

DISCOVERING
**GOD'S
WILL**

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Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are taken from the New King James Version of the Bible. Additionally, for the sake of clarity, all Scripture quotations and parenthesized Scripture references have been placed in italics.

How can I discover God's will for my life? What should I do with my life? Where should I go to college? Should I be married or single? If married, whom should I marry? Aren't these the questions we all ask?

The subject of God's will has always been fascinating to me. The phrase "*God's will*," by the way, is just another way of saying "*God's plan*." The Bible teaches that God has a plan for each of our lives. But how can we discover what it is? And what happens if we get out of God's will? Can we ever get back in?

These are just some of the questions I hope to answer in this booklet. And wherever you are in life, I pray that the Holy Spirit will create a fresh desire in your heart to live your life in the center of God's will. After all, the center of His will is the place of protection, provision, and peace. It is the greatest place in all the world to be!

The Two Categories of God's Will

As we think about God's will, we need to understand that God's will can actually be divided into two categories. First, there is the *general* will of God. This is that part of God's will that is the same for everybody. God's

general will is revealed in the Bible. Then, there is the *specific* will of God. This is that part of God's will that is unique to you. The main point I want to make here is this: It is difficult, if not impossible, to be in God's *specific* will if you are not already in God's *general* will. In other words, if you are not doing those things which God has clearly instructed you to do in His Word, then why would you expect Him to reveal His specific will to you? God doesn't reveal His specific will to rebels. He reveals it to people who are trying to be obedient to that part of His will that is already revealed in the Bible. The Psalmist said, "*The secret of the LORD is with those who fear Him*" (Psalm 25:14). To "*fear*" God means to "*reverence*" Him, to "*obey*" Him, and to "*follow*" what He has told us to do. When we do that, God has promised to reveal His secrets, or His counsel, to us. In other words, God reveals His counsel, His *specific* will, to those who are already obeying His *general* will. So as we think about God's will, we need to begin by making certain that we are in God's general will.

God's General Will

What exactly is it that God has instructed everyone to do? I want to give you a little

checklist about God's general will. As you work your way through this material, if you have already done this part of God's will (or if you are now in the process of doing it), place a check mark in the appropriate box. By the time you get to the end of this section, you may have one or two boxes unchecked. If so, that would explain why you feel stuck in life. It would explain why God doesn't seem to be revealing His specific will to you. God is waiting on you to be obedient to His *general* will before He more fully reveals His *specific* will to you.

1. *It is God's will for you to be saved.*

Remember, God made you, and He knows what it takes in order for you to function properly. So when we talk about "*God's will,*" we are simply talking about aligning our lives up with the way our Maker intended for them to be lived. When you buy a new car, you get an owner's manual. The people who made your car know what it takes in order for it to run well. It is the same with God. He made us, and He has given us a manual for living. Our manual is the Bible. In the Bible, God tells us what to do. And the first thing He has instructed us to do is to repent of our sins and receive Jesus as our Savior. That is the most important part of His will for our lives.

We aren't born Christians. We may have been born into a Christian family. We may have been raised in a Christian home. We may have attended a Christian church. But we have to actually *become* Christians. And God wants us to do that. Jesus said, "*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life*" (John 3:16). "*Whoever*" includes you. God wants you to be saved. It is "step one" on our journey into His will. The Bible says that God is "*not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance*" (II Peter 3:9). Have you ever repented of your sins? Have you ever given your heart to Jesus? Have you ever had a genuine salvation experience? If you have, give yourself a check. If you haven't, keep reading. We'll come back to this at the end.

2. *It is God's will for you to be baptized.*

After we become Christians, God wants us to be baptized. Baptism doesn't save us. Jesus saves us. Baptism is just our way of letting others know that we have been saved. Baptism is an act of obedience. Jesus said to His early followers, "*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy*

Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). Have you ever been baptized? If not, you need to understand that baptism is part of God’s will for your life. By refusing to follow God’s command to be baptized, you are limiting the extent to which He will reveal more of His specific will to you. Remember, God doesn’t reveal His *specific* will to those who haven’t obeyed His *general* will.

□ 3. *It is God’s will for you to walk in faith.*

Trusting God is the best way to live. The Bible says, “*Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding*” (Proverbs 3:5). If I have learned anything in life, I have learned the importance of trusting Jesus completely...first with my soul and then with everything else. When we walk in faith, we walk in step with God. When we worry, fret, and doubt, there is a dark cloud that covers our souls and even our minds. That dark cloud makes it virtually impossible to discern God’s will. But when we walk in faith, completely trusting God, there is a lightness in our spirits and a clarity in our minds. In such a condition, it is much easier to discern the will of God. Doubt and anxiety never do a person any good at all. But faith does. That’s why God wants us to trust Him

with all of our hearts. Faith makes it much easier to discern the will of God. Doubt blinds us spiritually. Faith opens our eyes.

4. *It is God's will for you to be a healthy, growing Christian.*

When we first become Christians, we are like newborn babies. In fact, the Bible says that new Christians are “*babes in Christ*” (*I Corinthians 3:1*). But God doesn't want us to remain baby Christians forever. He wants us to grow up. He wants us to be spiritually mature. His goal for us is that we would be “*conformed to the image of His Son*” (*Romans 8:29*). In other words, God wants us to be like Jesus. In our thoughts, in our speech, in our actions, and in our attitudes, God wants us to become increasingly more like Jesus. That's what spiritual maturity is all about. So we have to ask ourselves, “Am I becoming more Christlike? Am I treating people with love? Is my desire for spiritual things growing? Am I being obedient to the teachings of Scripture? Am I sinning less?” These questions help us to determine if we are healthy, growing Christians or if we have become stagnant, perhaps even backslidden, spiritually.

Don't get me wrong, even mature Christians aren't perfect. We all still sin. Sometimes we lose our temper. Sometimes we are rude. Sometimes we live in the flesh. But remember, God is not looking for *perfection*. He is looking for *progression*. So don't evaluate your spiritual health based on an isolated incident. Instead, evaluate your spiritual health based on a pattern of behavior over a period of time. For example, as you look back over the past two years of your life, do you see a pattern of growth? Certainly there will be sins you have committed. But is the overall pattern a pattern of growth? The stock market has up days and down days, but if the overall trend is upward, then our money is growing. Similarly, each of us has up days and down days, but if the overall trend is upward, then we, too, are growing. Again, God is not looking for *perfection*; He is looking for *progression*. He is looking for growth. When we are growing, we are indeed in God's general will.

□ 5. *It is God's will for you to have a heart full of love.*

One day Jesus was asked what the greatest commandment of all was. He responded with these words: “*You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and*

with all your mind.’ This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (Matthew 22:37-39).

Do you love God? I mean do you really love Him more than anyone or anything else...more than sports, money, your family, or your career? Do you love God even when He allows you to go through difficult circumstances? When Jesus said that the greatest commandment is to love God, He used the Greek word “*agape*” for love. The word “*agape*” describes God’s unconditional love for us. But in this passage, Jesus explained that *we* are to love *God* unconditionally. A lot of people love God conditionally. They love Him as long as everything is going smoothly in their lives. But when trouble comes, they sometimes get angry with God. Maybe we’ve all done this. But Jesus was teaching that the most important thing Christians can do is to love God unconditionally, regardless of what happens. Do you love God like that?

How about other people? Do you love them unconditionally? Or is there bitterness and resentment in your heart? Jesus said that we are to love others just like we love ourselves. And once again, He used the Greek word “*agape*” to describe this love. Do you love

others unconditionally, regardless of how they act? If not, stop asking God to show you more about His specific will for your life, and deal with those toxic sins in your heart. If you will do that, you will put yourself in position for God to reveal His specific will to you.

6. *It is God's will for you to be sexually pure.*

This is a big part of God's will. The Bible plainly says, "*For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality*" (1 Thessalonians 4:3). God wants us to be pure. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God*" (Matthew 5:8). If our hearts are pure, we will see God in nature, in circumstances, and in opportunities. As a result, we will be able to understand His will for our lives more clearly. For that reason, we should ask God to help us live pure lives.

Sexual temptation is all around us. The television, internet, movie industry, and society itself all seem to promote sexual promiscuity. This is sometimes done blatantly, and it is sometimes done suggestively. Either way, we need God's help to stay clean.

The apostle Paul instructed us to offer our “*bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God*” (Romans 12:1). He further instructed us to bring our thinking under the control of the Holy Spirit. He exhorted the Christians in Rome to “*be transformed by the renewing of your mind*” (Romans 12:2). He went on to say that when we discipline our bodies and control our minds that we are then able to “*prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God*” (Romans 12:2). That word “*prove*” could also be translated “*discern*.” In other words, when our lives are clean, it is easier for us to discern God’s will.

If there is an area of impurity in your life, confess that sin to God. Repent of it. Repentance simply means to go in a different direction. It means to change your attitude *about* sin and your behavior *towards* sin. God helps us to do that. So if you will turn away from immorality and impurity, you will put yourself in position to experience more of God’s perfect will for your life.

7. *It is God’s will for you to be joyful, prayerful, and thankful.*

We often wonder what God’s will is. Yet much of it is clearly revealed in the Bible. The

apostle Paul instructed us with these words: *“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (I Thessalonians 5:16-18)*. It doesn't get much clearer than that.

Do you rejoice even when things don't go your way...knowing that God will somehow bring good out of your difficulty? Do you live in a spirit of unbroken fellowship with God? That's what it means to *“pray without ceasing” (I Thessalonians 5:17)*. Are you thankful for the blessings God has given you? Are you thankful for the challenges He allows you to face? If not, you are actually out of the *general* will of God for your life. And, as a result, you are not in position for Him to reveal His *specific* will to you. So ask God to help you to rejoice always, to continually be in a spirit of prayer, and to be thankful for what you have instead of complaining about those things in your life that you wish were different.

8. *It is God's will for you to desire to do His will.*

God is pleased when He sees in your heart a desire to do His will. He is looking for people whose hearts are committed to Him. The Bible says, *“For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro*

throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him” (II Chronicles 16:9). God wants us to be more committed to doing His will than we are to doing our own. Jesus is the quintessential example of this. In the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before His crucifixion, Jesus surrendered His will to His Father’s will. He obediently prayed, *“Not as I will, but as You will” (Matthew 26:39).*

Do you have a burning desire to obey God? King David did. He expressed the highest joy of his life with these words: *“I delight to do Your will, O my God, and Your law is within my heart” (Psalm 40:8).* David, of course, was not perfect. He committed some serious sins. But David had a heart for God. In fact, God referred to David as *“a man after My own heart, who will do all My will” (Acts 13:22).* And throughout David’s life, God revealed things to him. God directed David’s steps. God showed David His will. God didn’t do this because David was perfect. He did it because David’s heart was in the right place. Is yours? Do you have a desire to do God’s will? If you do, God will reveal His will to you. God always speaks to those whose hearts are in the right place.

So how are you doing when it comes to God's *general* will? If you are obeying His *general* will and pursuing it with all of your heart, then He will reveal His *specific* will to you. We just have to be in the right position spiritually. If we are in the right position, God will reveal His specific will to us. Remember, God reveals His secret counsel to those who fear and reverence Him (*see Psalm 25:14*).

God's Specific Will

Again, God's specific will for your life is that part of God's will that is unique to you. It is customized especially for you. God's specific will includes what you will do with your life...where you will live, where you will go to school, if you will marry, who you will marry, when you will marry, and where you will work.

Some people don't believe that God has a specific will for everyone's life. They view God's will like a pasture. In their minds, you can do anything you want to do as long as you don't violate a biblical command. When you violate a biblical command, they would say, you have crossed a fence. You are out of the pasture. Then, and only then, according to their theory, are you out of God's will.

While we certainly need to obey biblical commands, there is more to following God's will than that. But those who don't believe that God has a specific will would disagree. They would say, "God doesn't care what you do with your life, just do it honestly and well. God doesn't care who you marry, just marry a Christian. God doesn't care where you live, you can decide that on your own. Living in one city isn't any more biblical than living in another city."

People who teach things like that, in fairness to them, are trying to maximize the importance of God's Word. What they are saying is that the only thing that really matters is the Bible, and as long as you don't violate the commands contained in the Bible, then you are okay. The problem with such teaching is on two levels. First, that teaching actually goes against what we learn in the Bible. Throughout the Bible, we see God leading His people to specific places. God told Abraham to go to a specific mountain to offer his son, Isaac. Years later, God led Abraham's servant to Rebekah so she could become Isaac's wife. God led Ruth to Boaz. God didn't say to these people, "Go where you want to go. Do what you want to do. Just don't violate My laws."

The second reason it is dangerous to teach that God's will is like a pasture is because it actually minimizes the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. For all practical purposes, it removes Him from daily living. The reason some people teach that God's will is like a pasture surrounded by fences is because they fear that people will make choices which actually violate God's Word and then say, "Well, God told me to do it." To guard against that error, they just teach that God doesn't have a specific will at all. But these teachers have gone too far. Obviously, the Holy Spirit would never lead us to violate a biblical teaching. But that doesn't mean that He doesn't lead us at all.

On one occasion, the apostle Paul and his companions were "*forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the Word in Asia*" (Acts 16:6, *emphasis mine*). They weren't forbidden by the written Word of God from going to Asia. They were forbidden by the Holy Spirit. And then we read, "*After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them*" (Acts 16:7, *emphasis mine*). Again, it was the Holy Spirit of God Who was leading them.

The Holy Spirit plays a major role in leading us into God's will. In fact, we cannot know God's specific will for our lives without His

help. Certainly we must obey biblical commands and principles, but we must also allow God, by the power of His Spirit, to guide our steps and reveal His specific will to us.

Understanding God's Specific Will

Perhaps the best way to understand God's specific will would be to look at a well-known biblical story. In I Kings 17, we read about God's specific will for Elijah's life. The narrative is an interesting one to say the least:

“And Elijah the Tishbite, of the inhabitants of Gilead, said to Ahab, ‘As the LORD God of Israel lives, before Whom I stand, there shall not be dew nor rain these years, except at my word.’ Then the Word of the LORD came to him, saying, ‘Get away from here and turn eastward, and hide by the Brook Cherith, which flows into the Jordan. And it will be that you shall drink from the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to feed you there.’ So he went and did according to the Word of the LORD, for he went and stayed by the Brook Cherith, which flows into the Jordan. The ravens brought him bread and meat in the morning, and bread and meat in the evening; and he drank from the brook” (I Kings 17:1-6).

There was a drought in Israel. For three and a half years, there was no rain (*see James 5:17-18*). At the beginning of this drought, God devised a plan to take care of Elijah. He gave Elijah a clear word of instruction. He told him to go to the Brook Cherith. At the brook, Elijah would find water to drink. And God would send the ravens to feed him there. Elijah obeyed God, and God provided for his physical needs at that brook.

When God told Elijah to go to the Brook Cherith, He said, “*I have commanded the ravens to feed you **there***” (*I Kings 17:4, emphasis mine*). Pastor John Osteen used to preach a powerful sermon entitled, “*A Place Called, ‘There.’*” Dr. O.S. Hawkins has a similar sermon. Both sermons have blessed my life. They make us think about where our “*there*” really is. Later in this booklet, we will think about how we can find our “*there*.” But before we think about where our “*there*” is, I want us to think about what our “*there*” is like.

“There” is a Specific Place

First, our “*there*” is a specific place. For Elijah, it was the Brook Cherith. There were other brooks in Israel. But God wanted Elijah to go to one particular brook.

God's will is the same for us. For twenty years, I have been on the staff at First Baptist Church in Pasadena. There are thousands of other churches in the world. I could have served God at any of them. But for these years, it has been God's will for me to serve Him in Pasadena. It has been and continues to be my "*there*." And how grateful I am to God for that. Our "*there*" is indeed a specific place.

"There" Can Be a Lonely Place

Another thing I have noticed about "*there*" is that it is often an unfamiliar and lonely place. When Elijah got to the Brook Cherith, he was there alone. This seems to be the way God prepares His servants for future ministry. In I Kings 18, Elijah stood on top of Mount Carmel and admonished the people to serve God. He publicly challenged 450 prophets of the false god, Baal. On the top of that mountain, God proved Himself to be the only true God. And He publicly validated His servant, Elijah. The victory Elijah experienced on top of Mount Carmel was the high-point of his public ministry. But before Elijah experienced *God's power* in I Kings 18, he first experienced *God's presence* and *God's provision* in I Kings 17. There was the *private obedience* before the *public victory*. This seems to be God's way.

Before Joseph became the Prime Minister of Egypt, he spent several years in an Egyptian prison for a crime he never committed. Before Moses led the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage, he spent many years on the backside of the desert tending his father-in-law's sheep. Before David became the king of Israel, he spent his adolescent years tending his father's sheep in the fields of Bethlehem. He then spent many of his adult years hiding in caves from paranoid King Saul who sought to kill him. Before Paul became the great preacher of the gospel, he spent several years in the Arabian Desert alone with God. There is a clear pattern here. Before God *uses* us, He must first *develop* us. And He usually develops us in unfamiliar and lonely places.

Three of the loneliest years of my life were the years I spent at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth. I received a great education, and I had a wonderful experience there, but it was a lonely time. In college, I never had a shortage of friends. The college experience, by nature, is social. But in seminary, I lived in an apartment by myself. Most of my seminary friends were married. My friends from college were getting established in their careers. And there I was at seminary...alone. But those were three of the greatest years of my life. God taught me many

wonderful lessons. He taught me how to live alone. He taught me to depend on Him. He taught me that as long as I have Him in my life that I have all I need. He was preparing me for experiences I would face in the future. He was teaching me to rely solely upon Him.

You may be in a similar situation today. Perhaps you feel alone and isolated. Maybe you are in an unfamiliar and lonely place. You may even be thinking that you must certainly be out of God's will because things are so difficult. But sometimes God's will is difficult. The circumstances you are going through now may well be your "*there*." God has you by the brook. He has you in a place where all you have is Him. And soon you will discover that He is all you need. For now, you are alone at the brook. Stay there until God moves you. If you are in the place where God has led you to be, you are in the center of His will...no matter how difficult and lonely it may be for now.

"There" is a Place of Great Blessings

Not only is "*there*" a specific place, not only is "*there*" an unfamiliar and lonely place, but "*there*" is also a place of great blessings. It was at the Brook Cherith where God sent the ravens to feed Elijah. They brought him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in

the evening. Fresh hamburgers twice a day!
And plenty of water from the brook to drink.
God was meeting Elijah's needs.

This is why it is so important for us to be in the center of God's will. That is the place where we experience God's greatest blessings. Had Elijah gone to some other brook, he couldn't have blamed God when he became hungry. It wouldn't have been God's fault. God sent the ravens to the Brook Cherith with food. God provided for Elijah. But it was Elijah's responsibility to be in the place where God told him to be.

When I was a student at Baylor University, I did a one-semester ministerial internship at Calvary Baptist Church in Waco. The pastor of that church was Dr. Jim Johnson. Dr. Johnson was a blessing to my life. Every Monday afternoon of that semester we met in his office and discussed various aspects of church life. Dr. Johnson was gracious, compassionate, and always willing to help me in any way that he could. He even let me preach in his church. I had a wonderful experience in that internship program.

Not long after I completed my internship at Calvary Baptist Church, Dr. Johnson was contacted by a great church in Atlanta, Georgia.

That church was in need of a pastor, and they wanted Dr. Johnson to fill the position for them. He and his wife, Robin, prayed about it. They wanted to be in God's will, but they didn't want to leave Waco. For one thing, Robin was the anchor woman on Channel 10 News in Waco. It was a dream job for her. The thought of leaving a position like that was heartbreaking. After all, television jobs are not easy to come by. But as she prayed about it, she felt like God was indeed leading them to move to Atlanta. She told Jim she was willing to go. Once they were united in the decision, he resigned from the church in Waco, and they followed God to Atlanta.

A year or two later, I was watching television one night, and I noticed a familiar face. It was Robin. Miraculously, God had opened a door for her to work for CNN in Atlanta. As I sat there and watched her deliver the evening news, I thought to myself, "Only God could do a thing like that. From Waco's Channel 10 to CNN!"

And that's why it is so important to be in God's will. It is the place of great and unusual blessings. Ravens fed Elijah. CNN hired Robin. And God will bless you in supernatural ways if you are in the center of His will for your life.

Sometimes “There” Changes

One other thing I would like to say about “*there*” is this: Sometimes your “*there*” changes. It did for Elijah. The Bible describes it for us:

*“And it happened after a while that the brook dried up, because there had been no rain in the land. Then the Word of the LORD came to him, saying, ‘Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell **there**. See, I have commanded a widow **there** to provide for you’” (I Kings 17:7-9, emphasis mine).*

After Elijah had been at the Brook Cherith for a while, God told him to go to Zarephath. There was a widow “*there*” who would provide for him.

Sometimes God changes our “*there*” as well. Sometimes He moves us geographically. Sometimes He changes things circumstantially. This is one of the things I love about being a Christian. You never know what God might do next. Following God really is the most exciting way to live.

So as you think about your life, do you think you are at your “*there?*” Are you in that place where God has led you to be? Do you sense

that God may be leading you in a different direction? Is your “*there*” changing? How does God lead us from one place to another? How can we know His specific will for our lives? These are good questions, and they deserve honest answers.

How Can We Discover God’s Specific Will?

It is easy to discern God’s *general* will for our lives. The Bible plainly tells us what it is. But it is not as easy to determine God’s *specific* will. There is no verse in the Bible that says, “You are to be an airplane pilot. You are to live in Chicago, and you are to marry a girl named Emma whom you will meet at Willow Creek Church in Chicago on December 5, 2028.” Now if the Bible spelled out God’s will for us like that, then there would be no question as to what it is. But that’s not how God works. Pastor Adrian Rogers once said, “The will of God is not a road map; it is a relationship.”¹ In other words, God reveals His will to us as we walk with Him each day.

I’m actually glad that God doesn’t give us a road map and say, “Here is what the next twenty-five years of your life will look like.” There wouldn’t be any excitement to that. There wouldn’t be any surprises. And such a

plan wouldn't require any faith. That's why God doesn't give us a road map. He leads us one step at a time. When He led the Israelites through the desert, they followed a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (*see Exodus 13:21*). When the cloud moved, the people moved. When the cloud stopped, they stopped. The same was true with the pillar of fire by night. God led His people little by little. And He still does today.

The question for us is simply this: "*How does God lead us?*" As we think about that question, it is obvious that He leads us in a number of ways. Let's think about God's method of leading His children.

1. God leads us by His Word.

First, God leads us by His written Word. As I have already said, His written Word doesn't tell us the specific details of His will for our lives, but it does give us some principles to follow. For example, God would never lead a Christian to marry a non-Christian. His Word speaks against that (*see II Corinthians 6:14*). So no matter how strongly a Christian may "feel" that God is leading him to marry an unbeliever, we know that "feeling" isn't from God because God would never lead us to do something that His Word prohibits. God's

Spirit and God's Word are always in agreement. For that reason, when we are in the process of making a decision we should always begin with this question: *“Does the Bible address this situation?”*

2. God leads us by His Spirit.

The second way God leads us is by His indwelling Spirit. When a person becomes a Christian, the Holy Spirit comes to live in that person's heart. And one of the responsibilities of the Holy Spirit is to lead us into God's will for our lives. He leads us. He doesn't *push* us or *force* us. As our Shepherd, He tenderly *leads* us. And He leads us in a variety of ways.

Sometimes He places *a thought in our minds* that just won't go away. A young lady in our church recently came forward during an invitation to make her decision for the Lord. After the service, I talked to her about her decision. She said to me, “Every Sunday for several months when the invitation was given, I felt like I should go forward. Today, I finally did.” That is an excellent example of how God places a thought in our minds that just won't go away. That doesn't mean that every thought we have is from God. It doesn't even mean that every lasting thought is from God. But it does mean that if we are thinking about

something and that thought just won't go away that God may well be speaking to us. That is one of the ways He leads us.

Another way He leads us is by *placing a desire in our hearts that gets stronger and stronger with time*. This is the way I knew that God wanted me to be a preacher. As a child, and then as a teenager, I had a desire in my heart to preach, and that desire continued to grow and grow. The Bible says, "*Delight yourself also in the LORD, and He shall give you the desires of your heart*" (Psalm 37:4). In other words, if we will seek to please the Lord in all that we do, and if we will seek to find our joy in Him, then He will place within our hearts a desire to do whatever it is that He wants us to do. This is why you never need to fear God's will. He will never lead you to do something without first giving you a desire to do it. God is good like that.

God also leads us by *supernaturally opening a door for us to walk through*. It is as though an opportunity presents itself. Out of the blue, a job opportunity comes along, or you meet somebody and a relationship begins. Many times this is the providence of God. Certainly not every opportunity is of God. You can't marry every member of the opposite sex whom you meet. But it is interesting to me how God

will open a door here and close a door there. If we are sensitive to His Spirit, we will be able to discern which opportunities are of Him and which ones aren't. So as you are in the process of making a decision, don't get ahead of God. Stay one step behind Him. Let Him open doors for you. Watch for Him to work on your behalf. And then pray for wisdom to discern which opportunities are from Him and which ones aren't.

3. God leads us by His people.

As you seek clarity on thoughts in your mind, desires in your heart, and opportunities that are in front of you, one of the wisest things you can do is to seek godly counsel. This is the third way God leads us into His will. God speaks to us through His other children. The Bible says, "*In a multitude of counselors there is safety*" (*Proverbs 24:6*). In other words, as you are trying to determine God's will for your life, you should ask other Christians what they think. This doesn't mean that you are going to let other people make your major life decisions for you. But it does mean that you are going to consider their input as you make major life decisions.

For example, if I were in the process of buying a new house, I would listen to the

opinions of those in my inner circle. If I found a house that I absolutely loved but everyone close to me said that it was either too big, too expensive, or in the wrong location, I probably wouldn't buy the house. There is virtually no way that everyone else could be wrong while I alone am the voice of wisdom. Notice I said there is "virtually no way" that everyone else could be wrong. There may be instances in life where God is leading you to do something and nobody supports your decision. All I would say about that is that you better be very sure that it is God who is leading you. But if you are convinced that He is, then you have to go with God. In my experience, those situations are *the exception* rather than *the rule*. More times than not, God will use those who know us the best and love us the most to help us understand His will for our lives. So never make a major decision alone. Seek out the wisdom of others.

4. God leads us as we seek Him in prayer.

As important as it is to seek the counsel of others, it is infinitely more important to seek the counsel of God. When you want to know what God wants you to do in a particular situation, ask Him. God is real. God is alive. God listens to us when we pray. And God speaks to our hearts in response to our prayers.

There is a familiar verse in the Old Testament about God's will. God Himself said, "*For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope*" (Jeremiah 29:11). Notice that God knows what His will for your life is. Think about that. God knows what He wants you to do. You may be thinking, "Of course God knows. God knows everything. But how can I know what God's will for my life is? How can I know what God already knows?"

Well, in the next two verses God clearly tells us how we can know His will. His Word says, "*Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart*" (Jeremiah 29:12-13). God promises to listen to our prayers. And He promises that we will find Him if we will search for Him with all of our hearts.

One of the best ways to discover God's specific will is to earnestly seek God's face. Do you ever do that? Do you ever turn the television off so that you can pray about something? Do you ever fast (go without food) so that you can pray with more intensity? How serious are you about knowing God's will?

God honors us when we seek Him. The Bible plainly says that “*He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him*” (Hebrews 11:6). And He promises to reveal Himself to us if we will seek Him with all of our hearts. So as you seek to understand God’s will for your life, don’t forget to pray!

5. God leads us over a period of time.

As a general rule, quick decisions are bad decisions. God is never in a hurry. And we shouldn’t be either. When you are making a major life decision, you must be willing to be patient and give God all the time He needs to reveal His will to you.

Sometimes we pray about something, and it seems as though nothing is happening. But just because God is *silent* that doesn’t mean that He is *still*. God is always working behind the scenes. He is working in the lives of others. He is getting things in order. He is working in our own lives. And when everything is right, God will give us the green light to move forward. But until that light turns green, we must be willing to wait.

We may have a desire for something. We may even be convinced that something is God’s will for our lives, but for some reason we are

not able to go forward with it. It may well be that the thing we desire is indeed God's will for us, but the time just isn't right. The Bible says, "*For the vision is yet for an appointed time...though it tarries, wait for it*" (Habakkuk 2:3).

You don't pick fruit from a tree until the fruit is ripe. And you don't launch out into a major life decision until the time is right. We must be willing to set aside time to pray and wait for God to speak to us. His answer will come. But it will come in His timing, not ours.

6. *God leads us to make the best decision for all involved.*

Human nature is selfish. We want what we want, and we don't always care how our decisions will affect others. Satan comes along and says, "It's your life. Do what makes you happy." But God never says that. First of all, our lives are not our own. We belong to God. And as Christians, we belong to one another. God would never lead us to do something that would ultimately be bad for another person. God wants us to love one another, build one another up, and be considerate of one another. Pastor Charles Stanley once said, "When God speaks, He will have not only our best interests in mind but also the good of all concerned."²

So when you are in the process of making a major decision, ask God to show you how this decision will affect your family, your friends, your church family, and your witness in the community. Consider others when making a decision. Don't just think about yourself.

7. *God leads us by giving us peace.*

Understanding the specific will of God is a process. We begin with the Bible. Does it say anything about our particular situation? Then, we look for God's Spirit to lead us. Is there a thought that won't go away, a desire that is getting stronger and stronger, or a door that has opened before us? Then, we seek godly counsel. What do others think that I should do? Then, we pray about it and give God time to speak. As we meditate, we think about how our decision could affect others. As we go through this process, we may still be uncertain as to what we should do. We may feel torn. People may be giving us conflicting opinions. But eventually, we must make a decision.

I thank God that He has devised a way for us to decide on something when we are feeling pulled in different directions. I thank God that, at the end of the day, He leads us with peace. The Bible says, "*And let the peace of God rule in your hearts*" (Colossians 3:15). That word

“*rule*” is an interesting word. It literally means “*to act as an umpire.*” If you went to a baseball game that had no umpires, you would be in for a long night. The pitcher would think that every pitch was a strike. The batter would think that every pitch was a ball. If it were up to the two of them, the game couldn’t go forward. But *Major League Baseball* employs a home plate umpire to make the final call. And that is what the Holy Spirit is for the Christian. When we go through the process of making a decision and still just can’t decide, we have to sit back and ask ourselves this question: “*Which decision will give me the most peace?*” And then we make that decision. We follow the peace in our hearts. That peace is God’s way of leading us into His will for our lives.

What If We Miss God’s Will?

I wish I could say that if we will go through the process I have just described that we would never make a mistake. But I can’t say that. We’re not perfect, and sometimes we make *wrong decisions* when we are trying to make *right decisions*.

There are two ways to get out of God’s specific will for your life. You can either get out of His will *intentionally* or *unintentionally*.

Jonah is an example of a person in the Bible who *intentionally* got out of the will of God. God told him to go in one direction, and he went in the opposite direction (*see Jonah 1:1-3*). And Jonah ended up in a mess because of his disobedience. But even in his case, there was mercy and grace. The Bible says that “*the Word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time*” (*Jonah 3:1*). God gave Jonah another chance. And He graciously does the same for us...even when we intentionally and knowingly get out of His will. All we have to do is repent.

Sometimes, though, we get out of God’s will for our lives and don’t even mean to do it. We want to do right. We want to be in His will. We go through the process of making a wise decision, but sometimes we mess up.

Even Pastors Struggle to Discern God’s Will

I have a friend who was a faithful pastor for many years. In fact, he was one of the closest friends my father and I ever had. Several years ago, we flew to Alabama to officiate his funeral. He and his family are like family to us.

Many years ago, he was pastoring a wonderful church in Tennessee. He had been there for a long time. He, his wife, and his

children were well-loved by the congregation. As he was serving the Lord in Tennessee, a church in Georgia contacted him about becoming their pastor. He and his wife prayed about it. They sought to know God's will in the matter. It was an agonizing and difficult decision. They finally decided to move from Tennessee to Georgia. When they arrived in Georgia, they were immediately embraced and loved by the people there. The people loved his preaching. They loved his family. They were very happy with their new pastor. There was only one problem. He began to think that he had made a mistake by leaving his Tennessee church. He prayed about the situation, resigned the Georgia church, and was re-called by his Tennessee church to once again be their pastor. After only fifty-two days in Georgia, he and his family returned to Tennessee.

Now how do you interpret that? Well, that's not easy to do. Here was a man and his wife who wanted to do God's will. That was the desire of their hearts. Maybe they never should have left Tennessee. Maybe they should have stayed in Georgia longer. Maybe the whole thing was a test from God, and they passed with flying colors. We don't know what God had in mind for them. But on the surface, it would appear that they either messed up by

going to Georgia in the first place or they messed up by leaving Georgia and returning to Tennessee. God is not the author of confusion. So you would think that somewhere along the way they messed up. But the point I am making is this: They didn't intentionally mess up. They were genuinely trying to obey God's will. And that leads me to share one of the most important lessons I have ever learned about God: If the desire of your heart is to obey God, and if you follow what you believe in your heart that He is leading you to do, then even if you mess up and make the wrong decision, you are covered by God. He will take care of you. He will honor the process you went through to make the decision even if the decision itself was wrong. God always honors those who seek to honor Him (*see 1 Samuel 2:30*).

Isn't that liberating? Doesn't that take the pressure off? We're not robots. We're not perfect. Sometimes we mess up. But if our hearts are set on doing what God wants us to do, then He will protect us in a special way even if we unintentionally get out of His will. He will do that because in our wrong decision there was no rebellion in our hearts.

He did that for my friends. They went on to serve the Lord faithfully in the Tennessee

church. They then served Him faithfully in Texas and Alabama. And God blessed them all the way.

So while we shouldn't view God's will as a *pasture* and conclude that He really doesn't care what we do as long as we don't violate a biblical command, neither should we view God's will as a *tightrope*. Some people think they are doomed for life if they ever make a wrong decision. But there is no grace in that kind of thinking. And God is a God of grace!

When God devised His will for our lives, He factored in the mistakes we would make and even the sins we would commit. His will is big enough and strong enough to withstand our failures. If it weren't, none of us would have a chance of being in His will because we've all sinned. The Bible clearly says, "*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*" (Romans 3:23). That verse literally means that we have all "*missed the mark.*" On one level or another, we have all missed God's will. After all, it never was God's will for us to sin in the first place. But the Bible also says that "*where sin abounded, grace abounded much more*" (Romans 5:20). Through God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness, we can always get back into His will for our lives.

When Missiles Get Off Course

I read about guided missiles used by our military. I learned that every missile on the launching pad has a carefully designed path to fly. Yet seldom does one of these missiles ever fly according to that original plan. For various reasons, they inevitably go too far in one direction or another. Interestingly, when a missile gets off of its intended path, there are on-board computers that reprogram it. The missile may at times get off course, but it never gets out from under the control of the on-board computer. The only thing that would destroy the missile would be if it tried to return to the launching pad. In that case, the on-board computer would blow the missile up. But as long as the missile keeps flying forward, the on-board computer keeps reprogramming and redirecting it.³

Those missiles remind me of how God's will works. He designed a clear path for us to travel before we were ever born. Yet our sins, circumstances, and sometimes the disobedience of someone else can get us off course. But if we will repent of our sins and trust God with those things that we cannot control, His Holy Spirit will reprogram us and get us back on course. The only dangers are if we either refuse to deal with whatever got us off course

or if we just give up and quit. God doesn't reprogram missiles that no longer want to fly.

You may be reading this and thinking, "That is very encouraging, but deep down in my heart I still believe it may be too late for me." Friend, it is never too late. God can always reprogram you.

God Has a Will For Your Life Now

Years ago, I heard a story that I never have forgotten. A dedicated Christian made an appointment to visit with her pastor. She went to the church, sat down in his office, and began to share her story with him. She said, "When I was a teenager, God called me to be a missionary. I surrendered my life to that work, but I never became one. When I was in college, I met a young man, fell in love, and we got married. God has blessed us with a wonderful family. God has been so good to us. I teach Sunday School. I am active in the church. But I never became a missionary. I feel like I missed God's will for my life. And now it's too late for me."

Upon hearing that story, the pastor graciously replied, "Ma'am, I didn't know you when you were a teenager, so I don't know if God called you to be a missionary or not. But

if He did, that ship has long since sailed. But God obviously sent another ship along. You have a wonderful husband, a great family, and you are serving the Lord faithfully today. Don't miss the joy of today regretting what you might should have done yesterday. Just be grateful that God sent another ship your way."

Friend, that is God's message to everyone who feels they have missed God's will. You can't go back in time. You can't turn back the clock. Some ships have sailed. But God is a God of second ships, third ships, and fourth ships. And as long as our desire is to obey Him, He will continue to send ships our way. He will continue to line our lives up with His will for us now.

Like those on-board computers reprogram those off-course missiles, God reprograms us and gets us back on the right path. He helps us to fly straight. As a gracious Father, He always sends another ship our way. So no matter what you did or failed to do in the past, let God restore you to His will for your life today. He is big enough to do it. And He will make the years ahead greater than you can imagine. He Himself has said, "*I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten*" (Joel 2:25). We serve a good God...full of grace and

mercy. I'm so thankful for that. It's never too late to get into His will.

The Most Important Part of God's Will

As important as it is to know God's will, it is even more important to know God. That's why, as I said earlier, the most important part of God's will is that we would become members of His family. God wants all of us to be saved. God wants to have a personal relationship with each of us. One day a group of people came up to Jesus and asked Him what they could do to be obedient to God (*see John 6:28*). Jesus said to them, "*This is the work of God, that you believe in Him Whom He sent*" (*John 6:29*). In other words, Jesus was saying that the first step towards being in the center of God's will for your life is to trust Him to save you. Have you ever done that? If not, you can now. If you will ask God to forgive you of your sins and if you will invite Jesus to come into your heart, you can be saved today. The Bible says, "*Whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved*" (*Romans 10:13*). If you would like to call on Jesus to save you, then pray this prayer now:

“Dear Jesus,

I need to be saved. I believe You died on the cross to pay for my sins. And I believe You rose from the dead thus conquering death. I ask You now to come into my heart, forgive my sins, and make me a Christian. I ask You to save me, and I trust You to do it. Welcome to my heart. Please fulfill Your perfect will for my life.

*In Your Name I Pray,
Amen.”*

Friend, if you prayed that prayer, God just saved you. And you are on your way to experiencing His will, His very best plan, for your life!

God’s Daily Will

Remember, God’s will for our lives doesn’t just include who we will marry, where we will live, and what we will do for a career. God has a daily will for our lives. He wants us to walk with Him each day. There is a verse in the Old Testament that clearly explains what God expects of us on a daily basis. That special verse says, *“He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you*

but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8).

On a daily basis, God wants us to do three things. He wants us to do what is right. He wants us to be merciful to others. And He wants us to walk humbly with Him. That pretty much sums up the Christian life.

As we walk with God each day, He will speak to our hearts. He will give us opportunities to do the right things. He will put us in places where we are required to be kind to others. And as we obey in these “little” ways, He will show us the “big” things He wants us to do. The “big” things will become clearer to us as we learn to obey God in the “little” ways. In other words, as I said at the beginning, the *specific* will of God will become easier to discern as we obey His *general* will. And on the pathway of faith and obedience, we’ll begin to see that walking with God is the key to discovering His will for our lives.

¹ Adrian Rogers, *What Every Christian Ought to Know*, Broadman and Holman Publishers, Nashville, 2005, p. 132.

² Charles Stanley, *How to Know God’s Will*, Navpress, Colorado Springs, 1989, p. 6.

³ Adrian Rogers, p. 134-135.

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