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## **The Will of God: How do I know what I am supposed to do with my life?<sup>1</sup>**

### I. Introduction:

- A. How many of you have ever asked yourself, “What is God’s will for my life?”
  - 1. How many of you have ever wondered what job you were supposed to take or where you were supposed to go to school?
  - 2. How many of you have ever wondered what ministry or mission trip you were supposed to take part in?
- B. What were these experiences like?
  - 1. Confusing?
  - 2. Frustrating?
  - 3. Comforting?
  - 4. Assuring?
  - 5. Empowering?
- C. What does it mean to be in the center of God’s will? How do we know we are doing God’s will?

II. **Organization:** This morning we are going to ask the question, “How do we know we are doing God’s will?” by looking at the way Scripture talks about God’s will, probing our hearts, and then by attempting to understand how the bible directs us to know God’s will.

### III. What is ‘God’s will’?

- A. We use the term ‘God’s will’ in at least three different ways, while the bible seems to only talk about it in two ways.
  - 1. Biblical: God’s will of decree, or, God’s secret will -
    - a. God has decreed or declared and determined the beginning of history to the end so that everything that takes place, everything that has taken place, and everything that will take place happens because God has willed it.
      - **Ephesians 1:11-12** <sup>11</sup> In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, <sup>12</sup> so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory.
      - **Acts 4:24-25** <sup>4</sup> And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, <sup>25</sup> "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, <sup>26</sup> who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, " Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? <sup>27</sup> The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed'- <sup>27</sup> for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, <sup>28</sup> to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

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<sup>1</sup> The material in this lesson largely follows the content and organization of Kevin DeYoung’s book, Just Do Something: A Liberating Approach to Finding God’s Will, or, How to Make Decisions without Dreams, Visions, Fleeces, Impressions, Open Doors, Random Bible Verses, Casting Lots, Liver Shivers, Writing in the Sky, Etc., published in 2009 by Moody Publishers.

- **Isaiah 46:9-10** I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, <sup>10</sup> declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose,'
  - **Proverbs 21:1** The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will.
- b. Thus, God has decreed what will take place. He is sovereign over history, and yet man remains responsible for his actions and is justly culpable for his actions.
- **Luke 22:20-22** <sup>20</sup> And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. <sup>21</sup> But behold, the hand of him who betrays me is with me on the table. <sup>22</sup> For the Son of Man goes as it has been determined, but woe to that man by whom he is betrayed!"
  - **Acts 2:22-23** <sup>22</sup> "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know- <sup>23</sup> this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.
- c. No one can change God's sovereign determined plan for history.
- d. The world was planned out from the beginning. Sin was decreed by God, and yet he is not responsible for evil. Salvation from sin was decreed by God for the display of his own glory.
- e. God's will, then, can mean this secret will or will of decree.
2. Biblical: God's will of desire, or, God's revealed will -
- a. *The bible also speaks of God's will as that which God desires for us to do as he has revealed in Scripture.*
- **1 John 2:15-17** <sup>15</sup> Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. <sup>16</sup> For all that is in the world- the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions- is not from the Father but is from the world. <sup>17</sup> And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.
  - **Hebrews 13:20-21** <sup>20</sup> Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, <sup>21</sup> equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.
- b. God's will then, can also mean what God has required of us. It is what he has told us to be like. It is his commands to be holy as he is holy.
- c. Both of these ways of talking about God's will can be seen side by side in Scripture:
- **Deuteronomy 29:29** <sup>29</sup> "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.
  - God's will of decree is a secret to us. We do not know what will happen tomorrow, but we know how God has told us to live.
3. Unbiblical: God's will of personal direction -
- a. Unfortunately, Christians today talk about God's will in personal individual ways that mixes these two views into one distorted view.
- We have been taught to think that God has a private plan for your life that isn't found in Scripture, God's revealed will, and isn't the same as his sovereign decrees, God's decreed will, because we can miss it if we don't listen to the Holy Spirit's personal direction.
  - This is not the biblical view of decision making.

- b. However, because God has a decreed will, there is a specific plan for our lives that is for our good, to be made like Jesus, that we can look back on and see his hand over our lives all along.
    - We can look backward to see how God has brought us where we are for our good, but we aren't supposed to look forward with the burden of reading into the future to find what we are to do.
  - c. The problem comes when we think that it is our job to figure out what God's decreed will for our lives is instead of his revealed will. His decreed will is going to happen no matter what, so why worry?
- B. The Conventional View:
- “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.”<sup>2</sup>
1. The conventional view says that we must be in the center of God’s will for our lives. If we aren’t in the center, we will miss God’s best.
  2. This mindset leads us to expect God to reveal to us something not already revealed in Scripture, but we struggle how to read the signs. So, when it comes to making decisions, we talk about and look for:
    - a. open doors
    - b. feelings
    - c. impressions
    - d. sensations
    - e. dreams
    - f. hearing voices
    - g. a sense of peace
    - h. etc.
  3. We look for, expect, and talk about these signs because we do not believe Scripture is sufficient in giving us clarity as to what we are to do.
  4. The result is:
    - a. passivity, confusion, paralysis, frustration, disappointment
    - b. overconfidence, blindness, an inability to listen to others, pride

#### **IV. Looking to the heart of the question:**

- A. Why do Christians generally hold to the conventional view?
  1. We have been taught this view.
    - a. It is how we have been taught, and it is how we speak all the time in church and with one another.
    - b. It has simply become the implicit cultural understanding of Christian living.
  2. We want 100% confidence that we are doing what is right before we do it.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. pg, 25-26.

- a. Courage could be the issue. We don't want to take risks, so we find comfort in believing that God already has the way planned, so to speak.
    - b. Wanting to always be right could be the issue.
  3. We want our lives to be perfectly fulfilling, and we believe it won't be unless we are 'in the center of God's will.'
    - a. The fear of suffering could be the issue.
    - b. The desire for prosperity, comfort, and ease could be the issue.
    - c. The desire for ministry significance, i.e. God doing 'great things' through us.
  4. We have too many choices.
    - a. In an age where choice is celebrated with utmost value, we are not capable of constantly choosing.
    - b. Our lives are not made happier by always choosing what we want.
- B. But, underneath all of this is really a failure to apply the gospel message to our lives.
1. The gospel is the good news that Jesus Christ died for sin according to the Scriptures, and that he rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures.
    - a. If we believe in this message because we have seen that we are wholly sinful and totally unable to merit any acceptance before God because we are enslaved to sin, then we are justified before God through faith and faith alone, and adopted as God's children.
    - b. Through faith in Jesus Christ, we are united to him and have received a new identity, an identity that is secure and is not affected by our failures and sin. We are God's children through faith, for we have received his grace through faith, once and for all.
    - c. This means then, that even though we still sin, and even though we mess up and make dumb mistakes, and even though we still do not fully know God's character or understand Scripture, we belong to God.
    - d. This means that even though we might experience hardship and suffering in this life, we are promised that Christ does satisfy us and that he will give us all things in the future.
  2. The conventional view of determining God's will is not rooted in faith in the gospel but in works righteousness.
    - a. The idea that we must be in the center of God's will in order to receive blessing and in order for us to feel close to God reveals that our choices, actions, and works still operate as our means of acceptance before God.
    - b. This is why pride and despair characterize so many Christians when it comes to determining God's will for their life.
      - Some people are convinced they know God's will of direction for their lives because they have seen some sign or felt some leading, but if you challenge it, they become indignant, angry, or disdainful with you. How could you possibly question what they are doing? They have subjectively determined what God wants them to do and they are obedient. This response only comes from us when we find significance and identity in being 'the mature' Christian. We think ourselves more righteous than others and are offended that people question our ability to know God's will.
      - Some people cannot ever rest and be sure that they know 'God's will' for them and so they remain passive and despair that God is angry with them.

They often feel unspiritual and wonder why everyone else is so happy and confident about what they are supposed to be doing. People tell them that when God leads you, you 'know it's his voice', so they conclude God does not speak to them since they obviously don't know it, and they feel unspiritual and unloved.

- c. Both of these situations stem from us finding our security, happiness, righteousness, and sense of acceptance before God from our ability to 'know' what we are supposed to be doing and from our ability to 'know' how to sense God's direction.
3. The conventional view of determining God's will is not rooted in faith in the gospel but in a desire to get from God a comfortable life rather than finding our joy and satisfaction in him despite pain and suffering that comes.
  - a. The idea that we must be in the center of God's will in order to receive blessing shows that we are seeking blessings and comforts from God rather than God.
    - **Jeremiah 29:11** <sup>11</sup> For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.
    - This verse is constantly misapplied. Christians often think that God has one plan out there that is secret, but if you can find it, you will have a prosperous happy life.
    - In context, God is actually speaking to Judah in exile in Babylon. Judah has been judged by God because of their covenant unfaithfulness as God's holy people.
    - In this verse, God is telling Judah that this judgment will pass, and that God will use this judgment to discipline his son Israel and refine it to be restored to the land of promise. This is not a plan to prosper individual Christians.
    - In fact, since Christ is the true Israel, and even though he was faithful to the covenant, he underwent an exile on our behalf when he died for us and incurred judgment on the cross. But, in God's faithfulness, he was faithful to his covenant promises and raised Jesus up on the third day, exalting him as king and giving him all things.
    - If we believe in Jesus, we will share in his prosperity, BUT, first we must share in his suffering until he returns.
  - b. Our desire to be in the center of God's will so that we can prosper shows that we do not believe that Christ alone can satisfy, but rather we seek to use God to get prosperity. This is idolatry.
- C. The results of the conventional approach and not applying the gospel to our lives:
  1. We focus on non-moral decisions. (What should I eat for dinner?)
  2. We begin to believe that God is sneaky or distant, or worse, that we have our thumb on God and always know with certainty what he is up to.
  3. We become preoccupied with the future.
  4. We neglect personal responsibility, accountability, and initiative. (Like when someone breaks up with a girlfriend or boyfriend because God told them to.)
  5. We are trapped in subjectivism. (We can never be sure if Satan or God opens a door or gives us a feeling since Satan parades around like an angel of light.)
- D. How then do we move forward?

## V. A better approach:

A. There are two critical passages that I think help us see how we should understand and seek God's will:

1. **Matthew 6:9-10** <sup>9</sup> Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. <sup>10</sup> **Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.**
  - a. It is clear from this passage that Jesus teaches us to pray that our lives would conform to his revealed will in Scripture.
  - b. In heaven, everyone does as God pleases all the time because there is no sin in heaven. On earth, sin taints the world so that God's revealed will is not obeyed. Thus, we are to pray that on earth, God's revealed will would be obeyed in our lives just as it is in heaven, where God's revealed will is always obeyed.
  - c. In both heaven and earth, God's secret will always happens. (see above)
2. **Matthew 6:25-34** <sup>25</sup> "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? <sup>26</sup> Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? <sup>27</sup> And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? <sup>28</sup> And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, <sup>29</sup> yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. <sup>30</sup> But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? <sup>31</sup> Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' <sup>32</sup> For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. <sup>33</sup> **But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.** <sup>34</sup> "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.
3. These passages give us two important things to remember:
  - a. Don't be anxious about the future, but trust God to provide what you need.
    - We don't know what will happen tomorrow. That is not our concern.
  - b. Seek God's kingdom and his righteousness which is revealed to us in Scripture.
    - We are not to try and figure out the future, the decreed will of God.
    - We are to seek to know the king and be obedient to his laws.

B. This means our focus should not be on discovering some hidden plan but seeking holiness and wisdom.

1. **1 Thessalonians 4:3** <sup>3</sup> For this is the will of God, your sanctification:
2. **1 Thessalonians 5:16-18** <sup>16</sup> Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup> pray without ceasing, <sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

C. What this does not mean:

1. I am not saying that God does not ever speak in any way outside of Scripture. We see in the bible that he speaks through a donkey, in dreams, visions, and audibly. But, these experiences are never sought by those who have the experience. (The one exception that I know is Gideon, but his approach to knowing what God wants him to do is portrayed negatively as testing God).
2. The normal way God speaks and guides us is through Scripture. We should not seek other avenues to hear God's voice.

D. Jesus Christ is the fullest revelation to us concerning the character, plans, and will.

1. **Hebrews 1:1-2** Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, <sup>2</sup> but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he <sup>3</sup> created the world.

2. Expect God to use Scripture to guide you, but read Scripture not to hear God's voice behind the text or through it but understand that the text is God's voice. The bible is about Jesus, and the words are God's words.

E. Implications and Applications:

1. Most importantly, repent of the self-righteousness of gaining righteousness or acceptance before God by knowing what God wants you to do.
  - a. Be careful to see if you think yourself more spiritual than others because you hear God's voice all the time.
  - b. Examine yourself to see if you become defensive when others challenge the direction you think you are supposed to go in.
  - c. Listen to wiser Christians who might understand God's character and kingdom better.
  - d. Rest knowing that God accepts you because of Jesus, not because of your right decisions.
2. We are free to do what we want providing we are walking in the Spirit in community.
3. There is no one right way for us to live our lives in terms of a specific job or specific marriage partner.
  - a. This does not mean that all options are equal. Some are definitely wiser choices than others.
  - b. This means that one of the factors to consider when thinking about what is wise is considering our desires. We must seek to understand our desires to find out if they are coming from a place of worship or idolatry. If we desire that which is good, it is ok to do what we want!
4. Be cautious with feelings and open doors. They could come from the devil.
5. Seek to be wise by praying that God would make you wise. This is a lot harder than asking God to give you a feeling. It takes longer too!
  - a. Study God's word in community. Attend church. Read good theology.
  - b. Pray for wisdom.
  - c. Listen to other Christians.
  - d. Pray that God would reveal to you what your hearts worships.

F. Jesus Christ is the focus of God's decreed will, and Jesus Christ alone obeyed God's revealed will.

1. If you are burdened by what has been said today, or if you are angry about what has been said, remember that God's will was to send his Son to save us from sin. Do not despair in guilt or shame. Do not harden your heart in pride. Trust that Jesus' righteousness is our own through faith.
2. If you are confused and bewildered about how to move forward, remember that Jesus understood the Father's will and obeyed it perfectly so that all who believe in him might be credited as righteous!

G. For a fuller treatment on this issue which is more balanced and will deal with the many questions that you might have, please read Just Do Something by Kevin DeYoung. It is very short and very helpful.