

DECISIONS MADE SIMPLE

A QUICK GUIDE TO GUIDANCE

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DECISION-MAKING AND THE WILL OF GOD

Have you ever had to make a decision? Of course you have. We make decisions every day. Each morning we decide what to wear, maybe our blue top or our red top, whether to have cornflakes or toast (or both), whether to take one road or another to work, how to respond to an email or a colleague's request. And so on.

Most of the time we make these decisions without much thought. But there are some decisions we agonise over and which fill us with angst. Who to marry? Which church to join? Where to live? What job to do? To stay or go?

So this is a vital topic for Christians. We want to make decisions that honour Christ and that conform to God's will. That can add to the angst. Like everyone else we're trying to figure out what *we*

want, but Christians are also trying to figure out what *God* wants.

Not only is it more of a challenge for Christians; it's more of a challenge in our day. We make far more significant decisions that most people have in the past. Two or three generations ago where you lived and what you did was largely determined by your parents. There was little social or geographic mobility. Most people did the job their father or mother had done. You lived in the community in which you were born. Even who you married might be largely determined by your family.

Today life is much more fluid. We have a far greater capacity to choose what we do, where we live, who we love and even who we are. This is a great blessing. But it does come with increased angst. In the past your identity was largely given to you. Today, who we are is increasingly the product of the choices we make. So those choices carry extra weight because our identity is at stake.

So decision-making is relevant to all of us, every day of our lives, and particularly when we have big choices to make—the kind of choices that alter the course of our lives.

The will of God

The problem is that people often have a view of guidance that, while it sounds very spiritual, does not reflect the teaching of Scripture. And this faulty view makes decision-making even more angst-ridden. Perhaps you've heard people say things like:

- 'I'm asking God to reveal to me whether I should take this job.'
- 'We shouldn't just ask God to bless *our* plans—we should ask him to show us *his* plans.'
- 'Make sure you don't miss God's will for your life.'
- 'I'm seeking God's will.'

Statements like these sound so spiritual and often they're driven by a good desire to obey God. But their premise is not biblical. They assume God has a specific and unique plan for the life of each Christian. They assume God has chosen a partner, a job, a ministry for you, and your job is to discover God's will so you can act upon it. And, by the way, if you get it wrong, things will go badly. No wonder we get anxious!

And then things gets worse because God doesn't always seem to make his will crystal clear. So some

people look for signs or special words. Other people try to read God's will from circumstances or a sense of peace in their hearts. No wonder some Christians are left in a state of confusion or even paralysis. They're so concerned not to step out of God's will that they hesitate ever to step forward.

So let me state this clearly: while God sometimes intervenes to guide his people, *a specific divine direction for your life is not the norm* in the Bible. I realise it's often a deeply held assumption. People read it into all sorts of Bible verses. But it's not taught in God's word.

Let's bring some biblical clarity by looking at how the word of God talks about the will of God. It does so in two ways—God's sovereign will and his moral will. But it doesn't speak of God's will in three ways—it doesn't speak in terms of a person-specific will.

God's sovereign will

First, the Bible talks about God's sovereign will. Everything that happens, happens because God decides that it should happen. Nothing is outside of his control. In this sense, nothing is outside of his will. Even the evil things that people do are part of his will.

When the early church first faced persecution

they prayed: 'Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.' (Acts 4:27) They saw a parallel between their persecution and the conspiracy to kill Jesus. And yet the church continued in their prayer: 'They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.' (Acts 4:28) Murdering your Creator is not just an evil act; it's the epitome of evil! Yet the church said this is what God's 'will had decided beforehand should happen.' So even the sins people commit are part of God's will in this sense.

We don't know what God's sovereign will is ahead of time. But we always know God's sovereign will when anything happens because everything that happens is part of his sovereign will! He is working 'all things ... for the good of those who love him' (Rom. 8:28). In this sense, God has a plan for your life, though you can only see it in the rear view mirror of life. It is a plan that encompasses every step you take and it is a plan that ends in glory.

This is a great comfort when we make decisions. It means that, whether we make good decisions or bad decisions, God's purpose for us is sure. And his purpose is to lead us home to glory. However much you might mess things up, if you are a true believer, then God will keep you to the end and the end is glory.

God's moral will

Second, the Bible talks about God's moral will. Some things please God and some things displease God. Loving your neighbour is part of God's moral will. Murdering your neighbour is not part of his will. God's moral will in this sense is universal. It's not specific to me.

'The secret things belong to the LORD our God,' says Moses in Deuteronomy 29:29, 'but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.' In other words, God's sovereign will is a mystery. Even when events unfold, we often find it hard to trace God's purpose in those events because 'the secret things belong to the LORD our God.' But God has revealed his moral will to us and he's revealed it in his word. Working out God's moral will is not a mysterious process. We just need to read our Bibles.

For example, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 says: 'Be joyful always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.' Do you want to know God's will for you? Here it is: rejoice, pray, give thanks. It's not complicated. It may not always be easy to implement, but knowing God's moral will is straight-forward—just read your Bible.

God's specific will?

What the Bible never talks about is what we might call a person-specific will of God. By a specific will I mean the idea that God has determined things I should do that are not also things other Christians should do in the same circumstances. It's God's will for me that I should love my wife. But then that's his will for every husband. It's part of his moral will revealed in Scripture.

What God has *not* done is create a plan for my life which I must try to follow that involves living in particular places and doing particular roles at different stages—a kind of timeline of things I'm supposed to choose at different moments. He doesn't have a specific will that I somehow need to second guess if I want to stay on track.

I moved to Boroughbridge in North Yorkshire in 2015. Moving to Boroughbridge was clearly part of his *sovereign* will, because here I am. Moving to Boroughbridge is not part of his *moral* will since it's not required of every Christian, otherwise every obedient Christian would be here! It is God's moral will that we should serve his people *somewhere* and Boroughbridge is as good a place as any. But it's *not* the case that God had a plan for my life that included coming to Boroughbridge which I had to discern and then choose to follow. In 2015, when my

wife and I were deciding whether to stay in Sheffield or move to Boroughbridge, it was not the case that one of those options was God's will and the other was not. God did not have a plan for my life in this sense that involved moving to Boroughbridge. We could have stayed in Sheffield and still been obedient to God.

'The way many Christians practice seeking God's will before they make a decision,' suggest Mark Dever, 'amounts to spiritual and emotional bondage.' We are bound to live in obedience to God's *revealed* will, but on other matters we are free. 'I do believe that God's Spirit will sometimes lead us subjectively,' he says. He goes on to give an example from his own life when he felt God's leading. But, he says, he was free to follow that lead or to ignore it because it was not something explicitly mandated by Scripture. 'I could be wrong about that supposition. Scripture is *never* wrong.' He concludes:

Most decisions I've made in my Christian life, I've made with no such sense of subjective leading. Maybe some would say that this is a mark of my spiritual immaturity. I understand this to be the way a redeemed child of God normally lives in this fallen world before the fullness of the Kingdom comes, Christ returns, and immediate, constant, unbroken fellowship with God is re-

established. A subjective sense of leading—when we’ve asked for it (as in James 1:5 we ask for wisdom) and when God freely gives it—is wonderful. The desire for such a subjective sense of leading, however, is too often, in contemporary evangelical piety, binding our brothers and sisters in Christ, paralyzing them from enjoying the good choices that God may provide, and causing them to wait wrongly before acting.¹

Consider this. The Bible has a huge amount to say about *wisdom*. All of that teaching on wisdom would be redundant if every decision was zapped down to us from heaven. If direct divine guidance was the norm then the Bible would simply tell us to wait for a message from God. But a message from God is *not* the norm. When the Bible talks about waiting on God it refers to trusting him to deliver us rather than hanging around for a decision to be communicated direct from heaven. Instead the Bible equips us to make wise decisions. We’re free to use our God-given brains to make wise decisions as long as the options are godly, our motives are pure, the gospel is our priority and the Christian community is taken into account.

I suspect some people cling to the idea that God constantly communicates which step we should take next because they want a sense of living in

relationship with the living God. That is clearly a good desire. But it is such a *narrow* view of our relationship with God. God is interacting with our lives in a thousand ways every day. In his providence the Father organises our lives for our good. As we read the Bible, Christ speaks words of comfort and challenge to us in the power of the Spirit. The Father hears and answers our prayers. The Spirit is giving new desires and power to live holy lives. The Father generously provides for our needs. Jesus is present with us in adversity. Everyday the Holy Trinity is giving us joy, peace, comfort, forgiveness and much more.

God's guidance

We can do the same exercise with the language of 'guidance.' The Bible often talks about God guiding his people, especially in connection with Israel's time in the wilderness. God led his people in the wilderness through the pillars of cloud and fire. In the prophets and then again in the New Testament the exodus and the journey to the promised land is used as a picture of a new exodus. God has liberated us from sin and death through Jesus, the ultimate Passover Lamb. Now God is leading his people by his Spirit as we travel like pilgrims through this world heading for our ultimate home in the creation.