

Sermon
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The Agony of Choice
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Grace to you and peace from God the source of life, and from Jesus, God's son, who is the Christ, Amen.

I spend a lot of time on I-5, traveling north and south to my parents' home in Chico, California where I'm from. And along the way, I engage almost ritualistically in a kind of spiritual masochism: I listen to Christian radio. And I do so in the spirit of one trying to understand what the dominant form of Christianity says in this culture, but too, always hoping that there are little gems I can nevertheless draw out of what I hear.

One of the things that frustrates me however, is that the problems of faith according to preachers on Christian radio and television, often go unaddressed. And so today to remedy that in this, "our little corner of Christendom" you might say, I would like to speak on what I call "the agony of choice," and how our faith as Christians can help us make some of the most difficult decisions in our lives.

Angela and Scott were two of the closest siblings you might ever meet. It wasn't always that way, of course. As children, they would often fight.

But things changed shortly after Scott, the oldest by two years, turned ten. One night, Scott and Angela's parents were driving home together from dinner when suddenly a hit-and-run driver ran a red light and collided into the side of their car. They were pronounced dead on the scene.

In the months that followed, now in the care of foster parents, Scott and Angela bonded. Each was all the other had.

Later in his twenties, Scott faced a second tragedy. He started experiencing chest pain, repeated bouts with pneumonia, and difficulty breathing, all of which led to the diagnosis everyone dreads. Scott – now divorced and in sole custody of his two daughters – had lung cancer. The doctor gave him six months to live.

After Scott received his diagnosis, he immediately reached out to Angela. "You have to promise me you'll take custody of my kids," he said to her. "You and Jason [her spouse] are the only real family they have."

Now Angela loved her nieces, and she felt a deep responsibility to take care of them. But there was a problem. Jason had **never** wanted kids, so much so that when Angela told him the news, he gave her an ultimatum.

"I feel bad," he said after they argued for several hours. "I really do. But if you decide to raise them, I will leave."

Naturally, Angela was devastated. How could she possibly choose between raising her brother's children and her marriage? What should she do?

Fortunately, many of us will never find ourselves in Angela's situation, one where we are forced to decide between two options of the highest value. Yet at some level, Angela's dilemma resonates with us – doesn't it? I mean, we all know to a greater or lesser extent the **agony** of decision-making, right?. Some of us remember, for example, how difficult it was to choose which college to attend, or which major to pursue. Others among us may recall the difficulty in choosing a partner, our first career, a different career, or when to retire from a career that gave us meaning.

The good news, in short, is that we are not alone. While class mobility, socioeconomic status, race, and a variety of other factors determine which choices are available to us, the predicament of difficult decision-making arguably constitutes a widespread if not **universal** human experience. All of us, in other words, have to make difficult choices at some point in our lives.

Even without reflecting on it consciously, we know these decisions are difficult because in many cases we can only make them once. We also sense their impact, how they can irreversibly shape the course of our lives.

Such, at least, is the view of probably the most **prolific** and certainly the most **neurotic** Lutheran philosopher and theologian of the 19th century, Soren Kierkegaard. Life would be easier, Kierkegaard argues, if we were merely animals. We would still live out our lives in time, of course – past, present, and future. No creature can escape that. However, we would be blissfully ignorant of the brute fact that we are going to die.

To be human, on the other hand, is to **know** we are going to die, that is, that time will stop for each of us. Like the man and woman of the Garden of Eden, our eyes have been opened (Gen 3:7), and this awareness places extraordinary pressure on **what** we choose for ourselves. We know we have options; yet we also know we have only a finite amount of time to actualize even just a few of them.

This is how Kierkegaard understands our predicament: "To be conscious is to be aware of this limitation; it is to know that there are many options and that, when we choose one, all the others are excluded. Though we presumably gain something by choosing [one option over the other], we certainly lose something as well – we lose all the [other options]. The trouble is that we can never be sure, it would seem, that what we have gained exceeds what we have lost. Hence the agony of decision" (W.T. Jones, *A History of Western Philosophy*, v. IV, p. 218).

We can, in other words, never be certain whether the decisions we made in life were the best ones for us or the "right" ones. .Or can we? As most of you know, the theological claim I struggle with the most in the whole world is that "God has a plan," followed closely by the corollary that "everything happens for a reason".

Now before some of you leave, let me explain why . For one thing, **these phrases are not biblical**. Yes, Jer. 29:11 talks about having God having "plans" for the people of Israel, "plans for [their] welfare and not for harm, to give [them] a future with hope". But notice the language. God has multiple **plans** for the Israelites in

general, not a **single plan** for each and every one of them, much less each and every one of us. The same is true for writers of the New Testament. God may have a plan for our salvation, the church, or **intensions** for the world in general, but God does not micromanage each and every detail of our lives. Not everything, in short, happens for a reason according to Scripture.

Indeed, as Ecclesiastes confirms, it often appears like **nothing** happens for a reason. The strongest don't always win in battle, and the fastest don't always win the race, "but time and chance," its author writes, "happen to them all" (Eccl. 9:11).

Claiming God has a plan, secondly, **violates our free will**, the freedom of choice God has given us as human beings. It reduces us to puppets who merely play out what God has already determined. In the process, it confuses **faith** with **fate**, as if the purpose in life is merely to submit to what has already been arranged from the beginning.

Third and finally, claiming God has a plan or that everything happens for a reason **ultimately makes God responsible** for evil and suffering. If everything that comes to pass reflects God's plan or God's will, then whatever bad things happen in life must come from the proverbially abusive Father who "punishes us for our own good."

Who among us can trust in a God who acts like a monster by destroying people's lives, even if the "reason" for such an act will be unveiled to us, say, after we die? How, moreover, could we ever equate such a God with the loving God we see in Jesus who is the Christ?

Ok, you've heard my reasons. Now let me explain why I shared them. It was certainly not to embarrass anyone who believes that whatever comes to pass reflects God's plan. I understand that for many people, this view can be extremely **comforting**.

Think about it. If a person I love dies prematurely or senselessly, then believing I will someday know **why** could be reassuring. Maybe their death wasn't senseless after all, I might say to myself; maybe there was a purpose behind it, one I simply do not (yet) know.

If I believe that God has a plan, notice as well how much that frees me from the **agony** of decision-making we discussed earlier. In the modern world, we have so many options available to us that choosing which ones to pursue has become more difficult than ever. Believing that whatever path I choose reflects God's plan for my life accordingly reduces my anxiety. Instead of wondering whether I should become a pastor, a professor, a plumber, or a police officer, I can simply attribute what I decide (or decided) to God. What a relief!

But notice the cost. Not only have I undermined my freedom, since whatever I choose is **already** part of God's plan, I have also undermined the responsibility I should bear for my choice.

There must be an alternative, something that can help us make wise decisions as people of faith. And here's the good news: there is.

I have now shared with you two phrases I dislike, the claim that “God has a plan” (for everything that comes to pass) as well as its corollary, “everything happens for a reason.” Now I want to share with you one of my favorite phrases. It’s a quote Cantor Kyle remembers from one of his professors at Luther Seminary.

Lutherans, this professor said, have a **nose for the gospel**. It belongs, you might say, to our spiritual DNA. Since Martin Luther, the Lutheran tradition has *at its best* focused on the good news or promise of God’s mercy and grace as the Word of God in the Bible. This Word of comfort, mercy, and grace that comes from God appears in both testaments, the Old and the New.

Today we see it in Hebrews 13, our second reading. Notice here what the author does to encourage his audience not only to live a godly life but also to help them endure torture and persecution. He turns to Scripture by citing Joshua 1:5, where God says to the Israelites, “I will **never leave you** or forsake you.” Do you hear that? This is **pure gospel**, the kind of promise we see most famously in Psalm 23:4 which says that “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you [God] are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me.”

Now, I can just imagine what you are thinking. “Ok, that’s great, Pastor Dan. We’re Lutherans. We have a nose for the gospel, but how on earth does the promise or good news that God will never leave us relate *in any way whatsoever* to the agony of making decisions you mentioned before?”

Well, let’s bring it all together. Imagine you are at a fork in the road. You have an immensely difficult decision to make regarding how you will be spending the next few years of life or perhaps who you will be spending it with. Suddenly, the burden of choice becomes apparent to you. You certainly could make your decision by assuming God has a plan for you, and that whatever you decide will reflect what that plan is.

But what if you assumed instead that God has given you the freedom to choose, and that no matter which road you choose, God will meet you on the way ahead, God will accompany you? God always will be with you, for God has promised never to leave you or forsake you, no matter which path you take at the fork in the road. What a **powerful** way to affirm your freedom as well as your faith. And what a great remedy for reducing, if not eliminating, the agony that sometimes comes with decision-making.

Now, I don’t know what I would do if I was in Angela’s situation. Perhaps you do, and if so, I would love to know what it is after the service. What I **do** know is this: In both testaments, we have a promise. “I will never leave or forsake you,” says the Lord.

May each of us learn to trust this incredible promise, especially in the hour of our most difficult decisions. God promises to be with us, no matter what path in life we choose.

Amen.

You can read more about this topic in the [September edition of *The Quill*](#).