

KNOWING GOD'S WILL

Knowing God's will is a crucial subject. If we're to effectively live for God we must know what he would have us do. What an awful thing, to approach death wondering whether we've lived effectively for Christ. Now is a much better time to wrestle with the question than on our death bed.

Knowing God's will can be a perplexing subject. Christians from most traditions struggle deeply with it and fear missing God's will. What should be my expectation of how God will guide me? How can I be sure that I'm not drifting off and missing it?

Knowing God's will can be a disturbing subject. Do I really want to know his will in the first place? Do I really believe that as I submit myself fully to God I'll find his will to be good, pleasing and perfect? How good do I really think God is? And what's my expectation about how much he really wants to be involved in my life?

This is a crucial subject, a perplexing subject and a disturbing subject. Perhaps that's why whenever a Christian Conference runs a seminar on discerning God's will, it's always one of the most popular. This is a big deal. In this article we'll consider:

- Assumptions about how we know God's will (What's the right question to ask? Big decisions versus daily discipleship and "Natural" versus "Supernatural" guidance)
- Practical questions about how God guides us
- The context of guidance of a surrendered life

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTION

Our culture leads us to ask the question "How can I know God's will for my life?" But this may not be the best question to ask. We may do better to start with what God has already said. A better question could be: "How does my life fit into God's already revealed will?"

Jim Wallis challenges the prevailing culture very strongly: "*The gospel message has been moulded to suit an increasingly self-obsessed culture... modern conversion is about bringing Jesus into our lives rather than bringing us into his... We ask 'how Jesus might fulfil our lives', not 'how we might serve his kingdom.'*"

Paul puts it succinctly in 2 Cor 5v15: *[Christ] died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. We don't start with a blank sheet. God already has purposes in the Earth and he's calling us to join him. Those not so blinded by our culture have seen this with great clarity:*

"Christians will pursue a profession here in the United States having demanded far less positive assurance that this is God's will than it is for them to go out into the mission fields. But by what right do they make such distinctions? Christianity contends that the whole of life and all services are to be consecrated; no man should dare to do anything but the will of God. And before he adapts a course of action, a man should know nothing less nor more than that it is God's will for him to pursue it.

If men are going to draw lines of distinction between different kinds of service, what preposterous reasoning lends to think that it requires less divine sanction for a man to spend his life easily among Christians than it requires him to go out as a missionary to the heathen? If men are to have special calls for anything, they ought to have special calls to go about their own business, to have a nice time all their lives, to choose the soft places, to make money, and to gratify their own ambitions.

There is a general obligation resting upon Christians to see that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is preached to the world. You and I need no special call to apply the general call of God to our lives. We do need a special call to exempt us from its application to our lives. In other words, every one of us stands under a presumptuous obligation to give his life to the world unless we have some special exemption.

This whole business of asking for special calls to missionary work does violence to the Bible. There is the command, "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature." We say, "That means other people." There is the promise, "Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest." We say, "That means me." We must have a special divine indication that we fall under the command; we do not ask any special divine indication that we fall under the blessing.

By what right do we draw this line of distinction between the obligations of Christianity and its privileges? By what right do we accept the privileges as applying to every Christian and relegate its obligations to the conscience of the few?"

And with that challenge ringing in our ears, we'll move on to think about:

BIG DECISIONS AND DAILY DISCIPLESHIP

Many people seem much more concerned about God's will in the big decisions than in the question of daily faithfulness to God's will before or after the big decision has been made. This seems to be the opposite position to the Bible. The Bible says little about which jobs we should do, few of us throughout history have the luxury of that choice. But the Bible has a great deal to say about how we obey him whatever we're doing.

This affects us on two levels. Firstly, we must ask ourselves why we want to know God's will. Is our concern to know, follow and serve Jesus most effectively, or do we feel threatened by the uncertainty of the choice before us and want God to use his foreknowledge to keep us out of trouble and keep life comfortable?

Secondly, consecrating our moment by moment lives to serve him informs how we make those big decisions. As we grow in our moment by moment discipleship and get to know Christ better, the bigger picture becomes clearer. It's been helpfully observed that you can only steer a car that's already moving. God directs us further as we get on with obeying what he's already asked us to do.

Here are a few examples of God's moment by moment will for us. Take a moment, pick the one which stands out to you and consider the question: Over the last month, does my life practically demonstrate a desire to implement this verse?

Mt 6:33	... seek first his kingdom and his righteousness...
Mt 28:19	... go and make disciples ...
1Th 5:16-18	Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances...
Eph 5:10	... find out what pleases the Lord.

Do the daily details of my life reveal the same desire to know and obey God's will as the big decisions? If so, the big picture will be much easier to see. Once we've consecrated ourselves to the will of God and are actually living as a disciple moment by moment, things become clearer. Next we need to consider a theological controversy within the church where I'm in danger of treading on some land mines.

"NATURAL" V "SUPERNATURAL"

How am I expecting God to guide me? This is related to the much bigger question of our expectation of what a relationship with God will be like. Obviously we can't get too far into this but I do want to outline two common views of knowing God's will which should help us see a few things more clearly:

The Conservative model divides decision making into two categories:

Moral decisions are those which are directly addressed by the Bible, eg. should I sleep with someone I'm not married to? Should I lie on a form?

Wisdom decisions are those which are not directly addressed by the Bible, eg. should I join Navs or UCCF? Should I go on holiday to Bangor or Bognor?

In this view we must follow the Bible in moral choices but we are free to make the choice which seems best to us in wisdom choices.

The strengths of this view are that it acknowledges that the Bible is the starting point. It encourages us to use our God-given mind to think things through. It acknowledges that God often encourages us to make choices and it delivers us from getting paralysed in a web of confusing subjective experiences. The weaknesses of this view are that it offers a system which appears to have no necessity of God's involvement other than through the Bible and it implies that we should expect no specific or personal guidance from God. It makes things simple and elevates the Bible but can reduce a relationship with God to a formula.

The view at the other end of the spectrum is the Charismatic view. Here the expectation is that we should experience direct personal revelation from God as the normal way we make decisions. This may come through an impression, a sense of peace, a prophetic word, a trail of circumstances or a vision. The strengths of this view are that it affirms that God guides us personally and specifically. It emphasises the need for prayer and it means that God can directly speak to us, challenge us and guide us. Its weaknesses is that it can downplay the Bible. It can paralyse us if we're unclear about whether or not we've "heard God", or even what it means to "hear God". It can overlook the fact that God often invites us to make choices and it can undermine our confidence in our God-given mind.

Both these views are deeply influenced by the worldviews of modernity and postmodernity. They tend to polarise the supernatural and the natural, objective and subjective, thought and experience, Word and Spirit. We can so easily find ourselves caught between the two or jumping between one and the other. The bottom line, as Psalm 23 reminds us, is that the Lord is our Shepherd. Ultimately it's his responsibility to get us where he wants us. Our job is to surrender ourselves to him and seek him. God is more committed to us doing his will than we are! Guidance is not supposed to be a mystical guessing game or a watertight system from the Bible.

If we're more inclined to the charismatic model, we would do well to remember that he's well able to guide us through a prayerfully considered pro's and con's list. We must not despise this because it doesn't appear as 'spiritual' as a word of knowledge from a stranger in the street. If we're more inclined to the conservative approach, we would do well to remember that God cannot be tied down to a system of theology which excuses us from dealing personally with him. I can't see any Biblical basis to believe that God will only speak to us directly through the Bible.

So those are some thoughts on the bigger questions of God's guidance:
How does my life and my decisions fit into God's already revealed will?
Is my decision being made in the context of moment by moment obedience to him?
Am I limiting how God will guide me through the models we've considered?
Now we need to get very practical.

PRACTICAL MEANS

The Bible

The place to start is the Bible. Does the Bible speak directly to this choice or decision? I don't need to agonise over whether or not to take revenge, whether I should share my faith, whether to forgive someone or whether to become a Mormon! Secondly, I need to ask how the Bible calls me to set my priorities in life and how that inform the choice before me? A couple of examples: Does this choice give me more influence for the Great Commission? Does this choice give me an opportunity to express God's love and justice? For some choices, the Bible will resolve the question without the need for any further reflection. However, for other decisions, this may be inconclusive or still leave all choices equally valid.



Our Mind



A critical promise for decision making is James 1v5-8: 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 of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.

So, if we want wisdom from God, he promises to give it to us. What he doesn't do is say how he'll give us that wisdom, just that he will give it. This is not a promise of a prophetic word, although he may give that. In my experience, I normally have to think things through, make a decision and trust that God has shaped my thoughts to bring me to the right decision. That's how it normally works. Paul speaks about this in 1 Corinthians 2v14-16: The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: "For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ. We can be a bit snobbish about this, it sounds a bit unspiritual. So we may be surprised at the following words of the apostles;

1 Thessalonians 3v1-2	"we thought it best"
Philippians 2v25,26	"I thought it necessary"
1 Corinthians 16v3-4	"if it is fitting"
Acts 6v2-4	"it is not desirable"
Acts 15v28-29	"it seemed good"

God has given us a mind. He's been busy reshaping it by his word. He expects us to use it. It's simply lazy to expect God to tell us what to do without us engaging thoughtfully in the process. Often, that process of evaluating our thoughts and desires is more important for our walk with God than the ultimate decision we come to.

Here are some questions you could reflect on: How can I best invest my life in what matters most to God? What gives me the greatest opportunity to grow in my faith? What do I have a vision for? What am I burdened over? What strengths and gifts have I been given? What has my background and training prepared me for? What needs in the world most concern me? What needs in the church most concern me? What do I enjoy and find motivating? What do I desire to do? How has God used me in the past? Where has there been evidence of past fruitfulness? What would prepare and develop me for the future? Two further questions to ask yourself: What cause will I serve? Who will I please?

A very effective way to help us to think things through can be to write a pro's and con's lists. This is a great way of getting everything out on the table so you can look at it all at once. Often, another perspective can be helpful.

Godly Counsel

Proverbs 12:15 The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice.

Ideally, we should look for counsel from:

- Someone who knows us well
- Someone who knows and walks with God and knows His ways
- Someone who's informed about God and what he is doing around the world.
- Someone who will be objective with us

The counsel of others can be helpful but it may also be unhelpful. It's advice, not the word of God. Listen carefully to suggestions, make sure you understand why people have given you the advice they have given and weigh it carefully. Sadly, some of the loudest voices telling us not to live radical lives of faith and obedience can come from those in the church who are challenged and threatened by our more radical choices.

Your Desires

Psalm 37:4 Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart.

We can be squeamish about acknowledging our desires as we know how easy it is to justify ourselves in doing whatever we want. However, to try and ignore our desires is likely to have exactly the same effect, only without us being as aware. The critical thing is to be honest about what we want and even more importantly why we want it.





There seems to be an inbuilt fear in most of us that if we really knew what God wanted for us, we wouldn't like it. The devil has been sowing this idea in our minds since the garden of Eden. We all know that in our flesh we can desire some pretty dark stuff. But as we delight ourselves in the Lord, he begins to shape our desires.

How could God's will for our life not, ultimately, lead us to the best place we could be? I love my job. I'm passionate about it. I can't think of anything I'd rather do. That's because God has wired me up to make a specific contribution to his creation. What could be better than to do what God has made me for?

Subjective means

There are many other ways that the Bible records of God speaking. He can speak to us through prophetic words, through visions, through circumstances. All of these can be found in the book of Acts. In the Old Testament God even speaks through a donkey! However, whilst God may and often does speak to us in these and other ways, he's not promised to always speak to us in any of these ways. Also, none of these means should be regarded as finally authoritative. All of these ways should be weighed carefully and generally not taken as conclusive in isolation.

We need to be especially careful with vague "feelings." The majority of times that people say to me "I don't feel that's right" or "I don't feel that's what God wants me to do" what the person is really saying is "I don't want to do this and have convinced myself that the feeling comes from God so I can justify not doing it". I place very little weight on vague "feelings", particularly when there's good reason to believe that it's just a way of avoiding something I don't like or I'm afraid of.

The same thing can be said of peace. I wonder how much peace Christ felt in Gethsemane? I would be more comfortable if we were to speak of our consciences, but even there we need to be ruthlessly honest with ourselves. Our consciences themselves are not authoritative and need to be listened to, examined and weighed.

So there are some practical thoughts: The Bible, our God-given mind, Godly counsel, our desires, and subjective means. We've thought about some principles and some practical questions, but there's a more fundamental question we must ask: Are we open to God's will, whatever he has for us?

TOTAL, UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER TO THE WILL OF CHRIST

So often we place conditions on God's will: So long as I can stay where I am. So long as I have the support of my family. So long as I can maintain my current lifestyle. So long as it uses my gifts as I want them used. So long as I don't have to learn another language. So long as I don't have to raise support. So long as I feel secure. So long as it doesn't interfere with my leisure activities.

These conditions are boundary markers on God's will for us. "Lord", we say, "So long as..." And thus we have a contradiction. Jesus says in Luke 14: v26 "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple... v33 In the same way, any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple."

This asks us two important and related questions: Do we actually believe that God's heart towards us is only good and only loving all the time and do we actually believe that his will, whatever it may be, is actually better than my will? Obviously, most of us would profess that this is what we think, but is it actually what we actually believe? Will you unconditionally surrender your life to Christ?

I promise that there's absolutely no reluctance whatsoever on God's part to give you the best, fullest life you can handle. I have a friend who is really starting to get to grips with what a real, personal, interactive relationship with God is like. He said to me a few months ago "I just want to see how far this thing goes!" The answer is that it goes as far as we let it. Let me ask you, what holds you back from abandoning yourselves wholeheartedly to Christ? Let me beg you to give those things to him right now. His plan for your life is infinitely better than yours. Please don't allow anything to rob you of that joy.

