WHAT SHOULD I BE DOING?

Have you been searching for your purpose? Are you trying to determine God’s will for your life? Do you think one mistake will destroy everything? The good news is God is loving and full of grace toward us. We don’t need to be anxious. Instead of worrying, join author J. Scott Duvall as he explores what the Scriptures say about the will of God. You’ll find the Father’s Word is the perfect guide for the present and the key to peace for the future.

J. Scott Duvall is a former pastor of Caddo Valley Baptist Church and co-pastor of Fellowship Church Arkadelphia. He earned his Ph.D. in New Testament and Theology from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. Currently, J. Scott is the professor of New Testament Studies and the J. C. and Mae Fuller Chair of Biblical Studies at Ouachita Baptist University in Arkansas where he resides with his family.

To order more of Making Decisions God’s Way or any of over 100 other titles, visit odb.org/discoveryseries.
introduction

Making Decisions God’s Way

The student seated in the chair on the other side of my desk was almost in tears as she struggled with what decision to make about a relationship. Was God leading her and her boyfriend to move toward marriage? The day before I’d had a conversation with someone about a ministry position: should he take this job to serve people and gain valuable experience, or should he continue his studies? What would God want him to do? As I walked across campus this morning, a student asked me about changing his major. Did God care one way or the other? Later in the week, I got a call from one
of our daughters, she was struggling with a schooling decision for our granddaughter. Did God have a preference? Not a week goes by that I don’t get some kind of question related to God’s will.

During the almost thirty years that I’ve been a teacher, pastor, husband, and father, the struggle with “What does God want” has never gone away. Issues come and go. Theological trends rise, fall, and recirculate. Worship styles change. But understanding and following God’s will seems almost timeless. Those who have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ are concerned about doing what God wants us to do. We genuinely want to be aligned with God’s will. But following God’s will can be deeply confusing. We often find ourselves asking, “What exactly do you want me to do, Lord?”

To experience peace in our walk with God, we need clarity on what it means to obey and follow God’s will. Perhaps we need to go back to the basics and ask a simple question, “What does God say about his will in Scripture?” For the purposes of this brief study, I will focus on the New Testament, but as you have time, I encourage you to explore the Old Testament as well with this question in mind.

As we discover what the New Testament says about the will of God, I think you’ll experience profound freedom, joy, and peace, in your walk with God—since God’s truth sets us free.

J. Scott Duvall
contents

one
Staying on the Balance Beam ........... 5

two

three
But I Still Have to Make Decisions! .. 20

four
A Few Final Things to Remember .... 31

EDITORS: Monica Brands, J.R. Hudberg, Peggy Willison
COVER IMAGE: © Shutterstock.com
COVER DESIGN: Stan Myers
INTERIOR DESIGN: Steve Gier

INTERIOR IMAGES: (p.1) © Shutterstock.com; (p.5) Skeeze via Pixabay.com; (p.10) Vansilein via Pixabay.com; (p.20) Piviso via Pixabay.com; (p.31) Free-Photos via Pixabay.com

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from

© 2019 Our Daily Bread Ministries, Grand Rapids, MI
All rights reserved.
Printed in USA
Before we turn to the New Testament, let’s take a closer look at why there seems to be so much confusion regarding what it means to follow God’s will.

Many Christians have come to believe that finding the will of God is much like walking on a balance beam, the narrow beam of wood that gymnasts balance on as they perform their routine. The thought goes a bit like this: the will of God, like a balance beam, is hard to stay on and easy to fall off. God has one, very specific path for every person to
find and once they find it, they must stay on this narrow path in order to experience the favor and blessings of God. This way of thinking is what we might call the “balance-beam” approach to God’s will.

Someone with this belief about God’s will might offer a prayer like: “Jesus, show me your will...” There is an assumption that once Jesus reveals his will for us, we will always obey. The difficulty is discerning what Jesus is telling us to do in each particular situation.

The stakes are high in this view of God’s will. If we veer off the narrow path of God’s will for us, we could wreck our entire future, the life God had intended for us. Seeing God’s will this way almost inevitably leads to a great deal of fear, anxiety, and confusion.

What’s more, there’s often a time pressure on important decisions. The decision date is set and it looms large, so we need to know what God wants us to do by a certain time—or else. With that kind of pressure, we can sometimes get very creative in trying to determine God’s will. Who has time to study the Scriptures in context? We need a word from God now! As a result, we may play “Bible roulette,” flipping randomly among the pages of Scripture looking for that specific answer to our particular burning will-of-God question. Or, we might stop reading the Bible altogether and focus more on our own thoughts and feelings. As we get more desperate, we might resort to seeking signs from God about what he wants us to do. Things can get plain crazy at
that point—if the light turns green in two seconds, I’ll take the new job; if I see a billboard of a couple holding hands in the next mile, I’ll go forward in the relationship; if this or that happens then God must want me to take a particular course. Crazy!

Even after we make the decision, the anxiety can continue. Did I really find God’s will and make the right choice? Am I still on the “narrow path” of God’s perfect will for my life? How can I be sure? What if I misread the signs? What happens if this decision wasn’t God’s will? Does that mean that I’ve completely messed up my life?

Just on the face of it, does it make sense for God to put us through this kind of rigmarole? Is this really how God expects us to live? Is this really what God is like?

The “balance-beam” approach to God’s will can impact our lifestyle choices in problematic ways. We can become focused on what we see as the “big” decisions—the ones we see as determining our alignment with God’s plan for us—to the neglect of what we see as more minor responsibilities. We start thinking that if we make the “correct” choice of school, spouse, job, church, and so on, then life will automatically work out the way God wants. But Scripture reveals that it’s the so-called “little” decisions that really define the quality of our life. Obeying God in the everyday, routine choices is what shapes our faith and defines our character. In fact, that’s true of any relationship. If I focused on
remembering significant events like my wife Judy’s birthday and our anniversary but ignored the dishes, laundry, checkbook, and spending meaningful time with her, I wonder if we would really have a good relationship. On the other hand, if I’m faithful in the little things, I will also very naturally remember and celebrate her birthday and our anniversary.

A related problem with this narrow view of God’s will is that it can lead us to become overly introspective and self-absorbed. When your friend is struggling over a decision they see as a crucial part of God’s will for their life, “the decision” can become all this person talks about. Your conversations don’t last five minutes before they begin talking about “the decision.” As you try to listen to the same spiel that you’ve heard ten times before, you may find yourself mentally working on your to-do list. Feeling pressure to find that narrow path of God’s will and stay on it can lead to a self-focus that is unhealthy for us and our community.

As alluded to earlier, the balance-beam approach to God’s will can also leave us confused about the character of God. If God really wants us to do his will, why doesn’t he just make it clear and plain? Why does it feel like a cosmic game of hide and seek? This way of thinking can lead us to question God’s motives and even doubt God’s goodness.

Finally, as I’ve experienced and observed firsthand, the balance-beam approach to God’s will can lead us to become obsessed with knowing and
controlling our future. God is sovereign and we are not, but the balance-beam approach to God’s will confuses these two, putting the pressure on us to secure our future. A question we must all ask is: Do I want to know God’s will in order to obey, or in order to be more in control of my life and my future? Is the bottom-line motive following God or a need for control? That’s a hard question for many of us.

If you’re weary of the confusion and dead-ends that the balance-beam approach to God’s will leads to, perhaps you’re ready for a different approach. So, let’s return to considering our primary question: what does God say about his will? As we do so, we’ll need to keep in mind that each of us is on a journey, a faith pilgrimage with our Lord and his people. What we’ll need most as we seek to grow in our understanding of God’s will is the biblical quality known as wisdom.
What Does the New Testament Say about “God’s Will”?

As we seek to understand what Scripture reveals about God’s will, it’s important to keep in mind the big picture that Scripture reveals about our purpose as human beings. Scripture reveals that God created us, in the first place, to be in relationship with him, and with each other. Jesus said that the greatest commandment of all is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind
and strength and to love our neighbor as ourself (Mark 12:28–31). As we consider texts that speak more specifically of God’s will, it’s important to remember the overarching purpose of our lives: loving God and loving people.

Second, Scripture reveals that we’ll need wisdom as we seek to discern God’s will, because there will be times we just won’t know why some things have happened (see Hebrews 11:39–40). It’s equally important to acknowledge that, although God is always sovereignly at work, not everything that happens in this world or in our lives is the direct will of God. God’s will includes provision for human freedom, for example. Living in a broken world, we struggle against spiritual enemies and real evil. Thankfully, God is always at work to bring redemption out of our brokenness (Romans 8:28). So, as we seek to make wise choices, there are some helpful principles we can rely on, as well as practical questions we can ask, but we also need to remember that there will always be some things we simply won’t know this side of heaven.

Finally, as I mentioned before, this study will have a New Testament focus. Not because the Old Testament is not relevant, but because our study space is limited. Think of what we’re exploring here as a foundation for building a solid biblical understanding of the topic of God’s will. For this reason, I’m zeroing in on the issue from the point of view of a Christian living in our place in God’s great story. We live after the coming of Jesus Christ, after
the pouring out of His Spirit, and the formation of the church.

**God’s Revealed Will**

What does the New Testament say about God’s will? When you look carefully at the phrases that relate to God’s will in the New Testament, they can be grouped into two basic categories. The first category of passages refer to what is often called “God’s revealed will.” God’s revealed will is something God has already made known to his people. It includes what God has revealed of his moral will—what is right and true, and the kind of life followers of God should strive for. We don’t have to “discover” God’s revealed will since we already know it as revealed in the Scriptures, although the application of these principles will require wisdom.

There are a number of passages that talk about God’s will for his people: These include passages such as Matthew 6:10; 7:21; 12:50; Mark 3:35; Luke 7:30; John 4:34; 5:30; 6:38, 39; 40; 7:17; 9:31; Acts 13:22; 20:27; 22:14; Romans 2:18; 12:2; 2 Corinthians 8:5; Ephesians 1:9; 5:17; 6:6; Colossians 1:9; 4:12; 1 Thessalonians 4:3; 5:18; Hebrews 10:7, 9, 10, 36; 13:21; 1 Peter 2:15; 4:2; and 1 John 2:17; 5:14.

Here are a few examples of Scripture passages referring to God’s revealed will. In Matthew 7:21 Jesus says, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is
in heaven.” Here, “will of God” clearly refers to obedience to God’s revealed will for how we should live, since we would need to know the Father’s will in order to do it. Or, take Paul’s statement to the Ephesian elders: “For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God” (Acts 20:27). Paul had to understand the “whole will of God” before he proclaimed it to them. Obviously, Paul didn’t have comprehensive knowledge of all that God would sovereignly do, but he did have a sound understanding of God’s will and intentions for his people. Similarly, there’s Paul’s words to the Thessalonians: “It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality” (4:3) or “give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (5:18). We don’t have to pray or debate about whether God wants us to live with gratitude and avoid sexual immorality; he’s already told us plainly. Peter’s statement in 1 Peter 2:15 also illustrates this category: “For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people.” Because of God’s revealed will, already made known by God through the Scriptures, we already know a great deal about what it means to love God and love others.

Most of my ministry has been among college students. I occasionally find myself in conversations where God’s revealed will is not understood or even misunderstood. For instance, let’s say I’m talking to a guy who has come to me for advice about whether
to pursue a serious relationship with a particular girl. The guy is a college senior and likes everything about this girl except one thing: she’s not a follower of Jesus Christ. His question to me is whether I think it’s God will for him to pursue this relationship in a serious way. I tell him that being friends with the girl and hanging out together is one thing, but pursuing this as a relationship that might lead to marriage is completely different, because God as Paul has already made it clear that believers should only marry other believers (1 Corinthians 7:39). According to God’s revealed will, God doesn’t want this guy to pursue this as a possible marriage relationship. Things could change over time if the girl becomes a believer, but since a Christian and a non-Christian very often have two different outlooks on the most important issues in life, this could become a huge problem if they get married.

To sum up, God’s revealed will is the kind of God-honoring lifestyle God desires for his people as revealed in Scripture, which boils down to, as Jesus said, loving God and loving others. But it will take wisdom and help to discern how best to live out his will in particular circumstances. For this, God has given us wise counsel from the people of God and the guiding presence of the Spirit.

**God’s Mysterious Will**

The second category of how Scripture refers to God’s will is known as “God’s mysterious or hidden will.”

This aspect of God’s will refers to his sovereign control over the universe, the way in which God is always working in all things towards his promised future, and how that affects our lives. We can never fully understand at the time what God is up to since his plan and purposes are mysterious or hidden to us. We don’t know the future and we don’t see the whole picture. God is sovereign but we are not. Sometimes, thankfully, we can get a good idea of what God has been up to when, years later, we look back. I’ve had that experience myself.


Some time ago, I was presented an advancement opportunity that would have included a greater sphere of influence, a larger salary, and other perks. I was naturally drawn to this chance to make the most of my gifts and abilities and agreed to serve in this role. Then, through a bizarre series of events, I was called upon to serve the organization in another way, which meant the role was no longer available. There was nothing I did to lose the opportunity, and nothing I could do to get it back. It was simply gone, as if God had changed the direction of my life at the last minute. It took me a couple of years to get over the disappointment of not getting that
job. Along with disappointment, I struggled with anger and frustration at how hard it was to see God’s role in everything that had happened. At the time, I didn’t get any answers. Nothing made sense. But as life moved on and time past, I was able to see a few things much more clearly. I would have hated the more prestigious job and probably wouldn’t have been very good at it. I’ve come to believe that God was protecting me (and probably the organization also) by redirecting my steps. That job just wasn’t a good fit for me, and the Lord knew it. I discovered his mysterious will as I looked back on the situation a couple of years later.

Perhaps you’ve heard it said that sometimes we know the will of God by looking in the rear-view mirror of our lives. Many times that’s true. This reminds me of something God told Moses in Exodus 3:12: “God said, ‘I will be with you. And this will be a sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain.’” I’ve always found it interesting that the sign that God was with him to deliver the people from slavery would only be witnessed by Moses after he led the people out of Egypt. Surely Moses would have preferred the sign of God’s presence before the adventure. But very often we can only understand God’s mysterious will as we look back on the whole experience.

Here are some other examples of how God’s mysterious will is described in Scripture. In Acts 2:23
Simon Peter says that “this man [Jesus] was handed over to you by God’s deliberate plan [word for “will”] and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.” It was only in hindsight (and with the help of the Holy Spirit) that Peter could say this. When it was happening, Peter certainly didn’t see the cross as part of God’s plan for Jesus (e.g., Mark 8:32–33), but over time he came to acknowledge the wisdom of Christ crucified.

Here’s another example. In Acts 21, some fellow believers tried to persuade Paul not to go up to Jerusalem because they feared he would suffer at the hands of the Romans. Paul insisted on going to Jerusalem, and this is their response: “When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, ‘The Lord’s will be done’ ” (Acts 21:14; cf. Jesus’s similar prayer in Luke 22:42). Paul often referred to himself as an apostle called “by the will of God” (1 Corinthians 1:1; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Ephesians 1:1; Colossians 1:1; 2 Timothy 1:1), but you’ll probably recall that Paul’s former life featured persecuting Christians. He could only say his call was the will of God for his life as he looked back on the experience. In Romans 8:27, Paul says that “the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.” The context of Romans 8:26 tells us that the Spirit prays God’s will for us when we don’t know what we ought to pray for. The Spirit prays God’s will for us even when we don’t know God’s will. How amazing is that!
The prayers of the Spirit on our behalf may not simply be about what we are to do or say—God’s sovereign plan. They may also be about God’s character/moral qualities and desires for us. We simply take comfort in the fact that the Spirit intercedes for us and that it is according to God’s will.

One final example. Peter says in 1 Peter 3:17 that “it is better, if it is God’s will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.” We won’t always know if it is God’s will for us to suffer, but should we suffer, we’re called to do so for the right reasons. Suffering for doing evil is quite clearly not God’s will, even if it is just. But certainly not all suffering (such as abuse, disease, car wrecks, etc.) is ultimately God’s will. God’s will is for creation’s wholeness (shalom). And God’s will is to one day remove all evil from his creation.

God’s role in suffering is a very complicated topic. Peter is addressing one particular type of suffering: persecution. God wants his people to remain faithful, and often their faithfulness will lead to their persecution. So Peter can speak of persecution as God’s will in the sense of believers’ faithfulness perhaps leading to persecution.

Traveling the Path: A Better Image
What else does the New Testament reveal about God’s will? We have so far considered two broad groupings in Scripture: God’s revealed will, and God’s mysterious will—the way in which God is at work in all things to bring about good and work
toward his final promise of a fully healed and restored creation. This aspect of God’s will is hidden from us at the present time, although occasionally we can get a sense of what God has been up to as we look back on our lives.

Remember our balance-beam analogy from earlier? The idea that God has a very thin line for us to walk and we dare not stray one inch to the right or to the left if we want his blessing?

I think it’s time for a better analogy for what God actually says about his will in the New Testament. Rather than the balance-beam approach, where we cautiously attempt to negotiate the very thin path of God’s perfect will, what if we thought of God’s will as us taking a journey with him along a road? The road is certainly wider than the very narrow beam, but it’s not enormously wide. It’s still the “narrow road” (see Matthew 7:13–14) compared to the wide-open, “anything goes” ways of this world. There are some things that are most definitely outside the will of God for our lives (for example, murder, lying, unrighteous anger, adultery, or lust). But on this road of God’s will there is still great freedom to make our own choices. There will likely be many times when you sense that God is leaving the choice between two good options up to you. Healthy parenting involves giving kids choices between good options. It helps them grow up. Likewise, our heavenly Father desires us to grow and mature in our use of our freedom.
At this point, someone might object and say, “But I still have to make decisions! How do I know what pleases the Lord?” Well, we begin with God’s revealed will; his character and purposes made clear in Scripture. God has called us to love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mark 12:29–31). Jesus told us to seek first God’s kingdom and God’s righteousness (Matthew 6:33). We are called to abide in Christ (John 15:1–17) and to allow the Holy Spirit to bear fruit in our lives (Galatians 5:16–26). Jesus commissions us to join him in
making disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:16–20) and to be his Spirit-empowered witnesses (Acts 1:8). These are just a few of the grand-purpose statements in the New Testament for the people of God.

Therefore, when we are grounded in God’s larger purposes for our lives, these can direct the overall trajectory of our lives. On the “smaller” decisions that confront us daily, we have the freedom to exercise wisdom. I would like to offer some questions that may help you discern if the action you are contemplating would please the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:9; Ephesians 5:10; Colossians 1:10). At the outset, it’s important to know that these questions/answers should be considered together as much as possible. No single consideration rules over all the others. We’re looking for a pattern of answers moving in one direction or the other. Thinking about what the Lord might want and discerning what would be wise will take time. Above all, we are trusting the Lord to direct our steps as we seek him and pursue wisdom. In what follows, I’m suggesting that we should want to make the best decision possible out of a range of decisions, but without falling back into the balance-beam way of thinking. Simply put, there are better options and different ways to make decisions (vs. only one right decision possible) and for that we need wisdom.

Sometimes there isn’t a right or a wrong decision. There are times when we face choices between two equally good options. In those cases, wisdom can help us make the decision.
Helpful Questions for Wise Decision-Making

Is this decision consistent with God’s Word (his revealed will)?

As I mentioned above, we never want to do anything that clearly contradicts what God has already told us to do in his Word. For example, it has become fashionable and acceptable in some circles that Christians live together before getting married. If you’re entertaining this as a possibility, know that God has already spoken on the subject (e.g., Matthew 19:4–5; Hebrews 13:4; Ephesians 5:3). It’s not that sex is bad or that you don’t really love each other. It’s simply that sex is an extremely important gift from the Lord and needs the full commitment of marriage in order to be enjoyed most significantly.

Answering this question doesn’t require that we become Bible scholars overnight, but it does call us to read and understand God’s Word. Here are some ways to grow in our understanding of God’s Word. Find a church with solid biblical teaching. Listen to podcasts from trusted preachers and teachers. Read the Bible on your own, using a reliable study Bible or Bible handbook as a guide. Ask questions from mature believers. God has given us guidance through Scripture, to set us free for a full and meaningful life. The Bible is the reality book given to us by God to help us know how to relate to him,
to each other, and to this world. It’s a storehouse of wisdom.

**Is the Holy Spirit leading me in this way?**

Living a life that loves and honors God is very personal; it’s about our relationship with the living God. God has put his Spirit within every genuine follower of Jesus and the Spirit leads and guides us in making decisions. Some have tried to separate the Scriptures and the Spirit but this is both harmful and senseless. Scripture is an expression of his very Person or Spirit, just like your words are an expression of you. God’s Spirit is never in contrast with Scripture. The Holy Spirit guides us through a variety of life circumstances, including decision-making. The Spirit’s leading helps us make choices that are consistent with God’s Word, especially when the Bible does not address the issue specifically or directly.

Learning to discern the voice of the Spirit is a process. It can be easy when you are a new believer to mistake a worship high or a caffeine rush or a hormonal phase to be the Spirit’s leading. Statements like “God told me to…” can be very misguided. I once heard a fellow student say to a chapel full of people that God had told him that he would marry either this girl or that girl. You guessed it: he married neither. In fact, I married one of them! Over time we learn to distinguish between the Spirit’s voice and competing voices, and we can more confidently say at times, “No, that’s not the Spirit” or “I think the
Spirit is leading me to . . .” Still, we have to be careful here since our own desires can play a role in how we feel the Spirit is leading us. One thing that I’ve found helpful is to remember that the Spirit’s voice leads us to love and serve God and others, to be other-focused, so that any voice suggesting that I act selfishly, no matter how much it may be wrapped in religious language, is not the Spirit’s voice.

**What is my Christian community saying?**

This is one of the most important questions/answers to consider. God works through Scripture, his Spirit, and his people in guiding us. So you’ll want to pay attention to what your Christian community is saying about the choice you are contemplating. But you have to be careful about the people you ask for input. If you ask friends you know want you to decide a particular way, you’ll probably get advice to decide that way. So, you can rig the answer to this question fairly easily. Here is what I suggest for keeping the process honest: ask people who know you well and love you deeply but are not wrapped up in your immediate emotional circumstances. Hopefully, you will have mentors, long time friends, or family members who can separate themselves from your immediate situation and offer wise advice. Be very cautious about going a particular direction when almost all of the people who know you best and love you most are suggesting a different path. It could very well be God trying to redirect you.
Does this action seem wise?

This is a basic but very important question. We often need to ask this question when contemplating taking on yet another responsibility. Although the biblical idea of wisdom is quite complex, the basic sense is the ability to discern what pleases the Lord in a variety of situations and contexts. The biblical idea of wisdom is much more than knowledge; it is applying knowledge of and love for the Lord to the particular situation in which we find ourselves. Wisdom gives us permission to say “no” to some opportunities in order to do a few things well, because we understand that it’s much better than trying to do many things and doing them poorly. It’s helpful at times to step back and take a wide-angled view. Would someone you consider wise think this is a wise thing to take on? I’ve found that reading the book of Proverbs on a regular basis helps us understand what kind of choices are wise.

It’s an important element of making wise choices to think about the long-term consequences of the different decisions and not just the short-term benefits. Making charts that show how each decision will affect every aspect of life, especially our relationships, can be very revealing (if we’re honest when making the chart.)

Does this fit with how I am gifted?

I once accepted an assignment of leading a big student ministry event as the main speaker. The
only problem is that I’m not really a dynamic youth communicator. That’s just not how I’m gifted. I did my best, but my presentation fell flat. I’m geared more toward relating to young adults, and it turns out that there is huge difference between a ninth grader and a junior in college or a young professional. Lesson learned.

Getting to know yourself is one of life’s uphill climbs, and can be frustratingly difficult. Although God may certainly ask us to do things that are outside our primary area of gifting, especially in situations where there is no one else to meet the need, God wants us to operate from the core of how he’s gifted us. We learn over time what seems natural for us. These activities tend to be life giving and energizing rather than demoralizing and draining. But once more, keep in mind that this is only one consideration and shouldn’t be used as an excuse for neglecting God’s larger purposes mentioned earlier.

* Much has been written about spiritual gifts, even though the Bible never really defines them (FOR THE SPECIFIC LISTS OF GIFTS, SEE ROMANS 12:6–8; 1 CORINTHIANS 12:8–10, 28, 29–30; EPHESIANS 4:11, AND PERHAPS 1 PETER 4:10–11). I’m convinced that God has given each of us “creation gifts”—abilities and talents given to every human being, Christian or not, as a result of being created in God’s image. Spiritual gifts might be called “new-creation gifts” and are given by the Spirit to every follower of Jesus Christ for the purpose of building up the body of Christ.*
Does this fit with what I love to do?

We have to be careful with this consideration, but I still think it’s an important question, one that’s closely related to the previous question. For some reason, there is an unfortunate notion floating around that following the will of God has to make us miserable. As a result, we sometimes neglect our great loves, those passions put in our hearts by the Lord himself. But these loves have a way of breaking through over time. You don’t have to give up or avoid everything you love in order to follow God’s will. In fact, God will most likely lead you to serve him through something you love.

Don’t ignore the good and God-honoring things that you love! God has put those in your heart. Pay attention to the things you long to see happen in other people, in your church, in your world. For example, if you love sports and can’t stand organizational tasks, then God is probably not calling you to be an accountant. If you love quiet and solitude and contemplation, then you probably don’t need to start a wedding coordinator business. If you love teaching, why do administration? If you love kids, why work with senior adults and vice versa? If you love working with your hands, try not to get stuck in an office from 8 to 5.

It’s easy to overemphasize this consideration. It’s just one of the questions to consider. The fact is, our day jobs may not always perfectly align with our gifting. But it’s still important to pay attention to what gives you joy, what passions and gifts God has given you. Whether or
not you can make a career of these interests, God has placed them in you for a reason. Surprisingly, many people deep down believe that God’s will for their lives can’t possibly include something they’ll actually love and enjoy, almost like they’re trying to serve out of a deep guilt. Let the cross of Christ free you from your guilt and shame. Then open your heart and all that you love to the Lord.

Does this fit with how God has worked in my life in the past?

God sometimes works in our lives in patterns (to be sure, he likes to surprise us too), or at least that has been my experience. While we want to remain receptive and open to God doing something new in our lives, it’s still wise to pay attention to how God has worked in our life in the past. Think of these patterns as expressions of God’s faithfulness to you. Through time you’ll learn to look for God to do what he has done before. But again—I can’t say this strongly enough—these patterns will be consistent with God’s character and God’s Word. These patterns can include not just how God acts in our lives, but also the ways we have come to recognize his will and his particular ways of leading us.

What doors are opening or closing?

For some people, this question is the primary one when making decisions. I actually believe it’s less significant than the previous ones, but still worth mentioning. That’s because there are times in Scripture that a door
is open but the man or woman of God doesn’t walk through it. I think of Paul’s strained relationship with the Corinthian church. Paul mentions in 2 Corinthians that he had traveled to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that “the Lord had opened a door for me.” Presumably, this was an open door for effective ministry of the gospel. The door was wide open but Paul doesn’t walk through it. Why? Because, as he says, “I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said goodbye to them and went on to Macedonia” (2 Corinthians 2:12–13). Paul had sent Titus with a message to the Corinthian church and Titus was traveling to meet Paul with their response. Paul’s heart was in Corinth and in reconciling with that church. He couldn’t go through the open door of ministry because he was more concerned about his relationship with the Christians at Corinth. Not every open door is the will of God. Also, as I mentioned earlier when speaking about the university job I thought I wanted, sometimes some doors shut and there is nothing we can do about it.

Sometimes opportunities seem to arise out of nowhere while opportunities we expected seem to vanish. Behind the scenes, God is still at work, though we often don’t know what he is up to. Sometimes an open door does signal God’s leading, but not necessarily so. Sometimes God closes a door to redirect our path. At other times, it’s an obstruction from the enemy and we need to persevere. All this is to say that we have to admit that there are open and
closed doors but the status of the door should not be the determining factor in discerning what is the wise choice to make.

*Will this action bring peace and joy and bring God glory?*

Finally, will the path you are thinking of walking bring you peace and joy? And will it bring God glory? Many different things get thrown into the mix of making a decision—such as time, money, place, responsibilities, benefits, and opportunities. Don’t ignore the basic relational payoffs when weighing a particular decision. Will this decision bring peace and joy, two key results of living a life that pleases the Lord? I’m talking about relational peace and joy, the kind that comes when you know you’re in the right place doing what God wants you to do. Following God’s leading may not be easy or always fun, but it will bring a deep sense of contentment and fulfillment, a godly kind of joy in doing what you know you’re supposed to do.

Finally, and perhaps above all, will this decision honor God? Will it please the Lord? Will it result in me loving God more deeply? Will God’s kingdom causes be strengthened? Will God’s people be edified and built up? We want to come to the end of our days and be able to say that we have glorified God with the life he gave us to live. What a tremendous privilege!
four

A Few Final Things to Remember

Focus on God’s revealed will.

Rather than becoming obsessed with our “big plans,” focus on obeying God in the “little things,” things we already know we’re supposed to do. In fact, I would say that if a person is faithful in the small, everyday choices, they really can’t “miss” the will of God. They just can’t! It’s comforting to know that we can put our energy into doing what we already know in the present rather than trying to discover how God wants to map out our future. If we follow him faithfully
Each day, we will also be in alignment with God’s will and purposes for us.

**When it comes to God’s mysterious will, strive to live wisely.**

We can learn to ask important questions (like the ones above) and look for more and more of the answers to point in the same direction. Still, any one of the questions by itself can be misleading since each has a counterfeit (for example, God’s Word can be misinterpreted, we can mistake another voice for the voice of the Spirit, etc.). But as we give it time and prayer, the answers will begin to converge toward a wise decision.

**You’re free to walk with God!**

Forget about trying to stay balanced on a thin beam, constantly afraid of falling off and ruining your life. We don’t know the future. We can’t plan or secure a perfect life. But God is with us, and he will never leave us. He is traveling with us on this pilgrim’s path. We are free to enjoy the adventure, to abound in our relationship with the living God. You can trust him. You’re free to walk with God! 🌼
Our mission is to make the life-changing wisdom of the Bible understandable and accessible to all.

Discovery Series presents the truth of Jesus Christ to the world in balanced, engaging, and accessible resources that show the relevance of Scripture for all areas of life. All Discovery Series booklets are available at no cost and can be used in personal study, small groups, or ministry outreach.

To partner with us in sharing God’s Word, click this link to donate. Thank you for your support of Discovery Series resources and Our Daily Bread Ministries.

Many people, making even the smallest of donations, enable Our Daily Bread Ministries to reach others with the life-changing wisdom of the Bible. We are not funded or endowed by any group or denomination.

CLICK TO DONATE