

Lay Counseling

Biblical Wisdom and Decision Making

Who is God & How Does He Communicate to Us? (Common Misconceptions)

A. God Has a Plan: God Decrees Whatsoever Comes to Pass

1. Westminster Shorter Catechism

Q. 7. What are the decrees of God?

A. The decrees of God are his eternal purpose, according to the counsel of his will, whereby, for his own glory, he hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass.

2. God is not simply the watchmaker who sets things up and allows nature to take its course. "...him who works all things after the counsel of his own will." Ephesians 1:11b

3. Whatever we think about God's will and our finding it, scripture teaches that he is active in history (past, present, and future) and he has a plan.

B. Most Popular Approach: Finding God's Will by Interpreting Signs

1. Begins with the assumption that God has a specific and detailed plan for your life. And following God involves discerning that plan.

2. Petty¹ calls this the **Traditional View**:

"God's plan can be discerned by looking carefully into a combination of circumstances, spiritual promptings, inner voices, personal peace of mind, and the counsel of others." Petty 30

3. Positives: This view believes that God has a plan!

4. Some **Significant Concerns**:

- Can you ever know for sure God's will?
- What does this imply about how God and how he communicates?
- Who is the arbiter of two different interpretations of "signs"?

5. However appealing this view is in getting guidance from God for life's decisions, it offers us a very unbiblical view of God.

a. It is a God who **must be figured out**

b. God will leave us vulnerable to missing his will and thus put us at risk of **harmful consequences** because we missed a sign

c. It provides **no way to differentiate** between Satan, God, our sinful desires and the burrito we had for dinner.

d. **Closed doors**: Often Christians interpret obstacles or trials as "closed doors," meaning they discern that God is communicating that they should not proceed. But, how can you tell if God is closing the door or you are just looking for an excuse to avoid something difficult? What is the difference between a closed door and a difficult task?

C. Prophecy View: Finding God's Will by Direct Communication

1. Petty writes:

"The charismatic view of guidance involves the confidence that God normally and naturally communicates with us in clear human language." 33

2. Positives: This view also affirms that God has a plan. It has an advantage over the Traditional View in that it does not leave the communication ambiguous or dependent on our interpretation.

3. Some **Significant Concerns**:

- What happens when the word doesn't come?
- What if two contradictory words come?

¹ James Petty, *Step by Step: Divine Guidance for Ordinary Christians* (P&R, 1999).

- Is this method for all decisions, some decisions, or only one's prayed over?
4. **Unbiblical aspects:** This view limits God's activity in the world only to the supernatural. In the Bible God is not constantly speaking to his people. Often there are centuries in between his direct, verbal intervention. That fact is not an indictment to the people of God, but reflective of the reasons why God communicates.
5. **Redemptive Word:** God only speaks when we need information regarding redemption. This is the pattern of the Bible. The salvation brought by Jesus cannot be discerned except by an in-breaking of God supernaturally. Aside from redemption, God's ordinary working in the world is called Providence.

D. What's Left? Not Finding God's Will

If both of these views are unbiblical, then how can we know God's will? How are we supposed to know the person God wants us to marry, the job he wants us to take, or the cause he wants us to give to?

1. What if God has a plan but doesn't want you to know it?
2. Notice that question is not saying "what if God offers you no guidance for making decision." Rather it is challenging the idea that we need to know God's will in order to make decisions that please God.
3. It is easy to turn the topic of "finding God's will" into a question about us. How can we know what to do? How can we know what is the right decision? And, we'll get to those, but it is **far more important to know who God is, how he communicates, and what he wants us to know.**
4. Before we move on, however, we must at last define the term "The will of God."

Which "Will": What the Bible means when it refers to God's will

A. Decretive Will: This is God's perfect plan, a plan that he made before all time. This plan cannot be thwarted and is specific in its detail. This plan, for good reasons, is secret to us. We are not meant to know it (unless a specific exception).²

1. God's Providence Foreordains All Things
God the great Creator of all things doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and holy providence, according to His infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will, to the praise of the glory of His wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy. WCF 5.1

2. This doesn't mean that man is not responsible (we have a free will)
 - Acts 2:23*this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.
 - Genesis 50:20*As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.

² For further study of divine sovereignty, see Gen. 18:14; 50:20; Ex. 11:7; 12:36; 14:17; Num. 23:19; 2 Sam. 16:10-11; Ezra 6:22; 7:6; Neh. 9:6; Job 14:15; 36:32; 42:2; Pss. 33:10-11; 37:23; 104:21; 115:3; 135:6; 139:16; Prov. 21:1; Isa. 14:24-27; 45:7; 55:11; 64:8; Jer. 32:17; Ezek. 36:27; Dan. 2:21, 28; 4:17, 35; Amos 3:6; 4:7; Hab. 1:6; Matt. 5:45; 6:26; 10:29; 25:34; Mark 14:30; Luke 22:22; John 6:64; Acts. 1:24-26; 3:18; 17:28; Rom. 8:28; 11:36; 1 Cor. 4:7; Eph. 1:11; 4:6; Phil. 2:13; Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3; James 4:15; 1 Peter 1:20.

3. What does his providence have to do with our lives? It is a good thing that God is sovereign. Because:

- a. He is good Psalm 119:68 You are good and do good
- b. He has a good plan that cannot be thwarted by evil or even us:
Job 42:1Then Job answered the LORD and said:
2"I know that you can do all things,
and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.

4. There is No Plan B

We tend to think that while God has a 'best' plan for our life, he also has some other, 'cheaper' plans for people who miss the best. Each time we make a bad decision, we drop down a notch to Plan C, Plan D, and so on. We think, "what could have been" if we hadn't married so-and-so, had not gotten pregnant, had not taken this horrible job...

This is often why we are so anxious to find God's will.

- a. God does have one specific plan for your life—Plan A. This plan holds despite all our stupid mistakes and sins.
- b. The events and choices of your life irresistibly and sovereignly work that plan in every detail.

5. Why Can't We Know This Plan? Toxic knowledge

"Far too many Christians rely on faulty logic to divine the will of God. Their thinking goes like this: 'God has a plan, and therefore He intends that I find it'...Simply because God has a plan does not mean that He necessarily 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...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 had in common is that they believed God and it pleased Him."
Waltke 19

There are really good reasons why God does not want to give us knowledge of his decretive will.

- a. God's plan by which he governs our world is way out of our league—both in sophistication and quantity of information. Job 38-42 God's questions to Job about nature challenged him to the point that Job insisted that God stop asking them.
- b. The information would damage us. What would we do with a list of those chosen by God for eternal life? The knowledge, even of our own standing, would corrupt us beyond recognition as Christians.
- c. Jesus teaches that we are 'wired' to handle each day's anxiety each day—no more (Matt. 6:34). Most anxiety-related problems are caused by a supposed need to know the future in some form.

"The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law." Deuteronomy 29:29

B. Preceptive Will: The "Will" God Does Reveal to Us

These are God's moral commands, how he wants us to live. It is the will he has revealed to us.

1. We live in a fallen world, thus not every creature does what God's wants us to do. We sin. The doctrine of providence reminds us that this is still under his command (decretive will) exercised through secondary causes, but all sorts of things go against his will (desires).

2. When Jesus prays in Matthew 6:10 "your will be done," Petty says, "We can be sure that Jesus was not concerned that God's sovereign plan would fail unless people prayed." 79

3. Examples

1 Thessalonians 4:3 "It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality." Not a prediction of providence...

1 Peter 2:15 "For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men."

4. It is this "will of God" that scripture commends for us to seek.

C. You Already Know God's Will For Your Life: Be Holy

*"The most important issues for God are moral purity, theological fidelity, compassion, joy, our witness, faithfulness, hospitality, love, worship, and faith. These are His big concerns. The problem is that we tend to focus most of our attention on everything else. We obsess over the things God has not mentioned and may never mention, while, by contrast, we spend little time on all the things God has already revealed to us in the Bible."*³

Wisdom Model: God's Design for Guiding Us

"...guidance to God, not guidance from God." Petty 19.

A. God Desires for Us to Become Wise

"In this view, divine guidance has nothing to do with discerning this secret plan and using it to make decisions. Guidance is given by God when he gives us insight into issues and choices so that we make the decisions with divinely inspired wisdom. *Guidance comes, in short, by God making us wise.*" Petty 33

B. Don't We Need More?

On the surface this might seem insufficient for making the ordinary decisions of life. We would affirm the value of scripture for knowledge of salvation, but when we have decisions about what job to take or who to marry scripture doesn't seem much help. Does the Bible really give us enough?

1. Don't sell scripture short:

2 Peter 1:3 "His divine power has given us **everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.**"

2 Timothy 3:16-17 "All Scripture is breathed out by God and **profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.**"

³ Kevin DeYoung, *Just Do Something: A liberating Approach to Finding God's Will* (Moody, 2009) 44-5

C. What Do We Do with the Non-Moral Stuff?

1. Motives check: Even in areas that seem non-moral (clearly not prohibited or commended by scripture), there IS often a moral component.

a. Does the Bible tell you what car to buy? No, yet it has a lot to say about your motives for wanting the car you want. Same with spouses: How much does your choice of spouse or desire for a spouse come from sinful motives?

b. BUT, just because our motives are sinful with a particular choice does not mean that the choice itself is wrong. You may evangelize for the wrong motives, but that doesn't make evangelism wrong. The key is that God's will is for us to do everything, whatever it is, for his glory!

2. Callings

a. It is not career, financial achievement, personal fulfillment, advanced degrees, a happy family, or physical health. All of these are part of your calling, but calling is more than these things.

"A call is an inner desire given by the Holy Spirit, though the Word of God, and confirmed by the community of Christ." Waltke 107

b. Why are we called?

1. Not to gain God's approval: You don't fulfill your calling to win God's approval, but through fulfilling your calling you experience his approval. A father doesn't play basketball with his son to win his approval; he does it so they can enjoy playing together. God does not need you to accomplish his purposes. His calling for us is a gracious gift that we can only do properly when we understand our relationship with him.

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. Eph. 2:10

2. God is not trying to get more work out of us, but rather to get more grace into us.

events and moving us in a particular direction.

e. We need to give God the right to control our life. God may call you to labor doing something that you are not gifted in. We may never even understand God's reasons for doing this. Dt. 8:2-5

d. All Christians are called to

i. Called to a role in our family

ii. Called to work

iii. Called to be part of a church (live faithfully, pray, love others, share faith)

e. Striving for faithfulness in all callings will help us discern God's will for each moment. Often this does not look like an equal balance, but it is an equal faithfulness to each to the degree your time and effort is needed.

3. Priorities

a. Godly wisdom means that we are constantly making decisions between the good and the best. This requires sensitivity and wisdom because many of us have multiple callings.

b. God doesn't want us to seek answers from him to make the decisions easier, he wants us to develop his heart so that we will wisely walk in faith.

c. Ultimately, we cannot do this perfectly. That is why the best thing we can ask for from God is not information but his blessing.

Comparing OT and NT Guidance: God Has Given Us the Better Way!

1. God's way of leading his people is far superior than any point in history.
 - a. We have his complete Word
 - b. We have his Spirit dwelling in us
 - c. We have his Spirit in the church giving us godly counsel
 - d. We have 2000 years of God's people following him
2. Prophecy, signs, dreams, etc. were crutches for his people who did not have these benefits. Gideon was weaker so God gave him the fleece. Do we want God to treat us like children or do we want to develop into mature, godly men and women?
3. OT saints would have loved to be in your position! John 8:56 "Abraham longed to see my day."

Application: How to make Godly decisions

A. Approaching the Question Wisely

1. Finding God's will is the wrong mission. Rather we should seek to make Godly decisions. God has given us all that we need to make these decisions.
2. This is a call to become wise. That means getting serious about long term discipleship, growing in your knowledge of scripture, and maturing in your prayer life.
3. It also means finding the sometimes hidden moral quality of some decisions. We need to check our motives and challenge our idols in things that otherwise are areas of Christian liberty.
4. It also means involving the community of God, your spiritual family, in the discernment process. They have relevant input because your goal is not to make the right decision but to do what honors God.

B. Praying for Blessing

1. When everything is factored in, your prayer now is not "God show me the right choice" but "God bless the choice I'm making."
2. Then step out in faith and make the choice, knowing that God loves you and you are earnestly seeking him.

"God is not a Magic 8-Ball we shake up and peer into whenever we have a decision to make. He is a good God who gives us brains, shows us the way of obedience, and invites us to **take risks for Him.**" -DeYoung 26

"So the end of the matter is this: Live for God. Obey the Scriptures. Think of others before yourself. Be holy. Love Jesus. And as you do these things, do whatever else you like [job], with whomever you like [marriage], wherever you like [place], and you'll be walking in the will of God." DeYoung 122

3. Expectations

If God is sovereign and he loves you, you can trust that he will bless you. As you strive to make godly decisions, expect the outcome to be a blessing for you. This is true even when it doesn't come according to your initial expectation.