

The Easy and Hard Parts of Discovering God's Will

He called to tell me that his car wouldn't start. I asked him if the engine turned over when he turned the key, and he said it did. I asked him if the car ran okay the last time he drove it. He said that it ran just fine. When I asked him if he had checked to see if there was a spark, he said he didn't know what I was talking about and had no idea how to find out. So I asked him if the car had gas. He said he'd have to check. The fuel gauge read "empty", so he bought a gallon of gas, put it in the car and it started just fine. He was looking for a hard answer when the answer was quite easy.

We often do the same thing when it comes to seeking the will of God. We pray and struggle and search for what to do when we haven't done the obvious. Sometimes all we need to do is what we already know to do.

Not that discovering the will of God is always easy. Sometimes it's very hard. I can tell you from personal experience that there have been times when I have pondered and prayed for a very long time trying to figure out what God wants me to do.

Actually, the will of God is revealed in three different ways in the Bible. Let's call them different flavors.

The first flavor is the sovereign will of God. The sovereign will of God is what God wants and what God gets. By sovereign, we mean that God is the absolute boss. If he decides that something is going to happen, it is going to happen – exactly the way he wants it to happen.

Nebuchadnezzar was the king of Babylon in the 6th century BC. He summed up the sovereign will of God very well in Daniel 4:35:

(God) does as he pleases
with the powers of heaven
and the peoples of the earth.
No one can hold back his hand

or say to him: "What have you done?"

For the most part, God doesn't tell us what he is going to do. His sovereign will is his secret until he does it. There are only two ways for us to learn the sovereign will of God: 1) Prophecy – when God tells us in advance what he will do, and 2) History – when we can look back and see what God has already done.

What is our personal and practical relationship to the sovereign will of God? I certainly take great comfort in knowing that God is in charge! Beyond that, we need to always remember that our plans are tentative and ultimately dependent on what God wants and what he does.

In James 4:15 we are told:

Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."

This is a reminder to us that everything we plan and do is subject to God's sovereign will.

The second flavor is God's revealed will. This is when God tells us what he wants us to do. On an everyday, practical level, this is the most important flavor of all. God tells us in the Bible what he wills for us to believe and do.

I John 2:17 says, "The world and its desires pass away, but the (one) who does the will of God lives forever."

We know from the Bible that it is God's will for us to believe in Jesus Christ and commit to him as Savior and Lord. God has re-

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vealed to us that Christians should profess their faith in Jesus Christ through baptism in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. In the Ten Commandments God tells us that his will is for us to not have idols, tell the truth, never steal and don't commit adultery.

In I Thessalonians 4:3-5 we read:

It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God.

And, there are other verses where we find God's will for our lives. I Thessalonians 5:18 reminds us to "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." In I Peter 3:17 we are told, "It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil." II Corinthians 6:14, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers." And Ephesians 5:18, "Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit."

The Bible tells God's will about husbands and wives, parents and children, employers and employees, paying taxes, obeying the laws, studying the Bible, and much more. It is very interesting that the Bible says little or nothing about the career we're to follow but a great deal about how we're to behave in our jobs. God has not told us whom we are to marry, but he has told us how to have a Christian marriage. We are not instructed on which highway to drive, but he has clearly instructed us about controlling our anger (when in stressful driving situations).

Imagine someone asking God to reveal his will about which apartment to rent or which house to buy or which car to lease. God replies by asking, "Have you been baptized?" "Have you asked forgiveness from that person you hurt?" "Have you paid your taxes?" "Have you told the truth?"

I sometimes wonder if God doesn't think to himself, "I've revealed my will to you on dozens of important matters and you haven't listened. Why should I tell you what to do when you don't listen to me anyway?" Most of what we need to know about the will of God is clearly spelled out in the Bible. We need to read it, and we need to do it.

That brings us to the third flavor: the personal will of God. This is when God gives specific direction to individuals. He tells a person how to decide a personal issue.

Joseph faced the toughest personal decision of his life. He fiancee, Mary, was pregnant. He knew that he was not the father. He agonized over what to do and was leaning toward breaking off the relationship. God gave him personal direction.

Matthew 1:20 tells us, "An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.'" That was a revelation of the personal will of God to Joseph in that specific situation.

St. Paul was in Jerusalem with threats against his life. God revealed to Paul that he should leave Jerusalem and go to Rome. In Acts 23:11 we are told, "The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, 'Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.'" The personal will of God for St. Paul was that he testify about Christ in the capital city of Rome.

Throughout the Bible, and at times since then, God has given direct, specific declarations of his will to individuals. However, it is relatively uncommon. It is not the normal or usual way for God's will to be discovered.

The Internal Revenue Service sometimes gives individual tax rulings (or letters) that tell you what to do in completing your annual income tax return. However, most of us can find out what we are supposed to do by just following the instructions that come with the tax return forms. In other words, the general instruc-

tions are adequate for tens of millions of taxpayers, but a few dozen or a few hundred sometimes receive personal instructions. Those personal letters apply only to those taxpayers to whom they are addressed – they don't apply to everyone.

God has given to us the instruction book of life called the Bible. For most people, most of the time, it tells us most of what we need to know. Sometimes God gives personal, special instructions to individuals - information that applies directly and personally to them.

There's something else interesting in the biblical examples of God revealing his specific will to individuals. For the most part, they never asked. There is no record of Joseph asking for an angel to tell him what to do. There isn't a record of Paul requesting an appearance of the Lord to tell him about going from Jerusalem to Rome. These were initiatives from God more than requests from individuals.

It's helpful for us to understand the relationship between God's will and God's wisdom. God has revealed enormous direction for our lives in the Bible. He has told us what he wants and how we are to live. What we most often need is wisdom to figure out how to take this information from God and apply it to the specific situations of our lives.

Proverbs 16:16 says, "How much better to get wisdom than gold, to choose understanding rather than silver!" Proverbs 24:14: "Know also that wisdom is sweet to your soul; if you find it, there is a future hope for you, and your hope will not be cut off." Ephesians 1:7-8, "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding." James 3:17, "The wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere."

And then James 1:5-6 talks about a situation where we have the revealed will of God, but we're not sure how to apply it to our own lives and we're wondering if God might be upset with us because we haven't figured it out. There we are told:

If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave on the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.

We sometimes misunderstand how to discover the will of God. We pray for God to show us where to go on vacation, which church to attend or how much medicine to take. What God wants us to do is listen to the Bible, obey what he says and then use wisdom to apply his revealed will to our situation.

Let's suppose you're trying to figure out whom to marry. God has already revealed that he doesn't want a Christian to marry an unbeliever. We know God's will about that. God has already revealed that husbands and wives

are to submit to one another, to treat each other with kindness and to provide physically and spiritually for the

family. We know God's will about how to live inside a marriage.

But we don't know whether to marry a specific person. What do we do? We should not expect a personal revelation from God that says a specific name. Rather, we should ask God for wisdom to make the right choice. Within God's revealed will and with God's gift of wisdom we are to make the choice that will please God and be best for us.

God wants us to commit to him. In fact, he wants us to make the decision in advance to do whatever he wants us to do. Pray with Jesus, "... not my will but thy will be done." Pray and

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say, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

God wants us to know his revealed will. We read the Bible. We go to church and listen to the teaching. We do everything we can to know what God wants. Ideally, we learn what God wants before we need to know.

The time to learn CPR is before you need to use it. Generally, it’s not good to have to go home and look up CPR in a book when someone is lying unconscious on the floor. It’s the same with the will of God. Study it in advance!

God wants us to accept Jesus as Savior. He wants us to be baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Spirit. God’s will is that we love our neighbors as ourselves, forgive our enemies, tell the truth, be kind, avoid gossip, be generous with our money and share the gospel with others.

Ninety-nine percent of God’s will is already fully revealed and available to us for our everyday lives. The question is what are we going to do with what God has told us?

God told the people of Israel in Deuteronomy 6:3, “Hear, O Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your fathers, promised you.”

The Old Testament prophet Samuel taught that, “To obey is better than sacrifice.”

I John 3:21-22 says, “We have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him.” And I John 5:3 tells us, “This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome.” (Don’t misunderstand. God is not asking us to be perfect. God is not saying that he will withhold his personal will or not give wisdom because we have ignored or disobeyed one of his commands.)

It’s really quite simple. To discover God’s will means that we listen to what he has already told us, and that we seek to do what he says. It is out of this context of listening and obeying

that God gives us the wisdom and direction for every decision of life.

What is the specific area where you would like to know the will of God right now? Here’s the deal – pray and ask God to give you the wisdom you need to know what he wants you to do. But, also promise God that you will do your best to obey what he has already told you. If there is sin in your life – ask for forgiveness and quit it. If there is something God wants you to do that you’ve been putting off – decide right now to do it as soon as you can.

These teachings about the will of God are based upon material we covered in a previous lesson, but it needs to be reinforced for those who have heard it before as well as for those who have not. It is that our discovery of the will of God for our lives grows out of three essential teachings of the Bible: 1) God loves us; 2) God always wants the best for us; 3) God has a plan for our future.

Be assured that God wants you to know and do his will more than you could ever want that for yourself. God is on your side; he always has been. He loves you passionately and seeks your best with all his heart.

May God’s will for you be clear, and may God’s best be your life’s story!

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Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
952-944-6300
www.wooddale.org
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