

Discerning God's Will

September 24, 2017

Although 9 out of every 10 of Americans believe in God, as you can imagine, what everyone believes about God can quite different.

- If there is a God, for example, **then is He active** in our lives?
- Or **does He just make a few cameo appearances** from time to time?
- Is He the kind of God we can **have a connection with**?
- Or someone whom we're meant to **simply appreciate from afar**?

Is He the kind of God who simply **set the world in motion** and left the rest up to us?

- Or the kind of God **that is orchestrating all the events** on earth according to His purposes?
- I'm sure you've heard questions like these... and have even asked a few of them yourself.
- One of the questions I hear a lot is **whether God has a specific will or plan for their life**, and, if so, how can you know it?

It's a good question. In fact, let me ask you... **how many of you are in a place in your life...**

- or **coming to that place** of having to make a pretty significant decision? **A career** or **financial** decision?
- A decision regarding a relationship? **Something that could impact** a whole season if not the rest of your life?
- A decision **where it would be really helpful** if God would show you what He thinks is best?

Well, over the years, I've seen Jesus-followers employ all different approaches to determine what God's will might be for them.

- There's **the ol' Finger-in-the Bible approach**, for example, where you just open the Bible anywhere...
- and point your finger at the verse you hope will answer all your questions!

One person looking to buy a new car used this approach in order to **decide which compact car** he should purchase.

- Basically, he opened the Bible and landed in **Philippians 2:2**, which says, *“Make my joy complete, be of the same mind, having the same love, being of one accord.”*
- So, **what did he do?** Yes, he bought a Honda Accord!

A bride planning her wedding used this approach **to determine which verse from the Bible** they would have the baker print on their wedding cake.

- Truth is, it sort of worked for her this time, because she landed in **1 John 4:18**, which says *“There is no fear in love; for perfect love casts out all fear.”*
- The problem is that the baker misunderstood and mistakingly embossed **John 4:18** onto their cake, which says
- *“For you have had five husbands, and the one whom you now have is not your husband.”*

Then there’s the Anything Goes Approach to discerning God’s will, where all the coincidences in your life may in fact be orchestrated by God.

- Maybe you interested in meeting Mrs. right and, while at the supermarket holding a chocolate bar,
- you accidently collided with a woman holding some peanut-butter.
- I mean, how could she *not* be the right one?!

Well, as much as the relationship between chocolate & peanut butter may have been made in heaven,

- it **doesn’t automatically mean** the relationship between that man and the woman is!
- In fact, there are at least an equal number of times when **what seems most obvious,**
- **is the last door God** would want you to walk through.
- In fact, when it comes to God’s will, God may be **calling you to wrestle your way through a closed door,**
- rather than walking easily through the wide open door in front of you.

Another related approach to discerning God's will **is the Pain-Level Approach**, which has to do with whether something is difficult or not.

- Now, the thing about this one is that you could go off on either direction.
- For some people, the harder, the messier, the more sacrifice something requires, the **more you can be assured** that God is behind it.

And, honestly, **what's behind that** is often a pretty punitive view of God *rather than* a God who has a plan "*to prosper you and give you hope*," as the Bible says.

- But far more common than that is **the idea that God is only behind those things** that assure my comfort... those things, which **offer quick & easy results**.
- "*God seemed to call me to a particular ministry,*" for example, "*but because it was challenging, I decided that He wasn't in it.*"
- "*God seemed to put it on my heart to go to this home group... but the drive is a bit inconvenient. I must've got it wrong.*"

Another way we might try and discern God's will is the old **Give-me-a-sign approach**.

- "God, if you really want me to forgive and be kind to my boss the way Your Word says I should, then,
- ***even though it's still September***, let it snow tomorrow morning!"
- You see, as much as God **may give you some sort of "sign"** to help you discern what He's doing or what He's calling you to, at times,
- we can use the "give-me-a-sign" approach **as a way of avoiding what we already know** God is calling us to.

Of course, **all of this raises some of the big questions** humanity has been asking for ages...

- And that is whether or not God has **one specific and unique blueprint** already designed for each of our lives.
- Whether you were created, for example, **to be born** exactly where you were born;
- Whether you were **meant to go to the college** you went to, where every other option would've been wrong;

- Whether you were **designed to work** where you're working right now and nowhere else.

You see, **if this is true**, then whenever we deviate from God's blueprint, then we have to assume that everything else that follows is second-best or worse.

- Truth is, a lot of people believe this... that **if we make the wrong choices...**
- even when **neither choice is implicitly wrong...**
- then we can **forever mess up God's plan** for our lives.

So, the question becomes even more important then... *"How can I determine God's plan? How can I know God's will?"*

"I've got two possibilities for a job, which one is the right one and which is the wrong one?"

- And, the pressure's on, because, to one degree or another, you're concerned that if you don't get it exactly right,
- then you're in trouble... that your life will always be less than God's best.

The problem is that whenever we're looking at *what's God's will is*, we're typically asking the "**who, what, when, and where**" kind of questions.

- **Who should I be with? Where should I live? What job should I take?** And so on.
- Now, that doesn't mean that God isn't interested in those things **or in the choices we make** concerning all that.
- And yet, the focus on the "who, what, where, when" questions can easily confuse rather than clarify.
- **I think, instead, we should be asking more of the "why & how" type of questions.**

So, **rather than focusing on whether God** would want you to take one particular job over another,

- perhaps the question He'd rather you ask is, "**Why are you interested in either of these job?"**

- Or, ***“How would this job open doors in my life to love and bless those I’m working with?”***

You see, more often than not, God is wanting us to focus more on the why/how questions, rather than the who, what, where, when.

- And the **reason for that is** because God is far more interested in the **kind of person you’re becoming**
- than all the specifics such as “what job” or “what person” or “where should I live” and so on.

Now, again, that doesn’t mean He’s not interested in those things... or that He won’t ever specifically call us to one thing over another.

- But, **when it comes to discerning His will and purposes**, I do believe that we’ve gotten a little off balance in our approach.
- For example, do you want to know what God's will is?

Well, in **1 Thessalonians 4**, Paul tells us that ***“It is God’s will that you should be sanctified.”***

- In other words, it’s is God’s will that we should grow & mature as Jesus followers.
- So when it comes to an opportunity before us we can ask ourselves **will this help me or not help me grow and mature in Christ?**

You see, when we think of God’s will, we tend to focus on who, what, where, and when...

- **But, God’s will** is so much more about the **kind of person you are and**, even more so, the **kind of person you’re becoming**.
- Again, *that doesn’t mean* that He’s **not interested in who you marry**, or **what college** you go to, or **what job** you should take, for example... those are important questions.

But, at the end of the day, He’s even more interested in who you are and who you’re becoming.

- And so, **more than the “who,”** *“Should I marry this person,”* **we should look at the “how”**...
- *“How will our being together make us more devoted followers of Jesus?”*

- “How will our being together help us to fulfill the calling God has placed in each of our lives?”

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 says, **“Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; Give thanks in all things, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.”**

- What is God’s will for you? Should I be here or there? Should I be with this person or that person? Should I take this job or that job?
- Well... here’s **His will** for you... to **be a joyful, thankful person**... the kind of person **who’s dependent upon God** in prayer.
- What is God’s will? **1 Peter 2:15** says, “For is God’s will that you live honorable lives...”

So, let me ask you... in seeking the heart of God, do you invite the Spirit to **not only** direct you...

- but to also **reveal what your motivations are** as you seek His will?
- **Psalm 139:23-24** says **“Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life.”**

Have you prayed a prayer like that? Have you asked Him... “Am I becoming the kind of person you want me to be?”

- “God, **is there anything driving my motivations** that are ungodly?”
- “*Is there anything going on in my heart that I’m not aware of?*”

You see, here’s the deal... **If you see life simply as a blueprint to follow**, then you have to ask yourself how detailed that blueprint is.

- I mean, does it come down to what parking space you park in at the mall?
- “*God, should I eat the Fruity Pebbles or Cocco Puffs this morning?*”
- Maybe His blueprint applies only to the big decisions in life.

And yet, **if you think His blueprint applies** only to the big decisions of life,

- then **you'll have to define** what kinds of decisions are “big” and which ones aren't.
- And, what if you miss that big decision? what if I get it wrong?
- Is there redemption? Or is your whole life relegated to second best because of that one big mistake?

So, let me ask you... Did Moses and David miss out on opportunities because of some bad mistakes they made?

- Yes! But, at the end of the day, who they were becoming seemed to always be most important to God.
- Some of their bad decisions and actions did have an impact on their lives.
- I mean, **Moses was never allowed to enter** the Promised Land and **David was never allowed to build** the Temple.
- But, at the end of their lives, **Moses** was called a friend of God; while **David** was called a Man after God's own heart.

So, guys... **what if,** rather than God having a specific blueprint for our lives, He had, instead, more of an overall game plan in mind?

- What if, each of our lives were like an **original painting**
- that God unfolded through our lives...
- rather than a **very exact paint-by-numbers picture** that He created when we were born...
- Where every part of our life was predetermined with a particular color and shape?

What if God gives us a blank canvas... and, **along with that** blank canvas, He instilled in each of us a particular genetic predisposition, talents, gifts, and unique situations...

- and **rather than** you just filling in a paint-by-number space where painting outside the lines is always a bad thing,
- **What if,** as we walk out our lives with Him, our canvas slowly unfolds into a unique work of art?

You've all seen those **flexible wooden models** that some artists will use to help them create a figure on canvas, right?

- Well, what if, along with those gifts & talents and predispositions, **what if that model was Jesus Christ?**
- And, what if God's game plan was that our lives, with all the uniqueness that He's place in each of us, conform to the image of Jesus?

What if we thought of God, **rather than a Cosmic GPS**, that says turn here/turn there... we saw Him as a **loving Father** who guides us?

- In **Proverbs 3:5-6**, Solomon admonishes us to ***"Trust in the Lord with all of your heart; lean not on your own understanding, but in all your ways, acknowledge Him and He will direct your paths."***

You see, you can trust the Lord you've come to know... with all of heart.

- Don't trust in your insight or your intuition... not even the wisdom you have that has come from God...
- but rather... you should trust in... or lean hard into God Himself...
- because **the answers we need** in life don't come through intuition and insight but a God who is real and a God who cares.
- "Lean not on your own understanding," He says.

So, what if, **rather than waking up** tomorrow with the expectation of seeking God for what color goes into each area of the painting,

- you **focus on what is already clear** from Scripture... the kind of person He's created you to be...
- To **walk in the Spirit**... to **fellowship with Him**... to be a **thankful, mercy/grace-giving person**, loving those around you and so on...

What if you woke up in the morning simply **hungry for Him**...

knowing that as you acknowledge Him as you walk out your day,

- that **He will ultimately direct your paths**...
- that He will, day-by-day, be creating the kind of unique portrait that,
- ***by the end of your life***, will grow to look more and more like Jesus?

ILL: transition story from Bangalore... transition from my work with Vineyard missions to the Armenian Turkish peace initiative.

You see, **so many people**, when they think about God and about His will, they don't understand what a loving, relational God He is...

- That, at the core of our universe, is a loving God, *not a bureaucrat*... not **CEO**... not a **politician**... not a **policeman**...
- or an *unknowable being* who simply created you and then abandoned you to your own devices.
- But rather, we get to do life with a God **who promises to always be with us**...
- who **loves us**, who **cares about us**, who's genuinely involved in our every day lives.

You see, I think the reason why we struggle with the idea of knowing God's will...

- **is because we don't understand** how fully relational, how fully loving and fully present God really is.
- We don't realize how much God desires to "do life" with us in friendship and intimacy.

In **John 10**, Jesus says, **"I am the Good Shepherd."** You see, He's not an aloof, distant being...

- but a Good Shepherd "*who lays down His life for the sheep*..."
- You see, **Jesus cares for the sheep**. "*I know my sheep and my sheep know me.*"
- **If you really want to know God's will** in your life, than it will **always begin with knowing the Good Shepherd**...
- Acknowledging Him, inviting Him into your everyday life.

And how do you do that? By being with Him in His presence.

- Guys... you can go to church for the rest of your life...
- You can read **theology books**, listen to **worship music** for hours each day in the car,
- But none of that can ever replace the **intimacy that grows out of being still** in His presence...

- By cultivating the kind of rich friendship that Jesus longs to have with us.

Honestly if you choose to engage in the 50 days of transformation, I know that the level of intimacy that you experience with him will grow.

I love God's invitation to David in **Psalm 27:8**, where He simply says, "**Seek My face**".

- And so, David says, "***With all my heart, O Lord, Your face will I seek.***"
- In spite of the craziest of circumstances and a whole lot of personal "issues,"
- David lived his life in responding to God's invitation, in Psalm 46:10 to "Be still and know that I am God."

He knows us & we know Him. And as we purpose to know Him more;

- and as we **invite Him into our everyday lives**, He will direct us.
- He's not gonna hand us a paint-by-number set... where every wrong decision threatens to ruin the whole painting...
- but instead, He says, "*Walk with Me... make intimacy **with Me** your passion... Walk in the Spirit!*"

Purpose to be the kind of person I've created you to be!

- *Then, as you walk out your every day lives, I will direct your paths."*
- And, often times, in spite of our need for a quick answers and quick solutions,
- this will mean that God will simply make sure you get where you're supposed to get...
- rather than showing you, in advance, each and every turn you're supposed to make.

He's not playing games with us... He's a Good Shepherd. **He's not wearing camouflage** so we can't find Him... He is out leading the Sheep.

- He takes the responsibility... **He's guiding us** through our lives... in ways we're not even aware of.

- Honestly... there are many times when **I would just love it if God would just answer** the who, what, when, where type questions.

And yet, as much I would want all of us to press in to hearing God's voice more and more in our lives,

- I put a lot more faith in His ability **to get His point across to me** than in my ability to hear Him.
- I put a lot more faith in his ability to guide me then my ability to be guided by Him.
- You see... My trust is **not** in my great follower-ship but in my Shepherd's love for me...
- and His desire to create, from all the pieces of my life, an amazing masterpiece.

You see, guys... as we get a little older, it becomes easier to see all the not-so-good decisions we've made from time to time.

- And yet, it should also be easier to see, even through those poor decisions, **how God was forming and shaping us.**
- Of course, through my own journey, there have been a number of times when I've asked God some specific questions...
- What do you want me to do? When should I do it? Who should I do it with?

But in the absence of specific answers to those specific questions... we can already lean of what His ultimate will is for us...

- To be **joyful people of prayer**; To be people of generosity...
- To be a people quit more passionate about knowing him and making him known than having any particular question answered.
- And so, as you can see, what's most foundational to living in God's will is **the quality of our relationship with Jesus.**

Are we walking in intimacy with Him? Are we trusting in Him? Are we leaning on His understanding, not our own?

- Are we acknowledging Him in our every day lives?
- Am I growing in generosity? Am I a man of prayer? **Am I becoming more and more like Jesus?**

Because of those things, *along with a passion and hunger to know Him more...* we can be sure that He will direct our paths...

- That He is **creating a beautiful canvas** from our lives that will be a blessing to those around us.
- You see, it's not so much a blueprint that He has... but a game plan...
- **that we walk in intimacy with Him**... that we purpose to be the men and women of character that He's called us to be...

And yet, if you've lived for a long time with the idea that God has a single blueprint rather than a broad game plan,

- Than perhaps you've been feeling, for a long time, that, because you blew it some time ago,
- That you've become and continue to be a **second-rate believer** living a **second-rate life**.

Well, **I believe God wants to set us free** from that this morning.

- (maybe you need to let something go... perhaps you need to forgive someone; or yourself)
- He wants us to hear His heart for us from **Jeremiah 29:11**,
"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future."

I've been ready through the Book of Jeremiah all week...

- and let me tell you... God was speaking to a people who really blew it.
- And yet, He's making this incredible declaration... *"I will finish, in your life, what I started... and it's not going to be a second-rate plan, but My best plan for you."*
- And He'll do that because He is the Good Shepherd... and, because He loves you.