Barak's response (Jud. 4:6-8).
- God speaks through a woman to command Barak to march against Israel's enemy.
- God promises victory. Sisera, commander of Jabin's army to be given to Barak (v. 7)
- Barak's conditional acceptance (Deborah must go also) (v. 8)
- Seems to be lack of faith because of Deborah's response in the next verse.

E. God will give the honor to another (Jud. 4: 9).
- God's judgment on Barak (and the nation Israel) is to give the honor to a woman.
- Note Deborah's submission to the Lord and Barak. She did not hesitate!

GOD WILL ONLY USE US TO THE EXTENT WE ARE WILLING TO COMMIT TO HIM!

Making The Right Choices: Quiet Time

"Therefore to him who knows to do good,
and does it not, to him it is sin"
(Jam. 4:17)

Often we are afraid to do something, thinking we may do the wrong thing. But there are times in our life when a failure to act may be sin.

a. Write down some examples of times in your life that you, like Deborah, were faithful to obey the Lord.

b. What was the result?

c. Is there any part of your life that is like Barak, hesitant to step out by faith?

d. How can you make the right choice in following God and trusting Him for the victory?

Choosing The Season: The Timing Of God's Will

Esther (Book of Esther)

- **The events in Esther are structured like an intricately designed clock.**
- **Providence is God's hand on the steering wheel of the universe.**

A. The training of a queen (Est. 2:7, 20).

- Mordecai faithfully brought up his niece in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.
- And he was a single parent! No super nanny here!!
- Her willing submission to Mordecai prepared her to be a queen!
- Esther's personal discipline and character are evident throughout the book.

B. The timing of events (1:19; 2:17; 2:22; 3:10; 6:1; 7:10; 9:1; 10:3).

- Vashti is deposed as Queen
- Esther is crowned as Queen
- Mordecai informs Esther of the plot to kill the king
- Haman, the enemy of the Jews is promoted
- During a sleepless night the King reads of Mordecai saving his life
- Haman seeks permission to kill Mordecai
- Mordecai is honored by the king; led through the city square by Haman
- Haman is hanged on the gallows after his plot is revealed
- The Jew won mastery over their enemies
- Morcecai is promoted to second in the kingdom

C. The specifics of God's Will (4:14).

- Mordecai's command to Esther was very specific (4:8)
- Her initial reply was she had to be persuaded
- On of the best verses in Scripture to define the will of God [note different factors].
- "Such a time as this" emphasizes providence of God in elevation of Esther as Queen.
- She was in the right place at the right time.
- God knew He could trust her to carry out His will.

D. Esther's response was total obedience.

- "**go** in to the king"
- "**implore** his favor"
- "**plead** with him for her people"
- She risked her life by appearing before the king without being summoned (5:1).
- She obtained favor in his sight (5:2; 7:3).
- She pled with him to spare the lives of her people, the Jews (8:3).

God used Esther's commitment to obedience to save the nation Israel from distinction and preserve the line through which Jesus Christ would be born as Savior of the world.

THE TIMES ARE IN GOD'S HANDS!

Don't be impatient! It took Noah six months to find a parking place!

The Timing Of God's Will: Quiet Time

"And who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this? (Esther 4:14)

In this verse Mordecai challenges Esther to action because of God's providential timing in her life. The providence of God is like a sweet aroma of perfume that permeates every corner of a room. It affects each aspect of our life. God is continually at work in our lives, whether subtly or dramatically. Sometimes it's a gentle nudge. Other times, it is like a tsunami.

a. As you look back on your life, what are some ways in which you see the providence of God at work through various circumstances?

b. What is a specific example of God's providence preparing you for something you are currently doing or perhaps a relationship you have?

c. So you have someone like Mordecai in your life that challenges you to follow God's leading? How has he or she helped you?

d. How can you be an encouragement to a loved one or friend so he or she will be challenged to obey the Lord's leading?

Picking the Flowers: Acting on God's Leading

Ruth (Book of Ruth)

- **Esther was a young Jewish orphan married to a pagan king.**
- **Ruth was a Gentile widow who left a pagan country to go to Bethlehem**
- **Esther ruled in a palace; Ruth gleaned in a field**
- **Both were foreigners living in a land other than their own**
- **Both found favor in the eyes of those who saw them**
- **Both were women of integrity**

♦ **Like Esther, Ruth acted on God's leading.**

♦ **She left her home, her family, and the gods of Moab to seek the LORD.**

A. Rejecting bad advice (1:15). Naomi tries to persuade Ruth to return to Moab with her sister-in-law.

B. Fully dependent upon God (1:16-17).
- One of the greatest declarations of faith in the Bible.
- A Gentile has more faith than her Jewish mother-in-law
- Her decision is permanent, ". . . there I will be buried."
- Her vow invokes divine punishment if not kept.

C. Submission to God (2:12) and others (3:5). Ruth's trust in God enabled her to submit to those in authority over her.

- Boaz recognizes Ruth's faith as he blesses her for seeking her refuge in the Lord.
- Without hesitation, Ruth sets out to obey every detail of Naomi's command

D. A woman of excellence (3:11).
- Ruth's testimony is known throughout the city of Bethlehem
- Excellence means bravery or virtue
- Ruth is a Proverbs 31 woman!

E. Blessed by God (4:13).
- Boaz takes Ruth as his wife and God gives them a son!
- She is the great-grandmother of King David.

RUTH WAS A WOMAN OF EXCELLENCE,
BUT SHE WAS ALSO A WOMAN OF ACTION!

Even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there!

Acting On God's Leading: Quiet Time

". . . where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God."
(Ruth 1:16)

Faith in God is a great motivator! It enables us to walk on uncharted paths. As we seek refuge under His wings, are we willing to trust Him in the challenges of our life?

a. What thoughts might Ruth have had as she followed her mother-in-law and turned her back on Moab?

b. What were some of the evidences of faith in Ruth's life?

c. What are evidences of faith in your life?

d. In which areas of your life do you need to increase your faith in the Lord?

Smelling The Roses: Rejoicing in God's Plan

Hannah (1 Samuel 1:1-2:10)

- **If we're going to smell the roses, we have to watch out for the thorns.**
- **For Hannah, suffering came before blessing and rejoicing!**

A. Enduring persecution as a believer (1:6).
- Polygamy was not God's ideal for a marriage (Gen. 2:24; Deut. 21:15-17)
- Hannah was bitterly provoked by Peninnah, especially at worship in Shiloh
- The persecution of Hannah resulted in extreme sorrow.

B. A failure to retaliate (1:7).
- Hannah wept and did not eat
- Hannah was greatly distressed (v. 10)
- She prayed to the Lord
- She wept bitterly

C. Prayer with a promise (1:10-11).
- She vowed that if God would give her a son, she will give him to the LORD.
  - Dedicated to lifelong levitical service (Num. 4:2-3) (usually 30-50)
  - Take vow of Lifelong Nazirite (Num. 6:1-8)
- Hannah's prayer was specific and intense, but it was not selfish.
- "I have poured out my soul to the Lord" (1:15).

D. Keeping a promise (1:27-28).
- Hannah's faith was rewarded,
- Hannah recognized that Samuel was an answer to her prayer.
- Hannah's vow was fulfilled as she dedicated Samuel to the Lord
- Even though Samuel was still quite young, his response was to worship God.

E. Rejoicing in the Lord (2:1).
- Rather than grieving, Hannah writes a song of praise to God
- Samuel called the nation Israel to a revival of true worship of God.
- Samuel became one of Israel's great prophets (3:19-20).

"REJOICE IN THE LORD ALWAYS" (PHIL. 4:4).

AND DON'T FORGET TO SMELL THE ROSES!

Rejoicing in God's Plan: Quiet Time

The Weaver

My life is but a weaving, between my God and me,
I do not choose the colors, He worketh steadily.
Ofttimes he weaveth sorrow, and I in foolish pride
Forget He sees the upper, and I the underside.
Not till the loom is silent, and the shuttles cease to fly,
Will God unroll the canvas, and explain the reasons why
The dark threads are as needful in the skillful weaver's hand
As threads of gold and silver in the pattern He has planned.

Rejoicing in God's plan is a result of understanding who He is! Everything He brings into our life has a reason. "All things work together for good to those who love Him and are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

a. In what way has God spoken to your heart during this retreat?

b. Is there anything you think God wants you to do as a result of His leading?

c. What specific action will you take in order to obey Him?

If you are not sure if you are a Christian, you can make that life-changing decision today. Jesus Christ, God's only Son, came into the world to bring salvation. John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life." You can have eternal life by placing your faith in Jesus Christ. Pray this simple prayer: "Heavenly Father, I believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross for my sin. Right now, I receive Him into my heart as my personal Savior. Thank you for forgiving my sins and giving me eternal life. In Jesus' name. Amen."

DETERMINING GOD'S WILL

A. Some general principles.

1. God's first priority is to accept Christ as Savior (2 Pet. 3:9). God is more interested in your soul than He is in your circumstances.
2. For believers, God's first objective is to be controlled by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:17-18; 1 John 1:9). There is no power for knowing or doing the will of God apart from the Spirit of God.
3. God is working in our lives to give us both the desire and enablement to do His will (Phil. 2:13; Rom. 8:32).
4. The Word of God reveals the will of God. One reason for the 176 verses in Psalm 119 is to teach us to discover God's will from God's Word (Isa. 55:8-9). Satan is the great counterfeiter who tries to devour believers (1 Pet. 5:8).
5. Prayer reveals God's will, "If anyone lacks wisdom . . .ask " (Jam. 1:5).
6. Faith is essential to pleasing God and discovering His will (Heb. 11:6). The examples of people in Hebrews 11 detail a variety of ways people trusted God. Thus, a key element to determining the will of God is the degree you are willing to trust God for His will (Pro. 3:5-6).
7. Submission to God is essential, "Not my will but Thine..." (Luke 22:42).
8. The providential leading of God can indicate the will of God (Acts 10; Gen 24). But remember circumstances and even peace can be rationalized.
9. Counsel of godly people is important (Pro. 19:20).

B. Questions to test decisions and actions:

1. Does it glorify God? (Matt. 6:1-6; Col. 3:17; 1 Cor. 10:31)
2. Does it help believers grow in Christ? (1 Cor. 3:1-3; 8:7-13; Rom. 14)
3. Does it win a hearing for the gospel? (1 Cor. 9:19-23; 5:9-11)
4. Does it help me grow spiritually? (Phil. 3:5-6, 13; 1 Cor. 9:24-29.

Agape love always seeks the best in the other person (1 Cor. 13)

"A man's heart is right when he wills what God wills"
Thomas Aquinas (Psalm 37:4)

"To know God is man's greatest treasure.
To do God's will is man's greatest privilege."