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GOD WORKS ACCORDING TO HIS NATURE

*Dear friends, let us love one another, because love is from God,
and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.
The one who does not love does not know God, because God is love.
(1 John 4:7-8)*

MY DAUGHTER'S CANCER

When one of my children couldn't get his own way, he used to say accusingly, "You don't love me." But was that true? No, of course not. At that moment, however, my love was expressing itself differently than he wanted it to. My actions might sometimes have been confusing to my children, but my love for them was constant and unchanging.

When our only daughter Carrie was sixteen, doctors told us she had Hodgkins Disease. The doctor had missed a spot in her chest cavity during an earlier x-ray, and now cancer had spread dramatically and was threatening her life. We had to take her through aggressive chemotherapy and radiation treatments from which she suffered terribly. It was extremely difficult for Marilyn and me to watch her endure the debilitating nausea and pain that resulted from the treatments. Some people face painful experiences like this

and angrily blame God for their suffering, assuming He doesn't love them anymore. Carrie's cancer treatments certainly could have been devastating for us. We had never undergone anything so difficult. Yet did God still love us? Yes. His love for us had not changed. Our circumstances had altered, but God had not.

When you face situations like this, you may want to ask God to explain what is happening. We did that. We desperately wanted to know God's purpose in allowing our young daughter to suffer so terribly. We asked God to help us understand why He was allowing our family to undergo such a difficult ordeal. But we never concluded that God no longer loved us.

At times as I prayed about Carrie, I would see that behind her and her illness stood the cross of Jesus Christ. I said, "Father, don't ever let me look at my difficult circumstances and question Your love for me. Your love was forever settled on the cross. That has never changed and it will never change for me. After what You did for me, I will never question whether You love me." My love for God did not hinge on whether or not God healed my daughter. I believe with all my heart that my wife and I would still have loved God even if He had chosen in His sovereign will not to heal Carrie. I recognize that there are times in God's divine will and infinite wisdom that He chooses not to heal or to protect from harm. It was out of my love relationship with God that I was able to trust Him to walk with me through the situation, regardless of how it turned out.¹

God created you for a love relationship with Him. He yearns for you to love Him and respond to His immeasurable love for you. God's nature is perfect, holy, total love. He will never relate to you in any other way although you may not always understand His actions. There will be times when you do not comprehend why He allows certain things to occur, and that is to be expected. He is the infinite God while we are limited human creatures. He sees the eternal ramifications of everything that happens. We don't.

There are many things God does that we will never understand this side of heaven. But God does invite us to come to know His nature, the essence of who He is and what He is like. As you think about knowing and doing God's will, you must first come to know who God is.

Let's look at three aspects of God's nature that dispose Him to act in certain ways. Each of these characteristics has special implications for how you relate to Him and how you understand and do His will.

GOD'S NATURE

1. God is love—His will is always best.
2. God is all-knowing—His directions are always right.
3. God is all-powerful—He can enable you to accomplish His will.

GOD IS LOVE—HIS WILL IS ALWAYS BEST

According to 1 John 4:16, "God is love." This does not say that God loves, though He does love perfectly and unconditionally. The Scripture says that God's essential nature is love. God will never act contrary to His nature. You will never experience God expressing His will except in a demonstration of perfect love. God's kind of love always seeks His best for each person. If we reject His best, He will discipline us. However, the discipline will come from a heavenly Father who loves us and who will do whatever is necessary to bring us to a place in our lives where we can receive what He wants to give us (see Heb. 12:5–11).

God does bring discipline, judgment, and wrath on those who continue to live in sin and rebellion against Him. Even this discipline, though, is based on love. "For the Lord disciplines the one He loves, and punishes every son whom He receives" (Heb. 12:6). Because His nature is love, I'm confident that however He expresses Himself to me is always best. Many other verses describe His love toward us. For example: "For God loved the world in this way: He gave His One and Only Son" (John 3:16), and "This is how we have come to know love: He laid down His life for us" (1 John 3:16).

Your confidence in the love nature of God is crucial. This has been a powerful influence in my life. I always view my circumstances against the backdrop of the cross, where God clearly demonstrated once and for all His deep love for me. I may not always understand my current situation or how things will eventually turn

out, but I can trust in the love Christ proved to me when He laid down His life for me on the cross. In the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God forever convinced me that He loves me. I choose to base my trust in God on what I know—His love for me—and I choose to trust that in time He will help me understand the confusing circumstances I may be experiencing.

Trust Him!

Have you ever heard someone say: "I'm afraid to surrender my life totally to the Lord because He might send me to Africa as a missionary"? Or have you been cautioned, "Don't say what you don't want to do because, sure enough, that's what God will tell you to do"? Such statements indicate a lack of trust and understanding of God's love, for He would not call you to be a missionary in Africa unless He knew such a call was best for you. I know many people who serve the Lord in dangerous or impoverished nations, and they would not want to be anywhere else in the world. They love their adopted country and its people, and they know God gave them His best when He invited them to serve Him there.

One missionary couple came back to their home in the United States for a year with their two children before returning to Zimbabwe. Their schedule in the United States was so full and hurried, they declared, "We can't wait to get back to Africa. We love African time!" The place in Africa where they work has no electricity. They go to bed when it gets dark, and they rise with the sun. When they go to a village for a meeting, no schedule drives them. Upon arrival, they send word throughout the village by children. A crowd gathers, and they meet until they are finished. The pace is far less stressful than the frenetic schedule in America.

When you trust that God always gives His best, you will devote your heart to whatever assignment God gives because you know in that role you can experience everything God has in His heart for you. Those who are perennially unhappy and dissatisfied with God's assignments exhibit their lack of belief that God loves them and that He is expressing His love in His guidance of their lives.

Never allow your heart to question God's love. Settle it on the front end of your quest to know Him and experience Him: He loves you. Every dealing He has with you is an expression of His love for

you. God would not be God if He expressed Himself in any way other than perfect love! What you believe about God's love for you will be reflected in how you relate to Him. If you really believe God is love, you will also accept that His will is always best.

God's Commands Are for Your Own Good

When you hear words such as command, judgment, statute, or law, your first impression may be negative. God's commands, however, are expressions of His love, as the following passages demonstrate:

What does the LORD your God ask of you except to fear the LORD your God by walking in all His ways, to love Him, and to worship the LORD your God with all your heart and all your soul? Keep the LORD's commands and statutes I am giving you today, for your good.
(Deut. 10:12-13)

He said to them, "Take to heart all these words I am giving you today, so that you may command your children to carefully follow all the words of this law. For they are not meaningless words to you but they are your life, and by them you will live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess." (Deut. 32:46-47)

The foundation for God's commands is His love relationship with you. When you come to know God by experience, you will be thoroughly convinced of His love. You will know you can believe Him and trust Him, and because you trust Him, you will readily obey Him. Those who love the Lord have no problem doing what He says. "For this is what love for God is: to keep His commands. Now His commands are not a burden" (1 John 5:3).

God loves you deeply and profoundly. Therefore, He has given you guidelines for living, lest you miss the full dimensions of the love relationship He seeks to have with you. Life has some "land mines" that could harm or destroy you. God does not want you to miss out on His best, and He does not want your life to be destroyed through foolish choices.

Avoiding Land Mines

Suppose you were in a war-torn country, and you had to cross a field full of land mines. If a local soldier knew exactly where every one of them was buried and offered to take you through the field, would you protest and say, "I don't want you to tell me what to do. I want to be free to make my own choices"? I don't know about you, but I would stay as close to that person as I could. I certainly would not go wandering off. His directions to me would not restrict me; they would preserve my life. As we walked together, he would say, "Don't go that way, because that path will kill you. Go this way and live."

The Purpose of God's Commands

God wants you to live an abundant life (John 10:10). When God gives you a command, it is to protect you and lead you toward His blessings. He does not want you to miss out on the fullness of life He wants you to experience. God's instructions do not restrict; they free you. God's purpose is that you prosper and live:

"When your son asks you in the future, 'What is the meaning of the decrees, statutes, and ordinances, which the LORD our God has commanded you?' tell him. . . 'The LORD commanded us to follow all these statutes and to fear the LORD our God for our prosperity always and for our preservation, as it is today. Righteousness will be ours if we are careful to follow every one of these commandments before the LORD our God, as He has commanded us'" (Deut. 6:20-21, 24-25).

Suppose the Lord says, "I have a gift for you—a beautiful, wonderful expression of what love is. I will provide you with a spouse who will love and cherish you. Your relationship with this person will bring out the best in you. It will give you an opportunity to experience some of the deepest and most meaningful dimensions of human love that are possible. That individual will walk alongside you to encourage, challenge, and strengthen you when you lose heart. Within that relationship, your mate will love you, believe in you, and trust you. Out of that relationship, I will bless you with children, and those children will grow up to love you with all their hearts."

But then He cautions, "Do not commit adultery" (Matt. 5:27). Is that command meant to limit your happiness? No! It is to protect you so you can experience love at its human best. What happens if you begin to view your marriage vows as restricting, choosing instead to ignore God's command and to be unfaithful to your spouse? The love relationship in your marriage will be ruptured. Trust will disintegrate. Guilt will set in and bitterness will fester. Your children will feel the pain as well. Emotional scars may severely limit the future dimensions of love you and your family could experience together. God knows what the horrific result of sin is, so He clearly warns you not to succumb to it.

God's commands are designed to guide you to the best He has to offer. You will struggle to obey Him, however, if you do not trust Him. You will not trust Him if you do not love Him. And you will not love Him unless you know Him. But if you come to know Him as He reveals Himself to you, you will love Him, trust Him, and obey Him. The Bible is crystal clear at this point: if you love God, you will obey Him! If you do not obey Him, you do not really love Him, regardless of what you may claim (see John 14:24).

GOD IS ALL-KNOWING— HIS DIRECTIONS ARE ALWAYS RIGHT

By nature God is omniscient, or all-knowing. He is not limited by the dimension of time—He knows the past, present, and future. He created all things, so nothing is outside of His knowledge. Whenever God expresses Himself to you, therefore, His directions are always right. When God gives you a directive, you can be sure He has already considered every factor. You will never do God's bidding only to discover that God was somehow mistaken. You can have absolute confidence that when God tells you to do something, it is the right course of action.

As you seek to know and obey God's will, you must wait to proceed until you clearly understand what God wants you to do and how He wants you to do it. Human wisdom and knowledge are inadequate to determine what you should do. You must depend on God's wisdom and knowledge for the important decisions of your life. At times, you may not understand why God is asking you to do

something. As you obey, however, you will come to understand why His guidance was the best possible counsel for your life.

Perhaps you have asked God to give you several alternatives so you could choose the one you thought was best. But how many options does God need to give you so you know the right one? God always gets it right the first time. You only need His one best option. Once you've heard God speak, you don't need to continue waiting to seek other alternatives. You need to proceed with confidence based on what God said.

Trusting in God's Direction

When I served as a denominational leader in Vancouver, one of our churches believed God was leading it to begin three new mission churches for different language groups. At that time, the church had only seventeen members. Human reason would have immediately ruled out such a large assignment for a small church. They were hoping to receive financial support from our denomination's Home Mission Board to pay the mission pastors' salaries. One pastor was already in the process of relocating to Vancouver when we unexpectedly received word that the mission board would be unable to fund any new work in our area for the next three years.

The church didn't have the funds to do what God had called it to do. When they sought my counsel, I suggested that they first go back to the Lord and clarify what God had said to them. If this was merely something they wanted to do for God, God would not be obligated to provide for them. After they sought the Lord, they returned and said, "We still believe God is calling us to start all three new churches." At this point, they had to walk by faith and trust God to provide for what He was clearly leading them to do. A few months later, the church received some surprising news.

Six years earlier, I had led a series of meetings in a church in California. An elderly woman had approached me and said she wanted to will part of her estate for use in mission work in our city. The associational office had just received a letter from an attorney in California informing them that they would be receiving a substantial check from that dear woman's estate. The association could now provide the funds needed by the sponsoring church. The amount was sufficient to firmly establish all three churches this faithful congregation had launched.

Did God know what He was doing when He told a seventeen-member church to begin three new congregations? Yes. He already knew the funds would not be available from the missions agency, and He was also aware of the generosity of an elderly saint in California. None of these details caught God by surprise. That small church in Vancouver had known in their minds that God could provide. But through this experience they developed a deeper trust in their all-knowing God. Whenever God directs you, you will never have to question His will. He knows what He is going to do.

GOD IS ALL-POWERFUL— HE CAN ENABLE YOU TO ACCOMPLISH HIS WILL

Our all-powerful God created the universe out of nothing. He breathed life into creatures of dust. He can accomplish anything He purposes to do. In fact, He declared, "My plan will take place, and I will do all My will. . . . Yes, I have spoken; so I will also bring it about. I have planned it; I will also do it" (Isa. 46:10–11). If He ever asks you to do something, He Himself will work through you to do it. Think of these biblical examples:

- God enabled Noah and his sons to build an enormous boat that spared the lives of every animal species during the great flood (see Gen. 6–9).
- God used Gideon and three hundred men to defeat an army of one hundred twenty thousand (see Judg. 7–8).
- Christ Jesus empowered His twelve disciples to heal people and to cast out demons (see Matt. 10).
- God equipped Paul to carry the gospel to the Gentiles and to establish churches throughout Asia Minor, all the way to Rome (see Acts 9:13–28).

When your life is centered in God's activity, He will rearrange your thinking. God's ways and thoughts are so different from yours that they will often appear wrong, unloving, or impossible. You will often realize that the task He assigns is far beyond your power or resources to accomplish. As soon as you recognize that the job appears humanly unattainable, you need to be ready to believe God and to trust Him completely.

You must believe He will enable and equip you to do everything He asks you to do. Don't second-guess Him. Simply take Him at His word. Turn to Him for the power, insight, skill, and resources required. At times I hear Christians say things like, "My pastor asked me to give my testimony in church next Sunday, but I could never do that . . . I have been approached about leading a Bible study at work during the noon hour, but I have never done anything like that before, and I don't think I could . . . I sense God wants me to go on my church's mission trip to South America next summer, but I can't afford to . . ." When we announce what we think we *can't* do in response to God's initiative, we are actually saying more about our faith in God than we are about our own abilities. The fact is, either we believe God is all-powerful or we don't. When you declare it's impossible for you to do what God told you to do, you show your doubts about how powerful God really is. It is one thing to believe in God's power, it is quite another to live your life in obedient response to an all-powerful God.

As you set out on your walk with God, He will initially make Himself known to you quite simply. As you respond with a childlike trust, an entirely new way of viewing life will unfold. Your life will be fulfilling. You'll never have to live with a sense of emptiness or lack of purpose. He will always fill your life with Himself. When you have the Lord, you have everything you need. As He was to Moses, He will be to you the "I Am that I Am."

SUMMARY

Knowing and doing God's will depends on how well you know Him and His nature. Because God is love, His will is always best. As you follow and obey Him, He will direct you in ways that are best for you and for the situation into which He calls you. Since God is all-knowing, you'll never have to question the wisdom of His directions—even when they don't make sense to you. His plans are always right. God is all-powerful, so you need not doubt your ability, strength, or resources to complete His assignments. He will equip you to accomplish all He calls you to do.

EXPERIENCING GOD TODAY

Meditate on the truths in this chapter, and ask God to reveal His nature to you. Ask Him to develop in you a confidence to trust Him anytime He has an assignment for you.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

As you answer the questions below, ponder the following three characteristics of the Lord:

- God is love. His will is always best.
 - God is all-knowing. His directions are always right.
 - God is all-powerful. He can enable you to accomplish His will.
1. Describe the experience that most permanently settled your belief in God's love for you. What questions did you ask during that experience? Did God provide answers for your questions? How? Or why not? Did you ever doubt God's love during this experience? How can you be sure God loves you today?
 2. When God has asked you to do something, what has your response typically been? If you struggled to obey, what hindered you? Did you lack trust in God's love? His wisdom? His power?
 3. Has God ever asked you to do something that didn't make sense to you? If so, what happened? What did you learn about God and yourself through that experience?

1. In chapter 14, "God Speaks through Circumstances," I will tell you how God used the circumstance of Carrie's cancer to bring glory to Himself and renew prayer ministries around the world. Since then, Carrie has graduated from college and seminary, has married, had two beautiful children, and is a career missionary in Germany.