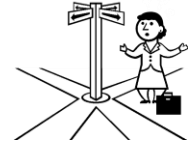




# Knowing God's Will



## What is "God's Will?"

- ❑ What does the term "God's will" generally mean in the Bible? Based on consideration of over 40 occurrences in the New Testament,<sup>1</sup> the meaning of "God's will" can be placed in one or both of the following categories:
  - God's "determinative will" – what *God* will do (or has done) according to His purpose
  - God's "desired will" – what God wants *us* to do (especially God's moral will)
  
- ❑ "God's will" might also fall into one of the following categories:<sup>2</sup>
  - God's "revealed will" – what God has chosen to reveal, primarily through the Scriptures
  - God's "hidden will" – what God has chosen *not* to reveal

## Knowing God's "Revealed Will"

- ❑ The foundation of knowing "God's will" is knowing His will revealed in the Scriptures (the Bible). Through the Scriptures, God reveals both his determinative will and his desired will.
  - God's determinative will – for example, God's purpose and plan in redeeming the fallen creation through Jesus Christ.
  - God's desired will – for example, God's commands, instructions, and moral principles to guide our thinking and acting.



### *Reflection/Application*

- If you are not a believer, God's will for you is to "seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us" (*Acts 17:27*).
- If you have not received Jesus as Lord and Savior, God's will for you is "believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved" (*Acts 16:31*).
  
- ❑ While some of God's "hidden will" in history has become His "revealed will," God has chosen *not* to fully reveal His determinative will. Still, God is working out His purpose and plan, and that purpose and plan involves individuals.
  - 📖 "And [God] made known the mystery<sup>3</sup> of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ" (*Ephesians 1:9, NIV*)
  - 📖 "... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and act according to his good purpose" (*Philippians 2:12b-13, NIV*)

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<sup>1</sup> The most common New Testament word for God's "will" is *thelēma*, which means "what one wishes to happen; what one wishes to bring about by one's own action, or by the activity of others to whom one assigns a task; that which is purposed, intended, or willed." Another word for "will" (*boulēma*) is used interchangeably, but leans more toward that which is accompanied by purpose or plan (more specific and deliberate)

<sup>2</sup> These two sets of categories are not corresponding. God's "determinative will" may be either revealed or hidden.

<sup>3</sup> In Paul's writings, "mystery" refers to something formerly hidden but now revealed by God (e.g., Rom 16:25-26; Col 1:25-26; Eph 3:3, 5). This "mystery" generally refers to the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation in Christ.

## Does God Have a Specific "Plan" for My Life?

❑ In answering the above question, we must define the term "God's plan."

1. How would you define the term "God's plan" (for individual human lives)?<sup>4</sup>



2. How much of "God's plan" for our lives can we know? How much do we *need* to know?

❑ This leads to the tension between God's sovereignty (rule, control) and human responsibility (or "free will").<sup>5</sup> This tension is explained in different ways. In any case, the majority of Christians would agree that "God's plan" for our life is somehow interwoven with His "determinative will" (His ultimate purpose and plan for creation). In other words, God will somehow work through our lives (including our decisions) to accomplish His purpose.



The story of Joseph (*Genesis 37-50*) is a wonderful illustration of the interplay of God's sovereignty and human responsibility. Years after his brothers had sold him into slavery, Joseph told them, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (*50:20, NIV*).

## Can I Know God's Specific "Plan" for My Life?

❑ God is all-knowing. He knows the future of each human being. He knows the decisions we will make and the roads we will travel. God is also sovereign. He will accomplish His purpose and plan. Only God knows His "plan" for us.<sup>6</sup> We can only know what He reveals to us, and what He reveals is adequate.

❑ We do not need to know God's "hidden will," and we can get carried away attempting to "discover" it. Instead, we should seek to know and love God!<sup>7</sup> We should seek first His kingdom (rule) and His righteousness. We should desire to know *and do* God's revealed will. Having done that, we can trust that God will accomplish His purpose in our lives.

📖 "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." (*Romans 8:28, NKJV*)

📖 "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge<sup>8</sup> him, and he will make your paths straight." (*Proverbs 3:5-6*)

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<sup>4</sup> For some, "God's plan" is like a roadmap for our life, which is part of God's hidden will. Some say that the roads we travel (including the causal conditions for our decisions) are determined by God, or are at least interwoven with the determined will of God. Others say that we can choose from various roads, but only one route is best. Some might call the best route God's "perfect will," and say that we should seek to discover God's "perfect will" for our life (which seems to mean that even a non-moral "wrong" decision can throw us off course in our walk with God). According to this view, the discovery process may involve looking for "signs" and "open doors." Still others reject the roadmap concept. For them, God's plan is either more general or fluid, accommodating human "free will" while still resulting in God's ultimate purpose. In this case, the designation "God's plan for us" might be abandoned.

<sup>5</sup> "Human responsibility" is the more general term. "Free will" is used by those advocating a particular view of the tension. A discussion of the various views is beyond the scope of this present study. See article on the ICF website.

<sup>6</sup> "Plan" in this sentence means the roadmap of our lives from God's perspective, including our future.

<sup>7</sup> "Knowing God" should be our primary pursuit. Knowing God is fundamental to knowing His will.

<sup>8</sup> To "acknowledge" God is to "know" God, with the sense of "having fellowship" with God. To "make your paths straight" means to "bring you to your appointed goal."

## How Can I Know God's Specific "Will" for My Life?

- ❑ This question concerns God's guidance for our lives. Though we cannot fully know "God's plan" for our lives, we still want to know what God wants us to do. We want God's guidance in our decisions. How does God guide us?

### Seeking God's Guidance<sup>9</sup>

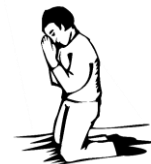
#### 1. Read your Bible.

- 📖 "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16-17, NIV).
- 📖 "Your word is a lamp to my feet and light for my path" (Psalm 119:105, NIV).
  - Pray. Realize that the Holy Spirit helps us understand and apply God's word.
  - Learn to interpret.
  - Meditate (think about, reflect on); memorize.
  - Humbly obey.



#### 2. Develop a heart for God.

- 📖 "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 (or rational) 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." (Romans 12:1-2, NIV)
- 📖 "Jesus said, '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 neighbor as yourself.'" (Matthew 22:37-39, NIV)
- 📖 "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things (that is, the things you really need) will be given to you as well." (Matthew 6:33, NIV)
  - Key ideas: love, devotion, relationship, desire to be changed
- 📖 "Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart" (Psalm 37:4).
  - If we have heart for God, the desires of our heart will be more consistent with His will. We will be more sensitive to the Spirit's guidance.<sup>10</sup> If our motivations are pure, God will use the deep desires of our heart to lead us in the direction he wants us to go.



<sup>9</sup>Adapted from Bruce K. Waltke, *Finding the Will of God, A Pagan Notion?* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002). Waltke lists six "steps" and says the order of these steps is very important. Most Christians would agree that "steps" 1 and 2 are foundational, but Waltke's precise order of "steps" may be disputed.

<sup>10</sup>Waltke emphasizes the "inner desire given by the Holy Spirit, through the Word of God, and confirmed by the community of Christ" (p. 118). We "listen to God" through His Word. "Listening to God" is a subject of some disagreement among Christians. Every Christian believes that God "speaks" through the Bible. Many say that God also "speaks" through "the prompting (inner witness) of the Spirit." Gordon Smith says that we can recognize the prompting of the Spirit by recognizing the four distinct messages we receive from the Spirit: 1) the Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are God's children (Romans 8:16); 2) the Spirit convicts us of our sin (John 16:8); 3) the Spirit guides us into truth (John 16:13); and 4) the Spirit guides us at the decision times of our lives. The first three are all foundational to the fourth, and prayer is fundamental to the process. The witness of the Spirit is confirmed by a combination of joy (from assurance that we are God's children) and moral transformation (from a desire to do good and turn from evil). *Listening to God in Times of Choice* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1997), p. 37-40.

3. Seek wise counsel. Seek guidance in the context of the church.
  - 📖 “Listen to advice and accept instruction, and in the end you will be wise” (*Prov. 19:20*).
  - 📖 “The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice” (*Prov. 12:15*).
  - 📖 “Let us not give us meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (*Heb. 10:25*).
  
4. Look for God’s providence (the ways God is working in and around you).<sup>11</sup>
  - 📖 “for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (*Phil. 2:13, NIV*).
  
5. Use sound judgment.
  - Make your decision in light of Scripture.
  - Consider your gifts and abilities.<sup>12</sup>
  - Consider your circumstances.<sup>13</sup> (*1 Corinthians 16:5-9*)
  - Consider an overall strategy.<sup>14</sup> (*2 Corinthians 1:15-18, 23-34, 2:1*)
  
6. Be open to the possibility of divine intervention.



### *Discussion Questions*

1. To know “God’s will” for our lives, what is most important? In seeking God’s guidance in our decisions, what particular attitudes and actions are most important?
  
2. In seeking God’s guidance in “big decisions”<sup>15</sup> (e.g., what career to pursue, which job to take, where to live, whom to marry, etc.), what should the Christian do? What kinds of questions should the Christian ask?
  
3. What if we need to make a decision, but we seem to be lacking “God’s clear guidance”? What if we make a decision, and later feel like our decision was not the best? How can the Christian navigate (steer through) life’s big decisions without fear and unrest?

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<sup>11</sup> “providence” refers to God’s maintenance and guidance of His creation to accomplish his purposes. We may ask, “How is God working?” This may be evident in inward changes, movements, circumstances, events & other people.

<sup>12</sup> In his book *Courage & Calling*, Gordon Smith says that self-knowledge helps us discern God’s calling for our lives. He suggests asking the following questions: What are my gifts and abilities? What is the deepest desire of my heart? Where do I personally sense the needs of the world and feel the brokenness in God’s creation? What is my unique personality and temperament?

<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that we can put too much emphasis on this factor, as well as the other “steps” listed on this page. For example, “open doors” and “closed doors” are not necessarily clear indicators. Some “open doors” may lead in the wrong direction, and some “closed doors” may open later.

<sup>14</sup> The Bible instructs us to make plans, but warns us against presumption. As James writes, “Instead, you ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.’” (*James 4:13-17*)

<sup>15</sup> When we talk about “knowing God’s will” or “seeking God’s guidance,” we often focus on the “big decisions” of life. However, we make decisions throughout each day, and these “little decisions” can be very important too!