life groups study guide

how can I know God's plan for my life?

LIFE GROUPS
doing life together

"I wonder what sort of tale we've fallen into."
Sam to Frodo in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*

"He has also set eternity in the hearts of men;
yet they cannot fathom what God has done
from beginning to end."
Ecclesiastes 3:11

In Life Groups, kids, youth and adults study God's Word together and discuss the issues and challenges of life.

The Universal Question

It is asked in different ways. Within the church we would phrase it as we have for this sermon: What is God's Plan for my Life? Outside the church, however, the same question still gets asked. It may be phrased in a way that sounds very un-churchy. In fact, God may be stripped out of it altogether. In such instances it would be put forth like this: "Why Am I Here?" Whether God is inserted into the equation or not, I believe the questions are, at their core, one and the same. Rick Warren wrote a bestselling book and made, like, a kajillion dollars that was centered around this very question. He puts it this way: "What on earth am I here for?" Don't think this is a universal question? The most recent sales figures I could find for *PDL* was 30 million copies sold – and that was from 2007!

Q :: Why do we have this burning desire to know why we were made?
And when we dig really deep, what things, ideas, thoughts, or feelings might be at the heart of this question – what are people really asking?

Q :: Why does this question also seem so universally hard to answer?

Q :: What exactly does it mean that God has set eternity in the hearts of men, as mentioned in Ecclesiastes 3, and quoted above?

Two Plans – Two Crosses

I believe God has two plans for all people – and both involve crosses. It's not like God necessarily has a "Plan B" in the sense that it's a backup if the first idea fails, but I believe God, first, has a universal plan for ALL people – and then an individual plan for people, but only after the first plan is acted upon or received.

The universal plan for every person is that they come to repentance and are reconciled to God through acceptance of Jesus Christ's payment of their sin debt on the cross. Scripture tells us that God is not willing that ***any*** should perish (2 Peter 3:9). Since Scripture also makes it abundantly clear that ALL have sinned, and that the wages of sin is death, AND that God is not willing that ANY should perish – I think it's safe to say that as a starting point, God's plan for our life is to have a relationship with Himself through Jesus. And really, if you're trying to answer the "Why Am I Here?" question without starting at this baseline plan that God has clearly spelled out then you can just move on to another question entirely because I don't think you'll ever have a credible – or satisfying – answer.

Q :: For an unbeliever asking why there were made, what might be some reasons they would not be happy with this answer above?

Q :: The answer to the question, of course, is dictated largely by the context of the asking. In other words, the first part of the answer as listed above is not what you would get if the answer is sought outside of an inclusion of God. Asking the question of "Why Am I Here?" outside of the context of a biblical or Christian worldview will get you different answers. How do you

think the world – or our post modern, pluralistic and 'inclusive' culture – attempts to answer the question?

Q :: I think many believers see their conversion as the fulfillment of God's plan in their life. What might some negative consequences of that notion be? For the person themselves? For an unbelieving person watching from the outside?

The universal plan for people has at it's heart, the first cross. The one Jesus was crucified upon. God's individual plan for us also involves a cross – except this one is ours.

I'm actually a little surprised at where the Holy Spirit directed my thinking on this. A few weeks ago we talked about why God tolerates evil, but the underlying idea of that was "Why do bad things happen to good people?". We are quick to want to explain bad things away as results from being in a broken world, or suffering the consequences of someone else's free will. And while those may be true, I'm sensing that something bigger may be at play.

Many Christians can recite Jeremiah 29:11 from memory - some, I suspect, may even claim it as their life-verse. It is wonderful Scripture. Encouraging. Hope-filled.

> *"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."*

But if we claim that as some sort of promise that God ONLY has good ***things*** in store for us, then I think we may have hijacked the verse in an attempt to get it to say something that it doesn't. Notice the implication in my statement is that God may not only have good THINGS in store for us – the Scripture clearly states that God's ***plan*** for us is good, but I think we often want that to mean that God would never allow bad events to overtake us.

The very context of the verse contradicts this idea. Read Jeremiah 29: 4-14.

I believe, in context, this verse was originally intended to give hope, much as it still is (and does) today. But hope was needed because the Israelites were living in exile. And they were in that condition because God had carried them there Himself (mentioned in v. 4 and 14). Not only that, he was leaving them there, as captives, for SEVENTY YEARS (v. 10). That doesn't fit as nicely with the whole "plans to prosper you and not harm you" thing, right?

Actually there is a lot of language in the Bible that speaks to our need to be broken – or even to die (1 Corinthians 15:29-31; 2 Corinthians 4:10-12; Luke 9:23-24; Galatians 2:20). Clearly God's plan for us involves a second cross - our own. The one that Jesus, Himself, tells us we are to take and carry as we follow along after Him. And, lest we miss it, we are to do this daily. And I believe this term of taking up your cross, or having a cross to bear, has lost some of it's resonance that it most certainly would have had in full-effect on the people of Jesus' day. Carrying your cross meant one thing: you were on your way to die.

Os Hillman writes this:

> *"The goal of the Christian life is death, not success. A popular teaching says that if we follow God, we will prosper materially. God may, in fact, bless His people materially, but few can make this claim among third-world countries. Wealth must never be the goal of a person's life, only a by-product.*
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> *A missionary to a Middle-Eastern country has shared a motto among their ministry team: "God does not require success, but radical, immediate obedience." Jesus' obedience gained Him the cross. It did not gain Him popularity among the heathen, the religious or financial success, or a life of pleasure. His obedience resulted in His death on the cross. This is the same goal Christ has for each of us – death of our old nature so that He might live through us."*

Q :: As ***believer's*** ask the question: "What is God's Plan for My Life?" do you think the expected outcome is success-oriented? In other words, are they looking for a way to die to anything keeping them from more complete Christ-likeness, or are they

looking for a way to be successful in the Christian walk? Are those two things different or not? Explain.

Q :: Has a culture far-removed from the practice of crucifixion diminished our ability to grasp what Jesus wants us to do as His disciples (as stated in Luke 9:23)?

Q :: In Jeremiah 29, what we see is God's discipline for rebellion as the reason for the bleak circumstances the Israelites find themselves in. Obviously God can still discipline us via our circumstances. What are some other potential reasons God may actually be orchestrating difficulties in our life?

As much as the Bible speaks about dying being sort of an unexpected component of God's plan for us, it is also rife with examples of something else that seems to be part of God's individual plan for us – something short of death, but still surprising, unpleasant and sometimes, perhaps, just as painful. That would be brokenness. Again, from Os Hillman:

> *"There is an oxymoron throughout the Bible. It says that brokenness is strength. How can this be? How can brokenness be strength? In order to use men and women to their fullest extent, the Lord has to break His servants so that they might have a new kind of strength that is not human in origin. It is strength in spirit that is born only through brokenness.*
>
> *Paul was broken on the Damascus road. Peter was broken after Jesus was taken prisoner. Jacob was broken at Peniel. David was broken after his sin with Bathsheba. The list could go on of those the Lord had to break in different ways before they could be used in the Kingdom.*
>
> *When we are broken, we see the frailty of human strength and come to grips with the reality that we can do nothing in our own strength. Then, new strength emerges that God uses mightily. God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.*
>
> *Do not fear brokenness, for it may be the missing ingredient to a life that emerges with a new kind of strength and experience not known before."*

Q :: Please share examples where God used brokenness in your life to bring about a new kind of strength - that was not of yourself?

Q :: What are the differences in brokenness and dying to self? Is it important to know which is required in a given situation?

Q :: How do we get to the place where we want the death and brokenness aspects of God's plan for our life as much as we want success, or a greater level of whatever I feel I can contribute to the Kingdom?

Conclusion

My fear in all this is that it will appear that God's plan for us is limited to these two things. That somehow I don't think God does have a good plan for us, and that He loves to bless and prosper His children (especially when they are obedient). For the record, I do believe those things. Completely.

I just also think that God is about much more than making me happy (which itself kinda doesn't make me happy - at least in my flesh). I have been very challenged in preparing this. I want God's ultimate plan for me – to make me like His Son – to be fully realized. Do I still want blessings, joy, peace, prosperity? Sure. But my prayer is that they would be benefits and not the goal.

I was praying recently to grow in favor with God and with men. Sounds like a good prayer, right. I mean, that's specifically how Scripture says Jesus grew. I felt good about praying it – until the Holy Spirit rose up inside and asked "I know why you want favor from men – why do you want favor from me?" Sadly, the answer was: So you will grant even more favor with men. Now, as I had been praying this I don't think I was even aware that the prayer was not rightly motivated. I have a more focused prayer now.

As I seek God's plan for my life I just want the right motive behind the effort.
Because, y'see, there's this selfish thing living inside of me that still needs to die.