

On Friday I was reading a particular quote in an article from “Famous People Quotes”... but ironically... it did not cite who the quote was from. ... But I still want to read it to you... because I found it quite profound. As I read it... Please check and see if you have ever felt the same way as this anonymous speaker... as to how you got to where you are today:

Often I have not known where I was going until I was already there. I have had my share of desires and goals, but my life has come to me or I have gone to it mainly by way of mistakes and surprises. Often I have received better than I deserved. Often my faintest hopes have rested on bad mistakes. I am an ignorant pilgrim, crossing a dark valley. And yet for a long time, looking back, I have been unable to shake off the feeling that I have been led – make of that what you will.

Does this in any way describe you...? Has your life come to you by what seems like mistakes and surprises...? Do you ever feel like an ignorant pilgrim...? ... I think that (even as believers who are trying to follow God)... it may not be uncommon for us to sometimes feel like “ignorant pilgrims.”

Following God is the most important thing in life. Following God gives *fulfillment* and *purpose*... a fulfillment and purpose that is deep within... and that lasts forever. ... Following God fills us with *happiness* and *joy*... the most secure happiness and joy that can be possessed.

But this is not true about the world’s pursuit of happiness. ... The fulfillment... purpose... happiness... and joy of the world does not last. What the world gives... fades... and eventually (though often - very soon) becomes empty and void. ... What the world gives leaves us just as quickly as it arises, leaves us feeling... empty... hollow... lacking... unfulfilled... meaningless... void.

The world leaves us so hollow and so empty within that millions of people are asking questions like these every day: "*What's life all about anyway?*" ... "*What's the sense, the purpose, of it all?*" ... "*What good is it all?*" ... "*Of what use is it?*" ... "*What am I doing this for?*"

But God does not leave us hollow and empty within - not if we follow Him. But take careful notice: there will always be obstacles against our following God. ... (LISTEN!) Whenever anyone sets out to follow God... they will (every time) face some barriers and roadblocks... (some hurdles that they must jump.)

This was what Jacob faced. God told Jacob to follow Him... to return to the promised land... and Jacob was determined to obey and follow God. ... His heart was set on returning... but when he started out... he found several major obstacles lying out in front of him. ... Nevertheless... Jacob did not give up: he followed God and overcame the obstacles. ... This we must do, too. ... We must set out on our journey of following God and overcome the obstacles lying out in front of us. ... This is the subject of this exciting passage of Scripture.

Threatening situations can keep us from following God. ... We can be thinking about following God... or already committed to following God... and before we know it... a threatening situation arises that stops us dead in our tracks. ... Once we make a commitment to follow God... all kinds of threats stand before us... threats such as... ridicule and persecution... having to give up the bright lights and pleasures of this world... losing a promotion or some business deal... losing friends or close associates... losing money... business... property... and possessions

On and on the list could go. There are always threatening situations... obstacles that can keep us from following God. ... But the call of God to us is the same as it was to Jacob: to follow the revealed will of God through any obstacle that is thrown before us.

Today... in our passage of study... we are **first** going to look at how Jacob discerned what the will of God was (in our first three verses). ... (Now HEADS UP!)... in it... we will look for some general principles for how we... ourselves... can know the will of God for our lives. ... And then (through the rest of the chapter)... we will go on to see how Jacob persisted in following God... by overcoming his obstacles. ... Here we can expect to find encouragement for our own situations... as we encounter the impediments (that are certain to come)... to our following God.

Listen to these words from J. Vernon McGee:

We are in a section of the Word of God, which God has given to minister to our needs. It deals with a man, who is a very sinful man in many ways, and a man whom God would not give up. You and I can take courage from this. The Lord will never give us up, as long as we keep coming back to Him. He will always receive us. If He will take a fellow like Jacob, and a fellow like I am, He will take you, my friend.

Well... lets open our passage now... and discover how God made it known to Jacob that it was time for him to return home to Canaan. We have already seen one of the ways in the previous chapter. (You see)... After the birth of Joseph... Jacob **wanted** to go home. He was **stirred within** to trust the God Who had opened Rachael's womb. And now... here are the final promptings... telling Jacob that he should leave.

Genesis 31:1-3

Warren Wiersbe... James Montgomery Boice... Arthur Pink... and many others are diligent to point to three elements that we see here... for how Jacob knew the will of God. They are: **1)** through the inner witness in the heart... **2)** the outward circumstances of life... and **3)** the truth of His Word.

Six years before... God had put the desire in Jacob's heart to return to his own country. Jacob announced his decision to Laban... but Laban convinced him to stay and earn some travel funds. But Jacob's desire had never left him.

(LISTEN!) **Not** every longing in the human heart is necessarily the voice of God.

Jeremiah 17:9 (ESV)

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?

However... the Lord often does speak to His followers in this way.

Philippians 2:13 (ESV)

for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

This verse says that God works on our “wanter.” He makes us desire His will. ... And yet... as Jeremiah warns... our “wanter” can trick us. ... So... we must carefully exercise discernment!

Along with the desire within us... God also directs us as He did Jacob through the circumstances around us. ... Toward the end of those six critical years... Jacob noticed that his in-laws weren't as friendly toward him as before... largely because of the increase in his wealth. They were jealous.

Laban's face had become a mask of scowls instead of being wreathed in smiles as before... when Jacob had worked solely for him. ... We gather more of other people's disposition toward us from their looks... than their words.

I teach in my Interpersonal Communication class at the community college that non-verbal communication has greater impact than the words that we say... and sullen silence (which it appears Laban was giving Jacob)... is often more intolerable than spoken contention itself. It is more disconfirming. Jacob was facing strong disconfirming circumstances.

But just like our desires... circumstances aren't always the finger of God pointing out His way... either. (In Acts 27... the Apostle Paul tried to advise the captain of the ship he was on... not to set sail... even though the weather seemed fine. The captain didn't listen and they lost their ship in a storm.) ... Circumstances are not always reliable... but they can be significant indicators of God's will. When God wants to move us... He occasionally makes us uncomfortable and "stirs up our nest." God describes His leading of Israel this way (by using difficult circumstances...)

Deuteronomy 32:11 (ESV)

Like an eagle that stirs up its nest, that flutters over its young, spreading out its wings, catching them, bearing them on its pinions,

Jacob had **desire** and Jacob had **circumstances**. ... Yet Jacob did not **go** until God spoke to him. This is the third element in his awareness of God's will. He waited until God said: "*Go back to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you.*"

The third and most important way God leads us is through His Word. God had already spoken to Jacob in a dream (we are about to see this in Gen. 31:10-13)... but Jacob remained in Padan Aram to acquire his wealth. Then God said to him, "*Go back to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you.*"

It is not always that God gives us a manifestation of these three principles... when we want to know what God's will is... but whenever they do exist together and are evident... we may be sure of His will in any given circumstance.

What are they (again)...? What are the three elements of knowing God's will (seen here)? **First**... is a definite conviction in our hearts that God desires us to take a certain course or do a certain thing. **Second**... is the path that he would have us take being indicated by outward circumstances... which make it (humanly) possible or expedient we should do it. ... Then **third**... after definitely waiting on God for it... there will be some special word from the Scriptures... which is suited to our case... and which by the Spirit bringing it manifestly to our notice (while waiting for guidance)... is plainly a message from God to our individual heart. ... This may we be assured of God's will for us. The most important thing is to wait on God. And there are some **MUST DO's** in your waiting.

Tell God your perplexity... ask Him to prevent you from making any mistake... cry earnestly to Him to make "plain His way before your face." This is what King David did.

Psalm 5:8 (ESV)

*Lead me, O LORD, in your righteousness because of my enemies;
make your way straight before me.*

And then "wait patiently" till He does so. Remember what Romans 4:23 tells us - "*whatever is not of faith is sin.*" ... If you are sincere and patient... and pray in faith... then... in His own good time and way... He will most certainly answer... (LISTEN!) He will either remove the conviction or desire from your heart... and arrange your circumstances in such a manner that your way is blocked... (by which you will then know *His time* for you to move has not arrived)... **OR**... God will deepen your conviction. ... In deepening your conviction... He will so order your circumstances... that the way will be opened up - *without your doing anything yourself*... and also... He will speak definitely through His written Word.

Psalm 37:5 (ESV)

Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act.

We can learn from Jacob that God often uses three elements to communicate what His will is: **1)** the inner witness in the heart... **2)** the outward circumstances of life... and **3)** the truth of His Word.

James Montgomery Boice adds a fourth element for knowing the will of God... and I could not agree more! He writes:

I must add that there is another thing equally important – that is, to do the will of God once we know it. That is why I like those words written by Ezra...” (in Ezra 7:10) “Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord and to do it.” The reason for defeat in so many Christians lives is not that they do not understand the will of God, but that they do not do what they understand.

They do not press forward when the obstacles come... (and they do come!)

(LISTEN!) The presence of hardship does not indicate that we somehow missed in our discerning the will of God.

Jacob set out to do the will of God. But he immediately faced a known obstacle. Let's shift our focus now... to pushing through the obstacles to our following God. Jacob faced the potential obstacle of his family's opposition. Jacob was committed to following God... but what about his family? ... What was their attitude going to be? ... Would they make the same commitment he had made to follow God and His promise of the promised land?

Jacob had to tell his wives about the problem... and the issue was going to be sensitive because it involved Laban... the father of his wives and the grandfather of their children. ... Because of the threatening situation... Jacob knew that he had to meet his wives someplace where they could be alone. ... He also knew that he would have to explain the situation to them in detail... making sure that they understood fully. ... There was the possibility that they would disagree with his decision to follow God and take a stand with their father against him.

Genesis 31:4-5

This is a critical statement for Jacob. The deceiver, the one who must be in control and the one who always seizes the moment admits, 'God did it.' He was in control all the time.

Genesis 31:6-16

Jacob received what he had hoped for: a positive response from his wives. They knew their father... how he really was. ... He had even mistreated

them... his own daughters... his very own flesh and blood. ... Here for the first time we see Rachel and Leah in agreement.

The willingness of Leah and Rachel to leave is premised on an accusation against their father concerning his handling of their inheritance. ... The bride price (paid by the husband's family) was supposed to be held in trust... in the event it was needed to provide for the wife... if she were abandoned or widowed. ... Jacob... of course... gave no bride price except for his labor. ... So the equivalent of his wages... should have been set aside for the women. ... Apparently that was never done. ... Jacob's labor has ONLY benefited Laban... not the women. This is what they mean that it is as if he has "sold" them to Jacob. ... AND If their father's house holds no economic security for them... they have no reason to stay.

Although their decision was not based on the same spiritually strong consideration as that of Jacob... they never-the-less realized it was of God... and therefore had confidence that whatever God had told Jacob to do... they were ready to go.

Joyfully... but nervously... Jacob quickly made all the necessary preparations to leave. ... Laban was away shearing his sheep... so it was an opportune time to make preparations and to leave before anyone could find out.

Herein we find another obstacle – Jacob's fear of Laban.

Instead of facing Laban honestly and trusting the Lord to keep His promises and work things out... Jacob fled with his family like a criminal escaping justice. ... This was an act of fear and unbelief... not an act of faith. In fact... Jacob later admitted to Laban that he had departed secretly

and quickly because he was afraid. ... It isn't enough to know and do the will of God. ... We must also do His will in the way He wants it done... the way that will glorify Him the most. Jacob had to face some unwanted consequences... because of his failure with this obstacle.

Genesis 31:17-19

Jacob faced an unknown obstacle. Sometimes in our following the Lord... there are obstacles that we don't even know about... (they come out later.) And these are unnecessary obstacles... that if we did know about them... we could have prevented future hardship.

Whatever her reason, she was terribly wrong. ... She was stealing something of enormous value to her father... something that he held in the highest esteem. ... And by stealing the household gods... she was endangering her husband and her family. (This will be seen later.) ... For now... the point to see is this: her sin of stealing is an obstacle to following God. Stealing is not of God. ... The theft of the idols was probably the main reason why Laban and his men chased after Jacob.

Genesis 31:20

Where was God in all this? ... Where was Jacob's trust in God? ... Was God going to forsake Jacob at this point in his life? Jacob secretly left because of fear... because he did not trust God enough to work things out between him and Laban.

Whenever we commit to follow God... it is not uncommon for us to have some sort of fear. ... We need to handle the obstacle of fear properly. Jacob didn't. ... Jacob... of course... should have gone to Laban in the

strength of the Lord and firmly discussed the issue with Laban. ... He should have trusted God to take care of his leaving for the promised land. ... Jacob should have left Laban just as any godly son-in-law and business partner should: being firm and kind... setting all false accusations and suspicions straight and sharing one's testimony for the Lord... settling all accounts... trusting God to take care of the situation.

We must never fear a person so much that we do wrong in order to please or escape the person. In all situations... we must do what we can... to do right... and to bear witness to the unethical and immoral person. ... Above all... we must trust God... and not allow our fear to cause us to do something foolish... as Jacob's fear did. God promises to help us if we are true believers and followers of His.

Genesis 31:21-25

One thing is sure: Laban's posse thundered after Jacob with murderous intent. The verbs in verses 22-25—"*fled*," "*pursued*," "*overtook*," "*pitched tents*"—are all militaristic terms. ... Laban was on the warpath. ... If God had not come to Laban in a dream... (which we will see in verse 29)... there would have been violence.

Jacob faced the obstacle of someone else's greed... covetousness... and anger. Sometimes that will happen to us when we try to follow after God. It threatens someone else's greedy plan and they become angry at us.

A stormy reaction swelled up within Laban—rage, fury, anger. As soon as he could... he dropped his shearing operation and gathered his weapons and mobilized his relatives and workers and set out in hot pursuit of Jacob.

He was determined to take the herds away from Jacob... using whatever force was necessary.

Genesis 31:26-28

When Laban caught up with Jacob... he did not attack him physically... but he certainly attacked him verbally. ... And his complaint is a farce. The daughters were not taken away at sword point. They were not captives. They were agreeing co-conspirators. ... They came voluntarily and enthusiastically. ... The only one who would do any capturing with the sword was the no-good Laban.

Laban's complaint here is laughable. No way would he have had a farewell party for Jacob. ... What a joke! ... And kissing his daughters was a joke also... for Laban had shown great disdain and disrespect for them in how he had treated them... and they knew it as they had said in their earlier comments to Jacob.

At this point Laban must have paused. It was evident that he was neither impressing Jacob or his own two daughters. So Laban changed his tune and did what bullies always do – he boasted of his ability to harm Jacob... if he wanted to. But he had to confess that God did not want him to do that.

Genesis 31:29

Note a striking fact: Jacob had created this obstacle himself. He was having to face Laban because of his own mis-dealings and deception of Laban. ... And the situation was far more tense and explosive (now)... than it would have been earlier. ... Jacob should have confronted Laban back in Haran and trusted God to work things out.... And God would

have... because as we saw in verse 3... God had already promised to be with Jacob and to take care of him. ... But Jacob did not trust God enough... so he schemed and deceived Laban. ... It was Jacob's own misdealings and deception that created this obstacle... (this crisis in his life.) ... But God still intervened.

Sometimes we will not follow God the way we should... and He has to intervene for us. We should not purposefully and foolishly test Him on this. But often He will work on our behalf behind the scenes... without our ever knowing it. ... [PAUSE]

Laban's buffoonery rings hollow and ineffectual... except for the final line— "*But why did you steal my gods?*" ... Laban (with this) came to the most critical charge of all: he charged Jacob with stealing his household gods.

Another obstacle that we often face when we try to follow God's will... is the thoughtless things that the people close to us will do. They may not steal... but they can do all sorts of ill-advised actions... like gossip... or go to others and bring wrong impressions... which eventually lead to unnecessary hardship. ... Without understanding your carefulness in discerning God's will... others (close to you)... might throw their support in the opposite direction of where you are going... Or in their exuberance of support... they might impulsively take action... which they think helps. ... More than one Bible commentator suggested that Rachael took the household idols... in order to prevent Laban from learning from them where Jacob and his family were... and if he should pursue them. ... (Maybe...)

Genesis 31:31-35

Had Rachel been having her period... such a contact would have contaminated the gods. ... Laban could not imagine such a sacrilege. Among the ancients "the way of women" was considered to be a state of impurity and thus contaminating. ... Rachel's sitting on them was an act of withering contempt for the gods of Mesopotamia. She treated them as worthless and unclean.

Genesis 31:36-42

"Me dishonest? No! You're the cheat."

Laban was so low... he would have been content to rob his own daughters and grandchildren. ... And again... notice that Jacob credited God for everything. It was all the grace of God. Jacob's grateful spirit honored God alone.

This was pure triumph! ... The impassioned reply left Laban nearly speechless. But not quite. He knew that he was beaten. The relatives were present to witness that Jacob had done nothing wrong. But Laban had one last tirade. He blasts it... and then he pretends that out of the magnanimousness of his heart... he is will to let it go.

Genesis 31:43

Exposed for what he was... Laban tried to cover himself with bluster. This was a bunch of hot air by Laban... to make it look like he was being the man of charity who gives up his rights... in the cause of peace. Laban was a rascal and would pervert anything to improve his own situation. ... Empty words from a hollow man. ... But... embarrassed and off-balance... Laban

needed to do something. ... So he proposed a mutual covenant of nonaggression.

Genesis 31:44

It was Laban who proposed the peace covenant. And that says plenty about his situation. Jacob had rebuked Laban strongly, and Laban could not refute the rebuke. He knew Jacob was right and so did the men with Laban. So Laban, to save face, proposes a peace covenant. He is like the communists who only talk peace when they cannot win the war. They want peace to stop their losses. Proposing a peace conference saves their face and disguises their evil.

Genesis 31:45-52

In reality... Jacob did not need a treaty because God had already protected him from Laban. ... However... a treaty would officially keep them apart—and for that it was well worth it. ... The treaty would recognize Jacob and his family as a separate... independent people.

Laban added some stipulations to the treaty. ... These were more face-saving items than necessary stipulations... for he demanded that Jacob take care of his daughters... and that Jacob would stay on his own side. In making these stipulations... Laban used many words to cover up his own untrustworthiness. ... The man was trying to portray Jacob as the slippery... untrustworthy party... who had to be bound by a whole series of stipulations. ... The truth was that the women and the children would be much safer and better cared for with Jacob than they ever could have been with Laban.

Genesis 31:54-55

The last act of Laban was again as phony as a three-dollar bill. These were kisses that dripped with insincerity and were nothing but show. Laban must show that he is a charitable man and that the peace treaty is because he is such a nice person. But no one there was fooled... they all knew him.

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Following God... (doing His will)... isn't easy... even when we clearly know what His will is. But if we push through the obstacles (which are sure to come)... we will develop the kind of character that glorifies God.

This is what we have been observing with Jacob. For any who have eyes to see... here is the work of an awesome... sovereign God who works amidst the compost of human sin - to do His will. ... Amidst the swirl of deception and intrigue... God birthed a people who would become the twelve tribes of Israel. ... God took a poor man who had been repeatedly enslaved and exploited and made him rich. And now God led him in a glorious exodus. Such an awesome God!

God has a glorious plan for your life as well. And He has one for our church. He wants to take us (*the sinners that we are*)... and develop our character. ... Let's follow Him... and not let the "character-developing obstacles" turn us back!

1 Peter 5:10 (ESV)

And after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, confirm, strengthen, and establish you.