

## Is Finding God's Will a Biblical Idea?

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Margaret is a successful career woman with a desire to please God. She worked her way up to a supervisor's position in the accounting division at First National Bank, married rather late, and now, in her late thirties, is struggling with the importance of her job. She would like to do something significant for Christ, but feels that her job prevents her from making any changes. Margaret's church recently held a missionary conference in which the speaker challenged Christians to become involved in world evangelism and encouraged everyone to justify why they are not "serving the Lord overseas." Those words stay with Margaret as she ponders spending the next twenty-five years at her desk, doing the same old accounting tasks.

The next day she reads in the paper about a hurricane devastating the Marshall Islands. The accompanying photograph of two children crying over the death of their parents vividly captures the destruction and depravation, and Margaret prays for those poor souls left to fend for themselves. That very afternoon a co-worker, making plans for his vacation, leaves a brochure on the Marshall Islands in the staff lounge. Margaret notices it, wondering if God is sending her a message about the Marshall Islands, and decides to pray that the Lord would make His will clear to her. That night her husband comes home complaining that the best lawyer in his office, a young man named Marshall, has just been transferred to their east coast office. "Honey," Margaret says to her husband, "I've been thinking about what that speaker said in church yesterday, and the funniest set of coincidences occurred. Do you think God could be calling us to be missionaries in the Marshall Islands?"

Dave is a surveyor for a land development firm, with designs on going back to college. He married young and started his family right away, so he never found the time to attend more than a course here and there. But quitting his job isn't very realistic. He's got two kids in school, car payments, and he and his wife have been talking for a long time about getting together a down payment on a home of their own. Still Dave would like to get more training, which will better equip him for a career in the long term, and he would also like to take a couple Bible classes. At a men's breakfast at his church he shares his thoughts with his good friend, Tom, who is an older, more experienced Christian. "Have you

prayed much about this," his friend asks, "so that you can be given the mind of God?"

"Well, not as much as I'd like," Dave admits.

"Listen," Tom replies. "We're going to pray right now. I want you to make your mind blank. When we're done praying, I want you to tell me the first thoughts the Lord puts into your mind. O.K.?"

Dave agrees, and both men pray earnestly. After Tom closes with the words, "Please tell my brother Dave what your will is," they open their eyes and look at each other. "What's He telling you?"

"I guess that I should be going to school," Dave replies, wondering if he has really heard the voice of God.

Suzanne needs direction from the Lord. She has saved a little money, and wants to invest it for her retirement. Since her husband died, she hasn't had anyone she feels she can lean on for sound advice. A nice young man from her church visited Suzanne recently and talked about annuities and other investment strategies, but much of it was over her head. She has also heard from her alma mater, which is looking for people to invest in their childhood education program, and several Christian organizations have appealed to her for a gift. Not knowing what to do, Suzanne sits down in her favorite chair, her Bible in her lap.

"I need you to tell me what to do, Lord," she prays silently. "Show me through your Word." Then she picks up her Bible, flips it open to a page, and begins reading.

"But Jesus said, 'Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.'" Suzanne takes this as God's leading that she is to invest in children's ministries, and she decides to send her money to the college.

Douglas is a teenager, active in his youth group at church, and anxious to obey the Lord Jesus. He knows that Scripture calls him to heed the will of God, but he isn't sure what God's will is for his social life. So Douglas has worked out a system for Friday nights. First he makes a list of the girls he wants to take out on a date. Then he begins phoning, starting at the top of the list. If the line is busy, he takes that as God's sign that he is not to date that girl. If no one answers, he is to wait and try again later. If the phone rings and the gal he's interested in answers, that means God has given His blessing for Douglas to ask her out.

As you read through these examples, does the thought strike you that perhaps there is some silliness at play in the lives of God's people? The Bible refers to God as our Father, our Provider, and our Redeemer. If we accept the fact that

our heavenly Father loves us, and that we are His children, does it make sense that He would hide His will from us?

Many Christians talk about "the will of God" as though it were a version of the old con man's ruse, the three-shell game. You remember the game: a pea is hidden under a walnut shell; two other walnut shells are placed on either side of the first, then all three are quickly moved around the table. The con man then asks you, the spectator or "mark," to guess which shell the pea is under. No matter which shell you guess, you are always wrong. You can watch as carefully as possible, trying to unlock the secret of the manipulations, but you can never quite keep up with the manipulator.

When I hear Christians talking about the will of God, they often sound like marks. They use phrases like: "If I could only find God's will," as though He is keeping it hidden from them; or "I'm praying that I'll discover His will for my life," because they apparently believe God doesn't want them to find it, or He wants to make it as hard as possible to find so that the individual will prove his worth. Unfortunately, those concepts do not mesh with the balance of Scripture. Isaiah tells us that "there is no one worthy," and the story of the Old Testament is that man, no matter how hard he tries, can never attain to God. If we really believe in God as the perfectly loving Father, we can do away with our notion of Him as an almighty manipulator and con man.

God is not a magician. Our theology tells us that God loves us enough that He sent His Son to die on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. So does it make sense that He would play some sort of game with His children, hiding His will? Is it logical that the God who says He has a plan for each life would conceal that plan so that His work cannot go forward through His people? It is time for Christians to observe, analyze, and systematically determine what the Bible says about God's will. *Perhaps it is time for Christians to ask themselves if the words "finding God's will" is even the best way to phrase the plan our Lord has in mind for each of us.*

### **God's will—a slippery term**

The term "God's will" is tough to define. It is often used in Scripture to refer to God's plan and decrees: "And all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, What hast thou done?" (Daniel 4:35). The will of God refers to his eternal, sovereign rulership over the world that, according to Habbakuk 2:3, "hastens toward the goal, and it will not fail." In the New Testament the will of God is spoken of with reference to His immutable, eternal counsel. Ephesians 1:9-11 reads, "And He made known to us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure, which He purposed in Christ to be put into effect when the times will have reached their

fulfillment... in Him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of Him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will." God has a plan in place, and as that plan is worked out we refer to it as His will.

However, we also use the phrase to describe God's desire or consent - what He wants and what is favorable to Him. "It was not His will," it says in Deuteronomy 10:10, "to destroy you." Isaiah 53:10 tells us "it was the Lord's will" for Christ to suffer for us, and Christ in the garden of Gethsemane prays, "Not as I will, but as you will." It is important to grasp this concept of God's will as that which brings Him pleasure, for much of our spiritual growth is learning to live lives pleasing to Him. "It is God's will that you should be holy; that you should avoid sexual immorality," says 1 Thessalonians 4:3, and later in that same letter we read, "Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (5:18).

The will of God can refer not only to His immutable decrees and to his pleasures but also for His general providence. King David once said to the whole assembly of Israel, "If it seems good to you, and if it is the will of the Lord our God, let us send word far and wide to the rest of our brothers...to come and join us" (1 Chronicles 13:2). In effect David is saying, "We do not know the details; providence will have to work it out." Paul took the same approach to God's will in Acts 18:21, telling the Ephesians, "I will come back if it is God's will." The Apostle did not know the details of what the future would bring. Paul may or may not return to Ephesus, depending on how events unfold. If providence favors it, then it must be God's will. James specifically instructs us to pray that way: "You ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that'" (James 4:15). Sometimes God's will is simply His acts of providence, of which we do not know. Whatever comes of our circumstances is God's will.

Finally, we use the term "God's will" to refer to His specific choices in perplexing situations. The Scriptures speak of seeking God's will in some specific situations. It is in this sense that we use the term in the phrase "finding God's will." Moses told his father-in-law that "the people come to me to seek God's will. Whenever they have a dispute, it is brought to me, and I decide between the parties and inform them of God's decrees and laws" (Exodus 18:15-16). God's will is sought in specific decisions, to give us wisdom and guidance. In the early church the disciples, seeking the Divine mind in their choice of a new apostle, came before the Lord in perplexity and asked, "Which of these two have you chosen?" (Acts 1:24). Not knowing what they should do, they ask God to make a decision. When we talk of "finding God's will" we generally want divine guidance on specific choices, but it should be noted that the term is never used after the Holy Spirit came upon the church at Pentecost. The apostles, upon whom the Church is founded, do not teach that we are to seek God's will in this way. Instead the New Testament offers us a program of the Father's guidance that is based upon having a close relationship with Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

## **What does it mean to "find" God's will?**

The word "finding" we normally use in the sense of learning or obtaining or attaining to God's mind. When we seek to find God's will, we are attempting to discover hidden knowledge by supernatural activity. If we are going to find His will on one specific choice, we will have to penetrate the divine mind to get to His decision. Finding is really a form of divination.

This idea was common in pagan religions. As a matter of fact, it was the preoccupation of pagan kings. Most of our texts from the ancient near east pertain to divination. The king would never act in something as important as going into battle until he had the mind of the god as to whether he should or should not go to war. Many Christians follow this same path in seeking the Divine mind in decisions. I have talked with people who have claimed that there are certain rituals they perform before going to God with an important request, as though they could make themselves more acceptable to God and therefore be more likely to get an answer. But that sort of pagan behavior is what Christ saved us out of. We don't have to slaughter lambs or make great promises or offer special sacrifices as a means of bargaining our way into the presence of God. Christ, with His death on the cross, rent asunder the veil in the holy of holies. Access to God is no longer limited to one man providentially born to the right family, who comes to the Lord on behalf of the people. You now have access to God through Jesus Christ. You now have guidance from God through the Holy Spirit. Perhaps the problem is that not enough Christians are walking in close relationship with the God who loves them.

The New Testament gives no command to "find God's will," nor can you find any instructions on how to go about finding God's will. There isn't a magic formula offered Christians that will open some mysterious door of wonder, allowing us to get a glimpse of the mind of the Almighty. The Bible forbids pagan divination (Deuteronomy 18:10) and claims severe penalties for those who resort to magic for determining the will of God in this way. Simon Magus was severely rebuked in Acts 8 for seeking supernatural powers, and Christ criticized the perverse generation that always asks for a sign from God.

God is not a magic genie. The use of promise boxes, or flipping open your Bible and pointing your finger, or relying on the first thought to enter your mind after a prayer are unwarranted forms of Christian divination.

The reliance on special signs from God is the mark of an immature person; an individual that cannot simply believe the truth as presented, but must have a special, miraculous sign as the symbol of authority from God.

## **Man's search for authority**

It is no surprise that we desire to know the mind of God in our specific circumstances. Every person craves wisdom, particularly divine wisdom in the great issues of his or her life. Every person on earth is looking for authority to guide them. That is why we talk through tough decisions with friends, colleagues, or parents. We seek assurance; someone to tell us that we are good people, making the right decisions. We want to be seen as being not only valuable, something the psychology craze has popularized in recent years, but competent. I want to know that I'm good at something, that I'm recognized as knowing something important, and that perhaps through my competency I can leave an impact on my world.

Above all that, we fear making a mistake. For you see, a mistake suggests that I am not a competent, worthwhile person. Therefore I will go to extreme measures to make sure that any major decision I make will be a good one. Also, I truly want to please God, so I will seek to discover His mind on the matter at hand.

Unfortunately, our western culture doesn't offer a strong structure for authority. Parents no longer arrange marriages, and fathers rarely mentor their sons to take over the family craft, so each individual is stuck making his or her own choices. The breakup of the family has taken a toll on the ability of families to communicate, so it seems there is less and less inter-generational wisdom being passed from one generation to the next. The general lack of respect for authority that grew out of the 1960s mindset has also accounted for the lack of contact between generations. Consequently we are seeing young people make choices for which they are unprepared, and often making terrible ones.

So we have the desire for authority, yet a social structure that mitigates against authority in our lives. That motivates believers to seek a divine authority to assist them in making wise choices. Yet their spiritual immaturity often causes them to seek guidance from God in improper ways. It also occasionally puts people in my office at Regent College, thinking that the way to determine the will of God is to go to an institution of higher learning and learn more about Him. I have often had young people in my office asking, "Is it God's will for me to be at Regent?" To which I can only reply, "What do you mean by God's will?" I want to know the student's walk with God, motives, and ambitions, not serve as a shill for a school. And occasionally I have had to say to a student, "You're here because you don't know what else to do. You are hiding out, which is more an escape from God than it is a love for Him."

In my view ministry is a calling, and God not only puts a burning desire in the heart of the learner but places people around the student who encourage him to use his gifts in the church. When I see a student without the gifts necessary to pastor, and without the affirmation of the body of Christ, I believe I am looking at a young person who has made some irresponsible choices.

## **The error of finding God's will**

Far too many Christians rely on a faulty logic to divine the will of God. Their thinking goes like this: "God has a plan, therefore He intends that I find it." That is a non sequitur, a conclusion that cannot logically follow the premise. Simply because He has a plan does not mean He has any intention of sharing it with you; as a matter of fact the message of Job is in part that the Lord in His sovereignty may allow terrible things to happen to you, and you may never know why. In North America we live such safe and scheduled lives that we come to presume God will act "fairly" toward us. Thus when some young person dies in a tragic accident, we cry "Unfair! How could a loving and just God allow this to happen?" An excellent question, and one that Job asked but was never given the sort of answer he expected. However, if you contrast our lives with those of Christians living in sections of Africa that have experienced racial strife or who have gone through severe drought, we begin to remember that there is no guarantee of "fairness" in Scripture this side of the grave.

Instructively, the outcomes of faith for the first three heroes of faith celebrated in Hebrews 11 vary considerably. Abel believed God, and he died; Enoch believed God, and he did not die; Noah believed God, and everybody else died! The only thing they have in common is that they believed God and pleased Him.

The problem of suffering, such as Abel's, leads people to think that either (a) there is no God, and life is merely a pathetic joke, or (b) God is a cruel and arbitrary God who cares nothing for the people of earth, or (c) God is powerless, or (d) God is alive and at work in our lives, but we do not completely understand Him. It takes faith to believe in the latter; something many people refuse to do. But the Bible is clear, and according to Romans 1 nature itself evidences, that God is alive and powerful, that He loves us, and that He has a plan for everyone.

Being far beyond what our finite minds can comprehend, we do not know everything about Him nor are we able to always discern His plan. Yet my faith continues in Him. As Job put it, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him."

That's why my following of God is based upon my relationship with Him, rather than on a special "sign." Rather than looking for some sort of wrapped spiritual package from the Almighty, I want to rely upon my closeness to Him. So when I wonder about which job offer to take, I don't go through a divination process to discover the hidden message of God. Instead I examine how God has called me to live my life; what my motives are; what He has given me a heart for; where I am in my walk with Christ; and what God is saying to me through His word and His people.

I have observed Christians making major decisions based upon this faulty notion that God has a hidden will that He wants them to discover, and it has often led to disaster. One couple I know quit their jobs and went into a specialized ministry based on a "hunch" that God wanted them to make a change. I certainly believe the good Lord gives us desires and inclinations, but we need to examine our motives behind them. Instead the couple should have spend time discussing their love for God. When you clarify your love for God, and you stand right and clean before Him, it becomes much easier to see how the desires of your own heart match up to those of God. It is certainly cheaper and easier to say, "I've got a feeling," but it lacks the necessary depth and relationship that the Lord uses to shape His people.

Too many have used the "hunch" method to rationalize poor decisions or to excuse their carnal living. "God told me to buy this expensive home even though it is beyond my financial ability" is certainly convenient for assuaging the conscience, but it also happens to run in direct contradiction to God's own Word as given to us in the Bible. This sort of cheap reasoning requires no character development. God doesn't change you; you simply change your mind. "Wisdom" in the Old Testament is a character trait, not simply thinking soberly. People with wisdom have the character whereby they can make good decisions. They don't have to rely on faulty logic.

Not only is the logic of many Christians faulty, but their exegesis is terrible. Countless times I have heard people quote Proverbs 3:5-6 as their basis for divining God's will: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your paths." Many people read the word "direct" and assume that verse means God will give them special direction in the everyday decisions of life. But that Hebrew word literally means to "go straight," so a sound exegesis will reveal that if you will trust God you will not go outside the bounds of what the book of Proverbs teaches. When it says that "He will direct your path," it does not mean God will offer you special revelation, but that He will make your track right because you are living your life in accordance with the words of Proverbs. Using a verse as a magic incantation does not mean God is obliged to hand you an answer to your problem. That is simply not true to Christian experience. Receiving a message from God is nearly always in conjunction with having a loving heart toward God. The Spirit of God in your life, together with the influence of the Word, illuminates the thoughts of the Lord. As you put God's Word into practice, He establishes your thoughts so that you participate in His eternal plan.

Any time you take the Bible out of context you destroy the intent of His word. That's why you cannot take instances of God's special revelation and make them normative for the Christian experience. Paul saw a great light, fell to the ground, and was blinded when he met Jesus Christ. It was an amazing encounter, but if we try to make that the norm for all new Christian experiences we leave most believers out of the kingdom of God. By the same token, the apostle Paul took



the gospel message to much of Asia Minor without ever having a divine intervention. When he did experience a special revelation, seeing a vision of a man calling him to Macedonia, he obeyed. But the special revelation of God was a rare and unique experience, even for Paul.

The disciples obeyed their calling to preach the good news in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost part of the world, but they did so as they were given an opportunity. There are few instances of divine intervention like that of Philip being transported to a new location. And when God did miraculously intervene and lead someone to a special task, it was significant enough to be recorded in Scripture. I do not think we can take special circumstances and make them the norm by which we live our lives. Special revelation for guidance was not the normal apostolic experience. *And at the time it was received (by Paul, by Philip, by Peter as he lay on his roof, it was not being sought.* God intervened to change the course of their lives in a dramatic way, not simply to tell them to alter their plans a bit. Special revelation came at a time when God wanted to lead them apart from the normal ways in which His people make choices.

There is no place in the New Testament where we are taught to seek a special revelation, and the practice may actually lead to disobedience if it causes Christians to neglect the everyday opportunities life brings us to wait for a special word from the Lord.

Having said that, I do believe in special revelation, and I think too many conservative scholars have no place for God's special intercession because they have no control over it. We can't force God to talk, yet sometimes He completely surprises us and talks anyway.

### **The example of Abraham**

One of the most amazing stories in Scripture appears in Genesis 22, Abraham, who has waited decades for God to fulfill His promise and give Abraham a son, can finally rejoice in the birth of Isaac. It will be through Isaac that a great nation will be born, and a redeemer will come, and the world will be blessed. Abraham is filled up with love for his son and joy in his God. Finally he can see the beginning of a great fulfillment.

Then everything changes. God says, "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about" (Genesis 22:2).

Imagine the horror of Abraham. He is an old man and won't be having any more sons. It is sad when a father dies and leaves the son behind, but how much sadder when the son dies and leaves the father behind. It is sad when an old man dies and his staff is left behind, but how much sadder for the staff to be

taken away. Abraham is told to break his staff. The command is illogical. More than that, it is absurd. The fulfillment of God's promise that "in Isaac your seed shall be called," is going to disappear. The hope, that reversed years of disappointed hope, is negated. Beyond that is the revulsion of sacrificing a human to the one true God, an action associated with pagan deities. On one level it appears God's order violates His command not to take innocent life. We can rationalize the order by recognizing the truth that "whatever opens the womb belongs to God" (see Exodus 13:11-15). At the least we must say the order is unconventional and contradicts the custom of Israel. Nevertheless Abraham knew he must obey the Lord's word. Indeed, this passage is generally studied with an eye toward obedience, but inherent in the story is the concept of God's leading His people. The average Christian would rebel. "God would never call me to kill my son," he would rationalize. "I must be mis-taken. Give me some further sign that I need to make this sacrifice." But Abraham completes this bizarre tale by doing exactly what God called him to do. He was so aware of the special nature of this event that he recognized the importance of complete obedience.

The faith it would take to obey God in this situation amazes me. The fact that God stayed the hand of Abraham, arranging for a replacement sacrifice and blessing the descendants of Isaac, fascinates me. But the idea that the Lord will specially intervene when He must to shape the character of the man teaches me. Abraham did not seek a special message from God. He didn't ask for a sign or demand confirmation from the Lord. He simply walked close to God and obeyed His Word. Those two elements continue to be the essential ingredients of a vibrant faith.

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