

Man's Plans, God's Purpose • Proverbs 19:21

When Jimmy Carter was governor of Georgia he planned for the presidency like no other candidate before him. His strategy was careful and his approach was methodical. He even used his lack of name recognition to an advantage, coming out with “Jimmy Who?” buttons. It paid off in November of 1976 when Jimmy Carter defeated Gerald Ford to become the 39th President of the United States.

Pat Robertson adopted the same approach for the 1988 election. His strategies were smart and his plans were precise. Starting with the early Iowa caucuses and continuing through Super Tuesday in the southeastern state primaries, Robertson methodically executed his plan to win the Republican nomination on his way to becoming the 41st President of the United States. Except Robertson never made it to the November ballot and George Bush won both the nomination and the general election.

Apparently there is more to the outcomes of life than careful planning. But you already know that from personal experience and not just from presidential observation. Some people carefully plan for education, marriage, career and children. Their plans seem perfect, but the outcome is sometimes tragic. Others have similar plans and the outcome is triumphant.

It's hard to understand, impossible to explain. Some call it luck. Others call it fate. But it is the Bible that gives the best answer of all in Proverbs 19:21 where it says, “Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD'S purpose that prevails.”

This proverb has an extraordinary mix of truth with the potential to both upset and comfort. It is the kind of teaching that so obviously explains the realities of life yet is sometimes so difficult to accept.

Human planning is a smart thing to do. Proverbs 21:5 says, “The plans of the diligent

lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty.”

Planning is thinking. Obviously it is good to think. God has given us the ability and we should use it.

IBM has adopted THINK as a corporate motto. This is a corporate strategy as well as an individual exhortation. Whether it is individuals or companies, those who THINK are usually far more profitable than the ones that depend on luck.

God thinks. God plans. Repeatedly in the Bible we are told the thoughts of God on a whole range of subjects. Biblical prophecy reveals the plans of God. He has figured out what he is going to do with us and the world and everything else. God is a good planner. Since we are created in God's image, it is most appropriate that we think and plan the way God designed us to think and plan.

What type of planning would you like to talk about? Time planning is probably the most common. We think through the schedule for today. We plan for next week in terms of places to go and things to do. We may plan for next year and maybe for the rest of life, charting a course of what is to be accomplished and how it's to be done.

Then there is career planning. This is especially the thinking of the young who are trying

to answer the question, “What do you want to be when you grow up?”

Financial planning is thinking about money and the future. It's figuring

out how to get out of debt, how to save to buy a house or how to prepare for retirement.

And there's spiritual planning. That's thinking about eternity and how to get ready for it. Spiritual planning ranges from salvation to ongoing discipleship.

Since we are created in God's image, it is most appropriate that we think and plan the way God designed us to think and plan.

Be smart. Be a planner. Don't be one of these "shoot from the hip" hasty people who never think ahead. Use the "smarts" God has given to you. Think through what to do before you do it.

Planning is smart, but not all plans are good.

I have a brother who is very bright, very capable and a very good planner. Several years ago he was the speaker at a small rural church and was entertained at the home of two elderly single women. They were fine cooks and meticulous housekeepers. They provided him with a delicious meal. When the dessert was served, he was too full to eat it. So he began to plan on how to get rid of it without hurting their feelings. He decided that the next time the two hostesses left the room together to go to the kitchen he would toss the dessert out the window. What he didn't know was that the window was very clean . . . and closed!

Planning was smart, but his plan was not good. To help make your plans good, get wise counsel. Proverbs 15:22 tells us, "Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed."

Asking others is a smart thing to do. Some of us are very reluctant to do that. We somehow think that we have to figure it all out for ourselves. We imagine that there is some kind of strength in independence and weakness in dependence. The truth is that it's the other way around.

Several years ago, Charleen and I were scheduled to fly out of Kennedy Airport in New York City en route to Africa. Half way to the airport we discovered that our driver didn't know how to get there. The worse part was his unwillingness to ask for directions. We drove around Manhattan and most of New York's other boroughs as the departure time drew closer and closer. Somewhere in a residential section of Brooklyn he suggested that we take a cab if we expected to make our flight. Except there were no cabs in that part of the city!

Fortunately, we made it to the airport on time. But some foolish people live their lives

driving around without asking directions. They are determined to find their own way. It is a foolish and sometimes tragic approach. Foolish because there are many wise counselors willing to help; tragic because life is often wasted so needlessly.

Many health insurance companies now require and pay for a second or third medical opinion before authorizing non-emergency surgery. Not because the first physician is foolish, but because there is wisdom in multiple counsel.

One of the questions sometimes asked in premarital counseling is what others think about this relationship. What do parents and friends and coworkers have to say? Not because the choice is fully theirs, but their perspective can add wisdom to plans for marriage.

It is a wonderful and practical principle of scripture. Plan! And as you do, get wise counsel to help make the plans good.

But don't make the enormous error of thinking that human planning is the final answer. There is a huge additional factor in the equation of life, one that cannot be controlled by human plans or counsel. It is the purpose of God. Proverbs 19:21 says, "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD'S purpose that prevails."

God is a superb planner. He knows exactly what he wants to happen and how he wants it to happen. He figures all the contingencies and includes them into his plan.

Do you know that familiar line of childhood, "I didn't do it on purpose"? The frog has been pushed live down the garbage disposal and he says, "I didn't do it on purpose." She calls a record company in California and orders \$500 in compact discs. Then she says, "I didn't do it on purpose."

Well, God never says that. God does everything on purpose. There is a reason and intent and design to absolutely everything God does. According to Psalm 33:11, ". . . the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations."

Many of God's plans are unknown to us. We do not know what God has planned for most of the future events in our lives. For example, we don't know when or how we will die. And that is probably a good thing. If we knew that we had 50 or 100 years left to live, we would be tempted to live recklessly because of invincibility. Or, if we knew that life would end tomorrow in some terrible accident, we might spend today in misery and despair.

God has revealed only general information about the future. However, God has revealed enormous information about how we are to live. He has given us laws and guidelines about protecting life, being honest, treating others, maintaining sexual morality and many other matters. These ways to live are part of God's plan as well.

There is both wonder and frustration to the plans and purposes of God. Wonder that he can put all the pieces together and make everything come out right in the end. Frustration that we are so often ignorant of how our piece of the puzzle possibly fits.

During the building of the worship center at Wooddale Church I was able to watch the construction from my study window. It was an amazing project to watch. There were earthmovers, block layers, insulators, steelworkers, carpenters and ventilation workers coming and going almost every day.

When the steel superstructure was going up, a 250-foot crane lifted pieces of steel weighing up to 40,000 pounds. Steelworkers rode up on the steel and then walked across the top while I covered my eyes with my hands in fear.

As I drove up the road toward our campus each morning I wondered what the thousands of commuters going by thought of the construction. For a time it was hard to tell what was being built.

I wondered who coordinates a project like that. There was a construction office and I was told there was a superintendent, although I never

met him. He must have been the one who decided who did what when. He must have been the guy with the purpose of building the worship center and the plans to get it done.

Compare all this to life. The God we cannot see is in his heaven. He has a purpose and he has his plans. We sometimes can't make any sense out of what is going on. We wonder how our part fits together with all the other parts. At best, we only have our page of the master plan and sometimes we don't even have that.

The truth is that God is in the construction office of heaven, complete with detailed plans. His purpose is to fit all the pieces together to make history into his masterpiece.

The difference between God and us is that God is sovereign. Isaiah 46:10 says, "I will do all that I please." In other words, his purpose happens. He does it. The big issue arises when our plans differ from God's purpose. Because God is sovereign, his plans will prevail!

In Proverbs 21:30 we read, "There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan that can succeed against the LORD." Proverbs 16:9 tells us, "In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps." And Isaiah 14:24 says, ". . . as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will stand."

God may often allow us to do our own thing, but eventually his purpose will prevail.

In the course of the construction of our building some external waterproofing insulation was improperly installed. It had to be torn off and done over. It lasted for a while but eventually the superintendent had it redone to conform to the overall plan.

And so it often is with God. He allows us to make our mistakes, commit our sins, follow our plans - - - but eventually he will impose his master plan and it will prevail.

Several years ago Charleen and I were entertained in the home of Wycliffe missionaries in Colombia, South America. The wife told us

The difference between God and us is that God is sovereign.

a story of outright sinful rebellion against God. She knew God wanted her to be a missionary so she deliberately sought out and married a non-Christian in order to avoid missionary service. God let her work her plan.

What she didn't count on was God's greater purpose. Her husband, quite independent of her, accepted Jesus Christ as his personal Savior and decided to become a missionary to South America.

"Many are the plans in a man's (or woman's) heart, but it is the LORD'S purpose that prevails." (Proverbs 19:21)

What are we going to do with this? Will we be wiser because we have learned this proverb? How will our lives be different?

Let me give you two words that describe how we ought to be different. Those words are perspective and prayer.

Regarding perspective, we are to seek the perspective of God. Should we plan? Absolutely. The Bible teaches that we should. Should we seek the counsel of others? We'd better. But, always understand that our plans must fit God's

purpose. It is important that we adopt that perspective.

As for prayer, let's decide that we're going to ask God to conform us to his plans rather than asking God to conform to our plans. Or, as it says in Proverbs 16:3, "Commit to the Lord whatever you do and your plans will succeed."

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