

GOD'S WILL & DECISION-MAKING

INTRODUCTION

- What is the answer? → $3x = (2y+1)^2/5 + 4$ ($x=3; y=2$)
- God's will often looks to us like a terrifying problem. However, God wants us to understand it, so we must be able to (Ephesians 5:17). To not know it is "foolishness."
- Indeed, this whole topic of "God's will" brings great confusion to us: We ask, "So, what is God's will? Can I know it right now? How do I figure it out? What happens if I can't 'find and follow/fulfill' it?"

MISUNDERSTANDING GOD'S WILL

Where does this confusion come from? Confusion, frustration, and anxiety arise when we hear the wrong messages and begin to think the wrong way. Several erroneous views muddy the water with regards to understanding God's will.

View 1: The Jackpot Approach

"God's will is like the jackpot – I either win it or I don't."

- This problem is sometimes expressed in sentiments like these:
 - "If I got off the path in the past, how can I be or get back on track now?"
 - "I blew it in the past; there's no more hope for me to receive God's full blessing."
 - "If you marry the wrong person / go to the wrong college / don't follow His career path for you, you will miss God's best for your life."

- While it is true that bad choices have bad consequences, sometimes life-long consequences (Proverbs 13:15; 28:13; Samson; Ananias and Sapphira), this view doesn't take into account the mercy, grace, patience, and forgiveness of God. Nor, does it express confidence in His kind and promised guidance, His fatherly gentleness with His people.
- Being in God's will was never a result of our own decisions. We know this because from the beginning we were off the path, "going astray," and God regenerated us by His will (James 1:18). Furthermore, it is God's will to forgive the sins of His people (cf. Jeremiah 31), and "He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities" (Psalm 103:10ff; cf. Lamentations 3:21-27; Joel 2:25; Hosea 2).

View 2: The Prophetic Approach

"God's will for my future must be discovered."

- This problem is sometimes expressed in sentiments like these:
 - "I need to figure out what God wants me to be doing in 5 years so that I don't start going the wrong way!"
 - "If I can just find God's will, everything will work out okay."
 - "If I don't know what I'm supposed to do, how am I supposed to know how to get there?"
- This view has a host of problems and invites much danger:
 - We find ourselves trying to know the future.
 - We find ourselves living in the future.
 - We find ourselves trying to manipulate things for a particularly desired outcome.
 - We find ourselves making decisions to ensure the security of our future.
 - We focus primarily on the physical aspects of God's will, rather than the ethical.
 - We may be inclined to use some unbiblical tools for discerning God's will or investing too much "stock" in viable tools:

- Verse pick
 - Obscure word in a sermon (e.g., “west”) or a random chapter number (unbiblical)
 - Dreams or feelings (unbiblical)
 - Fleeces (unbiblical)
 - Open doors (biblical, but with caution)

Summary of Views 1 and 2

In his book, *Just Do Something: A Liberating Approach to Finding God's Will or How to Make a Decision Without Dreams, Visions, Fleeces, Impressions, Open Doors, Random...Liver Shivers, Writing in the Sky, etc.*, Kevin DeYoung quotes Gerald Sittser, an author on this topic who was impacting to him. Sittser does a good job of summarizing the “conventional” teaching on “finding and following God’s will”:

Conventional understanding of God’s will defines it as a specific pathway we should follow into the future. God knows what this pathway is, and he has laid it out for us to follow. Our responsibility is to discover this pathway—God’s plan for our lives. We must discover which of the many pathways we could follow is the one we should follow, the one God has planned for us. If and when we make the right choice, we will receive his favor, fulfill our divine destiny and succeed in life.... If we choose rightly, we will experience his blessing and achieve success and happiness. If we choose wrongly, we may lose our way, miss God’s will for our lives, and remain lost forever in an incomprehensible maze.¹

EXPLAINING GOD’S WILL

The Bible rather clearly reveals two aspects to God’s will, mysteriously coexisting within our good and great God.²

God’s Sovereign or Special or Decretive Will / God’s Will of Decree

This is what God decrees and will, according to His supreme sovereignty, surely come to pass (Isaiah 46:9-10; Ephesians 1:11; Matthew 10:29-30). It cannot be prevented, broken, or disobeyed. The Greek word *boule* is often used to refer to this sense (cf. Acts 2:23). It is usually hidden to us, a secret (Deuteronomy 29:29). → Restricting our understanding of God’s will to only this aspect leads to a Christian form of fatalism (“Que sera, sera. Whatever will be, will be”) that eliminates human choices/freedom (e.g., hyper Calvinism; “find and follow” [and mess up] God’s will) and dignity.

God’s Moral or Preceptive Will / God’s Will of Desire

This is what God commands to us in His inscripturated revelation. These commands reveal what is right and proper, and reflect His very character (Matthew 7:21; 1 John 2:15-17; Hebrews 13:20-21). → Too often, this revealed sense is overlooked in our focus on the secret decretive will of God.

One of the great tragedies of contemporary Christendom is the preoccupation of so many Christians with the secret decretive will of God to the exclusion and neglect of the preceptive will. We want to peek behind the veil, to catch a glimpse of our personal future. We seem more concerned with our horoscope than with our obedience, more concerned with what the stars in their courses are doing than with what we are doing.

With respect to God’s sovereign will, we assume we are passive. With respect to His preceptive will, we know that we are active and therefore responsible and accountable. It is easier to engage in ungodly prying into the secret counsel of God than to apply ourselves to the practice of godliness. We can flee to the safety of the sovereign will and try to pass off our sin to God, laying the burden and responsibility of it on His unchanging will. Such characterizes the spirit of antichrist, the spirit of lawlessness or antinomianism, that despises God’s law and ignores His precepts.³

[God's Will of Disposition

This refers to what is pleasing and agreeable to God (cf. 2 Peter 3:9; Ezekiel 33:11). Less technically, this can be lumped into "God's Will of Desire."]

Illustrations:

1. Is everything that happens on earth God's will? YES and NO! There is a difference between what God has determined and what God desires, what He wills to happen and what He wants to happen, what He decrees and what He commands. Daniel 4:35 vs. Matthew 6:10.
2. Is God willing for all to be saved? YES and NO! God "wants" all men to be saved (2 Peter 3:9), but has "willed" that only some will be saved (John 1:12-13; James 1:18). Question: If God wants it, why doesn't He will it? Answer: God wants it to be this way, but wills it to be this way, to the praise of His glorious grace.
3. When David killed Uriah and sinned against Bathsheba, was he in God's will? NO and YES! David grievously sinned against God's will, yet accomplished what God had fore-written (Psalm 139:16).
4. God had determined to hide from us exactly what He's doing in life (cf. Ecclesiastes 11:5). We don't belong in the cockpit, but in the cabin. Therefore, we pay careful attention to what God has already revealed (Ecclesiastes 12:1, 13).⁴
5. Was Jesus' death God's will? YES and NO! God had willed for Jesus to die, although the men who crucified Him violated God's will when they did it (Acts 2:23; 4:27-28). This is where we must come with the problem of evil – in the cross, we see the most powerful illustration of how God can bring good out of evil in His complete and good sovereign will. "[This] does...bear witness to the transcendent power of God to work His purposes sovereignly in spite of, and by means of, the evil acts of men" (cf. Genesis 50:20).⁵

APPLYING GOD'S WILL

God's Sovereign Will For Your Life

God does have a sovereign or specific will for your life (Psalm 139:16; James 4:13-17). This has already been established by God and cannot be tampered with, no matter what decisions we make (*Note:* It started with your salvation [cf. John 1:12-13; James 1:18] and most foundationally has to do with your person [sanctification; cf. Romans 8:28-30]).

Question: Do we need to "discover" or "look for" God's specific will for our life (career) or next decision?

Cf. Jonah (Jonah 1, 3), Isaiah (Isaiah 6), Paul (Acts 16:6-10; 1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:1), Sampson (Judges 13), Samuel (1 Samuel 1-3), Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:5), John the Baptist (Luke 1:5-17), Jesus Christ (Luke 22:42; John 4:34; 5:30; 6:38, 39; Acts 13:22).

Answer: NO! This aspect of God's will is solely up to Him—He is the one that determined it! Furthermore, when it came to the involvement of these individuals in it, God prepared them (cf. Jeremiah 1), got their attention, and caused them to accomplish this (cf. Jeremiah 20:9). Even the ones who made poor decisions (e.g., Jonah, Sampson, etc.), ended up fulfilling exactly what God had written for them in His book. When it comes to God's sovereign will, we must follow and obey; but we don't have to "find" or "figure out" what God wants to do with our lives. He will take care of that. Nor can we "mess it up," because this is His decreed, determined, and done will.

Regarding the danger of seeking to "find" or "figure out" God's secret decreative/sovereign will for our lives, R.C. Sproul writes:

When we seek the will of God, we must first ask ourselves which will we are seeking to discover. If our quest is to penetrate the hidden aspects of His will, then we have embarked on a fool's errand. We are trying the impossible and chasing the untouchable. Such a quest is not only an act of

foolishness, but also an act of presumption. There is a very real sense in which the secret will of the secret counsel of God is none of our business and is off limits to our speculative investigations.

Untold evils have been perpetrated on God's people by unscrupulous theologians who have sought to correct or to supplant the clear and plain teaching of sacred Scripture by doctrines and theories based on speculation alone. The business of searching out the mind of God where God has remained silent is dangerous business indeed. Luther put it this way: "We must keep in view his word and leave alone his inscrutable will; for it is by his word and not by his inscrutable will that we must be guided."⁶

God's Moral Will For Your Life

In short, God's moral will is what He tells us in His Word. We don't have to "find" this, for God has already clearly revealed it to us! For example, in addition to the numerous commands and prohibitions in Scripture (all of which reveal to us God's moral will), we discover the following to be foundational component of His moral will:

- 1 Peter 3:9 (cf. 1 John 2:17; Matthew 7:21; 12:46-50) → God's will is for us to be saved (**salvation**). → **Principle:** You have no hope of discerning God's will if you are unsaved (cf. John 10:4; 1 Corinthians 2:11-16).
- 1 Thessalonians 4:3 → God's will is for us to be sanctified by abstaining from fornication (**sanctification**). → **Principle:** While the details may be difficult to discern day by day, the overarching reality about the will of God on any given day is that you be and make disciples of Jesus Christ, being increasingly conformed into His image. This is key (Romans 8:28-30)! **Principle:** You are not in God's will if you are not living purely.

- 1 Peter 2:13-15 → God's will is for us to demonstrate a gracious submission within our community (**submission**).
- 1 Peter 3:17; 4:19 → God's will is for us to suffer for the sake of the gospel's spread in a hostile world (**suffering**).
- 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 → God's will is for us to be thankful (**satisfaction**).

The Convergence Of God's Sovereign Will & Moral Will

The real difficulty in this issue comes when we have decisions to make, big decisions to make, life-course-altering decisions to make. Now, we wonder, can we "mess up" God's specific will for our lives by making a wrong decision? This aspect of God's will, DeYoung calls "God's will of direction."

To answer this question, we'll turn to a familiar passage: Proverbs 3:5-6. This passage offers a promise of God's leading you every step of the way, clearing the confusion of the moment, allowing you to rest concerning the future, and making sure that you end up being exactly in the center of His specific will.

However, notice how this promise will be fulfilled:

- **Man's Dependence:** You must "trust with all your heart"; "lean not to your own understanding" (cf. Proverbs 16:25); "in all your ways, acknowledge [know] Him" → This is God's moral will. We must trust/obey God by praying to Him (James 1:5), knowing Him so that you know what is in keeping with His likes/dislikes (Matthew 6:33; Philippians 1:10; Colossians 1:10), obtaining counsel from leaders (Proverbs 1:5; 11:14; 12:15; 15:22; 19:20), using God-given common sense (Proverbs 4:1-13), taking all of Scripture into consideration (Psalm 119:105; Proverbs 2:1-5), and prioritizing/fearing Him (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14; Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 1:7; 9:10).

- **Man's Decision:** You must choose "your ways"! → We've been given free will, the exercise of which we are responsible for (Proverbs 16:9; 19:21; Psalm 37:4). "Suspect your desires [Jeremiah 17:9], but don't rule out your desires" (Joe Tyrpak).
- **God's Direction:** God will "direct your steps" → This is God's leading in His sovereign will. This verse doesn't say that God will impose His will over yours; He will lead you in your steps.

Man's Dependence + Men's Decision + God's Direction = God's Will

- **Illustration:** Ben – wanting to go to MBBC, chose BJU, transferred to NUI...in God's will the whole time.
- **Illustration:** Dawn's and my broken engagement – God's practicing the promise of Proverbs 3:5-6

A solution: "wise (skillful) decision making"

- *Our responsibility* – We must be diligent to keep ourselves in the middle of God's moral will (i.e., trusting Him, not leaning on ourselves, knowing Him, obeying Him).
- *God's responsibility* – God will be faithful to keep us in the middle of His specific will.

Joe Tyrpak: "You can be certain that God's will shall be accomplished in your life, and at the same time, your responsibility is to familiarize yourself, to study, and to do the will of God."

Some Practical Applications

- **Regarding the past** – We can have forgiveness and "second chances," even when we violate His moral will or make a foolish decision, because His sovereign will is to sanctify us (John 1:12-13; James 1:18; Romans 8:28-30). For those who are "in Christ by the will of God," fatalism is replaced with forgiveness, and careless sins find a clean slate. So, we can have boldness to make wise decisions about tomorrow even when we've made a really poor decision in the past, for there is no condemnation or defeat for those "in Christ." Joe

Tyrpak: "I need to recognize that as God's child, every time I have not done His will, or every time that someone has not done God's will toward me, it is still all within the perfect plan of God for my life." We don't have to play the victim!

- **Regarding the future** – We can have both freedom and peace of mind in those difficult decisions, (1) knowing that we cannot "mess up," "miss," or "escape" God's sovereign will with our choices, and (2) recognizing that we don't need to know His five-year sovereign plan for our life, since that's His control seat (cf. Matthew 6:25-34).
- **Regarding the present** – We need to study and do what God has revealed (His moral will). Then, we need to dependently practice wise decision making!

Case Study: Choosing colleges

- Moral Will Obedience
 - *Usually* a good rule of thumb: collect as much data about the question/decision as possible
 - Biblical commands and principles
 - Proverbs 2:1-5 — fear of the Lord
 - Ephesians 6:1 — obedience to parents
 - 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1/Ephesians 5:1-18 — avoidance of corruption
 - Proverbs 13:20 — wise companionship
 - 1 Thessalonians 4:3; Romans 12:1-2 — avoidance of sexual immorality and worldliness; growth in godliness
 - Common sense (not a law school if your GPA is .0013; amount of debt; etc.)
 - Gifts (not a law school if you cannot reason very well)
 - Circumstances (financial aid, ministering to siblings, close to home with family needs, etc.)
 - Mission — being and making disciples (Romans 8:28-30; Matthew 28:19-20)
- Sovereign Will Direction — Pray and choose ... God will direct!

CONCLUSION

- So, we don't need to "find" or "figure out" God's sovereign will for us or worry about missing what He has planned for us in five years. Nor do we need to be paralyzed by a poor decision made five years ago. Rather, we just need to focus on today and be sure to submit daily to His moral will. That's really the bottom line: focus on His moral will (what you know He expects from you today from the Scriptures), and God will take care of His specific will for your life. Then, when it comes time to choose, you will be in the perfect framework for a God-honoring decision that He will direct.
- See, the problem is not in our ability to discern God's specific will (that's up to God, and we shouldn't worry about it); our problem is that our selfishness and sin keeps us from obeying God's moral will and making wise decisions.
- God will draw near to you, when you draw near to Him. He will direct you tomorrow, when you surrender to Him today. God doesn't want to play games with you; He wants your heart. So, trust and obey, and then pray and choose, and you will find yourself right in the center of God's blessed will.
- And ... God will get all the glory (Genesis 24:27)!

ENDNOTES

¹ Gerald Sittser, *The Will of God as a Way of Life: Finding and Following the Will of God*

² R.C. Sproul helpfully warns against trying to eradicate all sense of mystery from this and similar questions (Can I Know God's Will? [Crucial Questions Series] [Crucial Questions (Reformation Trust)] [Kindle Locations 178-183, 194-201]. Kindle Edition).

³ Ibid., Kindle Locations 93-99.

⁴ It is possible both to violate God's moral will while fulfilling His sovereign will (e.g., Pilate ordering the crucifixion), and to fulfill God's moral will while conflicting with His decretive will (e.g., Daniel 1—the Israelite magistrate resisting Babylonian occupation, which was his civic responsibility, although God's will was to use Babylon [cf. Isaiah 10:5-340]; this is the tension in Habakkuk).

⁵ Sproul, Kindle Locations 211-213.

⁶ Ibid., Kindle Locations 240-246.