



**FINDING
GOD'S
WILL**

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS:

Presented by Murray McLellan, an unworthy sinner upon whom the kindest of Kings has poured grace unimaginable. May God be pleased to use the following manuscript to advance the faith and joy of God's people. I do not claim to be, nor seek to be original; my foremost desire is to magnify and exalt the Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. Unto him belong the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.

All Scripture quotations are from the New King James version unless otherwise indicated.

FINDING GOD'S WILL

Finding God's will is a crucial issue for his image-bearers, because all people have to make decisions every day. Believers, with their new hearts, want to honor the glorious Lord who, in incredible grace and mercy, has given himself to save them. They want to glorify him in all that they do (1 Cor. 10:31); thus, they want their decisions to glorify God. How can a Christian know the will of God for his or her life? Everyone who wants to please God will ask this important question at various times. The answers offered are as varied as the circumstances that produce the inquiry.

Some explanations give the impression that God has hidden his will, and Christians must find the right key to unlock this mystery, or else miss God's best for their lives. As a boy, I used to play a game in which someone who had hidden an object sat in chair and told the searchers when they were getting warmer or colder. Some people seek the will of God in a similar manner, assuming that the Holy Spirit will let them know whether they are close to or far away from God's will.

Others emphasize the reading of circumstances as the means through which God reveals his will for individuals' lives. If a person runs down the hall, slips on a banana peel, and lands on a map of India that has fallen off the bulletin board – it is obviously a clear sign from the Lord to that person to set off as a foreign missionary. According to this approach, Jonah was right to board the ship for Tarshish so conveniently docked at Joppa.

Some Christians follow a similar method, but they substitute the Bible for circumstances. They use the Scripture as though it were a Ouija board to discern God's will. Years ago, some Moravians would open their Bibles and, with no regard for the context of a particular passage, place a finger on a verse to discover God's will for their lives.

Still others say that Christians must reach a level of spirituality in which they draw near to God until they begin to hear "a still small voice." Thus, they teach that God leads his people unmistakably through inner impressions and impulses (albeit ones that never are contrary to the Bible, but that do go beyond the words actually written there). Once a Christian learns to recognize the still small voice of God's Spirit, he or she will know for sure what job to seek, what school to attend, what woman or man to marry, and what decision to make in any given situation.

Some feel that they can be certain something is God's will because they have peace about it. This manifests itself in phrases such as this: "The Lord led me to do this or that." I heard of one fellow who went to a girl and told her that the Lord gave him a word that she was to become his wife. Interestingly, the

Lord had not given her the same word!

The striking similarity among these methods of discerning God's will is that they all are subjective. Each individual must interpret whatever signs he or she finds. One difficulty with this approach is that we often find that for which we look. How can we distinguish between the peace that comes from discovering God's will and the peace that confirms our own will? How can we identify that still small voice in our heads – is it God's voice or our voice? What rules do we follow for interpreting circumstances or the random passage of Scripture? These subjective attempts to discover God's will and hear his voice often result in a life of confusion and indecision in which believers are tossed to and fro. On the other end of the spectrum, this subjectivity can lead to a misplaced, bold confidence and all manner of things done in the name of God – even things that may dishonor the Lord, who has spoken clearly in his Word.

I think it is very significant that there is no passage in the Bible telling us to find God's individual will for our lives. In addition, there is no passage telling us how to do this. The better question, it seems to me, is "How can I make good and God-honoring decisions?"

John Reisinger tells the story of Eve in the Garden of Eden. Adam comes home and sees his wife troubled. "I'm not sure what to make for supper. How can I know what God's will is for me in this matter? I want to be led by God in everything." How could Adam rightly respond? Could he not say, "Honey, fruit from any one of those trees is God's will – all but one"? With the one exception, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, all the rest were within the will of God to enjoy.

In the Bible, God provides everything his people need to make wise and good decisions. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17; see also Psalm 19:7-11 for testimony on the sufficiency of the Scriptures). Paul tells Timothy where to turn to gain wisdom and to discern what is true: he (and we) must study the Scriptures (2 Tim. 2:15). Paul's use of the word study means that some things in the Scripture may not be explicit. Most people like black and white. They like to be told exactly what to do. Freedom scares some people, because freedom means responsibility. Thus, God's people carry a responsibility before God for their choices. It is crucial for New Covenant believers to know how to read Scripture, and to know what laws are binding on them in Christ¹

1 For more information on the differences between the Old and New Covenants, see the author's article, "Is there a Difference between Old Covenant and New Covenant Holiness?" *Sound of Grace* 118 (June 2005): 3, 13-14, 18 and 119 (July/August 2005):1, 15-16, 19.

The Word of God often contains clear general mandates with no specific details. Should Christians give? The answer is an unqualified yes. However, each person must determine both the amount to give and where to direct that giving. Each individual is responsible for his or her choices.

Paul recognized this. When there were no clear biblical directives, Paul made his decisions based on the best information at hand. In addition, he did not qualify such decisions by saying that God had directed him to it. He used phrases such as “we thought it good to be left in Athens alone ...” (1 Thess. 3:1); “I considered it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus ...” (Phil. 2:25); and “I strongly urged him to come to you with the brethren, but he was quite unwilling to come at this time ...” (1 Cor. 16:12).

Paul also recognized and rejoiced in God’s sovereign will that no one could thwart. As God’s sovereign will unfolded, Paul would adapt his plans with an obedient heart that sought God’s glory in everything he did. That is why he qualified his statements and desires with the following: “For I do not wish to see you now on the way; but I hope to stay a while with you, if the Lord permits” (1 Cor. 16:7). And “...making request if, by some means, now at last I may find a way in the will of God to come to you... I often planned to come to you (but was hindered until now) ... (Rom. 1:10, 13). For Paul, the will of God was the limiting factor in everything. He did not demand things from God. He was not self-willed. In the latter verses above, Paul had been trying to get to Rome, but to this point, he had been hindered. Hindrances are not always evidence that our purposes are wrong, nor are cooperation and ease indications that we are doing what is right.

We, too, need to recognize God’s sovereign will. The Apostle James sets forth this idea in his epistle, “Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit’; whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, ‘If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.’ But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil” (James 4:13-16).

God’s sovereign will (or his decretive or secret will) is his predetermined plan for everything that happens in the universe. God has a perfect plan for all of history and nothing can frustrate his sovereign purpose (Psalm 115:3; Isa. 46:9-11; Dan. 4:35; Rom. 11:36; Eph. 1:11). We see parts of God’s sovereign will only as it unfolds in time. In this sense of the term, no one has ever been out of the will of God. This gives me great comfort. It is this knowledge that allows me to trust promises such as Romans 8:28.

Was Pilate outside the will of God? No and yes. No, if you mean God's sovereign will or purposes, but yes, if you are referring to God's revealed moral will. At first glance, this kind of ambiguity may lead us to suppose that God has contradictory wills. A closer look, however, proves the opposite. God's revealed moral will refers to his statements about what constitutes right and holy living. We need this kind of revelation because we are fallen creatures who do not know what pleases God unless he tells us. God's hidden will is tied to his omniscience. He knows how and when his image-bearers will freely act according to their fallen natures and will disobey his revealed will, and he determines to use even their disobedience to further his purposes.

In Acts 2:23-24, Peter clearly revealed that the cross was the eternal purpose of God. "Him, [Jesus of Nazareth] being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it." God determines and no one can thwart his hand. God uses even the evil plans of his enemies to work out his good pleasure – to their condemnation and his glory.

The early church recognized this and rejoiced in it. We hear them pray in Acts 4:27-28, "For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done." God controls all the events of history and at the same time, holds people responsible for the decisions and choices they make. Again, this is not a contradictory statement. God controls the actions of sinful creatures, sometimes by changing their hearts so that they want and are able to obey his revealed will, and sometimes by simply leaving them alone, to do exactly what they want to do, and by not preventing them from disobeying him. No one ever disobeys God against his or her own will; that is why God holds each individual responsible. They can plead neither coercion nor ignorance.

When we look at Pilate's involvement in the crucifixion, we ask if his action was part of the decree of God. We also ask if he guilty and responsible for what he did. The biblical answer to both questions is clearly yes.

God's revealed will, given in the Bible, teaches people how they ought to believe and live. God's revealed moral will is Scripture. It expresses how things ought to be. God holds us accountable for knowing his revealed will for our lives. This assumes that we can identify the will of God for our lives in some objective way. Therefore, God's will (moral) can be known (i.e. Eph. 5:10, 15-17; 1 Thess. 4:3; 5:18). He has revealed it; therefore, we are obligated to know it. We may investigate God's will and check our findings against the objective statements of Scripture.

Moses explained this concept to the Israelites as he bade them farewell before they entered the Promised Land. He reminded them of the faithfulness of God during their forty years of wandering, and of the covenant that God had made with their ancestors at Horeb. Lest this new generation think that God's will, revealed at Sinai, was limited in some way to a different time and place, Moses frames his words in terms of a covenant "with the people of Israel in the land of Moab, besides the covenant that he [God] had made with them at Horeb" (Deut. 29:1, ESV). He concludes the terms of this covenant renewal with these words: "For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it" (Deut. 30:11-14, ESV).

Paul quotes Moses, with some modification, as he explains to the church at Rome that God's will for righteousness is bound up in Jesus Christ: "But the righteousness based on faith says, 'Do not say in your heart, "Who will ascend into heaven?"' (that is, to bring Christ down) or "Who will descend into the abyss?"' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved'" (Rom. 10:6-9).

During a discussion about Scripture and God's revealed will, a friend commented:

Both Moses and Paul understand that God's will is not so obscure and mysterious that no one can expect to find it apart from some extraordinary means. God has not hidden his will in heaven, so that we must rely on a mystical experience whereby we travel to heaven to procure the knowledge of it. He has not located it in some distant geographic location on the earth where someone has had a vision, so that those who desire to learn about God's will must make a pilgrimage to visit the enlightened soul. He has not cloaked it in the darkness of the underworld, so that his people must mimic Odysseus or Aeneas and make a journey to the land of dead to consult the dead for advice on how live. God has proclaimed his will clearly and simply: under the Old Covenant, he made his will known through the words of the law; under the New Covenant, he has made his will known through Jesus Christ. God's revealed will comes in objective form, in spoken words, and in subjective form, in a heart that desires to obey what God has said.²

2 Carrie Bates, email message to author, December 27, 2005.

People go astray when, instead of following God's revealed will, they begin searching for God's individual detailed plan of their life. God does have a detailed plan for our lives, but that is his secret, sovereign will. He does not hold us accountable for that which he has hidden from us.

"The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law." (Deut. 29:29)

How then are we to approach open doors? An open door is simply an opportunity to do something. A believer is not morally obligated (nor is it usually physically possible) to take advantage of every opportunity. Paul left Troas despite an open door for the preaching of the gospel (2 Cor. 2:12-13). We must evaluate every open door. An opportunity does not imply that God is leading in a certain direction. Remember the ship conveniently waiting for Jonah? In addition, we remember from Romans 1:13 that hindrances are not always evidence that our purposes are wrong. The truth is, we could make a wise and good decision and the roof could cave in!

The great joy of the believer is the knowledge that every believer is led by the Spirit (Rom. 8:9, 14; Gal. 5:16-25). As we review our lives since the time when the Holy Spirit regenerated us, we can see how the Spirit of God has sovereignly led us. What a joy to know that even if we have sinned against the revealed will of God, we can obey his will now and confess our sins. Part of his revealed will is that if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9; 2:1). We do not have to mope, believing we have forever missed God's best will and plan for our lives. Our God is able to work all things together for good to those who love him, to those who are the called according to his purpose! Praise God that the Spirit has granted us new hearts, so that we are motivated to love God and to study his Word that we might know his revealed will, and so live for his glory in all things (1 Cor. 10:31).

There is no short cut to wise decision making. As we study the Word, the Spirit will mature us (1 Pet. 2:2; 2 Pet. 3:18). In the Scripture, God has given us everything we need to please him. We do not have to rely on subjective means to find his will and live responsibly in it. Our responsibility is to be informed by the Scripture and to be faithful to God's words revealed therein.



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