

Mark 8.31-38

God's plans and your heart's desire

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Sunday 5 February 2017

Looking in the right place

I have, in my time, lost all sorts of things. I once came home from school with only one shoe, and once without my trousers. I have to have rules about where I put things, to help make sure I don't lose them. I've even tried gadgets that you can stick to things, and then make a noise when you've lost it.

Attempt to make the church keyring sound a noise.

Have you ever turned your house upside-down looking for a thing you've lost, only to discover it's in your car – or worse, in your pocket – or even worse, *you're already wearing them*. I don't yet need to wear glasses, but I've done that with my sunglasses more times than I'd like to admit.

The thing is, it doesn't matter how carefully you look for the thing you've lost, or how long you spend looking: if you are looking in the wrong place, you are *never* going to find it.

Sometimes we can make that mistake in the Bible; instead of reading it as a whole, we only look in certain places – which means we will never find what we are really looking for. I don't know about you, but I gravitate towards what some people call 'purple passages' – those bits of the Bible that we love to read.

Here are some verses that you may recognise:

'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.'

Jeremiah 29.11 (NIV)

Take delight in the Lord,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Psalms 37.4 (NIV)

[Jesus said,] 'The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.'

John 10.10 (NIV)

That last one can also be translated, **'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly'** (ESV, NRSV).

They are wonderful, encouraging verses – but the problem is, life isn't always like that. I *don't* feel like I'm living life to the full all the time, I *don't* have all the desires of my heart, I *don't* prosper in everything I do, and I *don't* always feel full of hope.

I experience daily difficulty and frustration. Some of you know that I struggle to sleep properly. I am constantly operating below my best, and I find that really difficult. I have to go to bed in the middle of the day, I don't get everything done that I want to do, or need to do. I don't do things as well as I would like – all because I am constantly tired.

Please don't everyone come up to me afterwards and suggest cures – I have been to several GPs, I've read dozens of websites about insomnia, I've tried pills, lavender, relaxation techniques. I think it is something I have to live with, and it forces me to rely less on my own abilities, and much more on God's grace – which is a good thing, even if I don't always think of it like that!

How do we make sense of verses which are encouraging, but don't seem to match up to the life we all experience every day? Is the problem me, or God? Is it God's will that I don't sleep properly? Is it God's will that you struggle with whatever you struggle with? Why am I harmed sometimes, why don't I always prosper?

God's Plans (31-33 / Jeremiah 29.11)

Hands up: who likes making lists? Who likes planning holidays? Who likes to put things neatly in order? I'll admit it: my CDs are in alphabetical order by band name or the artist's surname, and then in release-date order.

Making lists, planning and organising are all things that help us achieve something. Whether our goal is having a fridge full of the food we need, a CD collection that's easy to use, or an IKEA wardrobe full of clothes, having a plan is *really* useful.

Simon Peter had a plan. He knew Jesus was **the Messiah** – look in verse 29, right before our reading. He knew Jesus was God's chosen one, come to save Israel. And, as one of Jesus' inner core of followers, he knew that when Jesus took over, he (Peter) would be *super* important. He would be Jesus' main man, with power, position and prosperity. *That* was Peter's plan.

At the time, people saw health and wealth as the sign of God's blessing – the promised '**plans to prosper you**' in Jeremiah 29.11. That's what Peter was looking for. After all, he'd left everything behind to follow Jesus – as he points out a couple of chapters after this, in Mark 10.28. He *deserved* it, it was his reward.

And so when Jesus **began to teach them that [he] was going to suffer many things and be rejected... killed and... rise again** (31), Peter wasn't happy. That wasn't the plan! Jesus was supposed to be a conqueror, not **rejected** and **killed**!

So Peter did an astonishing thing: he **took [Jesus] aside** and **began to rebuke him** (32). I mean, that's quite something. He took the incarnate Son of God, who was with the Father before the world was made, the one through whom and for whom everything was made, and *told him off*.

Pause

If I'm honest, some of that petulance is inside me, too. When I don't get what I want, when things don't turn out as I planned – the inner teenager comes out and I tell God he doesn't know what he's doing. Sometimes I even quote his words back at him – what about those **plans to prosper** me **and not to harm** me, God?

But the thing is, the world is broken, messy, complicated and difficult. A simplistic understanding of God's promises will only cause problems, and end up discouraging us – which is the opposite of God's intention! So this morning we're looking at what God's plan for you *really* is. I hope that sounds helpful?

And Jeremiah knew that, too. His book is 50% whingeing. (That may be a *slight* exaggeration!) He is angry and frustrated with God, because things haven't turned out the way he planned. He saw himself as a mighty prophet, proclaiming the Word of God powerfully and with awesome results.

Well he *was* a mighty prophet, and he *did* proclaim the Word of God powerfully – the problem was he didn't see awesome results.

And that's where *our* problem lies, too. Have you heard the phrase, 'the ends justify the means'? Our culture is goal-oriented. What's most important are outcomes – how you get there doesn't matter so much. Where you end up is key. That's what our culture tells us, and it's so deep in the way we think, we don't even realise it.

So when we read God's promises in the Bible, we tend to read them like that. We see them as a list of goals, outcomes – which means we get frustrated and disappointed when we don't get there.

As Jesus said to Peter, that is having in mind not **the concerns of God, but merely human concerns** (33).

Friends, did Jesus prosper in *everything* that happened to him? Was he *never* harmed? Did he *never* suffer?

Pause

If the world treated Jesus like that, if God's *only-begotten Son* suffered, do you think his followers will be any different?

Of course not – so what about God's promise? How do these two things fit together?

Well, here's God's plan for you, item one.

Even though I walk
through the [valley of the shadow of death]*,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me.

*Psalm 23.4 (NIV*footnote translation)*

God's plan for you, item one, is to be with you. However long is the walk through the valley of the shadow of death, *God will always be with you.* That is his plan for you. And his plan has a name: Emmanuel, God with us – the name given Jesus by the angel.

Of course, ultimately God's plan *is* to bring his people home, to be with him forever. But *until then*, what's important is *not* where we end up, what's important is *not* the outcome, what's important is *not* the end result – what's important is *how* we travel, and how we travel is with God by our side, *always* and *whatever happens*, good or bad. *That* is God's plan for you, item one: Emmanuel.

Your Heart's Desire (34 / Psalm 37.4)

What do you want most in the world?

A big yacht (that's high up my list)? A massive house on the sea front with an outdoor swimming pool and fifteen hours of hot sunshine every day? Perhaps you'd like to meet, marry or *be* a famous person? Maybe you'd like a simple, quiet, happy life.

I suspect, for most of us, that what we want *most* in the world, is something we don't have. You see that longing for something *more* is common to us all – in fact it's built-in, put there by God: the Bible says he **set eternity in the human heart** (Eccl. 3.11).

And so we love Bible verses like Psalm 37.4:

Take delight in the Lord,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Psalm 37.4 (NIV)

Like Peter rebuking Jesus, like the way we hear Jeremiah 29.11, too often when we hear that we think on a human level. And actually, what's wrong with wanting a simple, quiet life? What's wrong with wanting to provide for our family? What's wrong with wanting to make a difference in the world?

Nothing. Unless they come *first*.

Having told his disciples that he will suffer and die, Jesus called a crowd around him and explained what it means to be a disciple.

‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.’

Mark 8.34 (NIV)

What this means, is that the pattern of Jesus’ life should be the pattern of a disciple’s life, too. It doesn’t mean we shouldn’t have a house to live in, as Jesus’ didn’t. It doesn’t mean we will all be killed for our faith, as Jesus was.

No: what it means is that God comes *first, before* our passions and desires. How often it is the other way round! It’s not saying that all our desires are wrong – though they can be – but that we need to deny them first place, because first place is God’s place.

In Romans 1 Paul says that sin is **worshipping and serving created things rather than the Creator** (Romans 1.25).

It’s nearly Valentine’s Day. Jess and I don’t normally celebrate it – in fact I will be spending Valentine’s Day this year on retreat at a monastery. But this year I have bought her a silly present.

Picture this scene. I get home from Mirfield, and give Jess her present. She opens it, and is so happy with it. She loves it. She unwraps it, and starts using it. She holds it up and says, ‘Thank you,’ to *it*. She holds it close, gives it a hug. Then, that night she lays it down in bed beside her, and goes to sleep snuggling it. The next morning she puts it on the kitchen table and eats breakfast with it. That evening she gets home and goes straight to her present, gives it a kiss, and tells it all about her day – completely ignoring me, the one who gave her the present in the first place.

It’s ridiculous, isn’t it?

But that’s what people do, *every single day*. We **exchange the truth about God for a lie, and worship and serve created things rather than the Creator** (Romans 1.25).

So when Jesus says, ‘**Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves**’, *this* is what he’s talking about: putting things in their proper place, putting God in first place.

How does that fit with Psalm 37.4?

Take delight in the Lord,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Psalm 37.4 (NIV)

If we put God in first place, if we **take delight** in him – *he* becomes what our hearts desire. And – remember God’s plan for your life, item one? – *God is with us, always.*

In other words, Psalm 37.4 isn’t about getting what we desire, it’s about desiring what we *already have*. *Repeat*

It’s easy to say. It takes a lifetime to learn. When Luke quotes these words of Jesus, he adds a little word ‘daily’: **‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me’** (Luke 9.23).

God’s plan for you, item two, is this: delight in God.

We put fleeting and temporary pleasures first too often, and then wonder why they don’t satisfy! Friends, only *God* can satisfy our deepest longings, because only *God* can fill the **eternity** he **set** in our **heart** (Eccl. 3.11).

God’s plan for your life, item one, is that he is with you, always.

God’s plan for your life, item two, is for you to be satisfied by delighting in him.

Abundant Life (35-37 / John 10.10)

Is anyone having iceberg lettuce or broccoli withdrawal symptoms? I did our weekly shop yesterday and was quite shocked by the empty vegetable shelves. I confess I wasn't disappointed – I'm pretty sure I'm allergic to fruit and vegetables.

What I *am* allergic to, is oilseed rape. It looks pretty, doesn't it? Those fields of yellow, waving gently in the summer breeze. But it plays havoc with my face. I've been told there is a lot of it round here... so I may not enjoy the summers here too much!

For most of us, I suspect the word 'abundant' brings up images of fields full-to-bursting with crops. We are good at growing things, which means our supermarket shelves are full with abundant fruit and vegetables – far more than they are empty.

For most of us, I suspect the phrase 'abundant life' brings up images of wealth – having lots of *stuff*, being successful, getting ahead, having power, position and prosperity. But when Jesus said, **'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly'** (John 10.10 ESV), he meant nothing of the sort.

'Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it' (35).

This is where we come down to land. If we try to grip onto our fleshy desires, our fleeting pleasures, our **human concerns**, we will lose what little we have.

But if we deny ourselves, if we put God first, if we sit lightly to all that stuff that is only temporary anyway, and which doesn't satisfy – if we **lose** our **life** serving Jesus and **the gospel** (35), we will discover what it *really* means to be alive.

Forget about outcomes and goals. Yes one day all God's promises will be fulfilled, finally and in full, at the wedding feast of the Lamb. That is the promise for the future. But abundant life, life in all its fullness, is much more than our destination.

Abundant life, life in all its fullness, is *really* about the journey – what we do while we wait. This is Jesus' invitation for the present. He calls us to sit lightly to wealth, and instead bear fruit.

God's plan for you, item three, is this: be fruitful.

And so our Lent Course this year is called 'How to Bear Fruit'. Yes, I know it isn't Lent yet, but we need to start a little early to get it all in, because we are going to be studying the fruit of the Spirit, which Paul lists in Galatians 5.22. Each week we will think about how we can be fruitful as Christians.

God's will for your life, is this:

1. He **is** with you, always, no matter what happens
2. He **promises** you will be satisfied, if you delight in him, and put *him* first
3. He **invites** you to be fruitful

It isn't easy, and it takes faith to deny ourselves, trusting that God's way is the *best* way. It doesn't *necessarily* mean we have to give up the things we love or enjoy doing, though sometimes we do.

No – it means putting things in their proper place: God first, then everything else. That's what it means to be a disciple of Jesus, that's what it means to follow him.

So let's help each other on the journey: **following Jesus together.**