

How Do I Find God's Will?

April 8, 2018

How do you determine God's will? Chuck Swindoll tells the story of a man driving through Washington D.C. who was considering becoming a missionary. His car stalled in front of the Philippine embassy. He considered that a sign from God that he should be a missionary to the Philippines. What do you think? Is that the way God would direct him to the Philippines? He tells another story of a woman that was debating if she should travel on a tour of Israel. When she woke up the next morning, the clock said, "7:47." She took that as a sign from God she should fly on a plane. What do you think? Was that a sign from God telling her his will for her life? As Christians, should we be looking for those kinds of God signs to determine our future?

Today we begin a series called, "Discovering God's Will." In this series, we will learn how each of us can discover God's will for our lives. It is a three-week series. This morning, I am laying the foundation for the series. First, we are going to look at the different ways God describes his will in the Bible. Understanding these distinctions is crucial. Second, we will survey the ways people in the ancient and modern world try to discover God's will. Third, we will look at how God revealed his will in the Old Testament. Finally, we will look at the way God reveals his will to us in the New Testament times today.

Next week, we will look at how to discover God's will in difficult situations. In the third and final week, we will see how to discover God's will when it comes to the biggest choices in life — our careers and our marriages.

Let's start with a basic understanding of the will of God this morning.

What does the Bible mean when it talks about the will of God?

When the Bible talks about the will of God, it can be confusing. The Bible talks about the will of God in different ways. We need to understand these differences or we will be confused.

Decretive Will of God

The decretive will of God refers to the eternal plans and decrees of God. These are the decrees by which he created the universe and is moving everything to its divinely appointed destiny. This is talking about God's sovereign rulership over the world. In this sense, nothing can happen that is not God's will because nothing is bigger than God. He is the creator of everything, and he is ultimately in charge of everything. Let me show you an example.

...he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?" Daniel 4:35 (ESV)

God ultimately determines everything. God is large and in charge. Everything is in God's control. In this sense, even our salvation by Jesus Christ was determined by God before we were born and even before the creation of the universe. God chose us to save us. The Bible talks about this in the book of Ephesians.

...even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him... Ephesians 1:4 (ESV)

As soon as we talk about the decretive will of God — God's ultimate sovereignty and complete control over all things — many people misunderstand. They fall into a trap called fatalism. Fatalism says that since God ultimately determines all things, it doesn't matter what I do. What will be will be. My choices

aren't real. They don't matter. Fatalism is not biblical. Fatalism is Islam's view of Allah, not a Christian's understanding of our loving God. While God ultimately determines all things, our choices are real, and they still matter. He still holds us accountable for our choices. Look how the Bible holds God ultimately in control and sovereign over all things while still maintaining our moral responsibility. The Bible says this about God's decreative will.

Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. Psalm 139:16 (NIV)

Yet the Bible also says this about our choices.

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. 2 Corinthians 5:10 (ESV)

God is ultimately in charge of all things yet how we live and the choices we make still matter. We will be held responsible for them. Sometimes we can see God's ultimate decreative will and our moral responsibility held in tension in the same verse.

For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed! Luke 22:22 (ESV)

How are we to think about God's decreative will in everyday life? We take comfort that no matter what happens in this world, God is ultimately in charge of everything. Nothing is beyond his control. We know he promises us all the suffering and sin that we face for his glory. In addition, we realize that our choices still matter and that God desires to reward us for our God-honoring choices when we stand before him.

Preceptive Will

The preceptive will of God is also called God's moral will. When we think of the will of God, this is usually what comes to mind. This moral will of God refers to the everyday choices we make.

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality... 1 Thessalonians 4:3 (ESV)

...give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 1 Thessalonians 5:18 (ESV)

God's will for us is that we live holy lives. God's will is that we avoid sexual sin. God's will is that the only sexual involvement we have is with our spouses inside of marriage. God's will is that we have thankful hearts, even in hard circumstances.

Why are these things the will of God? Why does God desire for us to make certain choices in a particular way? It is vitally important to understand that the preceptive (moral) will of God is the way it is because obeying God's moral will is what brings him pleasure. Every time we face a decision where the Bible tells us the moral will of God, it is a decision to either bring pleasure to ourselves through sin or to put a smile on God's face by obeying his will. It is a choice to see who we want to please.

It is similar to marriage. If your wife asks you to pick up your clothes, every day you have a choice. Are you going to pick your clothes and bring her pleasure or leave them on the floor and gratify your slothfulness? We need to decide who we will please. Every time we follow God's moral will, we bring joy to God. When we violate it, it grieves the heart of God, just like it grieves the heart of your spouse when you don't pick those dirty clothes.

Providential Will Of God

We will look at the providential will of God next week in greater depth. The providential will of God is God working in our circumstances to limit our choices so he controls our destiny so that our future is in line with his will for our lives. We see people leaning into God's providential will all the time in the Bible. Look how Paul referenced the providential will of God when he left Ephesus.

But on taking leave of them he said, "I will return to you if God wills," and he set sail from Ephesus. Acts 18:21 (ESV)

Paul wanted to come back to Ephesus. Paul also recognized the only way he would be able to return to Ephesus was not just by him making plans but by God enabling those plans and steering his life in such a way that enabled him to return. James talked about the same thing. He said referencing God's providential will should be standard speech for Christians when they talk about making plans for the future.

Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." James 4:15 (ESV)

James said when we make plans, make sure we include God's providence in our thinking.

How does God's providential will show itself in everyday life? If you are applying to a college, and you are not accepted, it was God's providential will that you do not attend that college. If you are applying for a job and the employer never calls you back, don't fret. It is not God's providential will for you to work at that company. God closed the door of that opportunity to steer you away from that option in your life.

The way to understand God's providential will is to realize it is never something that works looking forward. It only works looking backward. Looking backward, we can see how God steered our lives by opening and closing doors of opportunity. How many of you guys dated a girl that you thought would be a perfect wife? Her heart grew cold toward you and the relationship fell apart. At the time, you were heartbroken, but looking back on the relationship you thank God he shut the opportunity out of your life.

When our family came to CrossWinds, the way we knew this is where God wanted us to serve was through his providential will. We had a time frame when we needed to move from our home. While I had other opportunities on the table, only CrossWinds offered the job in our time frame. We took that as God's providential will. He only opened one door of opportunity.

How do pagans find God's will?

Seeking the will of God was extremely popular in the ancient world. It is still popular today. Leo Eppenhimer, professor of Near Eastern Studies at the University of Chicago, says 80 percent of the writings from Mesopotamia pertain to divination for the purpose of determining the will of their god. Determining a god's will for the future was a huge preoccupation in the ancient world. Let's see how they tried to crack the mystery of a god's will.

Rolling Dice

Technically, this was called casting lots. When we read in the Bible about pagans casting lots, the lots were usually small stones or pebbles. It was similar to rolling dice, or drawing straws. Since they believed the gods were in charge of

all things, they believed the way the lots or dice rolled would reveal a god's will for perplexing choices. Sometimes, God accommodated people and actually revealed his will this way. We see this with Jonah.

And they said to one another, "Come, let us cast lots, that we may know on whose account this evil has come upon us." So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. Jonah 1:7 (ESV)

Checking For A Shiver In The Liver

This is called hepatoscopy. It was very popular in the ancient world. Today, we know memory and intelligence is in the brain. They thought memory and intelligence were in the liver, since it is one of the heaviest organs. People would sacrifice animals to try and read the livers to determine the future. Sometimes, to increase the accuracy of their readings, they sacrificed multiple animals and read multiple livers. Sometimes they even sacrificed human beings to read their livers and determine the future. Ancient kings spent a lot of time sacrificing animals and studying livers as they wrestled with decisions of significant consequences, such as going to war or remaining at peace.

Before you think this was totally crazy, today we have the science of phrenology, which believes you can tell people's character traits, or even diagnose mental illnesses, by bumps in the skull. We also have palm readers who claim they can discern your future by the folds in your skin. If people today think skull bumps and palms can reveal the future, it isn't too big of a leap to think the liver could do the same.

Spinning The Arrow

Technically, this is called rhabdomancy. This was done by ancient kings when they needed to make perplexing directional choices. They would spin an arrow in the air to see which way it pointed when it fell. They would head in the direction the arrow pointed considering that was the revealed will of the gods. They did this because they believed the gods were involved in every part of the world, which is better than most people today. Most people today don't even think God exists.

There are historical examples of kings calling off entire battles because they spun an arrow and it landed in a direction pointing away from the battle, so they took their armies home. This is the ancient equivalent of spinning a lottery wheel, which is something many people still practice today. Here is an example of this practice in Scripture.

For the king of Babylon stands at the parting of the way, at the head of the two ways, to use divination. He shakes the arrows; he consults the teraphim; he looks at the liver. Ezekiel 21:21 (ESV)

Consult Your Idol

This is technically called teraphim. It is the consulting of a small household god to determine the will of the gods for your personal life or your family life. The way it worked is people would make a small sacrifice to the idol to try and please the idol. Get the idol happy, then wait for the idol's reply. They expected the idol to reply through a series of unexpected coincidences or a strong feeling.

The Bible is clear the people of God are not to be involved in the practice of worshipping idols. While idols are simply dumb blocks of wood, there is real

spiritual power behind them. There is demonic power behind them. Look what the Old Testament says:

They sacrificed to demons that were no gods, to gods they had never known, to new gods that had come recently, whom your fathers had never dreaded. Deuteronomy 32:17 (ESV)

In the New Testament, we find the same thing.

No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. 1 Corinthians 10:20 (ESV)

Idol worship is actually demonic worship. This means there is real demonic power in the idols of Hinduism and the idols of Buddhism. There is real demonic power for the Muslims that is associated with the black stone located at the Kaaba in Mecca. It is not God's power; it is demonic power.

Astrology

Astrology debuted in the sixth century B.C. The premise of astrology is the stars, which are the home of the gods, will reveal the mind of the gods. Astrology was believed to be more precise than checking for a shiver in the liver so it eclipsed that practice. While astrology began with the Babylonians, it reached the zenith of its popularity during the Hellenistic (Greek) time period. When the Julian calendar was introduced, astrology became much easier. Even King Tiberius made crucial decisions based on astrology. Look what God says about astrology and horoscopes through the prophet Jeremiah who was writing to the Jews in Babylon while astrology was popular.

Thus says the Lord: "Learn not the way of the nations, nor be dismayed at the signs of the heavens because the nations are dismayed at them, for the customs of the peoples are vanity..." Jeremiah 10:2–3 (ESV)

Karma In Your Cup

The technical name for this is hydromancy. This is the belief that someone can predict the future of a person after they drink from a cup by seeing the signs left by the water in a cup. Think of the coffee stains left at the bottom of your cup. We see this in the story of Joseph in Genesis 44, when Joseph's servant accused Benjamin of stealing Joseph's cup. This is what he said:

Is it not from this that my lord drinks, and by this that he practices divination? You have done evil in doing this. Genesis 44:5 (ESV)

Of course Joseph didn't actually practice hydromancy, but it was popular in Egypt at this time. Before you think this is nuts and that modern people would never do anything so silly to determine the future, remember that even today people try to read your tea leaves or your tarot cards. Reading tea leaves and tarot cards is based on the same principle, which is the idea that your karma influences all you touch so someone can read your future by examining what you touch.

Sorcery

This is direct contact with a demonic power to determine the future.

There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead... Deuteronomy 18:10–11 (ESV)

Today, this is called witchcraft or Wicca. Girls want to learn to be witches. They want to learn how to cast spells on people to control the future. This is direct contact with a demonic power. God is completely against it.

When we started looking at these ancient methods of divination to determine the future, you may have thought modern people wouldn't practice

anything so silly. As you saw, these practices are still alive and well but just practiced under slightly different names — tarot cards, tea leaves, phrenology, palm reading and ouija boards.

Let's move to the Bible and start with the Old Testament. How did God reveal his will to his people in the Old Testament?

How did people determine God's will in the Old Testament?

Prophets

God raised up prophets that would speak for God and reveal his will. For example, when Saul lost his father's donkeys, he went to Samuel the prophet to help find them. Samuel the prophet could reveal where Saul could find the donkeys. When Barak considered going to war in Judges 4, he went to Deborah the prophetess to see if it was God's will that he war against the Canaanites. God sent his prophets to reveal his will to kings, to counsel them and to correct them. A quarter of the Old Testament is written by God's prophets. You knew they were speaking God's message because they began with these words, "Thus saith the Lord."

Urim and Thummim

The priest used these to determine the will of God. We are not exactly sure what they looked like but we know the priest carried them in a pouch in his priestly garments. They were kept close to his heart. From what we can tell, they were similar to two flat rocks. One side was white, and the other side was black. When the priest threw them on the ground, two whites was a, "Yes", while two blacks was a "No." One white and one black was a "No reply" signal from God.

As Israel prepared for battle, they would ask the priests to get God's guidance for the battle through the Urim and Thummim.

For example, on the night before King Saul's famous last battle with the Philistines, 1 Samuel 28:6 tells us Urim and Thummim is one of the ways Saul tried to determine God's will for that battle. Should he fight? 1 Samuel 28 tells us God gave Saul a "no reply" answer. The Urim and Thummim came up one black and the other white. The Urim and Thummim were only used with royal or priestly decisions. The scarce amount of information we have on them tells us God was more interested in reforming the character of his people than in rolling dice with his people.

Lots

The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord. Proverbs 16:33 (ESV)

Lots were usually small sticks or stones and were used to make decisions among a group of people, similar to drawing straws today. Lots were used to find the sin of Achan in Joshua 7. The 11 disciples drew lots to select a replacement for Judas in Acts 1:26, but this is the last time lots are mentioned in the Bible. This suggests they are not something New Testament Christians should practice to find God's will.

Dreams and Visions

And he said, "Hear my words: If there is a prophet among you, I the Lord make myself known to him in a vision; I speak with him in a dream." Numbers 12:6 (ESV)

God gave Joseph a dream that his brothers would bow down to him. God spoke to Joseph, Jesus' adoptive father, in a dream telling him to move to Egypt with baby Jesus. In Acts 10, God spoke to Cornelius in a vision.

Signs

God occasionally used supernatural signs. The best example of that is Gideon in Judges 6. God sent an angel to a young farmer named Gideon, telling him to lead Israel into battle to free God's people from the Midianites. He was fearful about going to battle so he asked God for a sign. First, he asked God to make a fleece wet and the ground dry. After God gave him that sign, he still didn't believe God, so Gideon asked for the opposite, to make the fleece dry and the ground wet. Both times God accommodated him and gave those signs.

Incidentally, this does not give us an example to follow. Today, people talk about putting out a fleece to see if they should purchase a new car. They talk about putting in a job application at another company as a fleece to see if they should go. That is not good. Gideon put out a fleece because he was a man lacking in faith and maturity. His fleece practice is not an example for us to follow.

Spoken Words

Of course, God occasionally revealed his will by speaking directly to his people in words. God spoke directly to Abraham in words. He spoke to Moses in words. God spoke words directly to David and Elijah.

We have seen how pagans searched for God's will, plus we have seen how God revealed his will in the Old Testament. The question becomes, how should we find God's will today?

God has a different program for us. After Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit, there is no instance of the church actively seeking God's will through any of the forms we just studied. Today, God is not leading his church like he led Old Testament Israel. His law is no longer written on tablets of stone, it is written on our hearts by his Spirit.

Let's see how God leads us through his Holy Spirit.

How does God lead us in the New Testament?

Most of the questions we ask about God's will for our lives are actually already answer in God's Word. Most of God's will that we don't know is already available for us to know. It is essential for God's people to know God's Word. God's Word is the primary way he reveals his will.

To illustrate the importance of knowing God's Word to determine God's will, look what was to happen when a king in Israel was coronated. He was to copy, by hand, the Bible of his day. His handwritten copy was to be proofread by a priest, then he was to read it every day of his life because it was through the Word of God that he would discover the will of God for his leadership.

And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests. And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them...
Deuteronomy 17:18–19 (ESV)

We also find the high priority of reading God's Word to know God's will in the New Testament.

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. 2 Timothy 3:16–17 (ESV)

The Bible rebukes us. How many times have we read something in the Bible and been rebuked from what we read? When we read God's Word, the Holy Spirit will prompt us if we are living out of line with God's Word. The Bible also corrects us. It doesn't just show us where we are wrong, it shows us how to live right. It literally trains us in right living.

No rebuking, correcting and training in God's will for our lives happens if we don't read our Bibles. How can God direct us in his will if we are not in his Word? The Bible is God's primary tool for shaping our lives and for revealing his will.

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. Hebrews 4:12 (ESV)

While the Bible may not give us God's specific hidden plan for our lives, it has God's revealed will for our lives. Most of the questions about God's will that we wrestle with on a daily basis are already answered in the Bible.

Your testimonies are my delight; they are my counselors. Psalm 119:24 (ESV)

In times of indecision, we want to talk with a counselor. The Bible is our counselor.

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. Psalm 119:105 (ESV)

When we don't know which choices to make, the words of the Bible will light our paths to reveal our next steps.

Some people will ask, "How much time do I need to spend reading the Bible to find God's will?" I often challenge people to start by reading one chapter a day. Don't let that stop you. You are not just trying to read a chapter. You are

trying to know the heart of Jesus who is the ultimate author of the book. Try reading entire books of the Bible in one sitting. Remember that you are not trying to learn information, you are trying to meet a person, his name is Jesus.

God's desires are clear in the Bible.

Sometimes people think the Bible is hard. I admit there are parts in the Bible which are hard to understand. The important thing to remember is God's will for our lives is not generally found in the hard part of the Bible. It is usually in the easiest parts of the Bible. Let me show you.

See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. 1 Thessalonians 5:15–19 (ESV)

It is God's will that we never try to get even when someone hurts us. It is God's will that we always go out of our way to do good to everyone. It is God's will that we always have thankful hearts, not grumbling hearts. It is God's will that we pray. It is God's will we give thanks in all circumstances. These things are plain. They are clear.

The vast majority of what we need to know about God's will for our lives is plainly revealed. The problem is we don't take the time to read the Bible. We don't take time to know our Bible. That is why we often struggle to find God's will.

Pray as you read the Bible.

Many times, we read the Bible like it is an academic book or we rush through it like we are trying to get to the end of a lengthy Facebook post. Before we read our Bible, ask God in prayer to open our eyes to understand his Word. Ask God to help you notice what you need to see in his Word. He will answer that

prayer. You will be shocked what a difference asking God in prayer to open your eyes makes before you read your Bible.

Memorize the Bible

When it comes to knowing God's will for our lives, this is crucial. When God's Word is memorized in our hearts, God will speak to us, counsel us and guide us in every situation we face because he will bring a memorized verse to mind that applies to the situation we face. God will talk to you about his will through the memorized verses you have hidden in your heart.

Not only will God guide us through the Word we memorize but he will also help us in our battle with temptation by the verses we memorize. In Matthew 4, Jesus was tempted by Satan when he was in the wilderness. In every temptation Jesus faced, he fought the devil by quoting verses of the Bible that he had memorized. For example, when Jesus was hungry, Satan tempted him to turn stones into bread. The temptation was to act independently of his father to satisfy his hunger. Jesus fought that temptation by quoting Deuteronomy 8:3 from memory.

...man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. Deuteronomy 8:3 (ESV)

Three times Satan severely tempted Jesus, and every time Jesus fought temptation by quoting verses he had memorized. The verses Jesus had memorized not only revealed God's will in these crucial moments but they also provided the strength to follow God's will in the moment. The best way for us to handle temptation is to memorize key verses so the Holy Spirit can bring them to

mind when we need them, verses, like 1 Corinthians 10:13. Every time we are tempted, we quote the Bible verses we need to remember in our thought lives.

Meditate on the Bible

Meditation was hijacked by a bunch of eastern mystics so it has a bum wrap in the church. Biblical mediation isn't something funky or weird. It is simply thinking about verses in the Bible. Biblical meditation is powerful. The more we think about a verse, the more God helps us understand and apply the verse. We are commanded to meditate on God's Word.

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. Psalm 1:1–3 (ESV)

Meditation on God's Word is the key to blessing from God in this life. Far too many of us read the Bible without thinking about the Bible, yet the Bible tells us we are to think about it.

How do we meditate on the Bible? Get away from your busy life. Sit in a quiet place then read and reread a portion of the Bible. Write down what comes to mind.

God will speak to you through his Word. You will not hear an audible voice, but things in the verse will click for you. God will show you how his Word applies to your life so you can obey his will.

How does the Bible help us discover God's will?

As we spend time in God's Word, God begins to reshape our hearts to be increasingly like Jesus. God places in our hearts the desires he wants for us. As

we spend time in God's Word, God places in our hearts the will he has for our lives.

God reveals his will for our lives by creating in our hearts the desires for our future that he wants us to have. To find and follow God's will for our lives, all we need to do is follow the desires God has placed in our hearts as we walk with him and pray, memorize, and meditate on his Word. Augustine said it this way in the fourth century when he was asked how a Christian discovers God's will. His answer was, "Love God and do what you want." It is that simple.

Cornelius Van Til, another famous theologian, commonly said that as we walk with God, we will learn to think God's thoughts after him. God will place in our hearts the desires he has for our lives as we spend time in his Word and the Holy Spirit applies the Word to our lives.

This is how Paul determined his career path to take the gospel to the ancient world.

It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known... Romans 15:20 (NIV)

God gave Paul a desire to preach the good news of Jesus every place that message had not been heard. He followed the desire God placed in his heart and spread the gospel to the world because that was God's will for his life.

Sometimes I talk to people that are worried that God's will is for them to be a missionary in Africa. They can't stand that idea. They don't like snakes, the heat and the country. Here is what I tell them. If, after reading your Bible, praying over the words of your Bible, memorizing your Bible and meditating on your Bible, you still have no desire for Africa, don't worry about it. The reason you

have no desire for Africa is because God doesn't want you in Africa. Just follow the desires God has placed in your heart.

This is revolutionary. We don't need to cast lots, look for a shiver in a liver, check our horoscopes, head to a fortune teller, read tea leaves, or cast the Urim and Thummim to know God's will. Since the Spirit of God resides in us, as we interact with the Word of God, he will create in our hearts the desires he has for his will in our lives. It is that easy.

Conclusion

Next week, we will look at the tougher situations. We will answer questions such as, What is the role of spiritual hunches? When should we seek wise counsel to discover God's will? And what is the role of providence?

Today, the application is simple. We leave with a commitment to read God's Word, pray over the Word, memorize the Word and meditate on the Word, knowing that as the Spirit of God that lives inside us interacts with the Word of God, he will give us the desires for what he wants us to do with our lives.



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