

DISCERNING GOD'S CALL
"When the Will of God is Scary"

A sermon preached by Gary Haugen – President and CEO of International Justice Mission

October 22, 2006

I Peter 3:8-18

Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing. For "Whoever desires to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit; let him turn away from evil and do good; let him seek peace and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil." Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil. For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.

It's a great privilege to get to be here with you this morning. I have been asked by John to address the question in this series of thinking about God's will and what we do when the will of God is scary. And my one hope and objective and prayer this morning is that after sharing something from the Word of God, we would leave this place with hope; but hope that isn't from the words of Gary, rather hope that comes from God. So I thought perhaps we might just take a moment this morning and just ask for the miracle that these words won't convey on their own. So will you pray with me for just a moment?

Kind Father in heaven, thank you for granting us life and breath today, soundness of mind, and the redemption of our life through Jesus. Father, we are gathered here because we would like to be more like him and so we ask you, O God, that you would speak some word of truth this morning that would be from you, and it would actually enter our hearts and change us to be more like your son, Jesus. We ask you this because Jesus said we could. And so we ask it of you in His name. In the holy name of Jesus, your son, our brother, Amen.

One of the greatest joys of this season of my life is that I get to coach pee wee contact football. [Laughter.] And when I say pee wee football, I mean seven, eight, and nine year olds. And when I say contact football, it means that they get to put on the helmet and the shoulder pads and the mouth guard, and they get to knock each other down. And it's so much fun that it doesn't seem like it should be legal, but it is. [Laughter.] Of course one of the most fascinating moments of pee wee contact football occurs very early in the season. It's the magic moment when the brand new pee wee discovers that contact football is about contact: a nice word for kids knocking each other down. The little pee wee has seen football on TV, so he's tempted to think it's about a really big party in a stadium. And he's heard the announcers and the color commentators talk, and he might think that football is about analyzing the plays in a really clever way. Then he comes to the first conditioning practice (now this is before all the equipment is handed out) and he can think it's about running fast and about catching the ball, or about running sprightly through the orange cones. And then finally, oh finally, he's issued his shiny new helmet, the broad shoulder pads, the dazzling jersey, and he takes it home to show his family and of course, runs down the street to show his friends. And at this point, he might think that all the excitement is really about the gear – football becomes about the uniform. After all of this, the first day of contact practice finally rolls around, and the new pee wee finds himself in a series of shocking collisions [laughter] that seem surprisingly intentional [laughter] and for which no

one is offering an apology. Shortly thereafter there's the magic epiphany when the pee wee discovers that contact football is about contact.

In such a moment the new pee wee is actually forced to make a choice: does he really want to be a football player, or not? Sometimes pee wees need help in clarifying the choice, and I can actually remember the moment when my mother clarified that choice for me. I was coming home in the car from one of my early contact practices as a new pee wee, and I told my mom that I had had enough. I didn't want to go to practices anymore. Knowing a thing or two about her little 8-year-old, my mom simply said, "Oh." And after letting me sit for a spell in the absence of enthusiastic affirmation of my decision, she simply said, "Well, I suppose you can just turn in your uniform and equipment to the coach tomorrow." This suggestion was, of course, horrifying to me. After all, I loved football. At least, I loved the idea of football. And, I looked pretty fabulous in the uniform. [Laughter.] I was thinking I could just be the kind of football player who wore the uniform without all that contact stuff. My mom, however, helped me to see that the contact stuff was precisely what football was about. And after encouraging me past the shock of the first few bumps, I found that I really was a football player because I truly loved what football was all about: the contact. It might have been sweet of my mom to let me avoid the bumps and bruises of the practices and games and let me just maybe hold onto the uniform for a season and pretend that I was a football player. She could have acted like it was possible to be both a football player and to avoid the contact, and to pretend that a choice wasn't necessary, but that wouldn't have been true. And thankfully, she loved me more profoundly than that; and gloriously, she allowed me to discover one of the authentic joys of my childhood.

Good parents, I think, help their kids clarify the reality of life's choices. God, our heavenly Father, is a good parent. And he likewise loves us deeply enough to clarify the actual choices of life. This isn't always easy for me, not easy for me to hear, but I'm so glad he doesn't withhold the best by failing to tell me the truth. And here is one choice that our heavenly Father wants us to understand, I think, as Christians (and certainly for us in our era, I believe this is the choice of our age): do I want to be brave or do I want to be safe? Gently, lovingly, our heavenly Father wants us to know that we simply can't be both. On the one hand, all of us, I think, do carry a great yearning to be brave. We want to be people of courage. Indeed, what is uglier or less attractive to us than cowardice? We admire and exalt the courageous. We return again and again to it in literature, in art, and in the cinema to catch even a glimpse of the beauty of a brave heart. Indeed, who wouldn't want to be like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego? Who wouldn't, when an entire empire was just bowing down before the idolatrous king, want to be the ones who just very calmly look Nebuchadnezzar in the eye and say,

"O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to present a defense to you in this matter. If our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire and out of your hand, O king, let him deliver us. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue that you have set up." Daniel 3:16b-18

Wow. I want to be like that. But on the other hand, I don't ever want to be like that. I don't ever want to be in a situation where I have to be that brave. Right? I'd like to be brave, but I'd also like to be safe. My heavenly Father, on the other hand, loves me deeply enough to tell me the truth. He tells me I can't be both brave and safe. He wants me to be clear there's a choice, and he wants me to choose to be brave. And choosing to be brave means choosing not to be safe.

What does all this mean? Well, it brings us to the topic that John asked me to address, which is "What do we do when the will of God is scary?" Well, first we might look at the question. Is God's will ever supposed to be scary? I mean, isn't God supposed to take care of me? Isn't he supposed to keep me from danger and make me safe? In fact, aren't I probably out of his will if I'm feeling scared? Well, according to Jesus, no. In fact, it turns out that doing God's will in a fallen world is inherently dangerous. Over and over in Scripture, Jesus teaches us that his disciples will suffer for following him. Of course, we will avoid a lot of suffering for following him. We will avoid the suffering of guilt, the suffering of self-destruction, of addiction, of hell. But there are other kinds of suffering we will encounter precisely because we are following him. And he wants us to be very clear about this. In fact, in our New Testament reading from I Peter it says,

Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But, even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed...Keep your conscience clear, so that when you are maligned, those

who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than to suffer for doing evil.

So some suffering can clearly be God's will. It isn't necessarily the suffering itself that is God's will, but rather, in a fallen world, following the will of God will generate suffering in our lives. In fact, there are two things that are always the will of God and always dangerous in a fallen world: telling the truth and loving needy people. In fact, if my life of following Jesus doesn't feel dangerous, I should probably pause and check to see if it's Jesus I am following. If I'm playing football and nobody is hitting me, I might check to see that I'm actually out on the field. [Laughter.]

Doing what Jesus does, telling the truth and loving needy people, is inherently unsafe in a fallen world of lies and selfishness. We have, perhaps, heard more about the dangers of speaking the truth as Christians, so I'd like to focus on the other dangerous activity that Jesus invites us all to, which is loving needy people. Let's be clear that that is what following Jesus is about. Jesus said all the teaching of the law and the prophets could be summed up in these two commands: loving God and loving our neighbor, especially our needy neighbor. In fact in I John it says that we shouldn't think we can love the God we can't see if we can't love the needy neighbor we can see. It says in I John if our neighbor is in need and we don't respond, the love of God isn't even in us. Football is about contact and following Jesus is about loving needy people. But loving needy people, it turns out, is not safe. In fact, I generally try to keep neediness away from me. Think about those in your family who are most needy and hurting, those in our church fellowship who are hurting the most, those in our community who are in the most need, those on the other side of the city who are most vulnerable. Them. Serving them and loving them is uncomfortable. It's messy, it's untidy, it's unsafe and can even be dangerous. And yet paradoxically, Jesus tells us this is where the deepest joy is. And based on the experience that my colleagues and I have had at the International Justice Mission, I think it's true. It's not safe, but I think it's true.

As many of you know, International Justice Mission is a collection of Christian lawyers, criminal investigators, and trauma social workers, and we take on cases of abuse and oppression from Christian ministries serving amongst the poor. They bring us cases of violence and slavery and sexual exploitation. And we investigate these cases to bring about four things: One: we rescue the victims. Two: we provide them with aftercare. Three: we bring the perpetrators to justice. And, Four: we bring structural prevention to keep the abuses from happening again. Also, as many of you know, we started out as a small handful of us here: American lawyers in Washington, DC. Now we're about 240 full time staff around the world in 14 different offices. And the vast majority of those working for IJM are nationals serving in their own communities. At IJM we specifically try to love the neighbors who are suffering because of violence, because of abuse and oppression. And this, as you can imagine, just isn't safe.

But let me just tell you about one category of neighbors we are trying to love. This is the category of our neighbors who are slaves. There are more than twenty million people in our world who live as slaves. They're not metaphorical slaves. They actually live as slaves. I've seen hundreds of them myself. I met a woman in South Asia named Shaybia. She and her family had been locked away in a rice mill for five years. They worked seven days a week, sixteen hours a day. About one hundred other slaves were also locked away in the rice mill. If anyone tries to run away, they're grabbed, brought back, and beaten viciously in front of the others. The children don't play; they work sixteen hours a day until they drop. If anyone tries to run away, they have no chance. And the women and girls are repeatedly sexually assaulted by the owners and overseers. Now, how do you love those neighbors? And would it be safe?

John was a young lawyer on the fast track with a successful law firm in Roanoke, Virginia. And then he heard that IJM needed a lawyer to help slaves like Shaybia. Of course, packing up his wife and young family to the developing world to confront violent slave-owners wasn't safe. But sometimes the will of God is scary because he's asking us to choose between being brave and being safe in order to love those who are in need. But not only is loving others not safe, but even worse perhaps, it doesn't look smart. [Laughter.] John's colleagues and associates just totally scoffed at him and his decision to go. "What do you mean you're going to rescue slaves? It will never work! You'll walk like a fool into a buzzsaw. You'll imperil your family. You'll have no future. You're a fool." They felt free enough to just call him an idiot. In fact, your choice to be brave, instead of smart, will be so threatening to those who are smart rather than brave that the Bible says you will be maligned, not congratulated. Darn! [Laughter.] But that's what it's going to take to show the love of Christ to Shaybia.

So sometimes we have to decide: are we going to love, or are we going to look smart? Because, loving the needy doesn't look smart. And in Washington, DC's culture, to be honest, one of our deepest fears is looking like a fool—a little unsophisticated, a little naïve, a little too earnest. Looking like a loser who serves the poor, because you don't have other choices. Finally, not only is it not safe and not the smart thing to do to try to love people like Shaybia, but it also doesn't match the image of the successful. There's no wealth in it, and there's very little regard. John has actually returned from his term of service in South Asia and I can certify that he's neither wealthy nor famous. [Laughter.] But then I can also certify that Shaybia is no longer a slave. John was able to send his investigators on a daring undercover operation that exposed the terrors inside the rice mill, mobilized a police raid to rescue the slaves out, and initiated prosecution of the slave owners. In fact, I've been with Shaybia and the other released slaves as they showed off their individual emancipation proclamation certificates. John and his team have been able to provide them with land, houses, livestock, and micro-loans to give them the ability to build their own life of dignity and freedom. I've seen this with my own eyes. And while none of it matches our prevailing cultural descriptions of success, it does match our Savior's condition of significance.

Jesus Christ says that significance is found in transforming people's lives through love. That is a significant life. Occasionally history will validate the significance of the life that didn't look successful at the time. For instance, few would have thought that Harriett Tubman looked very successful in the 1850's: an illiterate, runaway slave woman who managed to rescue scores of slaves on the Underground Railroad. But now go check out your kids' textbook, and she's presented as a model all around the country, of a significant life. Which makes it all the more interesting just to consider that John was able to rescue, with his team, four times as many slaves as Harriet Tubman did in her lifetime. Fortunately John had the law on his side in a way that Harriet Tubman did not. But someone had to help bring the law to violent brick factories, rice mills, and plantations of South Asia. And by golly, he did. There's just overwhelming opportunity for significance. In fact, John and his team have launched, I think, what is the most serious, hands-on Christian confrontation with slavery in 150 years. The work goes on with leaders that John has trained to carry on. And John and Linda and their children actually just live quietly among us here at The Falls Church (he's actually sharing at Kairos tonight). Now he's building the Kingdom of God at the U.S. Department of Justice.

Sometimes the will of God is scary because he's asking us to choose between a life that looks successful and a life that is actually significant. A life that wins the applause of our peers or a life that actually transforms lives through love. In Washington, DC, I think, one of the most exalted positions of life is actually becoming a Senator. Really though, history shows that you can actually be a senator of just about no significance. Sometimes it's just confusing. Are we seeking success or significance? Jesus tried to be clear about all of this with his disciples. He said in Luke 9:24 **“For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.”**

Another colleague of mine, Sean, calls himself a mad scientist of this divine paradox. See, the hypothesis is that you'll find your life when you lose it. So Sean decided to throw his life away, and being a proper mad scientist, tried first by doing an experiment and testing it on himself ... and then on his wife and two kids. [Laughter.] Let me share with you how he said it: “IJM needed people to go overseas. I was not so afraid of going as I was to coming back. I was at the top of my profession;, I could do anything I wanted.” He was with one of the premier law firms here in town. “If I went overseas for three or four years to work for some little Christian group, I was sure I would come back to a crappy job, work with crappy people, live in a crappy house, and wear crappy slacks as I drink my crappy coffee while driving my crappy car. [Laughter.] But I just thought, ‘if I can rescue one child from the unspeakable horror of forced prostitution, it would outweigh any sacrifice I could possibly make.’ How could any sacrifice I make, how could it possibly compare to the daily abuse and suffering of a child locked in a brothel forced to serve four to seven customers a day? It was like math,” he said. “No emotion. I did not have the faith to believe that God could somehow provide for me and that I might even find joy in it. No, I just expected to be lonely and to suffer. But I signed on to try and save that one child.”

And what happened as Sean went on to actually launch our first office in the Philippines from scratch? As he ran our office there and then our office in Thailand and then directed our offices throughout Southeast Asia? God actually used Sean and his teams to rescue hundreds of women and girls from commercial sexual exploitation. And they virtually shut down child prostitution in one whole city which had once been a cesspool of children for sale. All of

this through the power of a very great God working through a very common vessel, but a vessel that made a choice between being safe and being brave. What Sean seems to remember most is not the hundreds his team rescued, but the one. And he put it this way: “I looked into the eyes of a 15-year-old girl who had been brutally raped two years previously, and no one had done anything to help her. I was able to tell her, ‘God loves you. I know he loves you because he sent me here to help you. I don’t know what will happen, but I will fight for you.’” The man who raped her, the son of a police officer, is now serving a life-sentence for that crime. The 15-year-old girl is now a radiant 20-year-old young woman studying social work in university so she can help abused children. In fact, this extraordinary young woman, Cardela, is actually coming here to Washington, DC, on December 5.

Annually IJM has a Christmas celebration and benefit where we come together to share these stories. In fact, I’d like to invite you all to come December 5 to be a part of that. What could be a better celebration of the incarnation and love of Christ than to sit down with Cardela and Sean and to celebrate what He has done for us? Some brochures are on a table downstairs and there’s more information on our website: www.ijm.org. I would just invite you to come and to join me.

Jesus said this: **“If you lose your life, you will find it.”** Sean tested the proposition and found Jesus’ promise to be true. But, he says he almost missed it. What was holding him back? Four things, he says:

- “Number one: comfort. The state of contented well-being each night,” he says. But we know what this actually is, as he says. “It’s a nice pillow, it’s a couch, it’s air conditioning, it’s a vanilla latte [laughter].” So first it was comfort.
- “Second: security, the freedom from danger.
- Third: control, the power over circumstances and events to achieve a desired outcome.
- Fourth: success, the appearance of wealth and the high regard of your peers.”

Comfort. Security. Control. Success. These were the four things Sean said he had to let go of to get the life that Jesus promised. And what does that life look like? What do you get on the other side of that exchange? Sean says four things: “You get adventure, you get faith, you get miracles – authentic miracles, and a deep knowledge of Jesus.” How many of us don’t want that? Don’t we want adventure? Don’t we want faith? Don’t we want miracles? Don’t we want deep knowledge of Jesus? Jesus is telling me I have to choose. He’s saying I just can’t have adventure, miracles, faith, and deep knowledge of Him while still holding on to comfort, security, control, and success. It’s just math.

Jesus invites me to choose what I really want to do. Where today might you and I might be brave in loving those who are hurting and in need? Is it in caring for an elderly parent in this season of life? Need some courage there? Persevering in a hard relationship? Visiting Bill Haley’s ministry in the city? Volunteering at the Southeast White House? Serving vulnerable immigrant neighbors in our own community? Helping at the local battered women’s shelter? Giving generously of your finances to help those in need? Going on one of the church’s volunteer overseas trips? Maybe it’s even helping out with Sunday School for the kids at The Falls Church who need teachers. What could be scarier than that? [Laughter.] And perhaps I can make room for such things by off-loading some of the other fears and anxieties I carry around that don’t actually have anything to do with loving other people at all. They have to do with smaller things.

In fact, for parents, Jesus asks us, I think, to make yet another choice. Are we raising our children to be brave or to be safe? Are we raising our children to be loving or to be smart? Raising them to be successful or significant? How does God raise his children? This marvelous quote from C.S. Lewis I’d like to have you look at for just a moment: “Love is something more stern and splendid than mere kindness...Kindness merely as such cares not whether its object becomes good or bad, provided only that it escapes suffering.” My vulnerabilities as a parent are such that sometimes I just want my kids to escape suffering. But then they just can’t be good or brave.

IJM’s almost 10-years-old now, and one of the privileges I’ve had is ten years of interns at IJM. There are hundreds of them now who have served with us. And one other thing I’ve had a chance to connect to is hundreds of intern parents. We take these very young, earnest, incredibly sharp, brilliant Christian young people and send them off to these very tough places to go serve some very needy and hurting people. And this is a tough step of faith for the young people, but this is a leap of faith for the parents. It’s incredible to watch because all their life these parents

have been plowing faith into their children, and the love of Jesus, and it turns out their children actually believe it! [Laughter.] And they go do it! And the parents are out of their minds! Sometimes I wonder, because I think there comes a time when the child asks his mom and dad, “Mom and dad, why are you giving me all this stuff? Because you’ve given me food and shelter and clothing and great education and discipline and faith and structure and all these things, but mom, dad, why are you giving me all this stuff?” And the honest answer for me is that I’m giving you all this stuff so you’ll be safe. And I think my kid looks up to me and says, “Really? That’s it? That’s your grand ambition for me? That nothing bad happens?” And I think something inside them dies. And they either go away to perish in safety, or they go away looking for that adventure for which they were created, but they go away looking in the wrong place. I think Jesus is encouraging us to raise them up to be brave, to raise them to be loving, and to raise them to be significant. Sometimes I just want my kids to be safe, but I think they smell my fear and it builds little tiny prisons that can last a lifetime. On the other hand, I think I can help my kids choose to be brave, to be loving, and to be significant. And it’s the stuff that will actually dangerously change the world.

How do I actually live life with bravery, love and significance? You know, I think we’ve all had these moments. You’ve been brave when you should have been. I’ve had a moment when I was brave when I should have been. The question is how can we just live more like that? I’d like to suggest three very short things that I’ve been working on.

- Number one: do less and reflect and pray more. Reflect about the life we are living, about the anxieties we carry, about the life we sense God is calling us to live. At IJM every morning we spend thirty minutes doing absolutely nothing. For 30 minutes every day, we just sit still and do not a thing. We call it “8:30 Stillness,” and the whole idea is just to reflect and pray for a moment, to prepare spiritually for the day.
- Number two: search the promises of Scripture and take a risk. Take Christ at his word and see he is true. If you’re wrestling with some sort of decision or something to do, just imagine for a moment, “Am I being brave or am I being safe?” In the end, it will be a question of whether or not God is trustworthy. Listen to this verse from Matthew. Take it as Christ’s word to you. **“Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, fear him who can destroy both the soul and body in Hell. Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid. You are of more value than many sparrows.”** Cling to the promises of Scripture and live as if they were actually true.
- Number three: embark on the lifelong journey of spiritual formation and renovation of the heart. It’s not by the sheer will inside that we will be brave. It takes reformation of the heart. And God doesn’t call us to try to be brave. He calls us to train to be brave. It’s not something we arrive at tomorrow, but hopefully, by the grace of God, it’s something we’re entering into more deeply ten years from now. Two resources I’d like to recommend on this are Dallas Willard’s *Divine Conspiracy* and *The Life You’ve Always Wanted* by John Ortberg. This is work that you can do with these resources.

It’s just a matter of do you want to be brave or do you want to be safe? Jesus does want us to realize that it’s a choice, and he wants to help us make the joyful choice. I’m so glad that my mom helped me see the truth about the choice it takes to be a real football player. And in doing so she provided a path to one of the greatest joys of my childhood and one that I can pass on to my own children. Likewise, this is what Jesus wants us to know: we are so well taken care of by him that it is actually safe to be brave. Do you remember what Lucy said in the *Lion, Witch, and the Wardrobe* when she encounters the lion Aslan for the first time and she asks, because he’s a lion: “Is he safe?” And the answer, of course, is, “No, he’s not safe, but he’s good.” So as we follow such a lion into the world, it will not be safe. But that life will be good.

Will you pray with me? Father in heaven, we’ve asked you to help us with your word and by your spirit to be more like your Son. Seal to our heart those words that may be from you this morning. Allow it to take root and bear fruit and may all go to the glory of your Son that has saved us. And we pray in his holy name Jesus, Amen.”