

Did I Miss God's Will for My Life?

By R. A. Torrey

I recently received a letter from one who is evidently an earnest Christian woman but who was in a condition of great depression because some years ago, when in college, she felt that perhaps she was called to go to China but did not want to go but became engaged to a Christian man, whom she married, and now the old question has come up again and she is fearing that perhaps she is not saved, and may have committed the unpardonable sin, because she failed to yield to what she thinks may have been the leading of the Holy Spirit to go to China. The letter was so similar in many points to others that I have received, that I think the answer to it may be helpful to a great many, and as the letter was full of questions which are answered in my reply, it seems appropriate to put it under the head of "Questions and Answers." Of course, we have avoided everything that would lead any one to know who the writer of the letter was.

April 14, 1913.

Dear Mrs. _____

Your letter of April 5th received, and carefully read. Let me say first of all, that I am glad that you wrote to me. I think that I can help you. In fact, I am very sure that I can. In regard to the substance of your first letter, let me say:

First. I do not believe that you were ever called to go as a missionary to China. The fact that the thought comes to one that they ought to go to China does not constitute a call. Neither does the fact that China seems to be the hardest field for one to go to, constitute a call. It is utterly to misunderstand God to think that a surrender of the will to Him necessarily involves doing the hardest thing, or even hard things. God is love, and absolute surrender of the will to Him is simply absolute surrender to infinite love. God is a Father, and not only wiser than any earthly father but more tender than any earthly mother.

Do you suppose that if my son, when he was a boy, should have come to me some day and have said, "Father, I want this to be a red letter day. I want no will of my own today whatever. Just make me out a plan for every step of my life today"--do you suppose that if he should have done that that I should have tried to think up all the hard things and disagreeable things, the things that he disliked the most, and have given them to him as his plan for that day? Don't you know that if he should have done that, I would have made that the happiest day he had ever known? So it is with our Heavenly Father when we surrender our wills to Him. He puts forth all the powers of infinite wisdom and infinite love to fill our lives with sunshine. Or course, He may ask us to do things that we would not

have chosen to do; but if He does, those things will become the pleasantest things when we do them.

At the root of your difficulty lies a totally false conception of God, and a totally false conception of the way of salvation. I do not think God ever called you to China, for you do not seem to have fitness for that work, and certainly now that you have a husband and children, He does not call you to go to China. There is nothing in all that you tell me about the matter that indicates any call of God for that particular work.

Second. Even if you were called to go to China and did not go, salvation is not impossible for you, neither is large usefulness impossible for you. According to the clear teaching of God's Word, we are not saved by service, we are saved simply by faith in Jesus Christ. Our service and our works have absolutely nothing to do with our salvation, i.e., as the ground of our salvation. Works and service are the outcome of our having already been saved. If you will turn in your Bible to Romans 4:5, you will read these words, "But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness," so it is evident that all we have to do with our salvation is to believe on Him that justifieth the ungodly. Our salvation is purchased, not by anything that we do but by what Jesus Christ did when He bore our sins in His own body on the cross. His atoning death covered all our sins. "All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned every one to his own way, and the Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:6). Every sin that we ever committed or ever shall commit was fully atoned for when He died upon the cross; He "redeemed us from the curse of the law (which we had broken) by becoming a curse in our place" (Gal. 3:13) "He who knew no sin became sin in our behalf, (i.e., took our place of condemnation) that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (i.e., our sins were put to His account, and His righteousness is put to our account (2 Cor. 5:21).

It was His death and His death alone that secured salvation by simply believing on Him who secured it for us by His death, i.e., by accepting God's testimony about Him that our sins were laid upon Him (Isa. 53:6) and trusting God to forgive us because He died in our place. The moment any one thus believes he is justified from all things (Acts 13:39); he has eternal life (John 3:36); he becomes a child of God (John 1:12).

We obtain assurance of salvation by simply believing what God says in His Word about Christ and about those who believe in Him. John tells us in 1 John 5:13, "These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God that ye may know that ye have eternal life (i.e., that we may know it through His written Word, not through our feelings and not through the witness of the Holy Spirit). The Holy Spirit does afterward bear witness together with our

spirits that we are the children of God (Rom. 8:16), but it is only when our spirit bears witness to it on the simple ground that God says so in His Word that the Holy Spirit bears witness together with our spirit. And it is our duty to believe that we are saved, and have eternal life (if we believe on Jesus Christ) whether the Spirit bears witness to it as yet or not. Not to believe it until we receive the Holy Spirit's testimony is to question God's Word and to make God a liar. He that does not believe God (i.e., what He says in His word, viz., that every one that believes in Jesus Christ is justified and has eternal life) makes God a liar, because he does not believe the record (or witness) that God gave of His Son (1 John 5:10). The record or witness that God has given concerning His Son (given in His Word) is that "he that hath the Son (has Him simply because he has received Him) hath life."

You are looking in the wrong place for assurance. You are looking at your feelings, or at the witness of the Spirit, instead of looking right at what God says in His Word. If you have received Jesus Christ (i.e., if you have taken Him as your Saviour, believing what God says about Him, namely, that He has laid your sins upon Him) and trusted God to forgive you because He died in your place, and if you have taken Him as your Lord and King (i.e., making His Word, as far as you understand it, the rule of your life) and if you have taken Him as your risen Saviour who has power to save to the uttermost (Heb. 7:25) and are trusting Him to keep you, then you are saved even though it was God's will that you should go to China, and you did not go. If you have not so received Him, why so receive Him this very moment, and the moment you do, your sins are all forgiven (Acts 13:39); you have eternal life (John 3:36; 5:24); you are a child of God (John 1:12). The first thing for you to do is not to decide the question of going to China, the first thing for you to do is to decide whether you have received Jesus or not, and if you have not, just receive Him now. Indeed, I would not bother too much about the question whether I had received him in the past or not: to be absolutely sure, I would let the past alone, just receive Him now and say, "If I never believed on Jesus before, I will now."

Third. It is already indicated in what I have said above, but I want to say it again so as to make it absolutely clear, that your root difficulty is legalism. You have mixed up law and grace. Thousands of others are doing the same. You have got it into your head that you are saved by doing everything that God tells you to do, and that if you should not do what He tells you to do in everything, or even if you should be uncertain as to what His will was, and through not clearly understanding or knowing His will should not do what He tells you to do, then you should not do what He tells your to do, then you would be lost. If that were true, pretty much everybody that professes to be a Christian would be lost, for there are certainly very few Christians who are not at times uncertain about the will of God and who do not at times wrongly interpret God's will and, of course, every one of these, according to your theory, would be lost.

Let me repeat it in another form, we are not saved by doing God's will, in going to just the place that He would have us to go, and in doing the exact thing He would have us do: we are saved on the single ground of Christ's atoning death and on the single condition of believing in Him who died and rose again. If you will confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, you will be saved the moment you do it (Rom. 10:9), and you won't become unsaved by misinterpreting His will some time, and neglecting to do what it was His will you should have done. It is after we know we are saved because He says so in His Word that we are in a position to understand His will and do it.

Fourth. Now I will take up your specific questions, though they are really answered in what I have said.

(1) "If Abraham was willing to offer up his only son," of course we should be willing to give up, if God asks us to, our son or daughter, or husband, or any one else, but even Abraham was not saved by offering up his son. It was after He was saved that he offered up his son. He was saved by simple faith in God (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:3-5). Even if Abraham had not offered up Isaac, he would have been saved, but he would doubtless have missed blessing that he might have had. But you have no reason for supposing that God wishes you to give up your husband and children. Indeed, God in His Word tells you very plainly that your duty is to your husband and children, and it would take a very clear and definite and remarkable revelation in the face of God's teaching about the duty of a wife and of a mother to make it clear that you should leave your husband and children and go to some foreign field. There doubtless have been cases where God has called upon a man to leave wife and children and go to the foreign field. I have a dear friend who has done that very thing, but it was with the hearty consent of his wife and children, and they expect to follow him some time, though he has been separated from them most of the time for the past few years.

It is to such a case as that that God refers in the passage which you quote (Luke 18:29, 30) and in similar passages such as Matthew 10:27; Luke 14:26. Of course, if anybody would be a disciple of Jesus he must deny himself (i.e., say to self, "I don't know you; I recognize no master but Jesus") and take up His cross (i.e., bear the shame and reproach and suffering that may lie in the path of duty, rather than wandering out of the path of duty in order to avoid the shame and suffering that lie in the path), and follow Christ (i.e., take Jesus and Jesus only as our example) (Matt. 16:24), but bear in mind this verse does not state the way to be saved, it states the way in which a saved person becomes a disciple. We are not saved by denying self, or taking up our cross, or doing anything else, we are saved by simply believing in Jesus. When we are saved, of course we will desire to be true disciples of Him.

Let me add to this, though it is not exactly put in your letter in the form of a question, that even if you made a mistake in being married, instead of going to China (I don't believe you did make a mistake, but even if you did) you cannot go back now, and have no right to go back now and break your marriage promise to your husband and desert the children whom God has given you. Your duty now is plain, simply to go on and witness for Christ by being a gentle, true, loving, self-denying wife and a faithful mother. Even if this were not the highest calling that God had for you (I really think it was the call God had for you, but even if it were not), nevertheless it is a high calling and one in which you may have great blessing. The woman most honored in the Bible is not the woman in public work but the woman who is a mother (1 Tim. 5:14; 2:14, 15). The woman who John saw in heaven was a mother (Rev. 12:1, 2). Sanctified motherhood is a Christian woman's first call. I do not doubt for a moment that God calls some women to a celibate life and to forms of service where a married woman would not fit the case, but the ordinary call to a woman is to be wife and mother. It is evident that you have no special fitness for the lines of service to which God calls some women, and, as a condition, calls them to give up the privileges of motherhood.

(2) You write (though it is not exactly a question, it involves one), "I felt that God cared not for earthly things except spiritual matters and He would not save me unless I would go to China, and yet I could not see how to go." This has been already answered in what I have said above, but I will repeat it, you are not saved by going to China or going anywhere else; you are saved by believing in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, God does not tell you to go to China and then not let you see how to go.

You add the words, "Obey God and do His will mean nothing but go to China." Well, that is not in the Word, that was simply your fancy. You add still further, "The impression came, 'You will never have the power of the Holy Spirit and peace until you go to China.'" Well, that impression was certainly not from God. When you are saved you may obtain the Holy Spirit anywhere by simply meeting the conditions. Of course you will need to be willing to go to China, if it is God's will, but it is not clear that it is His will; in fact, it is very clear that it is not His will. Anyway this does not have anything whatever to do with your salvation. The baptism with the Holy Spirit is the gift of God to people who are saved; it is not a condition of their being saved.

You say further down, "Some months ago, while reading reports of our missionary work and the great need for workers, the old feeling came over me, 'Possibly I should have gone to my knees on my promise, but I did not go.' I began to probe my Christian life, I became anxious again, so much so that I could neither eat nor sleep." To this I would say, that even if you should have gone to your knees and did not, even though you made some mistake, it is done,

it cannot be undone, it should be left with God, you cannot possibly go to China now without disobeying God, and even if you have failed of God's first choice for you, He has other things for you to do. Mark failed when he went with Paul and Barnabas; he left the work and evidently did wrong in leaving it, but God found for him other fields of opportunity and made him a useful servant. Even if you have failed of God's best and highest choice for you, you have not buried your talents; you do that when you do nothing, and even though you do not gain ten talents with your one, you can give five, and will have the Master's "Well done." Let me add, we are not saved by using our talents to the best advantage, we are saved by believing on Christ.

(3) You ask, "If it was a call from God and I have failed to heed, can you give me any assurance from God's Word that Jesus will yet accept me, although I may have thwarted His life purpose for me?" I have already answered this in the above, and given you much assurance from God's Word, but I will repeat it briefly: Jesus does not accept you on the ground of your falling in perfectly with God's will and not thwarting to some extent His life purpose. He saves you solely on the ground of His atoning death, and on the one condition that you believe on Him. You have His own Word for it, that if you come to Him, no matter how much you may have thwarted His purpose, no matter what sins you have committed, He will receive you (John 6:37). You say, "Do you think this was the unpardonable sin?" I not only do not think it was, I know it was not; for God has defined the one only unpardonable sin in His own Word, and according to His own explicit Word, the only sin that has no forgiveness is the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, not sinning against the Holy Spirit. We have all sinned against the Holy Spirit at some time; the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is the deliberate attributing to the Devil what we know to be the work of the Holy Spirit. This sin, of course, you have not committed, and even if you have thwarted God's purpose in the matter of going to China, it does not bear the faintest resemblance to the unpardonable sin.

(4) You ask, "How can I know the Spirit's leading from Satan's?" Let me say, first of all in answering this, that you need not go back and decide whether it was the Spirit's leading that you should go to China. Even admitting that it was and that you resisted or grieved the Holy Spirit in that case, it is done now and cannot be undone, and you are saved just the same and may expect the Spirit to lead you in the future.

Now in direct answer to your question would say, that the way to know the Spirit's leading is found in James 1:5-7. This involves five things: First, that you sincerely desire to know the will of God, and therefore the Spirit's leading; second, that you realize your own inability to decide ("lack wisdom"); third, that you definitely ask God to show you His will; fourth, that you confidently expect God will show you; fifth, that you go step by step as He does show you.

You have a perfect right to ask God to give you clear light, and if you really desire to know and do His will, if impressions come to you of which you are not at all sure, you have a right to say, "Heavenly Father, I want to know Thy will and will do it as soon as Thou hast made it clear; make it clear as day," and you have a right to wait until He does make it clear as day, and not be at all bothered that you have not done what is not as clear as day; for "God is light and in Him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5), and any impression or leading that is not clear is certainly not His leading for you as yet. When men and women want to really obey God in everything, the devil tries to thwart them by bringing all kinds of impressions that they ought to do things which very likely are not God's will at all, but which the devil simply brings in to annoy and to bring people into darkness as he has you. God is a Father and we are His children. If I want my children to do anything, I make it clear, and if one of my children was not sure that I wanted them to do something and therefore should not do it, I should not want my children to be afraid of me or cringe before me, but come to me and ask me to make it plain as day—and I would—and so will God. And if my children made a mistake and failed to do the thing I wanted them to do, I would not exclude them from my presence; I would love them just the same and would want them to be perfectly free with me still; and so does God.

(5) Of course the thought of getting a divorce from your husband and leaving husband and child is not of God. I think you see that without my going into it. Your present duty is as plain as day.

There are a number of other questions which are so plainly answered in what I have already said, I think it would only confuse you to go over them again. You ask me to tell you what qualifications one needs for a foreign missionary. I will not bother about going into them: for it is evident God does not want you now to go as a foreign missionary, so it is not necessary to go into it now. I will say frankly, however, that I don't think you have them anyway.

You ask what it means to say, "All for Jesus." It means simply that you give all your powers to Him and are ready to go where He tells you to go, to do what He tells you to do, and to be what He tells you to be. Of course it involves your being willing to leave husband and child and go out into the world with nothing to do if that were His will, but it is not His will, and Jesus would not have you do this. Indeed, He tells you not to do it in His Word, and doing His will does not mean for a moment that we are to choose the hardest thing and decide because the thing is the hardest that it is His will; the hardest thing is not His will, though His will may sometimes be a hard thing. You say, "How can I appropriate Christ's promises if I feel that such a thing is God's will and yet cannot do it?" Anything you "cannot do" is not God's will. He is not a hard Master, certainly not an utterly unreasonable Master (Matt. 11:30).

You ask if you have interpreted the words of Esau right in thinking that perhaps you have sold your spiritual birthright for the pottage of life, and that there is no place for repentance. You certainly have not interpreted them right. Your case does not bear the slightest resemblance to Esau's. Esau sold his birthright deliberately and intentionally for a mess of pottage. You have done nothing of the kind; even though you have made a mistake in interpreting God's will, you were not deliberately and knowingly selling your salvation for the sake of getting a husband.

You ask, "Do you think it is well for me to read and try to understand these deeper spiritual books of men like Dr. Gordon and Dr. Murray or had I better just read my Bible with such helps as I need to understand it?" To this I would say, in your present state of mind, I think you had better stick to your Bible. I do not think the books of Gordon and Murray would be helpful to you. Indeed, I do not think that too much reading of them is good for any one; I think a great many people are neglecting the Bible to read devotional books and harping on one narrow line and so get more harm than good.

You say, "Shall I wait for the witness of the Spirit before I try to present Christ as a Saviour to others?" No, be sure that you have received the Lord Jesus, and, therefore, believe that you have eternal life, and that your sins are forgiven, and that you are a child of God, because God says so, and go and witness to others for Jesus and some day you will find that you have the witness of the Spirit. It may dawn upon you gradually, or come like a burst, but the ground of our assurance is not primarily the witness of the Spirit, but God's own written Word.

I find I have omitted a part of your letter, where you speak about "trying to love God." My advice is to stop trying to love God; simply keep dwelling upon His love to you. We love Him because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). Read over and over again the passages that tell you of His love to you (such passages as Isaiah 53:5, John 3:16). Ask God to make them real to you, and the first thing you know you will find you are loving God without trying.

Sincerely yours,

R.A. Torrey.