

Knowing and Doing God's Will

In all my years as a Christian, the one issue that has emerged more frequently than any other has been: how do I know and fulfill God's will for my life? Like everyone else, Christians look for direction. They know there is a spiritual dimension to life and that God wants them to walk in fellowship with Him, but they also know they cannot legitimately resort to the world's ways of obtaining guidance, such as horoscopes or seers. Christians sense that they are called to live according to a higher purpose than their own.

The plethora of books available in the market about knowing God's will can be confusing. Should we look for "signs" (Moses was shown signs)? Should we put out fleeces (Gideon used fleeces)? What are harbour lights? Does it really matter? Is the whole issue beyond our control anyway, because God's sovereignty is inevitably going to prevail? Is talking about God's will being too "spiritual" in the first place? Or superstitious? Is it a physical or transcendental state? Should we not pragmatically live on and just see what happens? What distinguishes a Christian from an unbeliever in such issues as: What should I study? Whom should I marry? What am I going to do with the rest of my life? What are the consequences of straying from God's purpose? If I fall down, is there a way back?>

God's will is for all His people

Every Christian, regardless of age or denomination, should be seeking to understand the will of God for their lives. God has a plan for you, irrespective of your background, faculties, temperament or disposition. You can't change yesterday, but you can choose to obey Him today. One of the greatest joys you can have, as a Christian, is the assurance that you are in the centre of His will. Doubt is dispelled, indifference is cast out, because you know you are building something that will last forever.

Many people seem to think that God only speaks to pastors, priests and other luminaries of the church. But He has a purpose for the student, the salesman, the plumber and the housewife as well. His will isn't limited to a certain kind of person or activity. We are instructed in the Bible to cultivate wisdom and discernment (Proverbs 4:5-8). We are told to walk wisely and make the most of our time (Ephesians 5:15-16). God is not the author of confusion, so ascertaining and living within His plan are not beyond the reach of "ordinary" Christians.

God is keen for all His people to know His will. If you are a parent, you never say to your children, "There is something I want you to do. It is very important. But, there's one catch. I'm not going to tell you what it is." No loving parent would ever say that. God is the perfect Father and he doesn't capriciously hide His will from us either. Life isn't like a cosmic Easter egg hunt. You don't "discover" the will of God, so much as building a meaningful relationship with the Father.

Everything that Jesus did and said were the eternal will of God; and He didn't have to struggle to do it. He is our example.

What do we mean by "the will of God"?

There are at least three key ways we can understand the will of God. First, there is His sovereign will, what He does because He is God. He is overall charge. His Master Plan is always carried out. He is the Creator and sustainer of life. His purpose and design are seen in nature. The laws He has set in creation obey him. Basically, He does what He likes.

Second, there is God's moral will regarding how we should live. There are some things God tells us to do and other things He tells us not to do (John 2:15-17; Matthew 7:21). Love is right; honesty is right; kindness is right; they are all part of God's character and will. But lying, cheating and pride are wrong. God has fixed certain standards as to how people should treat one another and the planet they inhabit. That is why we have the Ten Commandments. Man has strayed from the moral will of God (cf Isaiah 55:8, 9). Many people excuse their sinful lifestyles, believing there is not a problem (Proverbs 14:12; 16:25; 21:2) because they do not subscribe to His standards. The easiest way to do this is to simply deny that He exists. If there is no Lawgiver, there is no law and we are abandoned to nihilism and chaos. As Christians, we should do all we can to live according to God's moral will (unbelievers call us "hypocrites: if we don't), because it is the right thing to do.

The third way we understand what God wants is His "particular will". Jesus came to the earth in God's perfect time. He will come again in accordance with God's perfect time. He has a plan for you, just as He had a plan for Saul of Tarsus, who became the Apostle Paul (Acts 17:30, 31), and for other men and women in the Bible. There are no accidents in God's purpose. He wants us to be saved through faith in Christ (Acts 17:30-31) and to be conformed to His image (Romans 8:29). He wants you to know His plan for your life decisions. The Bible teaches us that, as Christians, we are to live under the authority of the Holy Spirit. These are all; aspects of God's specific will for our lives.

God loves us as individuals and has promised to guide us. Some people are afraid to find the will of God because of what they might be asked to do. That's called not trusting God's integrity. But put yourself in His place. If a son or daughter came to you and said, "I'll do anything you want me to do", do you think you would take unfair advantage of such generosity of spirit and make his or her life miserable? Of course not. You love your children and you want what is best for them. Don't be afraid of the will of God. He is good and He loves you. He may allow you to be tested (at times it may feel He is pushing you to the limit of your endurance – 1 Corinthians 10:13), but that is so that you will grow as a Christian, be conformed to His image and made even more ready to do His will. Obedience is a matter of trust.

Having the right attitude

Having the right attitude is important. Let's consider a few aspects of what this means.

1. Having a desire to know and please God

"Not my will, but yours be done". That was the heartbeat of Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane in Luke 22:42. Faced with the agony of betrayal, torture and crucifixion he could have called it quits and not gone through with God's plan. The fact that Jesus went all the way and laid down his life on the cross was because he had maintained this attitude throughout his entire life and ministry (John 5:30; 8:27-29). The first thing about knowing and having God's will become a reality in your life is to lay down your plan and surrender to Him. Let Him deal with personal motives that are inconsistent with (or in opposition to) His purpose (see Matthew 6:10; Psalm 27:4-5; 40:8). In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus taught us that down here is a mess, but heaven has got it all together.

Experiences shows that our heartfelt desires are often planted there by the Lord. We find that we enjoy doing what is actually His will, because the vision to do it originally came from Him. What He has been doing in the mean time has been working in our hearts, preparing us to do what pleases Him. You must earnestly, sincerely pray for God to guide you. To use a human analogy, you report for duty as a Christian soldier, rather than wait around for the Commander to find you and hope you are ready to fall into line.

If you have been waiting a long time for God to guide you, perhaps you need to consider how much time you spend with Him in private. If you get along with the Lord in quiet every day, praying and reading His word, you'll soon hear Him speaking to you.

2. Be ambitious for His glory

Jesus' desire was always that God be glorified in His life (John 12:20-30). To do God's will requires that we exchange our ambitions for His. Sound drastic? Jesus used the analogy of a seed. Only as a seed dies and is buried is it possible to produce a harvest. To do God's will requires yielding our lives to Him and dying to ourselves, so that we can live in Him.

3. Surrender to the Lordship of Christ

Jesus acknowledged that it can be hard focusing on doing God's will. But it was this that kept Him going. He came to earth to carry out God's purpose, so that we, in turn, could learn to do His will. To do God's will means giving primary allegiance to His kingdom (the place where He is king) and following Jesus' lead (John 12:26). Investing our lives for Christ is the most rewarding life of all (Mark 10:29-30). "For me to live is Christ, to die is gain" (Galatians 2:20). This is total surrender.

4. Learn to trust God.

If you truly trust God, you will be prepared to obey Him.

5. Be prepared to serve God where you are

It doesn't make sense planning only for the future. Don't build your life on hypothetical situations, "if only" or "when the circumstances are right". That ideal day may never come. Make every day count for Christ, where you are, with the tools God has placed in your hand for the moment. As you are faithful with little, God will entrust you with much. For each person the options will differ. They may involve working in industry, business, public service, education, at home, or in full-time Christian work.

6. Learn to practice obedience

God has promised guidance. That guidance has certain provisions that come into play. You must be prepared to obey Him. When Saul first saw Jesus, he asked, "Lord, what do you want me to do?" (Acts 9:6). Saul rightly supposed that God had something in mind. Unfortunately, many Christians don't bother asking. They simply expect God to rubber-stamp the plans they have already made. It is as if they had designed the house and now they want to architect and building inspectors to put their seals of approval on it without looking too closely. We must never forget that it is God who is building the house. If you really want Him to guide you, you will have to be willing to listen to Him and obey whatever He calls you to do. If you learn how to be obedient in "small things", larger situations will not unduly test you, because you will have learned how to grasp what God is saying to you.

7. Let God teach you meekness

When Paul responded with, "What do you want me to do", he displayed a sense of teachability. He allowed God to be in control. Psalm 25:9 says, "The meek He will guide". If you aren't meek (humble, teachable, submitted to Him), you will have trouble knowing and complying with His will. Your first reaction will probably be to argue with Him. There are too many arguers. God resists proud people (James 4:6). You are more likely to be receptive to God's direction for your life when you wait for Him and have an open and dependant heart.

8. Put your whole self into it

When you have a desire to please God, and take a delight in it, live as though you are in His presence and have a relationship with the Holy Spirit, your desires will begin to align with God's purpose (Psalm 37:4). Then you can pray in line with God's will and your prayers will be answered.

Knowing the will of God is both a process and a posture. It is a process because we are ever seeking to know God's will in a practical sense ("How should I live?") and God is revealing it to us. It is a posture, because we need to be in a position of prayer and have an attitude of obedience. As we embark on this road, we will know God's wishes every day.

God's will is a relationship, not a requirement or a roadmap. When the Children of Israel wandered in the wilderness, He didn't provide a map showing them where to go and send them off with a wave and a compass, to follow their own techniques and devices. He went with them, providing a pillar of fire by night and cloud by day, as tangible signs that His presence was with them. When the fire or cloud moved, they followed. He set up a relationship with the people. Many Christians want God to send them a complete plan, from A to B, that will outline everything they will see along the way, but that is not how life works. That would take all the romance and excitement (not to mention the challenge) out of the Christian walk.

Biblical principles for Divine guidance

In addition to all of the above, I believe the following general principles apply to knowing the will of God experientially in our lives.

- 1, God has revealed His will for our lives through the Bible

The Bible is a record of God and man in relationship with one another. It is a book of principles for living based on a Person, not a manual of regulations (Psalm 119:105). Go to the Bible; see what He has to say about your circumstances. No "revelation" will ever contradict God's Word. It is final, our ultimate authority about salvation, healing, the Holy Spirit, prosperity and eternal life; it provides practical guidance on such important areas as marriage and family, industrial relations, Christian relationships, holy living, dealing with the environment, and so on. Put it into practice (James 1:22).

2. God has given us the gifts we need

Start by looking at the gifts and talents you have. God created us all with talents, variable personalities and circumstances, so that we can wisely carry out His will.

3. The Holy Spirit will guide you as you walk with Him

God often speaks to us with a "still small voice" (Isaiah 30:21). The Holy Spirit will speak to you and confirm His will to you. Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit (Mark 12:12). He intercedes for us according to the will of God (Romans 8:26, 27). The Spirit leads the people of God. If our minds are under the direction of the Spirit, we will be wise and knowledgeable about what God wants. If we are not Spirit-controlled, we will not be able to operate according to the "mind of Christ", but the self-centred mind of our old nature.

It is important not to rely on feelings alone. Impressions can come from God or another source, such as Satan, demons, an angel, human emotions, hormone imbalances, insomnia, medication, fear, excitement, or an upset stomach. Sinful impressions (temptations) can be exposed for what they are by a Spirit-sensitized conscience and the Word of God. Don't listen to "voices" that are inconsistent

with God's Word, no matter how plausible they sound. Impressions are not necessarily valid. We must learn to de-code what we feel.

It sounds impressive to say, "The Lord told me" or "The Lord led me", but remember that God has been blamed for the most outlandish actions by people claiming they were acting in His name. Inverted pride can be confused with God's will. I have had people tell me God gave them secret devices to save them from the harmful effects of Martians, commanded them to claim sovereign states in His name and asked me to tell the Prime Minister that they were divine messengers commissioned by the Holy Spirit. As you develop a close relationship with God you will be able to distinguish between your emotions, the work of the enemy and the genuine work of the Holy Spirit.

4. Circumstances can be a good guide

Circumstances often give you insights into God's will. He opens doors that no one can close (Revelation 3:7, 8). Sometimes you will find that certain courses of action are simply not possible; doors are closed. If God has shut the door, don't fight it. A major part of serving God is learning to operate positively within a given set of circumstances. When those circumstances start to line up, check what God has been revealing by other means (Psalm 138:8).

5, The counsel of mature Christians can help

Another source of information and practical assistance in trying to determine God's will or an appropriate choice is other people, especially more mature Christians. These might be a pastor, teacher, friend, relative or counsellor. God places spiritual leadership over us (Hebrews 13:7) to help us. Talk to someone you respect and trust, someone whose life you can observe and who displays an appropriate level of maturity (Proverbs 24:6). Listen to the counsel of others. Get their opinions. However, do not use their counsel or conclusions as substitutes for seeking the Lord Himself. We are ultimately accountable to God. Specific direction in the form of prophecy should always be subjected to testing and scrutiny by the Body of Christ.

6. Learning comes through obedience

We must learn to obey God in the little things. The Bible says that "obedience is better than sacrifice" (1 Samuel 15:22b). If we obey in small things, it is easier to do so with major decisions. Likewise, disobedience can easily become a habit.

7. Supernatural guidance can be used by God to show us the way

God sometimes uses supernatural means to keep us in the centre of His purpose. These can include dreams and visions, miracles, divine provision, spiritual gifts or direct intervention in some other form. The same God who did this in Bible times is alive and well and can do so today.

8. The peace of God

You can often sense God's approval in a peace of mind that is experienced after making a decision, or a restlessness of spirit if your choice has been a poor one. The Bible speaks of God's "rest" (Hebrews 4). There is a sense in which we can "rest" in faith that we are in the centre of His will. Nevertheless, for reasons outlined above, it is important not to rely on feelings alone, as these can be very subjective. (It is hard to be objective when you are subjectively involved.)

We do well to act on what we know or believe is right and then remain open to learning and growth as a result of the decision. We can have confidence that we are on the right track in doing God's will when what we do springs from God's will; is based on obedience to the Gospel and the use of spiritual gifts of which we have been made stewards; works towards reconciliation, healing and beauty in the world, glorifies the Father and is predicated on dependence on Jesus (John 15:5). Human substitutes for God's will always fall short of His purposes.

Where to start

Every Christian should take a spiritual inventory to see whether they are living according to God's purpose. I want to encourage you to have a genuine desire to know and operate in God's will. Spend quality time in His Word. Seek the wise counsel of older Christians. Listen carefully for the Spirit's leading. Have an active prayer life. Don't just fold your hands and wait for something to happen. God doesn't work for you – He works with you. Be yielded to the Lord as you ask Him to guide you.

What if you make a mistake? We can all learn through our mistakes, but it is preferable to learn the right lessons from the beginning. If you do slip up, try to understand what went wrong. Don't sink into condemnation (that will only serve to compound the issues) but re-commit your life and decisions to Christ and listen to Him as He lovingly guides you to the next step.

Take the opportunity God is giving you.