

“What’s God’s Will for My Life?”

This is one of the most common questions asked of a pastor. To start, I would say that the Bible provides a general calling to all mankind. Meaning, that if one applies the Word of God to his life, he’ll be living within the will of the Lord. However, people are usually asking to know God’s will because they’re seeking direction beyond the general scope of the Bible. For example, some people ask the question looking for clarity about particular decisions – *“What job should I take?”*, *“Who should I marry?”*, or, *“Where should I live?”* Other times, people simply want to know if God could use them for anything significant; they want to know if they matter. This essay will attempt to address many of the motivations we have when we ask, *“What’s God’s will for my life?”*

Before considering anything else, it should be understood that God’s will is revealed after a person has entrusted themselves to Him. Consider the ministry of the Apostle Paul as an example. Saul, as he was called in Hebrew (Paul, in Greek), was a Christian hunter; seeking to kill and imprison those who identified with Jesus. We read in Acts 9 how God got ahold of Saul. The Lord Jesus revealed Himself to Saul, stopping him in his tracks. Jesus blinded Saul’s eyes for a time. In summary, Saul comes to believe that Jesus is God and Saul entrusts himself to Christ. Days later Saul’s eyes would be opened and he would be commissioned by the Holy Spirit to be an Apostle. It wasn’t until after Saul had surrendered to the Lord that the Lord revealed His plans to Saul.

The point here is clear, if you want to know God’s will for your life, He will reveal it to you after you yield yourself to Him. Too many ask to know God’s will, but aren’t ready to live in subjection to Him. In other words, they want to read the contract first before signing the dotted line. God doesn’t work that way. He says, *“Follow Me,”* and then after your heart is entrusted to Him, then He tells you where you’re going.

Consider the calling of Abraham in Genesis chapter 12. You can dig into the specifics on your own, but in summary, God tells Abraham to leave his homeland and relatives and follow Him to a land which the Lord will show him. Then, as you read through the rest of Abraham’s life, he is what is known as a sojourner: a person who moves about, living one place and then another. In short, he never really “arrives” anywhere. God’s will for his life wasn’t so much about where Abraham would go, but who Abraham would become. This is the same for you.

One particular example that highlights this point comes when Abraham and his nephew, named Lot, decide to part ways after their households and livestock become too vast to live on the same land together. In **Genesis 13:9**, Abraham says to Lot, ***“Is not the whole land before you? Please separate from me; if to the left, then I will go to the right; or if to the right, then I will go to the left.”*** Wait a minute, isn’t Abraham supposed to be letting God lead him to a specific geographical spot? If so, why is Abraham letting Lot’s choice determine which way Abraham will go? It seems that Abraham understood that following God’s will was not so much about geography, but obedience in daily living; morally, ethically, righteously. Abraham basically told Lot, *“You decide where I go, I’m just living for the Lord. Geography doesn’t matter.”*

God’s general calling for your life is to become someone He can use; someone who is available, however the Lord should lead in the moment. This is the lifestyle described as being surrendered to the Lord, or walking by His Spirit. It’s a daily choice to say, *“God, I’m available to be used by You today!”* God’s Word is complete with black and white moral and ethical commands which confirm what is right, decent, and fit for daily living. Beyond these, we have freedom to choose.

Consider a college-aged student who is unsure about God’s will regarding which college to choose. What does the Bible say? What college should he pursue? If he gets accepted to more than one college how will he know which one is the one God’s wants for him? The Lord may not direct him in such specifics. Circumstances like this are often where we have freedom to choose, knowing that there can be multiple appropriate choices. Too often we get paralyzed to move forward in life because we nervously think, *“If I don’t choose the one college that God has for me, then I’ve messed up!”* Seeking the Lord is always a good idea, but we can relax about many choices knowing that we have options on some

things, and specifics directives about others. For example, let's say this student gets accepted to the University of Florida, and the University of Wisconsin, and he chooses Florida believing it's God's will. But, what if after the first semester he's failing his classes, he's getting physically and emotionally run down from lack of sleep because he's up late playing video-games with his roommate, he's having sex with his new girlfriend that he met on campus, he's gotten away from his Bible reading and hasn't told anyone about his faith, he's gained twenty-pounds because he's only eating junk in the cafeteria, he's running up a credit card bill because he overspends on clothes and unnecessary dorm supplies, etc. Did God really care about what school he chose, or did God care about how he lived regardless of what school he chose? Perhaps God wanted him to attend at Florida, but what is known for sure is that God cares deeply about the very things this young man dismissed. Here are some examples.

- With regards to his studies – Do them as unto the Lord – Colossians 3:23
- With regards to his finances – Be a steward over all resources – 1 Corinthians 4:2
- With regards to ministry – Be salt and light – Matthew 5:13-16
- With regards to spiritual disciplines – Know God's Word, meditate day and night on it – Deuteronomy 6:6-9
- With regards to the church – Meet faithfully, serve and use your spiritual gift to edify the body – Hebrews 10:25
- With regards to bodily health – Be a steward over your body – 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, 10:31

So, if he says, *"I'm in God's will being at Florida because I prayed hard about it"*, he's missed the things that God truly cares about. If you get accepted to multiple colleges, God doesn't say, *"Don't decide until I tell you which one."* I think God would say, *"Pick your favorite, but just do the things I've made clear in My Word."* The same can be said about a job. Do you have several offers? Great, pick your preferred job and just honor the Lord with how you live and work. Choosing a house? Pick the one you like the most and just steward the house and your finances as unto the Lord.

BOTTOM LINE – Some Christians become paralyzed in moving forward in life because they believe any decision has to be confirmed first by God.

Consider marriage, what does God's Word say? How should one choose a spouse? God's will on this matter is actually quite simple and clear. There are a couple of key scriptures to consider when making this decision. First, one man marries one woman according to Genesis 2:24. Second, choose a spouse that has the same faith pursuit in Jesus as you have, according to 2 Corinthians 6:14. In 2 Corinthians 6:14, Paul says that believers are not to be bound together with unbelievers, or, another translation says that believers should not be unequally yoked. This expression "unequally yoked" refers to the yoke put over the neck of two oxen; a crossbeam that forces the two beasts to walk in the same direction. Simply put, if you are in a yoked relationship, such as a spouse, best-friend, girlfriend, or business partner, that other person influences your decisions. Christians shouldn't be bound with another person who might influence us in a different direction than what the Spirit is prompting us to take.

As profound as these two commands are, they are also quite simple. God's Word gives much liberty with choosing a spouse, as long as the spouse fits these two criteria. Too often we falsely think, *"God has only one woman for me on the planet, and I better find her or else I've married the wrong woman!"* This is not the case. I'm not saying a person shouldn't pray about who they marry, but there are many people that fit the criteria for an appropriate spouse. If you are a Christian man in search of a Christian wife, and you know a handful of single ladies that fit the criteria of being equally yoked with you, then you have the freedom to choose which one you want to pursue.

"How do I know I'm hearing from the Lord and not talking myself into something?"

Below are seven steps to consider when trying to navigate decisions. Keep in mind, when trying to discern God's will, you are wise to involve many factors and not lean exclusively on one, with some exception, which I'll explain.

1. READ – If you want to know God's will, read His Word. Sometimes we're lazy and think, *"Can't I just pray and have God tell me His will?"* Often, the words I need to hear have already been spoken in the Bible. I recall a conversation with a friend who was a Christian but at the time was immature in his faith. He said, *"I'm praying for God's will if I should go away on a beach weekend with my girlfriend or not."* To which I replied, *"Why are you praying for that? You*

already know God's will about staying in a hotel with your girlfriend. It's called fornication, and God's Word is clear that it's sin." In short, we ought not to pray for things that God's Word has already given clear guidance about. When it comes to morals and ethics, the Bible is black and white. When God's Word gives instruction as to what we can and can not do, no other factors need to be considered, i.e. no prayer is needed to discern His will. 2 Timothy 3:16 says, ***"All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness."*** Here, ***"teaching"*** means instruction, ***"reproof"*** means to rebuke, ***"correction"*** means restoration, and ***"training"*** means to coach along. So, the Bible instructs us with what the right path is, rebukes us when we take the wrong path, restores us back onto the right path, and coaches us as to how to stay on the right path.

2. MEDITATE – *"Okay, I've read God's Word, now can I just pray and ask Him to tell me what to do?"* Prayer doesn't bypass my need to think; meditation is required. The Bible commands us to meditate on God's Word. Meditating is not the same as the kind of "eastern meditation" you may have seen, where people sit on the floor and close their eyes and practice emptying their minds in silence. Biblical meditation is the opposite of this nonsense. Biblical meditation means to fill your mind with what you've read; to chew on it, consider it, wrestle with it. Meditating on the Word is one way God reveals the depth and breadth of His Word to us. Joshua 1:8 says, ***"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."***

3. MEMORIZE - God often works by bringing to mind what I've previously discovered. I've memorized hundreds of Bible verses and although I couldn't recall them all if someone were to challenge me, the Holy Spirit often brings to mind verses I've memorized when the occasion calls for it. When a person is considering God's will, the Holy Spirit often reminds them of a passage or verse that they've discovered previously. The Spirit has a ministry of counseling and guiding us by reminding us of our prior studies. This is one reason why it's so important to get into God's Word daily. Psalm 119:11 says, ***"Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against You."*** Colossians 3:16 says, ***"Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God."*** These verses are expressions of what's happening within the believer; expressions of what the believer has frequently read and attended to.

4. WATCH - One way to discern God's will is to pay careful attention to what opportunities may or may not be opening up for you. When Israel sought God's will, the Red Sea parted. When friends prayed for Peter who was in prison, his chains fell off and the prison doors swung open. Sometimes circumstances can insist on a particular course of action. Other times circumstances are vague, like when you have multiple options to choose from. Perhaps you've been given multiple job opportunities, or you got accepted into more than one college, etc. Ultimately, circumstances alone are not always a clear indicator of God's will, though they always need to be considered.

Two things are important to keep in mind. First, just because an opportunity presents itself, doesn't mean you ought to do it. Second, when no opportunity seems available, it doesn't mean God has shut the door forever. Consider my friend George. George was an inmate who attended my Bible study when I was a Chaplain in Pennsylvania. George was in his early twenties, and he had spent the last several years of his life being in and out of jail/prison. His latest charges led to George being deported to Mexico. Although George was raised in the United States from the time he was a baby, he was actually born in Mexico and had no U.S. citizenship. Before he left the jail, George was scared and told me that he didn't know anyone in Mexico and didn't speak Spanish. I gave him my contact information and asked him to keep me updated so that we could pray together.

Days after he left the jail, he emailed me telling me he was stuck in Tijuana and didn't know anyone. I told him that I'd been to Tijuana about 30 times on short-term mission trips, back when I was a pastor in California. I gave him the names of some pastors to reach out to. Soon, he had contacted a pastor and was able to stay at the man's home. After a few weeks the pastor had encouraged George to volunteer with their church's street ministry to the teenagers. As George served the youth with games, crafts, and Bible studies, his heart for ministry grew.

One day George called me and said, *“What do you think about me becoming a pastor?”* Keep in mind that George had no formal education, no real documentation, and no money. I said, *“Let’s just pray about it.”* To make a long-story short, about two weeks passed and George called me back and said, *“You’ll never believe me, but I have a full-scholarship to a Bible college/seminary in London, England!”* I thought he was kidding, but he wasn’t. With no money and no plans ahead of him, the Lord orchestrated that he had a plane ticket to England and a residential full-ride scholarship to a fine Bible college. George sent me pictures of himself standing outside the school.

In about two years George met a beautiful woman and was married. A year later he had a son and had graduated. He sent many pictures along the way. Now he’s serving as a pastor in London in a neighborhood church and volunteers twice a week ministering to inmates at a city jail! When circumstances seem hopeless, God can open all kinds of doors!

5. LISTEN – Prayer involves both talking and listening to God. We find it easier to do the talking part and usually struggle with the listening part. With regards to prayer, the Bible gives some big commands, like what we read in 1 Thessalonians 5:17, ***“Pray without ceasing.”*** How does one pray all the time, without ceasing? Well, this happens in two ways. First, it’s not that God wants us to talk without stopping. That’s not the point. Rather, we ought to take things to the Lord in prayer constantly throughout our day. You make hundreds of decisions in a day, so whatever you’re doing next, offer a short prayer to the Lord. For example, *“God, give me patience with my wife this morning while we get ready.”* *“God, as I drive to work, ready my heart to be sensitive to the circumstances I’ll encounter today.”* *“God, give me wisdom as I enter into my office and work for the next eight hours. Let me be led by Your Spirit.”* And so on.

The second way we pray without ceasing is to stay alert and listen for how the Holy Spirit prompts us. Colossians 4:2 says, ***“Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving.”*** The idea here, and the practicality of praying ***“without ceasing”*** insists on the idea of always being available to hear and receive from the Holy Spirit, just like a soldier who is at his post, alert and keeping watch for what may come. We need to be available to be interrupted by the Lord at any point in our day, and then to yield to those promptings. Listening to God is key to knowing His will. When you think you’re sensing God’s prompting, pause and pray, *“You have my attention, Lord! Are you telling me to do ____?”*

6. COUNSEL - Seek advice from wise believers, asking them to join you in prayer. Proverbs 1:5, ***“A wise man will hear and increase in learning, a man of understanding will acquire wise counsel”*** Before I decided to pursue pastoral ministry full-time, I prayed to see if I should quite my job and take this step. In making that decision, I reached out to about six older wiser Christians who I considered mentors. I asked them individually to join me in praying for this decision for the next two weeks, and at the end of the two weeks I’d contact them to see how they discerned that I should proceed. When the time came, each of them affirmed that they believed God was calling me to full-time vocational ministry. In that time too, I sat with my pastors and sought their counsel about the pitfalls of ministry and what I should be preparing for, etc. So, seeking wise counsel is a Biblical way to help discern God’s will.

7. MOVE - Avoid feeling paralyzed unless God *“tells me what to do next.”* Some people are afraid to make a mistake, or think that every decision must be affirmed by the Lord Himself before they can proceed throughout their day. This isn’t a healthy way to live. Keep in mind that many decisions we face aren’t matters of sin and righteousness. God gives us free will and the Holy Spirit works within our choices. I’ve provided examples above about choosing a spouse, a job, a college, etc. Often God is delighted to give us options. It’s the moral and ethical decisions that are rigid and must be strictly adhered to.

Other Considerations

Here are some questions to ask yourself regarding following God’s lead. Is my passion there? Is my vision clear? Is my character submitted? Am I hearing God’s voice? Is my pace sustainable? Is my heart growing? Is my calling sure? Are others confirming things in my life that I believe are of the Lord?

Conclusion

Review your daily goals with God.

“God is there something you want to say to me today?”

Saturate your mind with God’s Word. Apply His morals and principles to your daily choices.

Don’t live for yourself, but live for God and other people; God first, others second, yourself third.

Don’t be paralyzed in moving forward in life by falsely believing that God Himself must confirm all your decisions.

Preacher A.J. Gordon – *“If I depend on planning, I will get what planning can do for me. If I depend upon organization, I will get what organization can do for me. If I depend upon money, I will get what money can do for me. But if I depend upon prayer, I am brought face to face with what almighty God can do for me.”*