

Baccalaureate Sermon
Myanmar Institute of Theology
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“Not My Will, But Yours Be Done”

Scriptures: Proverbs 3:5-6; Mark 14:32-36; Hebrews 12:2

Greeting

Mingalabar. It's been a wonderful privilege for Jill and me to spend another semester with you at M.I.T. We have talked about some very difficult and yet very meaningful subjects. Our classes together were not always easy, but I have seen many of you grow in many different and beautiful ways. Serving Christ here at M.I.T. and in Myanmar is a great joy to Jill and me. Thank you to all those who opened up your heart, your mind, and yourselves to us over this past year.

Today, on this very special occasion, I'm going to be talking about one of the most important aspects of the spiritual life, and one of the most important characteristics for all those who go into Christian ministry. Our subject is trust in God, and what that truly means in the hardest of circumstances.

Prayer

Sermon

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.

These very familiar words from the book of Proverbs are known to most of us, but what do they truly mean? Especially when life gets hard, and ministry is overwhelming, what does it truly mean to trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding? In other words, what does it truly mean to walk by faith?

Well, today I have good news and bad news for you. The good news is that God will teach you the answers to these questions, and God will help you to develop the kind of faith you need for your personal life and your ministries. The bad news is that you usually have to go through the fire first. In order to develop a deep understanding of faith and trust in God, we have to go through painful or difficult experiences through which the Holy Spirit can develop our thinking and change our hearts.

Illustration

As some of you already know, in the mid-1980s, my wife and I served as pastors of a small congregation outside Chicago. It was a wonderful time, and a very difficult time—especially for my faith.

During our four years there, we lost one child in a miscarriage, and my roommate from college died at the age of 28. I was working up to 70 hours a week in ministry, but I wasn't seeing the results I had hoped for. I didn't know why God didn't seem to be helping more.

Then I got sick. On June 24, 1986, the day after my first son was born, I received frightening news. My doctor called me on the telephone. I had done some medical tests, and now he had the results. He tried to break the bad news to me gently. I had been diagnosed with a fatal skin disease. I only had perhaps 10 good years left.

Hearing this prognosis was like being punched in the stomach. What was going on? God had not blessed our efforts at the church in the ways I had expected. He didn't save our daughter from death, and now it looked as though my newborn son was going to be fatherless before becoming a teenager, and my wife a widow.

Then my mother got Alzheimer's disease, which completely took her mind away. My father was forced to retire early. We watched helplessly as his health declined faster than hers. There was little we could do to help either of them.

None of this made sense to me. Both of my parents had been faithful and devoted workers at a Christian college, and yet God didn't seem to take care of them. I had worked as hard as I knew how in Christian ministry, and instead of being blessed, I was surrounded by sickness and death. **I thought that if I served faithfully, the Lord would take care of me.** So, I couldn't understand why we were facing so many hardships and so much suffering.

Then, in January 1995, I chose to attend an eight-day spiritual retreat.... We worshiped, we prayed, and we did some soul-searching.... I was looking for some guidance from God about my future. I was completely surprised by what I received.

The second night I suddenly realized that something was wrong with my relationship with God. I didn't know how long I had felt this way, but unexpectedly the truth was right before me. Though I was at the retreat still looking to God to help me, I abruptly realized that, at the core of my being, I didn't really trust God anymore. There had been too much disappointment and pain, and I blamed God. From my perspective, God had let me down. God had failed me.

I was at a crossroads, and I knew it. I realized that to go forward, I was going to have to decide: was I going to choose to trust God or not? I could no longer serve as a Christian leader and teacher while secretly doubting God's goodness and activity in my life. I had seen the problem, and now I was going to have to choose: continue to be bitter about my mother's

disease and all the other losses in my life, or choose to trust that God was somehow still active in my life for good in ways that I could not fully understand or discern.

When all this became clear to me, I knew in an instant what I would choose. I was sick of carrying around bitterness in my heart. Instead of blaming God for my difficult life experiences, I could trust in the God of Jesus Christ. This God was not a stranger to me, but someone I loved and had come to know in many meaningful ways over the years.

So that night I put my life back in God's hands once again. Not for salvation. Not for ministry. But for life. No matter what happens to me, I decided I was going to choose to trust in God, even if I could not make sense of the suffering that I was experiencing.

From this experience, I learned at least two very important lessons that I never would have learned if I had not gone through fire:

Lessons Learned

1. I realized that it was my expectations of God that had failed me, not God.
2. Trust is a choice in the midst of life's painful and ambiguous circumstances.

So what should you do? If trust is a choice, then what does that mean concretely when life or ministry gets really hard?

ABC's of Trusting God in the Fire

- A. **Actively seek God.** The writer to the Hebrews says, "Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him" (Hebrews 11:6). Don't let disillusionment or doubt cripple your faith. Don't let anything get in the way of seeking God with all of your heart, mind, soul and strength.
- B. **Believe God is actively seeking you.** Never stop believing that God is active in your life and is responsive to your prayers. The Lord will not give you everything you ask for, but will provide everything you need in order to fulfill God's good purposes for your life. God seeks you because he loves you and because he wants to draw you to himself. But he does it to serve his good purposes for your life, not your purposes for your life. Trust does not mean blind faith that we will have whatever ask for, but that what God chooses to grant us will be in keeping with his good purposes for our lives and the world.
- C. **Consider God's ways as superior to your ways.** Now this might be hard for some of you, especially perhaps you who are graduating. After successfully earning your M.Div., you may be full of confidence and pride as you are about to graduate. But believe it or not, there's still a lot you don't know. And when it comes to God, there are things you will never know or understand in this

- life. Going forward, humility will be absolutely necessary. Trust that if you submit your will to God's, he will lead you in the ways you should go. And if you make a mistake, then he will help you to redeem your mistakes.
- D. **Do what needs to be done.** When things go well, rejoice. And when things get hard or frightening, stand firm. And when things seem beyond your ability to endure, admit your weakness and ask God for the grace to do what needs to be done. But stay the course. Regardless of your shifting feelings, do what needs to be done, as best you understand the will of God.
- E. **Express your heart to God.** When you are plagued by sorrow, confusion, uncertainty, or suffering, reach out to God in prayer. Pour out your heart to God. Tell him the desires of your heart and plead your cause. You need to tell God how you feel, because your relationship is strengthened through such honest, heartfelt communication. But, in the end, the strength of your relationship with God also depends upon your submitting your will to his. Not out of fear, but out of trust.
- F. **Focus on the good.** In life there is so much that we do not have control over, but we can choose our attitude. We can choose to focus on the good, wherever it may be found. Do not despair in the face of great sorrow or loss, but look to God to work for good in even the worst of circumstances. Ask God to change you through your disappointments, frustrations, and failures in some way that fits with his purposes. Remember, it's in the fire that precious metals are refined. You may have to suffer great losses, but you still have hope as long as you look to God to bring good out of the situation.
- G. Finally, **Give it up.** Give up all your desires, dreams, and ideas of what God should do, and put yourself and your ministry completely into his hands. More than anything else, for some of you, this means entrusting those you are serving into God's hands for God's will to be done. For me, this is one of the hardest acts of trust and submission of all. When I see those I love and care about suffering, lost, or in tremendous need, my heart breaks. I want to help them so badly, but sometimes I can't.

Illustration

This past fall, I began a small outreach to street kids in Yangon. When I'm not teaching seminarians or doing leadership training, I go downtown to meet these teenagers. My goals are simple: help them to get off the street, get them enrolled in school, and introduce them to the love and light of Jesus Christ.

Yet, I frequently find myself over my head. I often feel overwhelmed by their physical needs—extreme poverty, hunger, sickness, and stressful living conditions. I often feel discouraged by all their lying and manipulation. Often I don't know what to believe or what to think, let alone what to do.

What does trust mean in this kind ministry? What does it mean to submit my will to God's when I am not even sure what God's will is?

More than anything else, I have to remember that I cannot be their Savior. No matter how much I do for them, I cannot change their hearts. I cannot give them faith. I cannot make them want to help themselves. I can and must offer what I can. I can work hard. I can be patient, loving, kind, and forgiving. I can teach them many things, but I cannot change them. I don't have that power. Only God does.

Trust means that I offer myself up to God to serve these kids in the midst of their great need, but I have no guarantees that these kids will live or die, change for the better or change for the worse. I have to leave the results up to God. I don't know what God will do, but I have to trust that God loves them more than I love them. All I can do is offer my life to God in Christian service, work hard to do what I can do, try to discern and follow the Spirit's leading, and pray, pray, pray. I must pray continually for God to work in their lives and that God's will will be done.

Jesus in Gethsemane

When Jesus was in the Garden of Gethsemane, he was wrestling with a test of faith that is almost beyond comprehension. He and God the Father were not having an academic discussion on the meaning of Proverbs 3:5-6. He knew he was about to suffer unimaginable pain for the sake of the Gospel and for the sake of all those who looked to him for spiritual leadership.

We read that, in the fire, Jesus poured out his heart to God. He pleaded with God for what he wanted, according to his own will. But in the end, he chose trust in God. In the fire, he trusted God's judgment more than he trusted his own. And so he submitted his will to God's will, which is the greatest act of trust imaginable.

Application and Conclusion

As you think about your life and your ministries, where is your Gethsemane? Where do you think your Gethsemane will be in the future?

You are not going to be asked to die on a cross to save humanity, but you are going to be asked to give your life to serve Christ. You are going to be faced with situation after situation where your will is going to be different from what needs to be done, and from what God wants you to do. Not all the time (fortunately), but enough of the time for you to feel the heat of the fire.

Will you run away or let the difficulties and suffering undermine your faith? Or, will you chose to trust? Will you choose to live by the ABC's of faith?

- A. Actively seek God.
- B. Believe God is actively seeking you.
- C. Consider God's ways as superior to your ways.
- D. Do what needs to be done.
- E. Express your heart to God.
- F. Focus on the good. And, finally, will you

- G. Give it up. Give up trying to control or change others, and entrust your ministry into God's hands, for God's will to be done.

This is what it means to walk by faith. This is what it means to trust God. This is what it means to serve God's will, and not your own. As you go forward from here, there is nothing more important for yourself, for your family, for your church, and for your ministries.

So, I say to you again, you who are about to graduate, you who will continue your education, you who are parents, friends, and relatives, and you who are already actively engaged in ministry and Christian service:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.

Prayer

EXTRAS

Illustration

Jesus in Gethsemane—not my will be yours be done.

TRUST FOR THOSE YOU ARE SERVING—SOCIAL APPLICATION? How does trust apply to those who are suffering? How does their plight of the poor call for sacrifice on our part—NOT as heroic efforts, but as those who have entrusted our lives to God so that we can give them for the sake of others, knowing that our lives are secure in God's hands.

Mark 14:32 ¶ They went to a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to his disciples, “**Sit here while I pray.**”

Mark 14:33 He took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled.

Mark 14:34 “**My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,**” he said to them. “**Stay here and keep watch.**”

Mark 14:35 ¶ Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him.

Mark 14:36 “**Abba, Father,**” he said, “**everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.**”

When I think of the Gethsemane passage, they know or will know what it is to feel overwhelmed with sorrow. I do. If they try to address the needs, they will be soon overwhelmed.

So, I want to encourage them to trust. But what if the result is death? For Jesus, he pled with God to save him from death. I plead with God to save these boys from death. In Jesus' case, his death had a purpose. With the boys, their deaths seem pointless.

What does God want from me? I can pour out my heart pleading for the boys.

It seems that God intervenes only when it serves his purpose. Trust means letting to of what I think would be best, and accepting what God chooses.

ExtrasHowever, it is not until we are in the fire that we learn what faith really means. It's not until our world crashes around us that we understand what trust really means. It's not until we are faced with truly hard choices that we learn what it means to submit our will to God's will. Otherwise

3. Trust means you look ahead to the promises of God (Hebrews 12:2)

. Jesus's submission to will of God in the Garden of Gethsemane was not out of fear. On the contrary, he was not afraid of the will of God. No, he submitted to God's will

because he trusted God. He trusted God more than he trusted his own understanding, his own will, or his own desires.

Submitting your will to God's is at core a matter of trust. Some may submit to God out of fear, and Scripture warns us that we should fear God.

Now, I don't know what I thought "take care of" actually meant. In retrospect, I suppose I unconsciously assumed that my family and I would be protected from harm and that God would bless me with a fruitful ministry to some undefined extent. Whatever I expected, though, I knew I wasn't getting it. All the pain, losses, disappointment, and struggles without more "to show for" my hard work and faithfulness just didn't seem right. God had failed my parents, my family, my church, and me, so I thought, and my disappointment had begun to turn to doubt and bitterness.

Jesus is the greatest example of those who trust in the Lord with all their hearts and lean not on their own understanding. In all his ways, he acknowledged (or submitted to) God, and God made his paths straight.

Illustration. Philippians 4:11-13 Story of first church and terminal illness: so many questions, surprises, disappointments. Yet, I kept praying that God would be glorified in my circumstances. How do we learn to live by trust? Through experience—usually hard experiences. See 2 Corinthians 12:9-10

1. Rely on his guidance and his working in your life in ways that fit with His good purposes—for you and for the lives of those you touch. Live by the promise, "Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you?"

It's so easy to quote Bible verses like Proverbs 3:5 and 6, and to tell other people that they should trust in the Lord. It's easy to think we know what it means to live by faith. In the classroom, from the pulpit, or in the midst of things going well, such talk about faith, trust, and submitting our will to God's is easy. It's academic. It's shallow.

But the kind of faith you are going to need in ministry is anything but shallow. It must be deep, and it must be strong.