

# Discerning God's Will and Wise Decision-Making

**Defining God's Will** – *Review from last week* (theologians usually distinguish two scriptural senses of God's "will")

1. *Secret Will* – also called sovereign will, providential will, decreed will (all ordained circumstances; Eph. 1:11)
2. *Revealed Will* – also called moral will, perceptive will, commanded will (recorded in 66 books of the Bible)

\*\*God's will is not a secret to be discovered – our focus should be doing His will that He has already revealed in Scripture, and discerning how to be wise in applying It to difficult decisions (Eph. 5:8-21). God's Word does not teach a 3<sup>rd</sup> "will of God" as a mystically discoverable detailed "Plan A" for your life that's not from Scripture, but is specific to each individual and causes misery if missed (Plan B or C, etc.).

For further study of this in more depth, see Gary Friesen, *Decision-Making and the Will of God*.

*Below notes adapted from Stuart Scott (SC2003 Notes for Shepherding People in Biblical Decision-Making)*

## I. Presuppositions

- A. We do not need to know God's [secret] decreed will and how He is providentially bringing it about before we make a decision (Dt. 29:29). [Even the few in history who *did* receive direct revelation usually didn't know future]
- B. The Holy Spirit's role is to convict, teach and conform us – all through the vehicle of the Word of God (Jn 16:8; 17:17). He guides or leads by providence (we know it after the fact) or by Scripture (we know before we act).
- C. God is a gracious God who has provided everything we need in order to do what He wants us to do (2 Pet. 1:3).
- D. God holds us fully responsible to search out and follow His preceptive will (Word) in all of life (2 Tim. 2:15).
- E. If we make a decision based on biblical commands and principles alone we can fully trust that we are pleasing God in our decision and fully trust that He will providentially (by circumstances out of our control) change our choice if it is not within His decreed will (Prov. 16:9). [see also James 4:15, cf. Friesen, 202-3; Rom. 1:8-13]
- F. To rightly interpret and apply the Word of God we must use a prayerful, literal, historical, contextual, and grammatical method of studying it (2 Tim. 2:15; 2 Pet. 1:20). [unlike the "Promise book" listing Luke 4:7]
- G. No one is ever outside of God's decreed plan (Lam. 3:37-38; Rom 8:28-29) [We strive to be in His *revealed will*]
- H. Every believer needs pastoral oversight and the body of Christ to help him stay true to God's Word (Prov. 18:1-2; Heb. 13:17).

The insistence of Jesus and the Old Testament writers was not on the importance of discovering the will of God, but always upon the necessity of doing it. It was as if they took for granted that we would know what we were to do (revealed will). The battle for us seems to be in the diligent study of His revealed will (2 Tim. 2:15), the application of it (2 Tim. 3:16-17; Jas. 1:19-27), along with the proper motivation (Ps. 1:2; 40:8; 119:16, 24, 35, 47, 70, 77, 174).

"The Bible must be our standard. Whenever we are confronted with a question about Christian practice, we must apply the teaching of the Bible. Sometimes the Bible will deal with it directly, and we must go by its direct teaching. Often the Bible will not deal with it directly, and then we must look for general principles to guide us. It does not matter what other people think. Their behavior is not a standard for us. But the Bible is a standard for us, and it is by the Bible that we must live" (J.C. Ryle, *Walking with God*).

## II. Methods and Motives to Be Cautious of

- A. **Misusing the Bible** [scripture "roulette", using contrary to context, etc.]
- B. **Personal Advice** [ex: story of Pastor who counseled man to march around prospective wife 7x like Jericho]
- C. **Circumstances / Results / Setting Up Conditions** [ex: Gideon's fleece; but see Lk 4:12, cf. Friesen, p. 214]
- D. **Opened and Closed Doors** ["open door" in NT means opportunity (usually for gospel ministry) we should evaluate by wisdom, but is not an absolute directive of a supposed 3<sup>rd</sup> "will of God" to obey; cf. 2 Cor 2:12-13]
- E. **Ideas, Inner Feelings, Desires, and Impressions** [rather than think these are telling us a personal "will of God," recognize they are not reliable or Revelation, but are subjective, needing the objective Word and wisdom to discern them as to their source and value. See Friesen, p. 264-65, 206]
- F. **An Audible Voice** [or more commonly, "God told me" – but see Deut. 18:20-22; Jer. 14:14; Rev. 22:18]
- G. **Misusing Prayer** [ex: praying for *my will*, not Thine, or wrong motives or heart; James 4:3; Ps. 66:18]
- H. **Inner Peace** [or lack thereof. Better to seek to discern *why* you lack peace; cf. Friesen, 108-109]
- I. **Dreams or Devices or Signs** [ex: lady who saw 747 on clock as a "sign" to fly to California]
- J. **"Waiting" on the Lord** [or "let go and let God" but be passive and inactive]
- K. **Conscience** [not infallible, although we should inform it biblically and not ignore it into possible sin areas]
- L. **Reason** [We should use our minds to discern how to apply Scripture, but not *lean on* our minds - Prov. 3:5-6]

### III. The Biblical Principles and a Suggested Method

- A. Prerequisites for Biblical Decision-Making
  - 1. Be rightly related to Christ (2 Cor. 5:14-21)
  - 2. Pursue a life of worshiping God (John 4:23-24; 2 Cor. 5:9; Phil. 1:21; 3:10-14)
  - 3. Recognize God's sovereignty over all (Ps. 115:3; Eph. 1:11; James 4:13-16; Prov. 16:9; Rom. 8:28-29)
- B. Principles
  - 1. Scripture has bearing on all decisions, one way or another (e.g., direction, motives, behavior, etc.)
  - 2. Wisdom [or discernment, sometimes including what A.W. Tozer called "sanctified common sense"]
  - 3. Purposeful freedom (Matt. 22:37-40; Phil. 2:1-5; 1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23-24; Gal. 5:13)
  - 4. Desire (Ps. 37:4; Phil. 2:12-13)
  - 5. "Wishes" (1 Cor. 7:36, 39; 10:27)
- C. Process (these all interrelate)
  - 1. Continually have a humble, yielded, and dependent will before God (Rom. 12:1-2).
  - 2. Continually pray for wisdom (Jas. 1:5).
  - 3. Gather all the factual data (Prov. 18:13).
  - 4. Study any direct commands in Scripture concerning this particular issue (2 Tim. 2:15). Make use of a Bible concordance, Topical Bible (with caution), and other Bible reference books.
  - 5. Study any indirect principles/statements in Scripture concerning this issue (2 Tim. 2:15)?
  - 6. Weigh the purposeful use of freedom (Gal. 5:13; 1 Cor. 8).
    - a. Is there anything wrong with this activity? Is it lawful (1 Cor. 10:23)
    - b. Is it self-serving at the expense of someone else's benefit? (Rom. 15:1-2; 1 Cor. 10:33; Gal. 5:13; Phil. 2:1-4)
    - c. Is this something I can thank God for? (Rom. 14:6; 1 Cor. 10:30; Col. 3:17)
    - d. Is this something that will glorify God? (1 Cor. 10:31; 2 Cor. 5:9)
    - e. Is this worth imitating? (1 Cor. 11:1; Phil. 4:9)
    - f. Is this following the example of Christ? (Rom. 15:7-8; 1 Cor. 11:1; 1 John 2:6)
    - g. Will my choice affect others around me? If so, in what way?
    - h. Is it beneficial? Does it promote my spiritual life?
    - i. Is it a practice that over time will tend to master me? Will it stimulate a desire that will be difficult to control?
    - j. Is it constructive? Will it promote the spiritual well-being of other believers if they engage in this practice that is permissible for me?" —Jerry Bridges (*The Discipline of Grace*, 213)
  - 7. Affirm that your desires are God-honoring (Ps. 37:4).
    - a. What do I want to do? Will it bring glory to God? (1 Cor. 10:31)
    - b. Is this an occasion where my "flesh" (sinfulness) is seeking to indulge itself? (Gal. 5:13)
  - 8. If you still can't decide:
    - a. Rom. 14:23; Heb. 11:25 ("holding principle" = if it involves the conscience)
    - b. Gather more data (Start over)

The below notes are from Friesen, *Decision-Making and the Will of God*, chapter 11, "More Wisdom":

- 9. Where there is no command, God gives us freedom, responsibility, and wisdom to choose.
  - a. The Old Testament teaches wise decision-making by its Wisdom Books and examples of wise men – "Wisdom has the advantage of giving success" (Eccl. 10:10, Prov 20:18, 24:6)
  - b. Jesus commanded His servants to be "wise as serpents" (Matthew 10:16)
  - c. The apostles modeled wisdom in their decision-making [They didn't need to know a personal "will of God," just *wisdom* with godly desires] - 1 Thess. 3:1, Phil. 2:25-26, Acts 15:22, 25
  - d. The apostles commanded believers to use wisdom in decision-making – "Conduct yourselves with wisdom" (Colossians 4:5)
- 10. Scripture points to at least five avenues of investigation opened to the man who would find wisdom:
  - a. Ask God for it (James 1:5-6; cf. Colossians 1:9-10; see Friesen, 181)
  - b. Scripture [obviously related to above] see Ps 119:98-100; Ps 19:7; 2 Tim 2:7; 3:15-17; 2 Pet 1:19
  - c. Outside research, where appropriate (ex: Neh. 2:11-16; Joshua 2; Luke 1:3, 14:28-32)
  - d. Wise counselors (Prov. 11:14; 13:20; 15:22). Of those who possess *spiritual insight*, the question should be asked: Are you aware of any biblical principles that touch upon my decision?
  - e. Life itself (Heb 5:14 "the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern")