

Ten Evenings With God

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Introduction

Happiness and freedom are the two main desires of the human heart. Every person desires to be happy, and by this I mean every person wants to be loved, to feel secure, to be at peace, and to experience goodness. But every person also desires freedom, to live without coercion or constraint, spontaneously alive in choice and action. This concept of freedom, however, is the secular view, the worldly idea of freedom as the ability to choose for oneself, as the idol of my parents' generation, Frank Sinatra, once sang, "I Did It My Way."

The worldly idea of freedom fits snugly into the consumer culture in which we are immersed with its proffered promises of enduring happiness, beauty, and longevity. Larger homes, bigger cars, luxury upon luxury—we are led to believe that happiness is having everything we want and freedom is the ability to attain our desires. This may work for some people who are skillful in accumulating wealth, but the truth is real happiness and freedom have little to do with material things or living without constraint—and everything to do with God, who is the source of all that exists.

Some people come to realize the truth of happiness and freedom only when they can no longer depend on material things to fulfill their thirst for life's deepest desires, such as when illness strikes or they lose a loved one or a natural disaster destroys all their possessions. Others never find happiness or freedom because they are too enmeshed in themselves and enslaved by their personal desires. But for those who are willing to walk by faith, happiness and freedom can be found by seeking the will of God.

Although many books (including many based on the insights of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, the great teacher of spiritual discernment) address the subject of the will of God, I have chosen to explore the will of God not as end in itself but as the path to freedom, not the freedom of autonomy but the freedom to love. Too often these days, especially in the public political sector, we find “will of God” language used as a trump card for political agendas whether they entail stem-cell research, euthanasia, or the war in the Middle East. The politicizing of the will of God amid material wealth has created confusion and fragmentation in society—leading either to an abandonment of God or a shallow understanding of the will of God.

For some, the will of God is unimportant; for others, it is a fearful force that defines life. As a result, many young people have difficulty discerning their vocation in life. Amid life’s confusion they ask, “What is God’s will for me?” For some, the will of God seems too vague and obscure and so they exchange it for accumulated wealth (happiness is creating your own heaven on earth). For others, the will of God requires certainty and so they are drawn to institutions of rigid, hierarchical structure where the principal virtue is blind obedience. However, neither abandoning the will of God nor forming it into an ideology leads to freedom and happiness; rather, either extreme can easily throw one into despair and confusion.

The will of God will always elude us if we are looking for certainty. Because we live in a scientific age, we contemporary folk prefer immediate answers with a high degree of certitude. Just as science provides us with data, so too, we want God to be explicit about the divine plans for us. Perhaps this desire for certainty is not too different from the ancient Israelites who wandered in the desert and got lost. When Moses returned from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments, he found the Israelites had begun worshipping

an idol—a god they could see and control. Moses returned to the mountain to ask God for more explicit directions, more concrete revelation, and visible presence. But God said to him, “[W]hile my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen” (Exodus 33:22-23). God revealed to Moses that Divine Presence is always hidden; one cannot see the face of God and live. That is because God is much more than we can imagine or conceive. We can never really know God or God’s ways because God is beyond all knowledge; God is incomprehensible love.

Yet, while the amazing mystery of God is beyond our human comprehension, it is not out of our spiritual reach. In his classic autobiography, Saint Augustine (of Hippo) tells us that he searched everywhere for God only to realize that “you were more inward than my inmost self, and superior to my highest being.”¹ We are not only capable of knowing God within us (though we may not attain complete knowledge of God), but we are also capable of loving God (which is a higher form of knowledge) and thus we are created to live in the will of God.

In short, the source of our happiness and freedom lies in God when we come to know ourselves in God. To discover our identity is to find God, and to find God is to discover happiness in which lies our freedom. The medieval theologian, Saint Bonaventure, once said that happiness is of the heart. “No one can be made happy,” he wrote, “unless he or she rises above oneself by an ascent of the heart. But we cannot rise above ourselves unless a higher power lifts us up.” Saint Bonaventure tell us, “Prayer, is the mother and source of the ascent.”² If we desire happiness, then we must learn to pray because the will of God is not a thing or object to attain, it is not a blueprint but a living relationship of love.

The will of God cannot be purchased for a price or extinguished by oppressive forces, but it is a freedom deep within the human heart. If we find this freedom and live from its source of energy, we will discover the giftedness of our humanity and the freedom to become the human person that God has created us to be.

To explore this relationship between the will of God and freedom, I offer ten evenings of prayerful reflections. In the first evening, the revelation of God as love is discussed as the foundation for the will of God. As you awaken to the presence of God in your life, it is good to ask, “Who is God? How do you experience God?” Once you begin to explore the question of God, you will begin to plumb the depths of the will of God.

On the second evening, we examine prayer as relationship with God, the importance of solitude for listening to God, and the use of the senses in discerning God’s presence in our lives. The third evening focuses more specifically on discernment and the meaning of discernment as integral to human life. The fourth evening explores the signs of knowing when our choices are leading us in the right direction or when they are leading us in the wrong direction. Here the insights of Ignatius of Loyola are tapped to distinguish between good and evil spirits and the difference between these spirits.

Ignatius’s “intellectual” approach is tempered by an emphasis on the movements of the heart when we look at discernment through the lens of the Franciscan tradition. The Franciscan approach to discernment is attentiveness to the interior movements of the heart. Following Augustine’s insight on the restless heart that longs for God, discernment is examined as the heart of God in search of the human heart: Heart calls to heart. Discernment, therefore, is an ongoing movement through a deepening of relationship with God.

Approaching the middle of our ten-day journey, the fifth evening is a time of letting go and coming to realize that living in the will of

God is a continuous growth of wheat among the weeds of our lives. On the sixth evening, we move beyond how to make choices in life to living life as the choice for God. The maturing of discernment is expressed in surrender or the entrusting of oneself to God. It is a deepening of life in God through openness, poverty of being, and receptivity, all of which are the fruit of prayer and the centering of one's life in God. Gratitude becomes the language of surrender when we accept the totality of life as gift.

The seventh and eighth evenings bring us to the realization that living in the will of God is living in the ebb and flow of love. Our tendency in everyday life prompts us to hold on and control the events of our lives, but each moment invites us to let go into God and allow God to be the center of our thoughts and actions. Because we easily forget the simplicity of letting go and allowing God's love to govern our lives, we look to the book of nature to teach us the path to holiness through self-surrender. Thus we take a moment in the eighth evening to consider nature as a mirror of our lives as we seek to find God in the changes of our lives. Nature teaches us that to live in surrender to God is to discover freedom in love, and happiness as the enjoyment of being alive.

The ninth evening reflects on the progression from surrender to freedom, where we experience life in the Spirit of God as being possessed by God. That is, we experience the fidelity of God's love and trust the divine presence to such a degree that our choices in life are for the sake of love alone, a love greater than ourselves but which completes ourselves. Freedom is choosing our path in life that leads to the fullness of love. This is the path of Jesus Christ who shows us the meaning of freedom in love, which is love unto death; that is, freedom in love leads to the cross. The one who lives in surrender to God, and thus freely in God, is not afraid to die but rather sees death as integral to the fullness of life. For such a person true

freedom is the path of true commitment where love of the other is greater than love of self.

On the tenth and final evening, we begin to see that by loving the other, a person truly loves oneself because it is in union with the other that one finds oneself. Only when we begin to live in the will of God as the freedom to be ourselves does the unfolding of the reign of God through our lives take place. Christ lives only when we can give ourselves away in love. To live in love is to live in Christ or rather to give birth to Christ in our lives. This is the meaning of Christian love.

The path from prayer to surrender to freedom is the path to life. To seek the will of God is to seek life, to be a human person. The early Church Father, Irenaeus of Lyons, once said that the glory of God is the human person fully alive. This is what we are created for—the glory of God—nothing more and nothing less. Do our lives give God glory? Are we growing in the freedom of love? This small book may not provide any immediate answers but hopefully it will provide fertile soil for the mind and heart so that, like the tiny mustard seed, our lives may grow into a harvest of love.

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Awakening and Discovery

Life in God is a daring adventure through the uncharted depths of love. God breathes life into us through the Spirit of love, and this Spirit of love is the daily breath of our lives. We do not belong to God as slaves or fearful creatures but as children of a loving Father, brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, and spouses of the Holy Spirit. Life with God is relational because God is a Trinity of love. God is not a “loner” or an isolated “thinker.” God is not an elderly grandfather or the Marlboro man or an emperor. Rather, “God” is Trinity, a communion of persons in love. Relationship, therefore, is fundamental to what we call the “will of God.” In his book *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Thomas Merton highlights relationship as the true meaning of God’s will. Too often we think of the will of God as an impersonal law rather than as an invitation to love, he indicates. We think of God’s will like a force that controls us rather than an intimate encounter that takes place in contemplation. “We must learn to realize that the love of God seeks us in every situation,” he writes, “and seeks our good.”³ To know the will of God is to awaken to God’s love within us and around us. It is to realize that we are created out of love, we exist in love, and we are destined for eternal love. If all of creation flows out of love and unto love, then the only reason for our existence is *to love*. To be a Christian is to love well—to love first.

The problem with God is one of utter simplicity. We tend to com-

plicate God by projecting onto God everything we think God is or should be or might be. The beauty of Jesus Christ is the revelation of God, summed by the First Letter of John: “God is love” (1 John 4:8). How simple—*God is love*—and out of this love flows all of life.

Why do we speak of the love of God? Because the will of God is God’s inscrutable love for us! The *will* connotes affectivity and desire; it is the gravity of being. The will of God is not a “thing” or a rule or an object to attain. It is not like getting a degree or finding the right spouse. We cannot find the will of God as if finding an object; nor can we follow the will of God as if following a method or a plan of life. We cannot understand God’s love in the same way we understand a math problem or a story. The will of God is the perfect, simple, absolute love of God and the desire of God for his creatures.

Just as we humans are filled with many desires, fame, wealth, friendship, happiness, and peace, so too God is filled with desire; above all, the desire that we love God with our entire being, and in this love give glory to God. Thus we cannot know the will of God apart from the love of God and the desire for God. Faith is belief in the love of God, which is beyond our comprehension because it is divine love, a love that is eternal, perfect, and immutable.

To seek the will of God is to remain open to the many ways God expresses his love for us, through our neighbors, our family members, our community, or the beauty of creation. God’s love is mystery; it is incomprehensible, ineffable, invisible, indescribable, yet this love is the reason for our lives and for the life of this universe. Without the love of God we would not exist.

God’s will is God’s love for us and we must be ready to encounter that love, accept it, and respond to it in love. The meaning of our lives can only be found in the love of God. For deep in the love of God lies our happiness, our peace, our hope, and our fullness of

life. In this first evening, it is enough to ponder the profound simplicity of God: God is Love.

What Is the “Will of God?”

Life presents a series of unending choices. Day by day we are confronted by the need to make decisions, some of which are small decisions and others that can be “life-changing” decisions. How do we know what to decide? If we change jobs or decide to marry or enter a religious community, how do we know that our choice is in accordance with God’s will? What if we make the “wrong” choice? Will God punish us? Not too long ago, a young woman I knew decided to leave religious life after a difficult time of trying to live in community. Although she went through the proper channels of discernment, she still wondered about her decision and left saying, “I hope God does not punish me for this!” Many people are beset by the fear of God, as if God is quick to anger and slow to forgive. This may be the image of God portrayed in parts of the Old Testament, but this is not the God revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. The God of Jesus Christ is the God of unconditional love, and we must begin to see the will of God through the eyes of love.

The will of God is God’s desire to love each of us unconditionally and freely, as if each person was born for God alone. The will of God is the Spirit of God eternally breathed forth by the mutual love between the Father and the Son. Each of us is created through this continuous act of eternal love; we are created out of God’s desire to share love personally and individually. Because God is love, God can “will” nothing less than love, and anything other than love is not the will of God. That is why any disaster or misfortune cannot be the will of God because God does not desire our destruction or annihilation but life for us. Bad things happen to good people not because God “wills” it so but because we are finite beings. All of