



In
Search
of
God's
Will

In Search of God's Will

Some believe that God reveals his specific will for us in subtle ways. This view is not exclusive to any one religion, but crosses the boundaries of faith and belief.

For example, one young man was in a quandary about what college he should attend. He went to the internet to search for prospective colleges. He concluded that it was God's will for him to attend the first college found by the search engine he used.

Others seek God's will by praying long and hard—then waiting to see what thoughts or intuitions pop into their minds. They believe that God will reveal specific answers to their questions only after they expend considerable effort in prayer. And some actually claim to hear a literal voice—God speaking to them.

There are many ways people claim to have heard from God (see "God Spoke to Me," page 6) but his messages often seem conflicting—even among Christians.

Plain Truth Ministries occasionally receives submissions from writers who claim that God told them to write an article and that we should publish it.

It is true that God is all-powerful, and there is no doubt that he is capable of making his wishes known in any way he wants. But is it wise to ascribe the authority of God to imagined voices and random thoughts? As Christians, can we automatically assume that every thought we have is a prompting of the Holy Spirit, or are some or even many of these ideas our own mus-

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ings, hunches and notions? How can we be certain?

Methods some Christians use to determine God's will are highly subjective—arising from the individual's own perception and experience. Such messages are subject to personal interpretation. They are rarely confirmed, questioned, evaluated by critical thinking or verified in light of the Bible.

And ironically, in many cases, these perceived messages from God seem to affirm what the individual wanted to do in the first place.

Finding God's will via our own subjectivity can have more in common with tea leaves, palm readings, horoscopes and crystal balls than authentic Christianity. Are there ways of seeking God's guidance that are biblically sound and objective? Under what circumstances should we seek God's will?

Finding God's Will in the Bible

What does the Bible tell us about (1) God's will for us as individuals and (2) how he communicates that will to us?

God's *general* will for human beings is clearly revealed in the Bible. It is no mystery.

In the Old Testament, God laid out his will initially to Adam and Eve, and later to the patriarchs. He revealed his will for the ancient nation of Israel through Moses, in the form of the old covenant with its 613 laws and statutes, including the Ten Commandments.

In the New Testament, Jesus replaced this set of rules with an entirely new and different covenant that represents God's will, not only for Israel, but for all humanity.

God's general will for humans is completely revealed in the person of Christ. As the author of the book of Hebrews writes: "In the past, God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radi-

ance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word" (Hebrews 1:1-3).

Everything we need to know about God's will is simply a matter of learning about and knowing Jesus. We can learn about Jesus by reading and studying God's Word. We can know Jesus by inviting him into our lives and communicating with God through prayer. Through God, the Holy Spirit, living in us, we come to understand God's will.

Jesus described the role of the Holy Spirit living in Christians. "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come" (John 16:13).

Paul writes in Romans 12:1-2, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer 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."

Through submitting to God, we come to understand his general will for us as Christians.

So far, so good.

But what about God's *specific* will for you and me? What about career, family, business, finances and education? What many of us really want to know are specific details about whether to buy a house or whether to become a teacher or a lawyer or a doctor or even what stock in which to invest. But other than the principles given in Scripture, the Bible is silent on the subject of God's specific will for you and me.

As Christians, can we automatically assume that every thought we have is a prompting of the Holy Spirit?

Some point to the fourth chapter of the book of James as evidence that God has a detailed and specific plan or will for each one of us. “Now listen, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.’ Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.’ As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil” (James 4:13-16).

James was merely warning against the arrogant idea that we have total control or *self-determination* over our lives. His point was that we never have total control, and therefore that we should live in humble subjection to God.

James did *not* advise his readers to attempt to determine God’s will in specific business and life decisions—he merely reminded them to be aware that whatever they did, they were subject to God’s sovereignty.

Which brings us back to our original question. How can we discover God’s specific and individual will for us? Does God even have a *specific and detailed will* for individuals—a mysterious hidden agenda and plan? If so how are we supposed to discover it?

It is vitally important that we realize there is a big difference between how God reveals himself and his will in the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament God sometimes made his specific will for the Hebrews known through the casting of lots and revelations to prophets, even omens and portents (see “Finding God’s Will in the Old Testament,” page 10). Other ancient cultures also practiced similar ways of inquiring—but with other gods and animistic spirits.

After the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, God no longer revealed his will to Christians through omens, lots and other similar methods, as Christians enjoy a relationship with Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

No Magic Formula

Bruce Waltke writes, in his book, *Finding the Will of God*, “The New Testament gives no command to ‘find God’s will,’ nor can you find instructions on how to go about finding God’s will. There isn’t a magic formula offered Christians that will open some mysterious door of wonder, allowing us to get a glimpse of the mind of the Almighty.”

Making choices and decisions is hard work, and there is no indication in the New Testament that it is normative for God to make these decisions *for* Christians. In some few scriptural cases, apostles were directed by the Holy Spirit

in detail as to where to go and who to see. But there is no indication that the lives of average Christians were directed in that way. Thus, we may conclude that God’s will is for Christians to make biblically based decisions about day-to-day issues we face.

Many well-meaning Christians suffer needlessly because they are waiting for God to make decisions for them. They sincerely believe they are waiting on God and exercising faith. They believe they are “letting go and letting God.” In reality, God expects and directs them to think, research and seek counsel in order to make wise decisions.

Some Christians are simply indecisive, procrastinating while they expect God to send a thunderbolt-like answer out of the heavens. Meanwhile, a decision is eventually forced on them by the passage of time. They then attribute that decision to God. Then, when indecisiveness produces a sad and often pathetic result, they wonder why God has it in for them.

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GOD SPOKE TO ME!

Some believe actions like those illustrated below “keep them in God’s will.”

Negative Circumstances

Marsha feels depressed and frustrated. She had just failed to pass her real estate exam for the third time. What was she doing wrong? Was there sin in her life? Was God trying to tell her something? Maybe it just wasn’t God’s will for her to become a realtor. Yes, there is sin in all of our lives. But that has nothing to do with Marsha failing her exam. There are two legitimate possibilities: 1) She was not sufficiently prepared for the exam. 2) She either does not have an aptitude or does not have sufficient desire to become a realtor. Marsha needs to consider whether she has the aptitude, resources and determination to prepare for and pass the exam, and whether real estate is the right career for her. She can and should bring these issues to God in prayer. But failure to pass the exam can’t necessarily be taken as some kind of communication from God.

Thomas Edison and his team made over 1,000 unsuccessful attempts before they invented a light bulb that worked. What if, after attempt number 6, Edison had said, “Well, it’s clear that God isn’t blessing our work. I guess an electric light bulb just isn’t God’s will”? You would be reading this by candlelight.

Positive Circumstances

Daryl has been looking for a job—hoping and praying that the right one would come along, although he hasn’t done much research or sent out any resumés. Out of the blue, an old friend calls and offers him a part-time job at his new fast-food restaurant, Yam Delight. The job is only part-time and pays minimum wage with no benefits. Daryl is also a little concerned about the success potential for yam-based fast-food. But it’s an “open door.” Christian friends tell Daryl that it may be God’s will for him to get into the yam fast-food business (and on the ground floor, at that). Opportunities present themselves every day, and they must be judged on their

own merits. While God can certainly bring about good opportunities for his people, the presence of an opportunity is no dogmatic indication that God has brought it about, or that it should be acted upon.

Scriptural Misinterpretation

Harold is distraught because his landlord has not only raised the rent, but refuses to pay for extermination of the stinging centipedes that infest his apartment—the unfortunate result of a careless mistake by an entomologist neighbor who has since moved to South America. “It’s not my problem,” the landlord had said.

Harold consults the Scriptures. Since he can recall no verses dealing specifically with stinging centipedes or landlords, he decides to “lucky dip”—let the Bible fall open to a page and point to a scripture at random.

Harold’s finger lands on Hosea 13:6: “When I fed them they were satisfied; when they were satisfied they became proud; then they forgot me.” Harold decides that God is telling him through this passage that the best way to get rid of his centipedes is to starve them out. He removes all the food from his cupboards and refrigerator for several weeks, rather than insisting that his landlord hire an exterminator. Of course, Harold has taken the scripture out of context. God’s will cannot be determined by this approach, because it misuses the Bible.

Random Occurrences

Sarah’s husband is lost in his own world ever since he took up his hobby of insect collecting. The number of specimens now exceeds 2,500 and takes up an entire room of the house, with several boxes of unsorted insect samples stacked in the garage. It’s clear her husband may have a compulsion for which he needs treatment. Marriage counselors have been unable to help. Sarah has been praying for a sign to let her know God’s will. Sarah drives past a billboard on the highway. It’s an ad for Consolidated Airlines—the headline shouts “Fly Away!” *That’s it*, thinks Sarah. *It’s time for me to fly away from this insect and all of his little insects!* But there is no example of God communicating in this way in the New Testament. Sarah is searching for justification to leave her husband and his insects.

Christians often misunderstand what it means to turn over the reins of their lives to God. When we rely on some subjective or mystical means of auguring God's will, we are effectively abdicating our God-given responsibility, and letting our lives spiral out of control.

Rather than seeking mystical short-cuts or listening for voices or random thoughts that may be nothing more than justification for avoiding the difficult task of major decisions, the Bible offers the following practical insight.

The Role of Wisdom

The book of James identifies the element that gives us guidance in personal life choices.

"If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5). According to James, wisdom may be evidence that Christ is living his life in us.

"Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom" (James 3:13).

Paul tells the believers in Colosse that the way to understand God's will is through the gift of wisdom.

"For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (Colossians 1:9).

In the next chapter, he speaks of the Source of that wisdom.

"My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Colossians 2:2-3).

The New Testament speaks far more about wisdom than it does about finding God's specific will about the details of our lives. Scrip-

ture teaches that God's guidance comes through the development of wisdom, a process of spiritual growth God produces in us, which does not occur overnight.

Wisdom—good sense and sound judgment—is given to us as a result of our close relationship with God. Proverbs (one of two books in the Bible dealing with the subject of wisdom) advises:

"My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding ...then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God.... Then you will understand what is right and just and fair—every good path.... Discretion will protect you and understanding will guard you" (Proverbs 2:1-11).

Some individuals who do not have a relationship with God may display wisdom in certain areas based on education or experience. Although they may not acknowledge it, all wisdom is ultimately a gift from God. Genuine spiritual wisdom only results from a close relationship with God. God gives mature Christians wisdom—wisdom that is born of years of prayer, study of the Bible and advice from wise individuals.

Granted, some of life's decisions are difficult and painful even for wise and mature Christians. God, in effect, says to Christians:

I am sovereign, and in my sovereignty I grant you stewardship of your life. I give you freedom in Christ and the responsibility to decide what to do and how to do it. I know you may sometimes feel as though you are at the end of your rope, but don't be afraid. To help you find your way you not only have my written word and my gift of wisdom, but Christ will live in you "to will and act according to his good purpose" (Philippians 2:13).

No hidden agenda there. Just a plan for personal guidance that gives us peace, confidence and hope.

FINDING GOD'S WILL IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Aside from the law given to Israel, how did God make his will known to his people in Old Testament times? If a Hebrew had a question about God's intent for his life, or a conflict with another person that could be resolved by accepting the judgment of God, he might have used one or more of the following methods of discerning the will of God. Not all these methods were used by the common people. Prophets were primarily sent to the nation as a whole, and the Urim and Thummim, signs, theophanies and visions seem to have been applied mainly to matters of national importance.

Go to court

The Old Testament law was enforced by judges. Originally, Moses appointed these judges over each tribe. Much later, during the monarchies, kings appointed judges, and served as judges themselves. Some judges, but not all, were Levites. They heard both civil and criminal matters and interpreted the will of God as expressed in the 613 laws and statutes of the old covenant.

Consult with a priest or Levite

Priests and Levites functioned as teachers of the Law. They were supposed to be well-versed in Scripture. The average illiterate Israelite would consult with a learned Levite to find out if God said anything in Scripture that applied to the problem at hand. Examples: Leviticus 10:11; Deuteronomy 31:9-13; 33:10; 2 Chronicles 17:8-9; Nehemiah 8:9.

Consult a prophet

Prophets were called by God for the pastoral role of admonishment, warning and sometimes encouragement. God used them to convey specific messages to his people, usually as a nation. In some cases, individuals could bring personal issues to the prophets to obtain direction from God. Examples: Isaiah 58:1; Ezekiel 3:17; 1 Kings 14:1-3; 2 Kings 5:8-10.

Consult the Urim and Thummim

Scholars do not agree on exactly what these objects were or how they were used,

but it is generally understood that the high priest used them as tools to determine the will of God in matters of national importance. They were not available for the average Israelite. Examples: Exodus 28:30; Leviticus 8:8.

Cast lots

A lot was a marked piece of wood or stone, not unlike dice, used to determine the will of God (Proverbs 16:33). Lots were used to find God's will in matters ranging from great national importance to small personal questions and disputes. Examples: Numbers 26:55; Proverbs 18:18; Luke 1:9.

Seek a dream or vision

God sometimes made his will known through dreams and visions. While the Hebrews and other nations of their day had a high regard for dreams and their interpretation, it appears God communicated in this way in exceptional circumstances and to key individuals. Among others, Jacob, Joseph, Pharaoh, Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar had dreams and visions from God. God routinely spoke to his prophets through dreams and visions, sometimes appearing directly to them (a theophany), as he did with Moses. Examples: Numbers 12:6-7; Judges 7:13-15; 1 Kings 3:5; Daniel 7:1.

Look for a sign

Signs were miraculous tokens, omens or portents heralding future events or confirming divine authority. The rainbow was given to Noah as a confirmation of his covenant. Israel was led out of Egypt by a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. Gideon asked for a sign to be sure it was God who was speaking to him. Examples: Exodus 3:12; Judges 6:17.

Israelites were either legally or socially bound to abide by most of these ways of seeking direction from God. The benefits of wisdom, counsel and sound judgment are also extolled in the Old Testament, and there was ample opportunity for the Hebrews to exercise these gifts. But in an age of illiteracy and hierarchical rule, individuals were not as free to exercise the judgment and personal choice that we Christians often take for granted today.

ABOUT GOD'S WILL

QUOTATIONS CONCERNING THE WILL OF GOD

God is not a cosmic bellboy for whom we can press a button to get things.

—*Harry Emerson Fosdick*

The God who gave us life, gave us liberty at the same time.

—*Thomas Jefferson*

Common sense suits itself to the ways of the world. Wisdom tries to conform to the ways of heaven.

—*Joseph Joubert*

I don't doubt that the Holy Spirit guides your decisions from within when you make them with the intention of pleasing God. The error would be to think that he speaks *only* within, whereas in reality he speaks also through Scripture, the church, Christian friends, books, etc.

—*C.S. Lewis*

God gives when he will, as he will, and to whom he will.

—*St. Teresa of Avila*

God is sufficiently wise and good and powerful and merciful to turn even the most, apparently, disastrous events to the advantage and profit of those who humbly adore and accept his will in all that he permits.

—*Jean-Pierre de Caussade*

In the Spirit, God has found a way to live within me, helping me from the inside out. God has not promised a state of constant bliss or a problem-

free existence but has promised to be present in the silence and in the dark, to exist alongside us, within us, and for us.

—*Philip Yancey*

God made us, not because he knew what we would do, but to find out what we would do.

—*Damon Knight*

Satan is without doubt nothing else than a hammer in the hand of a benevolent and severe God. For all, either willingly or unwillingly, do the will of God: Judas and Satan as tools or instruments, John and Peter as sons.

—*C.S. Lewis*

To summarize, God's will is to give us his kingdom. God's will is to save us and rescue us. Our final quote is attributed to a seminary professor and pastor. He was commenting about pastors who do little preparation for preaching, believing that God will inspire them at the last minute.

A certain distinguished theologian once remarked what most preachers have discovered: the Holy Spirit seldom said anything to him in the pulpit not previously said to him in his study as he labored to prepare the sermon. The theologian noted one exception as he recalled that once during the concluding moments of a weak sermon he heard God say to him: "You have been lazy!"

—*Merrill Abbey*

Our Mission...

To lead people to Jesus Christ and authentic Christianity with the main, plain and sensible teachings of the Bible. Plain Truth Ministries is honest and forthright about the problems and shortcomings of organized religion. We challenge unbiblical practices and ideas that may be popular within the Christian community. We combat the deadly virus of legalism, and give hope, inspiration and encouragement to those burned out by religion, denominationalism and exclusivism—keeping a clear focus on Jesus Christ.

We Believe...

God:

We believe in one eternal, triune God in three co-essential, yet distinct Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Jesus Christ:

We believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, begotten of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, fully God and fully human, the Son of God and Lord of all, worthy of worship, honor and reverence, who died for our sins, was raised bodily from the dead, ascended to heaven, and will come again as King of kings.

The Holy Scriptures:

We believe the Bible constitutes the accurate, infallible and divinely inspired written word of God, the foundation of truth, the fully reliable record of God's revelation to humanity.

Salvation:

We believe that human salvation is the gift of God, by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, not earned by personal merit or good works.

The Church:

We believe in the spiritual unity of believers in our Lord Jesus Christ.