

Discerning the Will of God

"How can I discover God's will for my life?" "How can I be sure of God's guidance in my decisions?" "God, what do you want me to do?" Practically all Christians have asked questions like these, especially at critical decision points in their lives.

We shape and order our existence by the hundreds of decisions we make each day, and most of these are so trivial that we make them almost automatically. For many of us, the question of God's will hardly enters into our decisions apart from those unusual times when we realize that a specific choice could affect the rest of our lives. Because the consequences of a wrong choice at a point like this could be disastrous, we suddenly break out of our usual habits and begin to pursue and sometimes agonize over God's mind on the matter.

Is there a better approach? In this booklet we will look at God's will as a way of life and not as an emergency support system. We will consider the difference between God's plan and God's desires and get a perspective on our role and God's role in the realization of God's best for our lives. We will also look at the prerequisites and principles of making decisions in a way that will be pleasing to God and fulfilling for us.

The Priority of God's Will

Imagine the tragedy of waking up at the end of a self-centered and meaningless life. At the brink of death you reflect upon the years of wasted time and wonder how you allowed yourself to minimize the things you knew were important by becoming a slave of routine. Our years on this planet are brief, and none of us want to waste them. But unless we regularly acknowledge God and His desires, our lives will count for little.

Because He created us and redeemed us, God doubly owns us. We therefore have an obligation to fulfill His will as His workmanship (Ephesians 2:10) and His children (1 John 3:1). Like Jesus, our spiritual food (see John 4:34) should be to do the will of Him who has called us "out of darkness into His marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9; see Matt. 7:21).

We not only have an obligation to God but also to ourselves to discern and fulfill His will for our lives. Positively, it is only by making this a top priority that we will find the joy and satisfaction of an ultimately meaningful existence on this earth. Negatively, it is only in this way that we will avoid the undesirable and sometimes devastating consequences of pursuing our own will while rejecting God's. The initial pleasures of sin do not outlast the guilt, double binds, and disillusionment that are its final product. God loves us and desires what is best for us; He is also omniscient and knows what is best for us. Since His will for our lives is "good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2), it is in our own best interest to affirm His desires even when they are contrary to our own.

A third reason for making God's will a priority in our lives is our obligation to others. We cannot choose in a vacuum--the decisions we make will inevitably affect others, sometimes in ways we could never imagine. God has entrusted each of us with the stewardship of a unique sphere of influence. In the decisions we make and in our resulting life-styles, we are called to be faithful ambassadors of Christ to the Christians and non-Christians we touch (2 Corinthians 5:16-20).

The Patterns of God's Will

There are two major patterns in God's plan for mankind: His determined will and His desired will.

God's Determined Will

In the timeless mind of God, He sovereignly determined all that would take place in the cosmos. Even before He created this world, He foreordained the complex maze of human history. God "works all things after the counsel of His will" (Ephesians 1:11), and this divine mandate cannot be thwarted by human responses.

All that comes to pass in the world in general and in our lives in particular are part of God's determined will. Apart from divine revelation, we cannot know God's unchangeable plan until it is realized in time. We know, for example, that the second advent of Jesus will certainly take place, because God has revealed that this is part of His sovereign plan. But we cannot know with certainty what tomorrow will bring in our own lives until tomorrow comes.

God's Desired Will

Unlike His determined will, the fulfillment of God's desired will is dependent upon our responses. Because of human freedom, God's plan is not the same as His desires. God sovereignly controls all that happens and yet we are responsible for the choices we make. God did not desire the suffering and evil that spread throughout this planet, but it was His plan to create moral creatures who could choose to rebel against Him.

We cannot understand the mystery of divine sovereignty and human responsibility, but Scripture makes it clear that we are responsible for the degree to which God's desires are fulfilled in His plan for our lives. God's desired will, unlike His determined will, is not inevitable. We can choose to resist it or we can choose to accomplish it.

Although we do not know God's mandate for our lives, we do know much of what He desires. God's desired will for all unbelievers is that they turn from their sins to the Savior. He is "not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9). He "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). Clearly, God's desires for the lost are not being realized, but He will not force them to choose His Son and live. To paraphrase C. S. Lewis, there will ultimately be two kinds of people: those who

say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says in the end, "Thy will be done."

For believers, we know that God's desire on this earth is that they be progressively conformed to the image of Christ. "As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him" (Col. 2:6). "The one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked" (1 John 2:6). This involves a growing relationship with God in prayer, study of His Word, and dependence upon the power of the Holy Spirit. Increasing Christlikeness will also involve trials and suffering, according to Romans 5:3-5; 1 Peter 1:6-7; 2:19-22; 4:12-16; and James 1:2-4.

Pursuing God's will is therefore a matter of obediently choosing what He knows is best for us. This is not merely a once-for-all choice, but a series of choices made during the course of each day. God's will for our lives is dynamic, not static. As we travel into the unexplored territory of the future, it requires a walk of dependent faith to stay on the cutting edge of God's desires. Instead of giving us a photograph of His entire plan, God reveals it like a film, one frame at a time, in the course of our daily experiences. God's sovereignty and our responsibility mysteriously merge together in time to realize His eternal design for our lives. Before the foundation of the world, God incorporated our decisions into the fabric of His plan.

Perspectives on God's Will

Individual Versus Moral Will

Does God actually have an individual will for our lives, or is it only a moral will? This is a debated issue because some approaches to God's will emphasize guidance for specific decisions, while other approaches emphasize a biblical life-style.

We have already seen that the essence of God's desired will for the life of any Christian is a Christlike character (e.g., the fruit of the Spirit in Gal. 5:22-23). The details of this character are clearly revealed in the Bible, and thus we discover God's will and receive divine counsel by regularly studying its pages.

There is no question that God has a moral will for us, and that this moral will is universally true for all believers. But does this moral will exclude an individual or personal will for the decisions and direction of our lives? A simple study of Scripture shows that in the lives of many of the people of the Old and New Testaments, God had a very personal plan. To cite only one of numerous examples, the Holy Spirit said in Acts 13:2, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

Some people attempt to reinterpret all the passages that have been traditionally used to support the concept of individual guidance, claiming that they are really only examples of God's moral will. In addition, they assert that despite the many biblical instances of personal direction, God no longer directs His people in individual ways.

We must be careful not to go beyond what Scripture affirms in our zeal to correct certain abuses and misconceptions of God's will. The Bible does not say that God no longer guides people in the unique decisions they must make. God's will for our character is universal, but His will for other aspects of our lives is individual. His desires extend not only to our moral development, but also to other decisions (including education, marriage, profession, and Christian service) that determine the contribution each of us will make. God has given each of us a unique combination of gifts, circumstances, and opportunities, and we are exhorted to seek His counsel and direction so that our decisions will reflect God's desire to use us in ways we would otherwise overlook.

The following verses have been related by some to God's moral will and by others to His individual will. How do you see these verses: moral will, individual will, or both?

"I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you" (Psalm 32:8).

"I am the Lord your God, who teaches you to profit, who leads you in the way you should go" (Isaiah 48:17).

"For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10).

"For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God" (Col. 1:9-10).

Experiential Versus Rational Guidance

How do we discern the counsel of God in the decisions we make? In general, Christians have approached divine guidance from two different directions. The subjective approach emphasizes the more or less mystical experience of clear guidance from God. Sometimes this is described in terms of a direct, supernatural experience (e.g., an inaudible or audible voice, a dream, or a vision). Others see the experience of God's guidance more indirectly as a strong impression upon the mind or in the form of a certain passage of Scripture which "spoke" to them.

By contrast, the objective approach emphasizes certain rational principles which can be applied to determine the best course of action in any given situation.

Both of these approaches can be carried too far. An overemphasis on experience can lead to self-deception and a lack of sound wisdom in decision making. Many people have said, "God told me _____" and later found out (often to their own embarrassment or regret) that He didn't. Christians have

ascribed some of the most foolish and unscriptural notions to God. There is a strong temptation to baptize our own plans and desires by deluding ourselves into thinking that they came from the Lord.

On the other hand, an overemphasis on objective principles can lead to a kind of practical deism. This involves such an exclusive dependence upon our own ability to interpret circumstances and make wise decisions that even though we use Scripture, God may as well not exist.

We can only avoid these extremes when we realize that there is some truth to both experiential and rational guidance. This is because the former relates to divine sovereignty while the latter relates to human responsibility. The working out of God's will in our experience requires both sides of the coin. Our part is to move in conscious dependence and submission to God while at the same time following the guidelines of Scripture and exercising wisdom in the decisions we make. As we do so, God will fulfill His part in using a variety of ways to guide our steps.

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart" (trust Him entirely), "and do not lean on your own understanding" (trust Him exclusively). "In all your ways acknowledge Him" (trust Him extensively), "and He will make your paths straight" (God's response to our trust in Him; Prov. 3:5-6). As we make ourselves available and dependent upon God, we can move out in the knowledge that He will close and open doors and oversee the affairs of our lives.

Corridor Versus Take-Your-Pick Approach

Another debated issue related to the will of God concerns the nature and extent of His guidance in the believer's life. Traditionally, the decisions we make (at least the major ones) have been viewed as either inside or outside God's will for us. Often this is depicted in terms of a circle and we are told to live in "the center of God's will." Like the calmness and peace in the eye of a storm, if we move out of the eye we expose ourselves to the storm's fury and turmoil.

In this approach, the will of God is like the narrow passageway of a corridor. Just as there are doors which lead off the corridor, we are faced with many choices; at any given time, only one choice will be right.

More recently, a different view has been promoted which says that this corridor or funnel-like approach to God's will is inaccurate. Instead, we have been given the freedom to choose our own direction as long as it falls within the boundaries of the principles set by Scripture and sound judgment (wisdom). If the choices that lay before us pass these tests, God in effect tells us, "Take your pick."

Once again, we may be dealing with a both/and situation rather than an either/or. There may be times when God gives us a clear sense of direction and wants us to move in that way even though there are other options that also fit within prudent and biblical guidelines. There may be other times when we do not get a clear sense of direction from the Lord and must make our own choice. In the first case, only one of several options is valid; in the second case, two or more options are equally valid. No single model will account for the way God works, and it is unwise to limit Him to our imperfect models of what He can and cannot do.

Practice of God's Will

A Relationship

All too often, God's will is seen in terms of a program that has been laid out before us. When it is viewed this way, the emphasis falls on developing a technique that will help us discover the details of that program as we move from one important decision to another. Should I marry this person? Should I accept this job offer? Should I move to this city?

It is far better to see the will of God as a process rather than a program. Viewed this way, the emphasis falls on developing an intimate relationship with

God and not on following some all-purpose technique. Who we are should take priority over what we do.

The Bible concentrates on our need to cultivate intimacy with God but says little about methods of determining His will. It is not a how-to-do-it manual but rather a guidebook on who-to-know. God will not be manipulated by impatient demands and magical formulas. Instead, our paths will be illuminated by our growing and trusting relationship with Him.

"The steps of a man are established by the Lord; and He delights in his way. When he falls, he shall not be hurled headlong; because the Lord is the One who holds his hand" (Psalm 37:23-24).

"Nevertheless I am continually with Thee; Thou hast taken hold of my right hand. With Thy counsel Thou wilt guide me, and afterward receive me to glory" (Psalm 73:23-24).

The biblical model of knowing God's will centers on a relationship, but we must be careful to use the right earthly analogy. In some relationships we simply want to be told what to do or we want to get approval for our predetermined plans. A better analogy is that of the joint decisions reached by a married couple who enjoy an intimate relationship of mutual concern, respect, and trust. In this case, both are involved in the decisions that are reached, and it is sometimes impossible to distinguish the parts each played in the process.

Similarly, the will of God is a divine/human process, not solely divine or solely human. When we consciously acknowledge His presence and depend upon Him in the course of making decisions, the choices that are made are both ours and His. God's will, then, is not an end but a means of knowing Him better and becoming more like Christ.

A Subtle Voice

Because God honors our choices and desires our unforced love, He does not overpower or coerce us. "God never burglarizes the human will. He may long to come in and help, but he will never cross the picket line of our unwillingness" (James Jauncey). He speaks to us in a subtle voice, and we may be unable to hear Him when there are too many distractions in our lives. Just as we would have trouble carrying on a telephone conversation in a room full of blaring music and chattering friends, in the same way the clamoring voices of selfish desires, lack of submission, pride, independence, and unforgiveness prevent us from being receptive to the quiet voice of God.

Does God guide? Yes, I believe that he does. Most times, I believe, he guides in subtle ways, by feeding ideas into our minds, speaking through a nagging sensation of dissatisfaction, inspiring us to choose better than we otherwise would have done, bringing to the surface hidden dangers of temptation, and perhaps by rearranging certain circumstances. (He may also still guide through visions, dreams, and prophetic utterances, but I cannot speak to these forms as they lie outside my field of experience.) God's guidance will supply real help, but in ways that will not overwhelm my freedom.--Philip Yancey

A Way of Life

God's will is a way to be and a way to behave. He does not unfold His plan before us like a blueprint and expect us to do nothing until we see it. His will for us is a dependent walk in which we invite Him to participate in all of our activities.

We make thousands of decisions each day, most of them unconscious (which shoe to put on first, when to look out the window), and it would be impossible, not to say foolish, to seek God's counsel on each of these decisions. But there are still a number of decisions which are significant enough to capture our attention in the course of each day. A deliberate acknowledgement of the presence of God during these times will carry us far in making God's will a way of life rather than a crisis experience. The fabric of our lives is woven out of the threads of such minor choices, so it is wise to form the habit of being conscious of God while making them. This habit of taking God seriously in small decisions will make major decisions less traumatic.

Prerequisites for Guidance

We have seen that the whole matter of God's will centers around a relationship rather than a program or a technique. The character and quality of this relationship, then, is the key to how sensitive and responsive we will be to His guidance. The five C's of conversion, commitment, confession, concern, and compliance are prerequisites to guidance, because they are facets of our relationship with God.

Conversion

Our relationship with God begins when we become His children by trusting in Jesus. "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God even to those who believe in His name, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13). Until this happens, we do not know God, we cannot please Him (Romans 8:8), and we cannot understand or do His will.

Commitment

After becoming a child of God, each Christian must come to the point where he places himself on the altar before God in an act of total commitment. "I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship" (Romans 12:1). Without this declaration of God's complete ownership, our relationship with Him will be compromising and mediocre.

Since a living sacrifice tends to crawl off the altar, this *initial act* of commitment can only be worked out in our lives as it becomes an *ongoing process* of daily submission to His will. This involves a gradual movement from a worldly to a biblical mind-set as our relationship with God continues to deepen: "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of

your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2).

This all-out commitment and humble dependence upon God is the basis for what the wisdom literature of the Old Testament calls "the fear of the Lord." When a person pursues this kind of relationship with Him, discernment and direction are natural byproducts.

"Who is the man who fears the Lord? He will instruct him in the way he should choose" (Psalm 25:12).

"The secret of the Lord is for those who fear Him, and He will make them know His covenant" (Psalm 25:14).

Confession

Our fellowship with God is hindered by unconfessed sin. We must openly acknowledge before the Lord any known sins in our lives (1 John 1:9) and ask Him to illuminate areas we have overlooked (Psalm 139:23-24) so that we will continue to walk in the light (1 John 1:7).

Concern

An obvious yet sometimes overlooked prerequisite to guidance is a genuine concern on our part to know God's desires for our lives. We must decidedly want to know His will (John 7:17). At the time of His greatest trial, our Lord cried out, "yet not as I will, but as Thou wilt," and again, "Thy will be done" (Matthew 26:39, 42). An attitude of indifference will inhibit our knowledge of God's will. "So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is" (Ephesians 5:17).

Compliance

There is little point in pursuing God's will if we are not willing to comply with it. This begins with obedience in the things He has already made known to us. How can we expect more light if we have not responded to the light we have been given? God's guidance ceases when it is unaccompanied by our acceptance. Therefore, if we are serious about knowing and doing the will of the Lord, we should examine our lives to see if we are disobeying in areas He has already made clear.

Second, we must be willing to comply not only with what God has already shown us, but also with whatever He will show us. An attitude of availability in advance is crucial, because it is the true measure of the degree to which we really trust God as a person.

God's will for us is "good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2), but just as the serpent deceived the woman in the garden into thinking otherwise, we too will be tempted to think otherwise. Our natural tendency is to believe that our own plans are in our best interest, and that anything else is a threat to our happiness. This is why so many Christians limit their availability to God through multiple choice prayers. Instead of giving Him the whole deck, they offer up a small hand of cards (with one or two sticking out prominently) and tell Him, "Pick a card--any card." This is like the woman who threw a stick in the air to tell her which way to go when she reached a crossroad. After throwing it several times, she was asked why. She quickly replied, "Every time I throw it, the stick points to the road to the left, and I want to take the road to the right--it looks smoother." So she kept throwing it until it pointed in the desired direction.

When we hold back from giving God an unqualified yes to whatever He may choose for us in the future, we are really questioning whether His character is loving and good. We somehow get the idea that we must make a choice between the misery of God's will or the happiness of our own. As Paul Little wrote, "So many of us see God as a kind of celestial Scrooge who peers over the balcony of heaven trying to find anybody who is enjoying life. And when he spots a happy person, he yells, 'Now cut that out!' That concept of God should make us shudder because it's blasphemous!"

God is not some cosmic kill-joy who delights in taking advantage of people who are foolish enough to submit their wills to His. The one who loved us enough to sacrifice His Son to save us when we were His enemies (Romans 5:8-10) is certainly worthy of our trust now that we are His children. "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?" (Romans 8:32). We don't need to "surrender to God's will" as though we were resigning ourselves to a somber and joyless existence. Instead, we can say with David, "I delight to do Thy will, O my God" (Psalm 40:8), knowing that He loves us enough to desire a destiny for us that is beyond our highest hopes.

God is causing "all things to work together for good" (Romans 8:28) in the lives of His children, even though the things that happen sometimes do not seem best at the moment (e.g., Joseph and Job). C. S. Lewis used the illustration of a dog whose leash got hopelessly wrapped around a pole. As the dog pulled to get free, the owner found it necessary to move it in precisely the opposite direction to liberate it from the pole. God loves us and knows what is best for us. The path of our ultimate liberation will sometimes be painful, but we can delight in His will, knowing the glorious destiny that lies ahead of us.

Helpful Quotes

When David Livingstone was asked if he didn't fear that going into Africa was too difficult and too dangerous, he answered, "I am immortal until the will of God for me is accomplished."

Livingstone also said, "I had rather be in the heart of Africa in the will of God than on the throne of England out of the will of God."

A place of safety outside God's will is too risky a place for any child of God to contemplate.--Sam Higginbottom

If it were in the will of God, I'd plant an oak tree today, even if Christ were coming tomorrow.--Martin Luther

"My will, and not Thine be done," turned paradise into a desert. "Not my will, but Thine be done," turned the desert into paradise, and made Gethsemane the gate of heaven. — Pressense

Principles of Guidance

The seven C's that follow (communication, conscience, common sense, circumstances, counsel, compulsion, and contentment) are not a step-by-step formula, but a set of principles that can assist us in the process of making tough decisions.

Communication: What do the Scriptures say?

If we want to know and experience God's direction, we must communicate with Him through prayer and Scripture. Many Christians are concerned about knowing the will of God, but how many spend even five minutes a day asking God for His wisdom and direction? Prayer should envelop the whole process of guidance.

Communication with God also involves a regular time of reading the Bible with an open heart and mind to hear God's Word for our lives. The Bible is the central revelation for all believers, and its precepts and principles clearly give us the answers to most questions about the will of God in decision-making situations.

The Scriptures were provided not only to teach us the way of salvation, but also to guide us in the way we should live after becoming God's children. "Thy word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path" (Ps. 119:105). God designed His Word to equip us to accomplish "every good work" (2 Timothy

3:16-17), that is, to fulfill His purposes for our lives. God clearly reveals His moral will in the positive and negative commands of the Bible, and these precepts by themselves can guide us through the majority of the decisions we will ever make. In addition, the Bible offers a multitude of general principles that can be effectively applied to very specific circumstances.

There is no need for us to seek guidance in areas that have been expressly commanded or forbidden in Scripture. A believer does not need to wrestle, for example, over whether to marry an unbeliever, since the answer is already in the Bible. We can be sure that *God will never lead us to do anything that is contrary to His Word.*

Since the Bible is our primary source of guidance, we owe it to ourselves to become so familiar with its contents that its precepts and principles become ingrained in our patterns of thought. This process of renewing our minds with the Word takes time and effort, but there is no other way to "prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2). If we do not program our minds on a daily basis with Scripture, we will find our minds programmed by default with the temporal value system of the world, and our lives will soon reflect those values. Inner renewal is the prerequisite to outer transformation.

As we seek to renew our minds with the commandments and counsel of God's revealed Word, we must approach it with a resolve to do *whatever* it says, even if it goes against our wishes. Content without conviction will do us little good, because it is always possible to distort the Scriptures to match the shape of selfish desires. We will avoid self-deception only to the extent that we are willing and open to respond to God's light.

While the Bible is our primary guide to what God wants us to be and to do, God has providentially seen fit to supplement the Scriptures in a number of personal ways. The following secondary factors are useful in discerning God's direction in specific situations.

Conscience: How does this decision affect my love for God and others?

This is the ethical dimension of decision making; an option may appear to be sound on the intellectual level, but it may be unsound on the moral level. We cannot avoid the matrix of personal relationships in the decisions we make. Paul stressed the importance of living with a clear conscience: "I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men (Acts 24:16; also see Acts 23:1; 1 Tim. 1:5; 2 Tim. 1:3). God has implanted within us an intuitive sense of right and wrong. As we grow in Him, our conscience becomes more sensitive, more attuned to His desires. When we reject the input of our conscience, the proper response is to confess it (1 John 1:9), not to cover it. A failure to respond in this way will place us under a burden of guilt and take the joy out of our lives. Even worse, we can sear our conscience (1 Tim. 4:2) and become callused by repeatedly rejecting its warnings.

Common Sense: Does this decision reflect good judgment?

A Christian may be committed to the Lord, willing to comply with wherever God leads him, communicating with Him in prayer and in the Word, and enjoying a clear conscience. Even so, he still may not know which option to choose in a specific situation. It is within this framework that common sense should play an important role in the choices we make (outside this framework, common sense may simply feed the me-first mentality).

God was not erratic or capricious in the way He designed the universe, and He is not haphazard in His design for the lives of His children. He gave us minds and He wants us to use them to evaluate the consequences of our actions. The Scriptures tell us to "think so as to have sound judgment" (Romans 8:3). We should be level-headed and not rash in the way we evaluate our gifts and opportunities. Paul, for example, stayed where there were open doors (Ephesus) and left when his life was threatened. However, common sense has its limitations and it should never be our only criterion for discerning God's guidance. There are times when He leads people do things that are contrary to our concept of good judgment. We are often too nearsighted to see the goal He has in mind. Because we see such a small part of the puzzle, we should always be willing to submit our thoughts and plans to His. "The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps" (Proverbs 16:9). "For as the heavens are

higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:9).

Circumstances: How does my state of affairs relate to this decision?

God, who "works all things after the counsel of His will" (Ephesians 1:11), is in sovereign control of the circumstances of our lives. He causes "all things to work together for good" to those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28). Notice the word "together." In isolation, some of the things that happen to us may not seem so beneficial, but God uses them in combination for our good. Similarly, He does not allow our circumstances and temptations to overwhelm us without offering us the grace to endure (2 Corinthians 10:13).

Because of His providential care and involvement in the details of our lives, we should be sensitive to the situations in which we find ourselves. Factors like finances, aptitude, education, experience, family, spiritual gifts, and occupation all play a part in God's direction. For instance, if a Christian who is considering a job possibility realizes that his ability, education, and experience do not at all match the qualifications, he should be very hesitant to take another step even if the job opens up.

God often works by opening and closing doors as we come to them, but we should be careful not to make this our primary means of guidance. Just because a door is open does not mean that we should go through it. The "throwing out the fleece" approach is rarely valid. It is easy to misread circumstances and interpret them in ways that flatter our preconceived plans. This is like the farmer who wanted to be an evangelist. When he saw a cloud formation that looked like "PC," he took it to mean "Preach Christ" and left his farm, never thinking that it could also have been interpreted as "Plant Corn."

Counsel: What do wise and godly friends say about this decision?

"Where there is no guidance, the people fall, but in abundance of counselors there is victory" (Proverbs 11:14). "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man is he who listens to counsel" (Proverbs 12:15). "Without consultation, plans are frustrated, but with many counselors they succeed" (Proverbs 15:22). The Bible is full of examples of people who profited by heeding wise counsel and of people who suffered by ignoring it. We are called to exercise wisdom in "teaching and admonishing one another" (Colossians 3:16), and wise counsel involves both.

If a decision has significant implications, we should not limit ourselves to our own judgment, but we should also seek the perspective of mature and godly people who have wisdom and experience. Good counsel is both instructive and corrective, and requires frankness, not flattery.

Remember, however, that the counsel available in the precepts and principles of Scripture must always be the first and foremost influence in the choices we make. Even the wisest of men are finite and biased, and we must avoid the pitfall of uncritically accepting the advice we receive as if it were a word from the Lord. Ultimately, we alone are responsible for the decisions we make.

Compulsion: What are my own desires?

In Romans 8:14 Paul wrote that "all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God." In Philippians 2:13, he said that "it is God who is at work in you, *both to will and to work* for His good pleasure." One of the ways God works in us is to give us the desire to do the things that are pleasing to Him. A compelling desire to move in a specific direction or a burden to minister to certain people may be coming directly from God as a means of guidance. But we should bear in mind that God never gives us desires that are contrary to the commandments and counsel of His Word. Burdens and desires can be a significant input in our decisions as long as they are evaluated in the larger context of communication (prayer and Scripture), conscience, common sense, circumstances, and counsel. Otherwise, we may become victims of desires and inclinations that are not from God.

Contentment and Confirmation: Do I have a sense of peace and assurance about this decision?

Philippians 4:6-7 tells us that we are to turn our anxieties into peace by offering our problems and needs up to the Lord. God wants us to let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts (Col. 3:15). If a decision gives us a sense of doubt, distress, or confusion, something is wrong because it is not accompanied by the peace of God. Paul, for example, had an open door for ministry in Troas, but because he had no rest in his spirit, he went instead to Macedonia (2 Corinthians 2:12-13).

By itself, peace is a supplemental, not a sufficient principle of guidance. But if a particular option passes the test of the other principles and fails to provide peace, the wisest course of action is to wait on the Lord (if the decision can be deferred) and allow Him to provide further input. The option may be right, but the timing may be wrong.

Poor Conceptions of God's Will

1. I must pray about each decision I make.

Some decisions follow logically from others, and do not need to be prayed about. If you decide to go to college, you do not need to ask God whether you should attend classes and do the required work. Many other decisions, like what clothes to wear and how to behave in different social situations, are matters of common sense.

2. God's will is often contrary to human reason.

While it is true that God's thoughts are much higher than our own, this does not mean that His will for our lives is erratic and peculiar. He gave us a rational capacity and wants us to use our minds in the decisions we make. It is

our responsibility to submit our thinking to the truths of Scripture and the illumination of the Spirit so that we will have "the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16). God may direct a believer to do something that does not seem to make the best sense, but this is exceptional, not normative.

3. To submit to God's will, I must give up my happiness.

God is not a majestic monster who wants to make us miserable. His will for us is in fact the only pathway to freedom, fulfillment, and joy (Ps. 37:4; John 15:11). He loves us and offers an abundant life to those who walk in His ways (John 10:10).

4. If I follow God's will, my problems are over.

A quick reading of the book of Acts makes it clear that an abundant life does not mean a trouble-free life. Obedience to God prevents and corrects many problems, but does not exempt a Christian from trials and temptations. Nor is the abundant life the American dream; an obedient Christian may or may not be successful in the eyes of men. God's standard of success is different from that of the world, and we cannot serve both.

5. If I stray too far from God's will, He won't be able to use me again.

God does not exempt us from the consequences and scars of sin, but this does not mean that He puts us on the shelf. When we acknowledge our sins He forgives and cleanses us (Psalm 51:1-13; 1 John 1:9) so that we can be used again in His service. Some of the heroes of Hebrews 11 were also great sinners.

6. If I commit my life to God, He will want me to go to seminary.

God's best for a person is not always career ministry. For some it is, but most Christians are called to glorify Him in the context of secular employment. It would be just as wrong for them to go into professional ministry as it would be for those who are called into this form of ministry to leave it. There is no such thing as a part-time Christian, and we can honor Him in whatever context we are placed (1 Corinthians 10:31).

7. I must have special confirmation before making important decisions.

If we observe the prerequisites and principles of guidance listed above, we can be confident that God will not reward our openness and obedience by clouding the choices. We may not always have the subjective confirmation of peace about decisions that cannot be postponed, but this need not freeze us in our tracks. As we walk in fellowship with God, we can make the necessary decisions without anxiety.

8. God wants me to respond to every need.

God can lead us by bringing us into direct contact with certain needs, but not every cry for help is a call from God. We can assume more burdens than we can carry and spread ourselves so thin that we become ineffective. We must be careful not to let the good become the enemy of the best. It is better to do a few things well than to multiply mediocrity.

Reflections

1. By pursuing God, we also pursue His will. How does Proverbs 2:1-22 relate to knowing and doing God's will?
2. We looked at five prerequisites for guidance. Honestly grade

yourself with a yes or a no as you consider each of these prerequisites in your own life.

Conversion _____

Commitment _____

Confession _____

Concern _____

Compliance _____

3. To enjoy the benefits of intimacy with the Lord, we must be willing to commit both our attitudes and our actions to Him.
 - a. Use the following verses from Philippians to list some of the attitudes we should seek to develop: 1:21; 2:2-7; 3:8; 3:13; 3:14; 4:4; 4:8.
 - b. Use the following verses from Ephesians to list some of the actions we should seek to perform: 4:15-25; 4:29; 4:32; 5:15-16; 5:22; 5:25; 6:4.

4. What are the seven principles of guidance? How many of these did you follow in the last major decision you made? Which ones do you need to work on?

Scripture Memory Cards

Psalm 25:12; 32:8; Proverbs 3:5-6; Romans 8:28; 12:1-2; Ephesians 2:10; Colossians 1:9-10; 1 John 2:6.

In *Practicing His Presence*, Frank Laubach describes the transformation that occurred in his life when he committed himself to God's will for his life: "As for me, I never lived, I was half dead, I was a rotting tree, until I reached the place where I wholly, with utter honesty, resolved and then re-resolved that I would find God's will and I would do that will though every fiber in me said no, and I would win the battle *in my thoughts*. It was as though some deep artesian well had been struck in my soul of souls and strength came forth. . . . You and I shall soon blow away from our bodies. Money, praise, poverty, opposition, these make no difference, for they will all alike be forgotten in a thousand years, but this spirit which comes to a mind set upon continuous surrender, this spirit is timeless life."

"With perfect consistency of mind, help me to receive all manner of events. For we know not what to ask, and we cannot ask for one event rather than another without presumption. We cannot desire a specific action without presuming to be a judge, and assuming responsibility for what in your wisdom you may hide from me. O Lord, I know only one thing, and that is that it is good to follow you and wicked to offend you. Beyond this, I do not know what is good for me, whether health or sickness, riches or poverty, or anything else in this world. This knowledge surpasses both the wisdom of men and of angels. It lies hidden in the secrets of your providence, which I adore, and will not dare to pry open." (Pascal, *Penseés*)