

Distinctives: everything's under control

Sally Barker asks us to consider who is in charge

Calling all Christian medical students!

Feeling on top of things? In control?

What's the next step in your career? Please explain your five-year plan. Haven't you got your eportfolio/application/project sorted yet?

These questions should not surprise you. In fact, I have been asked all these questions in the last three months – by fellow students, tutors and even patients. Furthermore, they are usually asked with complete and utter certainty that you, the subject, will have a well-rounded and confident answer.

And doesn't that reveal something about the worldview of med school? I think it shows just how much we love to feel in control. Control of our present situation – our grades, our reputation, our timetable for the week – and control of our future career.

And the pressure to conform can feel heavy

because, in some ways, medical school itself is a just a series of checklists. If you get the grades, you can apply. If you smash the interview, congrats, you've made it in. Can you take blood, break bad news and list the Sepsis Six? Great, FY1 here you come. Structure and goals are undeniably useful but living our lives permanently in this culture feeds the illusion that we, as human beings, are in ultimate control. We might begin to believe that all we need to do is follow the rules, jump through the hoops, study hard and all our plans will work out.

Perhaps we need to ask some alternative questions.

are you giving God control?

As creatures created in the image of God, we're instructed to 'rule over',¹ 'subdue'² and 'take care of'³ creation. We could argue that the instinct to control is given to us by God. In fact, in many ways it can be a helpful and God-glorifying instinct; a patient's care depends on the medical team striving for control over a disease process, for example.



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However, problems arise when we forget who this instinct was from and thus its original purpose. Just as Adam and Eve focussed inwardly, marvelling at their potential to be like God, knowing good and evil,⁴ we can focus on our own desires. As fallen humans, our own desires are usually self-glorifying and dependent on feelings produced by the culture around us. Inadequacy, fear and discontent are real feelings, but they only exist when our comparison points are other human beings in a culture of striving and achievement.

If we look up, refocus on God and recognise him as our Lord, the daily struggle of ‘smashing life’ will fade into insignificance. By relinquishing control on the things we see as important, we give him room to show us and guide us in his infinitely greater plan for our lives. He made us for a purpose and he has, and will, give us all we need to fulfil it – if we truly humble ourselves and let him.

what’s God’s plan for you?

If you’re anything like me (ie a control-freak), you’re now itching to stand up and say, ‘That’s all well and good, but how do I know what God’s plan is?’

Well, Jesus gives us a wonderfully simple answer to this: *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”* This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: *“Love your neighbour as yourself”.* (Matthew 22:37-39) The repetition of ‘all’ here strikes me as especially challenging in terms of control. I love to portion up my day, with this time for revision, this time for socialising, this time for placement and oh yes, this time for a quick Bible study. Yet, rather than fitting God around my plans, Jesus calls me to give it all to God, shaping my day-to-day around him and, through him, others.

What would that look like? Perhaps it does involve success and achievement; studying to be a caring and effective healthcare professional equips

us to help others and relieve suffering daily. Furthermore, to be a humble and servant-hearted leader in an academic field, for example, is a challenging yet immensely powerful imitation of Christ. Or perhaps God’s plan for us does involve failure, persecution and pain. We may fail exams, suffer ill-health ourselves or have a career characterised by controversy as we stand as ambassadors for Jesus. In these times, it can be our relentless joy and trust in Christ that prompts non-Christians to ask where our hope comes from.

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what now?

By God’s grace, we are players in his great plan. He has chosen us to be his ambassadors, to communicate and exemplify the glory of God to whoever we can. That is our one, true purpose. As Paul puts it: *‘Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.’* (Romans 12:1-2)

Our world tells us we should be striving for control for ourselves. To resist this and to pursue God’s plan instead is countercultural and just plain difficult! It requires a daily surrendering to God, repentance and asking the Holy Spirit to equip us every step of the way.

What’s God’s plan for you? I have no idea. But I know that it’s going to be awesome. ■

REFS

1. Genesis 1:26
2. Genesis 1:28
3. Genesis 2:15
4. Genesis 3:22