

**Topic:** Following God's will and discovering my calling

**Title:** Get your own dirt!

**Key Verses:** Psalms 139:1-18

Good morning.

I'd like to thank everyone here for allowing me to speak today. This is the first time that I've participated in a church service in this way and it is a very important step in my spiritual journey. I really appreciate all of the love and support that I've received this far in my walk and I hope that you will continue to embrace me as I continue in my spiritual growth.

And please be gentle... no hecklers please! That'll only delay my message, which will only delay everyone being able to go home for lunch.

But before we begin, let us pray:

Dear Lord, we thank you for this time together. We thank you for your many blessings on our lives. We thank you for bringing us together in this sense of community and we ask that you continue to help us prosper in your message of faith, love and salvation. We now ask that you provide your wisdom to this message and that you help us to understand your word through your chosen vessel.

In your name, Amen.

I'm here to talk to you today about following God's will and discovering one's calling. To reinforce my message, I'll be sharing my personal search for God that has taken place over the last four or five years.

God's will in my life began a long time ago. He planted the seed when I was very little. As a child, my parents made sure that I was involved in church and with learning about the bible. I was involved with Sunday school as a child, and I participated in youth group in my teens. I strayed away from the church for a few years, from my early teens until my mid-twenties. I found my way back to Christ in my mid-twenties with the help of my wife Julie, who was my girlfriend at the time.

My time away from the church wasn't a time of rebellion, but rather, it was a time of competing priorities. My peer group was not religious and my schedule did not permit regular church attendance or participation. I knew that I eventually wanted to get re-acquainted with the church but it wasn't until I met Julie that I found the right set of circumstances to re-introduce me to the church. I always knew that I wanted to raise my family in a church setting and Julie's interest in church was one of the strong qualities that attracted me to her.

What started out as a re-acquaintance with the church has turned into something more. When I first came back to Christianity, I found a newfound comfort in Christ that I am sure could only be experienced through mature reflection. My original intention was to get involved in a church community as a husband, father and fellow congregant. However, I soon found myself examining my beliefs with a deep sense of contemplation that left me with many questions.

First and foremost in my mind was the need to defend my faith in a rational and methodical manner. As Hebrews 11 suggests, "*faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.*" I am in complete agreement with that statement but I still find myself trying to participate in current academic discussion. I can relate to Paul in his discussions with the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers on Mars Hill (Acts 17).

I soon found myself enrolled at the University of Toronto. I targeted my studies at U of T on understanding the origins of Christianity through my religious studies focus, while also challenging my Christian worldview through the lens of philosophy. The main goal of my studies was to graduate with the tools to articulate my faith and to defend it from skeptical attacks. Having now earned my Honours Specialist Degree in Religious Studies and Philosophy, I feel confident that I have obtained a strong foundation on which to base my Christian faith. My undergrad studies challenged and ultimately strengthened my beliefs and because of this I feel that my certainty in that which I cannot see is much stronger than when I first entered my undergrad program at U of T.

Don't get me wrong... After four years of university, I feel like I know less now than I did when I first enrolled. There's nothing like a lot of really smart people to keep you humble! And if anything, university has been great for highlighting the gaps in my knowledge that I have yet to fill. My last four years of school have shown me just how little I really do know. But, at least now I know where to start in terms of learning.

During my time at U of T, I decided to be baptized in the Mennonite church. This was a serious decision for me that was made after much soul searching. I wanted to be sure that my commitment was genuine and not just a fad that was being embraced to impress those around me. After a period of discernment and mentoring by a friend of mine here at NUMC, I made the baptismal commitment. This was in 2003. Since that time, my faith has continued to grow and I find myself becoming more of a light to my friends, family and peers each and every day.

Talk about God's will and trusting in what I feel is my calling...

I want to put this into perspective for you... Up until about five years ago, I had already set my career in motion. I'm a geek. I am a computer guy. I went to school for computer programming. I earned my diploma in computer systems technology from Mohawk College 10 years ago. I thought that my career was set. About 5 years ago, I had just met Julie and our relationship was becoming more serious. I figured that I might go back to school part time to earn a degree in computer science, which would give my resume a boost. But I soon found myself dramatically switching streams at school. My original intention of completing a Bachelor of Science in Computer Science soon turned into my pursuit of a Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy and Religious Studies. And now, I'm looking to further my studies by pursuing a master of divinity degree and becoming involved in ministry. It's kind of strange... this does not strike me as the typical path for most people.

Nevertheless, this has been quite a shift in focus for me, and for my family. Julie laughs... she has mentioned on more than one occasion that all she wanted was for her family to go to church. She never once thought that she might one day see herself as a minister's wife.

The Bible is a fascinating book to me. I remember a sermon where the speaker said that new Christians tend to get quite excited by the Bible. These new Christians get quite

excited as they start working through the Bible. They are constantly having “Ah Hah!” moments where they feel the need to share the word of God with others. They’re constantly going “Hey, check this out!” as if the pastor had never read it before. Now, I can understand the excitement that comes with anything new, and being a new Christian is no exception. I don’t quite know what the time limit is on being new though... I suppose that I’m relatively new when I compare myself to other Christians within this congregation (and I don’t mean by age... I just want that to be clear on that for when I go back to my father-in-law’s house later today! John, I’m not calling you old... honest!). But, I also think that I’ve become a little seasoned through my schooling and through my time spent in the church. Regardless, I don’t think that I’ll ever lose that enthusiasm that comes from reading scripture and finding something exciting and fresh. What do you think? Do you regularly find new material that re-invigorates your walk with Christ? I feel quite fortunate for this resource that allows me to regularly talk and walk with God.

Now, Psalm 139 is a Psalm that really speaks to me. I am able to relate to it quite deeply. I have spent the last five years (in school) trying to articulate exactly what Psalm 139 says. Let’s take a look:

Part 1 - God knows all (Ps 139 v1-6):

*O Lord, you have searched me and known me. 2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. 3 You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways. 4 Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. 5 You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. 6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.*

God knows everything. God knows what has happened. God knows what is happening right now. God knows what is going to happen. God knows what we think, what we want, what we are.

God is our all-knowing, all-powerful and all-good creator. God is the only one that has the complete picture of our existence. God is the only one that can comprehend the vastness of our existence and understand it. For me to claim that I know as much as God would be as ignorant as a child claiming to know more than their parent. (And for those teenagers out there, don’t worry... you might think you know more than your parents right now, but you’ll understand that you’re parents are quite wise in a few years. Trust me... Just give it time.)

In this way, I feel completely comforted in my walk. I sleep easy knowing that God knows me and that he knows where I am headed. As my father, I trust in God’s plan for me in life. I know that he will take care of me and that he will lead me in the right direction.

Part 2 – God is everywhere (Ps 139 v7-12):

*7 Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? 8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. 9 If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, 10 even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. 11 If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," 12 even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.*

God is everywhere. I have spent a great deal of time wrestling with skeptics and atheists. But I just don't get it... just look around. Shake hands with your neighbour beside you. Look at the children among us. Listen to the worship music. Smell the flowers. Taste the food that will be waiting for you at home for lunch. It's hard to deny that God exists when we look around. The world we live in is a beautiful place. I don't know about you, but I see God everywhere I look.

Yes, some days are harder than others, and some people will have a difficult time agreeing that God is with them always but I have faith that in my most difficult times I am not alone, and that God is there carrying me. Looking back on my life, I have had hardships... I have suffered loss. But it is during those times that I clung tight to the hope and to the strength that only God can provide.

We do recognize the good that God provides during times of plenty. But I'm sure you'll agree that it is in the times when we suffer most that we look to God the most and that God always helps us through our most difficult challenges.

Part 3 – God created everything (Ps 139 v13-16):

*13 For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. 14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. 15 My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. 16 Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.*

A big part of the philosophy of religion discussion revolves around the whole "In the beginning" piece. This is also a HUGE topic of discussion in the scientific community as well. We see debates in local school systems, especially in the US, between teaching creationism (what we understand as God's seven miraculous days in Genesis) and evolutionary theory (basically, the theory that living creatures change over time. This is where we get the discussion about mankind descending from apes). I don't want to get into this discussion too much today, other than to provide a little story that sums up, for me at least, the argument for the Genesis version of the beginning of time.

The story goes like this...

*“A scientist believes that he’s found the secret to life.*

*So, he goes to God and tells him, ‘God, we (humans) don’t need you anymore. We’ve found a way to create life on our own. We’re self-sufficient now. It’s time for you to leave.’*

*God thinks for a second, and then he says, ‘Alright... Well... before I go, maybe you should demonstrate how you create life... just in case there’s something wrong with your method... I might be able the help (God, always the humble guy!).*

*With that, the scientist bends down, picks up a handful of dirt and starts to pat it into a ball, saying ‘I take some dirt, and make it into a ball...’*

*God interrupts at this point and tells the scientist, ‘No no... get your own dirt.’”*

This for me really sums up my faith in God as my creator. “Get your own dirt” really puts us in our place. It keeps us humble. We are God’s guests in this life. God, as our creator, has all of the answers. We have been given this great gift of life. But I think it is dangerous for us to think that we can create life with no help from God.

Don’t get me wrong... I think that science has dramatically improved the way that we live. The last hundred years has seen dramatic improvements in health care due to advances in medicine. But even with the best doctors available, the best diagnosis we can get is in the form of a lottery statistic: 80% chance of being cured of this disease, or 1 in 20 chance that you’ll catch the flu (don’t quote me on those stats). God, on the other hand, is not about odds. As Einstein famously quoted, “God does not play dice”. I am thankful for the medical community, but I am not about to replace my faith in God with that of a doctor or other scientific expert. I will look to medical experts to help me in my time of need, but I don’t see them as replacing God. At most, they might be God’s messenger or servant, but they are not God themselves.

So remember that... “Get your own dirt”. If you get nothing more from me today than these four words, I will consider that a success. Those four words have made a tremendous difference in my ability to defend my faith to a skeptical audience.

Part 4 – I am in awe of God (Ps 139 v17-18):

*17 How mighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! 18 I try to count them—they are more than the sand; I come to the end F252 —I am still with you.*

I AM IN AWE OF GOD. This is where I’m at. I have spent the last five years challenging my faith... really challenging it. I’ve asked the tough questions. I’ve considered some pretty major challenges to religion. And I still can’t find a reason not to have faith. In fact, after looking at all of the evidence, I find it harder than ever to doubt that God is alive, that God is with us and that God taking care of us.

I have experienced a time of great growth and reflection over the last five years. I have tested my faith through my studies at U of T. I purposely challenged myself to examine

my beliefs and to learn to defend them in a secular academic environment. I feel that this has given me a tremendous base with which to further my studies in ministry.

So there... in 15 or 20 minutes, I've basically provided four years worth of philosophy classes. Well... maybe not four years worth, but it took me four years to really appreciate the meaning of this Psalm. Knowing that God is with me and that he knows where I am going gives me the confidence to follow the opportunities that he has provided to me. I have felt God's will in my life, leading me through my time at U of T, and now I feel him calling me to McMaster where I'll be pursuing my Master of Divinity in the fall.

Let me finish with one last bit about my personal experience of God's will in my life. As I mentioned earlier, I work full time in the computer industry. I have been working full time during my entire time at U of T. About 3 years ago, Julie and I began to plan our departure from Toronto. The only thing keeping us in the city was my schooling. So, finishing school quickly was the goal. My job at that time was in the East end of Toronto, out by the Science Centre, which is not at all convenient for getting to and from classes in downtown Toronto. At that time, I was only taking one or two evening courses at a time.

In order to graduate by June 2006 (now), I knew then, 3 years ago, that I would have to take a full time course load (4 to 5 courses per semester) in order to get us out of the city this summer (in addition to working full time!). This seemed like an impossible feat when we first considered it.

But, a short time later, God brought me to Toronto Rehab Institute as a project manager in their computer department. Why is this so important? Toronto Rehab is a teaching hospital in downtown Toronto, right next to U of T's main campus. And, my boss was busy working on his PhD at U of T and he was extremely supportive of my studies. My boss even allowed me to work flexible hours so that I could attend some classes during the workday. It's unbelievable how God provided for me during that time.

That, on its own, was sufficient proof to me that God was working in my life.

But there's more... My next goal is to complete my master of divinity and the school that I have chosen to do this is McMaster. Commuting to McMaster from Toronto would be quite difficult. But, through another grace of God, about four months ago, I was presented with an opportunity to work in downtown Hamilton, just minutes from McMaster's campus. And, what's more, we've been trying to sell our condo in Toronto and buy a house back this way. It's been stressful, as we need to make the move this summer in order for me to be settled in time to start school this fall. In that, God has played his hand as well. Just this week, we completed the sale of our condo and a home purchase in Vineland, which will give us the opportunity to be settled by the middle of August, which gives us plenty of time to prepare for the fall. It's crazy how well things are working out for us.

Some would call this luck. Skeptics would say that we're just good planners. But I call it divine intervention. Yes, we have been quite diligent with our planning, but there has been quite a bit in this process that has been completely out of our control. I am quite certain that God is helping us in our time of need and he is preparing the way before Julie, Noah and I as we make our new life in this area. This, to me, is how God has worked in my life and how I feel compelled to follow his calling in my life. I feel a deep sense of affirmation in the choices that I am making due to God's guiding hand in my life.

In closing, I just want to say thank you again for providing me with the opportunity to speak this morning.

And I'm surprised... I think I stayed within the 20 minute time limit as well. My father-in-law has been teasing me about some kind of "trap door" up here at the front that is used during long-winded sermons... notice I've been wandering around the front of the room up here... I bet most of you thought I was just nervous and needed to walk. No no no... I was looking for the trap door!

In any event, thank you again for this chance to share my message with you. And trust me... if you find your faith being challenged, just remember God's message to "find your own dirt".

Let us pray...

Dear Lord, we thank you for this time together. We thank you for this message and for the many gifts that you have given to us. We thank you for your presence in our lives and for your constant reminders of your time spent with us in this temporal life. We ask that you continue to empower us to be lights in the world to your existence and we ask you to watch over us as we proclaim your word to our friends and neighbours.

In your name, Amen.