

Tell Me About God's Will

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To Shawn. Thank you for taking this journey with me.

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Introduction

Are you curious about the topic of God's will? I am too, and I undertook an investigation to uncover the facts.

These notes are organized in a question format to remind me of the lessons I gleaned from the study and to make the material easier for the reader to digest. Some of the examples are diary-like as I reviewed events from my past and shared the experiences in a conversational format.

I realize that Evangelicals do not view the topic of God's will harmoniously and recommend that you read this work with the awareness that others conducting the same research might arrive at different conclusions. This paper reflects what I learned. For maximum benefit you should embark on your own study and form your own conclusions.

If the content helps you, why not send an email to let me know? And feel free to pass this work on to family, small group community, or church to help others who may be encouraged.

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Why discuss God's will?

Growing up in a stern rule-oriented Baptist church I squirmed through many sermons on the mysterious topic of God's will. No one seemed to know how to fathom what that will might be, but the consensus from the speakers was that every teenager needed to figure it out before choosing a college, a career, or a spouse. One wrong decision could shipwreck a life on the reef of self-will. The authority figures did not agree on the process for decoding God's will, a harsh reality that raised many unanswered questions.

I studied the Bible, focused my attention in Sunday School and diligently completed the weekly fill-in-the-blank questions in the student guide. I wanted more than anything to find God's plan for my future and live with a sense of His approval. Absorbing as much as I could from the Bible seemed a logical place to start.

I discovered that there are no verses in the Bible that specify the steps for determining God's will. Key verses with helpful guidelines are included, but to come to the Bible with applications for two prospective colleges, for example, and try to discern which is God's choice proved an exasperating exercise.

What kind of God would have a will for each individual yet make discovering that will so difficult that only a select few (usually those who opted for full-time employment in a ministry capacity) might discover it and be confident with their choice? That image of God did not align well with the Bible's teaching on God's love for me and His desire that I love Him with all my heart, soul, and mind. In clouds of uncertainty I chose a particular college because it was an in-state school and affordable. I specified my major as electrical engineering after some well-intentioned guidance counselor urged me to consider that path. I was a whiz at math, and electrical engineering students digested as many math courses as math majors. The choices tumbled into place one by one, and I thought my direction was cast.

A few days after high school graduation I drove Mom to the hospital where Dad was to undergo major surgery. The surgeon's diagnosis was grim. Dad's insides were eaten up with cancer, and he had but a few months of life remaining. That moment in the waiting room was shattering, but in the coming hours I would be the one sharing the news face-to-face with my brother, Jeff, with Dad's sister, Linda, and finally with Pop and Grandma. And I thought listening to the doctor was harsh.

Pop was a tough guy. I never saw him shed a tear upon the loss of his son, Larry, in the Vietnam War or at the death of his first grandson, my older brother, Rick. Upon hearing Dad's prognosis Pop broke down and cried in my arms. I guess enough bad news was enough. The scene seemed surreal at the time, and the memory etched itself deeply in my mind.

That June day ended for me in the wee hours of the next morning after miles of driving while wrestling with stresses and feelings I never understood. As I lay in the darkness searching for sleep, I realized my childhood was over. I also had serious doubts about God, how He works, who He loves, and the degree of detail in the plan He supposedly held for my life. In that moment my synopsis was that the train had jumped the tracks while God, the heavenly Engineer, was on His break.

I left for college as planned that August and would finish the first semester with 4 A's and a B. New friends joined me on the journey to find our life's purpose through higher education, but looking back I know we were looking in all the wrong places.

Rather than enjoy the care-free campus antics on the weekends I dutifully returned home via several tedious bus rides and much walking so that I might take Mom (who did not drive) to the store and handle as much stuff as I could before returning to school on Sunday afternoon.

Watching Dad melt away as he moved from cane to walker to wheelchair convinced me cancer was no way for a man to have to die. By now I had declared open war on God and wanted nothing to do with Him, His ways, or His words. God had failed me, or so I thought. As a believer in Jesus Christ I had reached the point where trusting God for practical matters was no longer a possibility. I would grit my teeth and make my own way.

One week into the second semester, sitting at my dorm desk beside the dirty window on the sixth floor of the tallest building in that dismal town, I had a spiritual awakening. Running from God was not the direction for me. I needed a course correction that led me toward Him.

I withdrew from college, paid for a needed haircut, and secured employment loading trucks in a warehouse so that I might be home to do whatever I could for my family. I had no idea what my journey would bring, but considering God in my decisions and choices became important. Gradually the topics of God's will, His wishes, and His desires for my life bubbled to the top of my priority list.

My life never included a burning bush experience like Moses, or guidance by the dreams that led Joseph, or visions like the Apostle Paul recounted. I never encountered a pillar of fire by night that morphed to a cloud by day, and though I tried Gideon's fleece method a number of times my results were inconclusive. Nearly forty years after that moment in the dorm I still struggle with discovering God's will for my life. Sometimes the right choice is obvious, but at other times my deliberations reach the point of agony while God remains strangely silent.

Maybe you've been there or are there now? Wondering, praying, lying awake, considering the options, and hoping to avoid the possible consequences of a wrong choice. Knowing that many choices can't be revoked once they are made. Realizing the rest of life will build on the moment at hand.

Or, perhaps you've never considered that God might have a reason for creating you with the unique assets and talents that make up your personality.

Saul, trained to be a rabbi at the best school of his day, zealous beyond measure for his faith, and determined to extinguish Christianity before it caught on, set sail on his life's course. But God had other plans. Saul's conversion to the very faith he hated so vehemently (see Acts 9) marked a turning point in his life. The winds changed as Saul the persecutor became Paul the preacher. As his relationship with God grew stronger and his life focused to a laser pinpoint Paul gained confidence in his purpose. He was certain enough to pen that confidence in the opening lines of several of his letters.

Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God,

Romans 1:1

Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God...

1 Corinthians 1:1 (Selected)

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God...

2 Corinthians 1:1 (Selected)

Paul, an apostle (not sent from men nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead),

Galatians 1:1

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God...

Ephesians 1:1 (Selected)

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God...

Colossians 1:1 (Selected)

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus according to the commandment of God our Savior, and of Christ Jesus, who is our hope,

1Timothy 1:1

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, according to the promise of life in Christ Jesus,

2 Timothy 1:1

Would that level of confidence in one's calling affect motivation on the job? Might the knowledge itself offer encouragement during difficult times? Could the comfort of knowing with certainty be a reward all on its own?

Near the close of Paul's life, in the last letter to his friend, Timothy, Paul wrote these words:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.

2 Timothy 4:7-8

Finished the course? Jesus, the Son of God, described His earthly life in that way in His prayer recorded in John 17.

I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do.

John 17:4

From the cross the Savior uttered a single Greek word, *tetelestai*, translated as "it is finished!" Then He died. That same word was placed on receipts for taxes or other debts and meant "paid in full." Jesus completed the purchase of our salvation in that moment. What an awesome truth!

But what about Paul? Was he arrogant in claiming as Jesus did, "I have finished the course!"? How could Paul be certain that he had done all he was supposed to do? Some might say he was a prisoner of Rome with a death sentence on his head so there was nothing left he could do. I would counter that while a prisoner of Rome Paul accomplished much, having been used of God to write the New Testament books of Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon.

What exactly was Paul claiming by his boast, "I have finished the course?"

I once interviewed several men on the campus of a noted Bible college to ask how they had determined that God's will included preparation for the ministry or the mission field. The question offered to each was the same, "How did you know this is what God wants for you?" Sadly, only one man could articulate with certainty what brought him to that campus. His passion for the future and his determination to do his best in preparing to serve a church spoke volumes. His closing comment found permanent lodging in my memory, "At that point I knew I was called, and I couldn't do anything else."

I wonder if that sentiment powered Paul's claim. Paul was certain that God had called him as an apostle, and he lived his live determined to be and do all he could do and be to fulfill the obligations of that office. Paul's life focus is echoed in these treasured words.

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Philippians 1:21

What did Paul accomplish between his conversion in Acts 9 and that final letter to Timothy?

- Wrote thirteen of the books found in the New Testament including Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon.
- Traveled extensively preaching the Gospel and starting churches in the populated regions bordering the Mediterranean Sea. In all Paul completed 3 such missionary journeys.
- Shared the message of God's Good News with rulers including governors and kings.

Paul's was an impressive and unmatched resume, and these accomplishments add to our understanding of his claim, "I have finished the course." But when we read those thirteen books and study his biography we find there was another side to his life. God's will for Paul included incredible levels of suffering, rejection, animosity, and public humiliation. This list comes from 2 Corinthians 11.

- Hard manual labor. Paul worked as a tentmaker to support himself while he preached.
- Frequent imprisonments.
- Beatings so frequent he lost count of the incidents.

- Life-threatening situations became the norm for Paul.
- Punished by the Jews five times with thirty-nine lashes as the sentence each time.
- Beaten with rods three times.
- Stoned once. (See Acts 14)
- Shipwrecked three times.
- Survived afloat in the ocean for a night and a day.
- Endured much travel often in unaccommodating circumstances.
- Faced dangers from rivers, robbers, the Jews, the Gentiles, and false teachers.
- Knew the perils of all terrains including cities, wilderness, and the sea.
- Experienced sleepless nights.
- Suffered from hunger and thirst, often coupled with cold and exposure.
- Carried the burden of concern for the people to which he ministered.

Paul's example gives me the clear message that if I hope to accomplish something in life which matters then the path ahead may not be a walk in the park. I should expect trouble. Though he was centered on doing God's will and confident of God's call Paul faced truckloads of trouble. Jesus warned about trouble.

I have told you all this so that you may have peace in Me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world.

John 16:33 NLT

After reviewing Paul's example are you still curious about a study of God's will? I learned long ago that God's plan, trouble and all, is superior to anything I might think up for myself. I want to know and do His will, immersing and investing my life in His purposes.

Please, keep reading.

What is God's will?

At sixteen months my granddaughter, Fern, has a will, and under certain circumstances she displays that will. Her tiny mouth came with an ejector mechanism that repels food for which she does not care. The dogs assume spots on either side of her high chair at meal time awaiting the bonanza. Move Fern toward nap time when she's enjoying play mode, and another expression of her will becomes evident. When we speak of a person having a will the meaning is clear. But what do we mean when we refer to God's will?

Bible scholars love to pontificate on the topic of God's will. Their pet terms such as determined will, desired will, hidden will, revealed will, decretive will, preceptive will, perfect will and even permissible will do little to remove the fog shrouding the topic.

Let's enter this study by embracing the fact that God has not revealed everything He knows, and we cannot and do not know as much as He does. As the disciples pressed Jesus for dates and times He stated:

So when they had come together, they were asking Him, saying, "Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or epochs which the Father has fixed by His own authority;

Acts 1:6-7

God reveals as much as He wants us to know. Nothing more. Moses captured the idea in these words.

The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.

Deuteronomy 29:29

God has not left us to grope in the dark in an attempt to figure out His expectations. Deuteronomy 29:29 tells us God revealed what we need to know to obey Him. In the context Moses passed command to Joshua and reminded the people of God's laws. Moses, described as the friend of God, had been God's instrument for giving that law to the people.

Our goal is to study God's Word to learn what pleases Him and then to orient our lives in that direction.

for you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light (for the fruit of the Light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth), trying to learn what is pleasing to the Lord.

Ephesians 5:8-10

Think of God's will as having two aspects. First, there is God's determined will, an overall plan that must play out as God has determined. God in His sovereignty plans, declares (or not), and brings to pass whatsoever He determines. Though men and angels rebel, God remains triumphant, and His determined will happens without deviation. Charles R. Swindoll describes it as "inevitable, unconditional, irresistible, and fixed".

Our knowledge of God's determined will is limited to what we can learn from looking backward into history both globally and personally. We cannot know God's determined will in advance. He alone retains the knowledge of the future. God's determined will has existed from eternity past.

who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity,

2 Timothy 1:9

God's determined will is irresistible. Victor Buksbazen states, "God's determined purpose cannot be <u>annulled</u>..."

All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, But He does according to His will in the host of heaven And among the inhabitants of earth; And no one can ward off His hand Or say to Him, 'What have You done?'

Daniel 4:35

also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will,

Ephesians 1:11

The LORD of hosts has sworn saying, "Surely, just as I have intended so it has happened, and just as I have planned so it will stand, to break Assyria in My land, and I will trample him on My mountains. Then his yoke will be removed from them and his burden removed from their shoulder. This is the plan devised against the whole earth; and this is the hand that is stretched out against all the nations. For the LORD of hosts has planned, and who can frustrate it? And as for His stretched-out hand, who can turn it back?

Isaiah 14:24-27

Second, God has a desired will. This aspect of His will speaks to the desires of God's heart, what He wants his children to choose. God's desired will can be resisted. He did not create man as a robot but as a free-thinker. Man has a will of his own which may or may not line up with God's desired will.

We can know God's desired will because He has revealed it to us in His Word. When we are concerned about pleasing God we adopt certain attitudes and opt for specific actions, those He has revealed to be pleasing to Him.

Swindoll offers a handy comparison of God's determined and desired wills.

Determined Will	Desired Will
Predestined	Calls for our cooperation
Comprehensive, eternal	Limited, temporal
It will occur	It may or may not occur
Cannot be frustrated	It can be resisted
Emphasis: God's sovereignty	Emphasis: Man's responsibility
Purpose: To glorify God	Purpose: To glorify God

For the remainder of the book the term "God's will" refers to "God's desired will" unless specifically tagged otherwise. Let's dig deeper.

Why does God's will matter?

Why does God's will matter? God, through His desired will, chooses men and women to play roles in bringing about His determined will. What a picture of grace! Sadly, some choose to ignore God. His determined will comes to pass anyway, but the one who rejected the opportunity to join God misses out on great blessings.

My wood shop is home to a number of tools. Each was designed for a purpose, and when the tool is employed according to its purpose exciting things happen. Imagine the foolishness of ignoring the saw and deploying a carpet knife when I need to cut a board. Consider the result of pounding nails with a brick instead of a hammer. Some level of work might be accomplished, but time and effort will be wasted, and the results may be less than stellar. By the way, I have performed both of those actions when the appropriate tools were not available.

Realizing that I exist for God's purposes, understanding that my talents and abilities figure in to those purposes, and focusing my life toward discovering and implementing His desired will gives my life its highest level of meaning.

Now, ask yourself this hard question, "Do I believe I am here for a purpose?" Paul addressed this question as he offered comfort to his readers.

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

Ephesians 2:8-10 (Emphasis added)

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.

Titus 2:11-14 (Emphasis added)

For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light.

Colossians 1:9-12 (Emphasis added)

But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired.

1 Corinthians 12:18

David, the psalmist, offers this perspective on life. Clearly he did not believe in a random existence.

You saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in Your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed.

Psalm 139:16 NLT

God has a plan and purpose for you and me as His Word clearly states. Do I want to do that will? Let's investigate some reasons why I should want to know (through the study of the Bible) God's desired will, and why I should live it out through my life choices and actions.

Because I love Him.

Love is a verb and requires more than words. I can talk about love, but the only way to demonstrate the genuineness of my love is through actions. God took great pains to compile His Word, preserve it, and make that gift available to me in myriad translations. Access to study tools such as commentaries, sermons, articles, courses, and books has exploded with the Internet. The issue is not with me knowing God's expectation but rather in my desire to align with Him.

If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.

John 14:15

He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him.

John 14:21

Because a life lived for God is a blessed life.

Blessings come in many forms, not necessarily through an amassing of material goods.

How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, Nor stand in the path of sinners, Nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night. He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, Which yields its fruit in its season And its leaf does not wither; And in whatever he does, he prospers.

Psalm 1:1-3

Because He's coming back.

Remember those times when Mom and Dad left us home alone? Could anything motivate us to cease and desist faster than the sound of the family car pulling up? Our frenzy was proportional to the degree of unacceptability of the activities we'd chosen. That's the idea here. If I believe God's

Word and His promise that He will return then I will opt to live in a manner that will please Him at His coming.

Now, little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming.

1 John 2:28

Because I cannot plan my own life.

Certainly, I can make choices without considering God. I may even get some right, but ultimately I will reach a point where my wisdom and experience run out, and I'm left to navigate uncharted waters. Who better to have on speed dial than the One with the plan, the One who knows the future?

I know, O LORD, that a man's way is not in himself, Nor is it in a man who walks to direct his steps.

Jeremiah 10:23

Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, "I am the LORD your God, who teaches you to profit, Who leads you in the way you should go. If only you had paid attention to My commandments! Then your well-being would have been like a river, And your righteousness like the waves of the sea. Your descendants would have been like the sand, And your offspring like its grains; Their name would never be cut off or destroyed from My presence."

Isaiah 48:17-19

Because God wants me to know His will.

We'll look deeper into this later in the discussion, but we must grasp the truth that God wants us to know what He expects.

So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

Ephesians 5:17

For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light.

Colossians 1:9-12

Because knowing I am living God's will brings assurance.

The sense of well-being that comes from knowing that God is looking at my life with favor is worth pursuing. Epaphras, one of Paul's coworkers prayed that his friends in Colossae would arrive at this point in their spiritual walk.

Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bondslave of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers, that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God.

Colossians 4:12

In short, knowing God's will is about our relationship with Him, not about uncovering a list of mystical steps. Philip Yancy states, "I have begun to wonder if our problem with guidance centers on our tendency to see it in terms of a technique, rather than part of a <u>relationship</u>." Yancy added, "The Bible contains little specific advice on the techniques of guidance, but much on the proper way to maintain a love relationship with <u>God</u>."

How do I discover God's will?

We often ask, "What is God's will for my life?" Well, His determined will is secret, and we can only know that after events unfold into history. And His desired will is spelled out in the Bible, so which aspect of His will are we asking about?

Usually, the answer is neither. We're asking God to lay out for us a complete life revelation—the school I should attend, the job I should choose, the correct spouse to join in holy matrimony, the right home to buy, and so on.

The knowledge of the future is closed to me, and I have to make choices in the present with the knowledge I have at hand. Will God help with my decisions in some way? Consider these promises.

The LORD says, "I will guide you along the best pathway for your life. I will advise you and watch over you. Do not be like a senseless horse or mule that needs a bit and bridle to keep it under control."

Psalm 32:8-9 NLT

Trust in the LORD with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek His will in all you do, and He will show you which path to take.

Proverbs 3:5-6 NLT

Charles Swindoll writes, "God isn't playing a guessing game with his people. His will for us is neither puzzling nor hidden within some deep, dark cave requiring magical words to let us in on the secret. No, nothing like that at all. He wants us to know and to do His will; therefore, He is actively engaged in the process of revealing it. Contrary to popular opinion, anyone who sincerely seeks His will can find it."

But God does not give us a blueprint indexed by the decisions we will face and coupled with an analysis of the various options. God expects us to rely on Him, walk with Him, trust in Him, and use the reasoning abilities He has given us.

Philip Yancy explains, "We would have no meaningful opportunity for faith or obedience if we knew the inevitable result of taking one sort of action and not another. Human freedom would dissolve."

F. B. Meyer wrote, "God has given us these wonderful faculties of brain-power, and He will not ignore them. In grace He does not cancel the action of His marvelous bestowments, but He uses them for the communication of His purposes and thoughts. It is of the greatest importance, then, that we should feed our minds with facts, with reliable information, with the results of human experience, and (above all) with the teachings of the Word of God."

Meyer continues, "...His voice may come to us through the voice of sanctified common sense, acting on the materials we have <u>collected</u>."

Let's dissect a decision. If the decision has only two options, I have a probability of 0.5 in choosing the correct answer. Mix in a reasonable level of due diligence on my part in gathering

supporting data and hashing through the possible consequences, and I have a good chance of choosing wisely.

Most decisions come with more than two options, though, and the more options to be considered the more complex the choice. Consider a decision with five options similar to my experience of choosing a college many years ago.

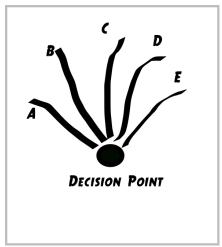


Figure 1 - A typical decision

I've actually heard preachers state that if I miss one choice and deviate from God's will my life will never count for Christ until I go back and choose the correct option and effectively start again. Figure 2 illustrates their idea.

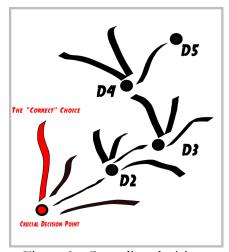


Figure 2 - Cascading decisions

Using their erroneous teaching that one wrong choice will void my life. Let's consider the impact. With five possible choices my probability of selecting correctly drops to 0.2 if there is a single right choice. Let's assume that I missed the correct choice at the beginning and that each subsequent decision in Figure 2 took me deeper into a tangled web. What if the critical decision was my choice of a wife? Years later would I suddenly realize I had blown it? Would restarting even be a

possibility at that point, and how many of God's precepts would I break in ejecting my wife and kids to go back to start?

Skip the little choices I've made in life and focus on some of the big ones.

- My school and major. I chose West Virginia Institute of Technology with my major specified as electrical engineering.
- That career choice led to myriad options of locations and employers. My first was Western Electric in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. During a thirty-two-year engineering career I worked in three states for six companies.
- Should I get married, and is Shawn Eddy the one? Asked and answered May 16, 1981 at our wedding.
- Which car should I buy? (This one continues to arise.)
- What neighborhood and which home should we pick?
- Should we have kids? How many?
- Should I join this church or the one down the street?

If there is a single right choice in each case the probability of making all the decisions correctly rapidly approaches zero. Are you with me?

The correct term for this ignorant teaching about God's will is *horse hockey!* Wade through the Old Testament and compile a list of people who blew a critical decision. Does your list include such slackers as Moses, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, and Solomon? Each of them chose unwisely at some critical juncture of life and generated consequences which complicated their lives. But God continued to use them and bless them. He is God, and He can do that.

Would a loving God make His will so convoluted that a single "wrong" choice by a determined seeker might void the remainder of that seeker's life? Consider the words Moses shared with Israel as he reviewed God's law with them. Moses pointed out that Israel's accountability was based on the precepts God had revealed. In short, God made obvious what He expected.

Now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require from you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and love Him, and to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the LORD'S commandments and His statutes which I am commanding you today for your good?

Deuteronomy 10:12-13

For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?' Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross the sea for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?' But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it.

Deuteronomy 30:11-14

Philip Yancy wrote these wise words, "Does God guide? Yes. I believe He does. Most times, I believe, it's in subtle ways. He feeds ideas into our minds, speaks through a nagging sensation of dissatisfaction, inspires us to choose better than we otherwise would have done, brings to the surface hidden dangers of temptation, and perhaps even rearranges certain circumstances. God's guidance will supply real help, but in ways that will not overwhelm my freedom."

Yancy adds, "For me, guidance only becomes evident when I look back months and years later. Then the circuitous process falls into place and God's hand seems clear. But at the moment of decision, I feel confusion and uncertainty. Indeed, almost all the guidance in my life has been subtle and indirect."

Figure 3 paints a different picture which I believe will shed light on the complexity of decision making. Decisions pile up as life moves forward. Hopefully at each decision, and certainly as I pay attention to the consequences of each decision, my level of wisdom rises. I become better at decision-making.

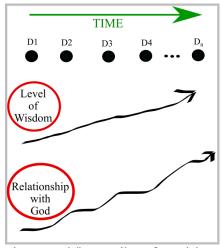


Figure 3 - The Reality of Decisions

Does this imply I outgrow the need to consult God? Absolutely not. My relationship with Him should be growing deeper as my years pass. I consult Him at every decision, but I know He will likely not send a burning bush. He expects me to evaluate my situation and use the wisdom I've accumulated.

Here's a verse to memorize and ponder.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful

Colossians 3:15

In my relationship with Shawn I can sense when I've made a wrong choice. Her responses to me become clipped, and the atmosphere of our happy home becomes frigid. There is a disturbance in the force. Action is required on my part to address our marital disconnect.

In like manner I can also sense when I select an option that will build our marriage. Perhaps my choice is one which delights Shawn like the day I (finally) agreed to plant a hydrangea bush in our garden. I recall one summer mowing weekly around an elderly lady's prized hydrangea with its

voluminous blooms and plentiful bees. I had hoped to avoid a repeat of that experience through the remainder of life.

Shawn loves her hydrangea, and we've moved that huge bush twice trying to find the perfect spot. She sees that bush and the thought in her heart is not that she won the argument but that I chose in favor of her desires and wishes. Our relationship was strengthened by my choice.

This same reasoning applies in my walk with God. Has my prayer life become dry? Does His Word hold little attraction for me? Perhaps I need to review my path and see what I have changed. Does His Word still excite me, and are praise and thanksgiving normal components of my daily life? Then I may be on the right track.

In the next chapter we will do a deep dive on practical steps to follow in decision making.

What practical steps should I follow in decision making?

In this section we want to examine nine life habits that become foundational in sound decision making.

1. Stay right with God.

God has a plan for each life, and His desire is to lead us to fulfill that plan. My relationship with God must remain functional. When the relationship is interrupted the problem is always on my end. Consider these words:

If I regard wickedness in my heart, The Lord will not hear;

Psalm 66:18

If my lifestyle includes provisions for practicing sin in the form of actions, thoughts, or attitudes, then my prayers, my seeking of God's guidance will not connect, and I will be left to stumble on my own.

My situational awareness is incomplete, and my knowledge of future events is exactly zero. Only God has that knowledge and the ability to make the right choice in every decision. Solomon's advice rings true. Why would I ignore God's offer of help?

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, And do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He will make your paths straight.

Proverbs 3:5-6

What does the Bible mean by the words *trust*, and *do not lean*, and *acknowledge?* These are not one-time steps we take but descriptions of our daily life, what we are like in public and private. The words speak to our character and integrity. The book of Psalms opens with a great description of a person who trusts and acknowledges God in every segment of life.

How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, Nor stand in the path of sinners, Nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night. He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, Which yields its fruit in its season And its leaf does not wither; And in whatever he does, he prospers.

Psalm 1:1-3

Paul, writing to the Romans, explained that a transformation must take place in our thinking so that we intentionally think God's way rather than wallow in the thinking patterns of mankind.

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

Romans 12:1-2

2. Devour the Bible.

The Bible is not a crystal ball. We do not pop it open at random, pick the first verse we see, and act accordingly. What we need, if we are to think as God does, is the systematic intake and application of the Bible through personal study, meditation, and solid teaching via church participation, radio, TV, print, or streaming technology. We have myriad options for learning the Bible.

Some seminaries offer MOOCs or Massively Open Online Courses for seekers desiring to go deeper in God's Word. With a computing device and web access anyone anywhere can benefit from these courses.

Students of the Bible will find many passages where the text states plainly, "This is God's will..." Questions surrounding the topics in context are therefore already answered as God has spelled out exactly what He expects. Consider some examples.

For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; and that no man transgress and defraud his brother in the matter because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you.

1 Thessalonians 4:3-6

in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

1 Thessalonians 5:18

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men.

1 Peter 2:13-15

A vibrant relationship with God means I am aware of His expectations, and I orient my life according to His instruction. How important is a proper view of the Bible? Joshua faced a daunting challenge in leading the Israelites into battle against powerful foes. God gave these instructions to the unsettled general.

This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success.

Joshua 1:8

Finally, here is Paul's description of the value of the Bible.

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:16-17

3. Make prayer a habit.

Prayer is not just for emergencies. It is not simply a wish list we rush through to try and convince God to deliver the sought-after answer. Prayer is talking and listening to God. It's repeating His Word back to Him, praising Him for His wonderful works, and thanking Him for His bountiful blessings, none of which we deserve. In short, prayer is time invested in a relationship with the One we love.

We've seen that God has a plan for each life. To build the strongest relationship possible I want to know that plan and join Him in shaping my life accordingly. If I ask His advice, seek His guidance, and yield to His wisdom as I deliberate over the next steps on my journey, is He honored by my actions? Most emphatically, yes!

David prayed in this way.

Teach me Your way, O LORD, And lead me in a level path, Because of my foes.

Psalm 27:11

Paul shared the example of Epaphras who, though he was far from home, prayed for his family and friends with a specific request.

Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bondslave of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers, that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God.

Colossians 4:12

And Jesus had much to teach about prayer.

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!

Matthew 7:7-11

Flying solo with God switched off and out of the picture is foolishness.

4. Keep focused on God.

A powerful question to ask and answer honestly when evaluating options is, "Can I honor God through this?" Any endeavor that opposes my worship of God or that prevents me from asking His blessing is likely the wrong choice.

We have no record of the Old Testament character, Lot, seeking God's direction before moving next door to Sodom. Lot saw what looked to be an opportune location and jumped.

Lot lifted up his eyes and saw all the valley of the Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere—this was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah—like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt as you go to Zoar. So Lot chose for himself all the valley of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed eastward. Thus they separated from each other.

Genesis 13:10-11

Sodom exerted a negative influence on Lot's walk with God, and Lot's days were marked by torment.

and if He rescued righteous Lot, oppressed by the sensual conduct of unprincipled men (for by what he saw and heard that righteous man, while living among them, felt his righteous soul tormented day after day by their lawless deeds),

2 Peter 2:7-8

We must be careful that the options we select do not lead to a lifestyle where time for God succumbs to other demands.

Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

1 Corinthians 10:31

Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.

Colossians 3:17

Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.

Colossians 3:23-24

5. Think.

God has given us minds, intellect, experiences, wisdom and common sense. He expects us to use these resources. Making a list of pros and cons for options then prayerfully considering the list is a valid approach for a believer. Asking questions of others who've faced similar decision points is also a sign of sound decision making. Consider the five-star rating system and product reviews now coupled with online shopping. Have you used those customer testimonials to help with a choice, or perused the ratings offered by a consumer advocacy agency before making a purchase?

Sometimes common sense resolves the issue quickly. Perhaps I sit down with the projected finances and determine there may be room in the budget for a maximum of \$300 for monthly transportation expenses. The Mercedes lot may not be the best place to start my search for a vehicle, and maybe I can decline pricey options to keep the acquisition within my budget.

Is my job demanding more and more time? Am I skipping out on my family, neglecting my spiritual life, and not taking care of myself? Do I need training to acquire new skills to do the work more rapidly, or is the nature of the business changing? Is it time for a new job or a new career? Can I make a conscious decision to jettison some of the demands? Sure, that implies monthly income may be reduced but what do I want to be remembered for? And so the analysis proceeds.

I must use my head and deploy logic and sound thinking. I should reason and evaluate. And all of this must be done in the context of my relationship with God.

Be warned that feelings are unreliable and can be swayed by circumstances and the atmosphere. I try to delay decisions when I am sick, overly tired, or even discouraged. Sober and careful analysis of the options is the goal.

6. Pay attention to circumstances.

For young people living under Dad's authority freedom to decide is often limited by Dad's wishes. In that case God's will is for the young person to obey his parents. Of course, reasonable parents raising sound decision-makers foster discussions at times of disagreement. The young person may not understand the reasons for Dad's choice, but Dad's treating him with value and respect can go a long way to strengthen the relationship.

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.

Ephesians 6:1

When we think we've located the dream job, completed due diligence to secure the position, and received a rejection our discouragement can cloud the scene.

Might God have blocked the door? This could be a case where His determined will overruled our wishes.

Joseph can be the poster child for guidance by circumstances. He was hated by his brothers, sold into slavery, and wrongly imprisoned. In each stage Joseph maintained his integrity and faith in God. He applied himself to do his best in every circumstance and to model an upbeat attitude. Long term God planned in His determined will for Joseph to be an integral part of preserving Jacob's

family, and all the setbacks positioned Joseph for that work. And that's why He is God and we are not. Which of us can plan and orchestrate a life in such a detailed and accurate manner?

What circumstances can and does God use in guiding us? Consider both surplus and shortage of finances. Or health issues. Or family limitations such as caring for a special needs family member. Make a list specific to your own life and prayerfully evaluate the entries.

7. Remain pliable.

God often surprises us with the new assignment, the delay in His answering, or the setbacks we face. Perhaps we see no way the current set of parameters could ever lead to good. Do we take the wheel and attempt to steer ourselves, or do we maintain our awareness that God is the potter and we are the clay? One option leads to dismay, gloom, and even depression. The other leads to a quiet confidence that God knows more than we know.

8. Don't succumb to pressure.

After succumbing to intense pressure from sales people early in our marriage, we found ourselves with increasing levels of consumer debt. The purchases included such luxuries as a bedroom set, and a pickup truck. Neither of us handles confrontation or intimidation, nor are we good at the real time responses needed to battle wits with an accomplished salesperson. To protect ourselves we enacted the \$50 rule. We would not look at and buy in the same shopping trip any item which cost more than \$50. We would walk away, retreat from the intensity, and consider the purchase in the quiet of our home. The strategy worked well.

In making decisions that affect our lives, I advocate a similar strategy. If the situation includes guilt, manipulation, or pressure to choose now, simply walk away. I've heard all the arguments, "But this is the last chance! The door is closing. Prices have never been this low. No payments for five years."

Walk away. Don't let someone else determine the course of your life. If you are unsure about a decision, wait. Stand still. Get the matter settled in your own heart. Let God guide you to the next steps. And the more life-impacting the choice, the longer the evaluation may take.

Don't panic when decisions for others seem to come effortlessly while you remain welded to one spot. I love Peter's beach talk with Jesus where Jesus, asked three times, "Do you love me?"

Peter's stress level was high. He had no idea if Jesus would let him back into the group, especially in light of Peter's triple denial. Jesus gracefully explained that Peter's purpose going forward would be feeding and caring for God's lambs. And Peter turned and saw John which prompted a question.

So Peter seeing him said to Jesus, 'Lord, and what about this man?"

John 21:21

Jesus expertly fielded Peter's question.

Jesus said to him, "If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!"

John 21:22

God has different plans for each of us. Comparing my assignment to that of my friend may lead to dissatisfaction, jealousy or outright disillusionment. My focus must be on my own steps. Paul, in a

passage where he uses the metaphor of a body to address the operation and makeup of the church, reminded his readers that God does the choosing.

But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired.

1 Corinthians 12:18

I must insert a word of caution. Professional ministers can be tyrants in the use of guilt and emotional appeals, and their advice may be skewed toward their own agenda rather than what is best for the parishioner needing guidance. Be careful. Not everyone is called to the mission field or to pastor a church. Let God do the calling and trust Him to confirm the call. Again, do not hesitate to take time to evaluate and pray over the direction you sense God leading. God will not be offended, and He will lead you as a loving shepherd leads a lamb.

9. Be patient.

God does not promise to reveal every part of the plan for my life nor does He share the consequences of the options for every decision.

The steps of a man are established by the LORD, And He delights in his way.

Psalm 37:23

We are guided by steps not yards or miles. We are not given the whole plan, just the next piece. That is why the Christian life is a life of faith and the reason our relationship with God is so crucial to our success.

In another place a psalmist used the metaphor of a lamp to describe God's Word and how we are guided.

Your word is a lamp to my feet, And a light to my path.

Psalm 119:105

Anyone who has used a flashlight to follow a path on a night hike or has walked with a candle in a darkened room understands the field of vision is limited to close proximity. But if the light or candle is used correctly, step by step, little by little, the person moves closer to his destination. Jesus posted this warning in His famous Sermon on the Mount.

So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Matthew 6:34

One day at a time? One step at a time? Does that imply we should not make plans? No. Planning is good, but we make those plans knowing that God may shift our steps left or right toward the goal. Or He may move us toward another goal entirely. The writer of Hebrews used a specific word to express the manner in which we should approach life.

For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.

Hebrews 10:36

The word *endurance* can mean steadfastness, constancy, patience, or perseverance. This is a man who does not lose sight of the end game no matter the trials, sufferings, and setbacks he encounters. He's willing to accept God's course corrections and through growing faith becomes comfortable with not knowing all the twists and turns on the path ahead. He focuses on his steps, one at a time, methodically moving as God leads.

Diagnostic questions for decision making

Let's close with a list of diagnostic questions to use in decision making.

Will God be glorified or dishonored by this option?

Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

1 Corinthians 10:31

Could my choice be a stumbling block to another believer?

But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak.

1 Corinthians 8:9

Will this slow my spiritual progress, displace a spiritual discipline or lead to a compromise of my faith?

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,

Hebrews 12:1

Have I adequately considered the consequences?

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap.

Galatians 6:7

Can I ask God to bless this choice and thank Him for it?

Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.

Colossians 3:17

Have I prayed thoroughly about the decision, and do I have peace in my heart over the choice?

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful.

Colossians 3:15

Is my mind open and is my heart willing should God lead in a different direction?

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

Romans 12:1-2

Resources

Foundations: An Overview of Systematic Theology, Lesson 14 - The Will of God, R.C. Sproul, © 1999 Ligonier Ministries

God's Will, Charles R. Swindoll, Multnomah Press © 1981

Understanding the Will of God, Charles Hornick, unpublished sermon notes

Decision Making: A Credible Alternative to Confusion, Philip Yancy, Moody Monthly, November 1994

The Secret of Guidance, F.B. Meyer, public domain

Meet John Nichols



I write from Raleigh, North Carolina, where I enjoy the company of my wife and best friend, Shawn. We are empty-nesters with two precious daughters, two wonderful sons-in-law, and two outrageously adorable grandchildren. The triple roles of husband, father, and grandfather drive my quest to improve as a man. My family deserves the best as does my Lord. I am a follower of Jesus, and my writing reflects lessons I learn from all these relationships.

I would love to hear from you. Please email me: john@nicholsnotes.com.

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The majority of the material on these sites is original content.

I have published articles for magazines and have created content for church publications. I have several books available and ordering information may be found on my Book Shelf.

- ❖ Facets of Manhood: Polishing Our Character
- Unmasking Satan
- ❖ Hold Fast: Honch Wilson Adventure #3
- Small Group or Sunday School?
- ❖ Tell Me About God's Will
- Quest for the Perfect Wife
- Never Give Up: Honch Wilson Adventure #2
- ❖ Go Eat the Cheese
- ❖ Go for the Gold: Honch Wilson Adventure #1
- ❖ Help! My Daughter's Getting Married!
- ❖ Who Ate My Cheese?

Footnotes

- 1. God's Will, Charles R. Swindoll, Multnomah Press, 1981. Page 7
- 2. The Prophet Isaiah, Victor Buksbazen, Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, 2008. Page 200
- 3. God's Will, Charles R. Swindoll, Multnomah Press, 1981. Page 11
- 4. "Decision Making: A Credible Alternative to Confusion" Philip Yancy, Moody Monthly, November 1994
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- 6. The Secret of Guidance, F.B. Meyer, Public Domain