

An aerial photograph of a winding road through a mountainous landscape, overlaid with a cyan color. The road starts in the lower right and winds its way through the terrain, eventually disappearing into the distance. The mountains are rugged and layered, with some snow patches visible. The sky is a pale cyan, and the overall scene is framed by a thin white border.

How to Understand God's Will

Getting oriented in a confusing world.

Understanding God's will

God's will for your life.

It's a big subject.

If you didn't grow up as a Christian, it's probably not a subject you've given much thought to—since most of us just think about what we want. We don't usually take too much time agonizing over the thought, “What's my will for my life?” But if you've begun to follow Christ, there's a good chance you've also begun to wonder, “what is God's will for me?”

If you did grow up around these things, that's probably been a big question for you since your early teens. It's a common thing for young Christians to wonder.¹

This booklet is designed to help you get your bearings. What are we even talking about when we talk about “God’s will”? What does that mean? The truth is, if we can’t answer that question, we won’t have a lot of success when we try to find God’s will for our lives. So let’s start there.

WHAT DO WE MEAN WHEN WE TALK ABOUT GOD’S WILL?

What do we mean when we say, “the will of God”? Well, it turns out that we mean a several different, related things.

First, God’s will means, simply, *what God wants*. What does God love? What does God prefer? What pleases him? Those things could be called “the will of God.” They include the commands and intentions God has stated in his communication with humans—things written down in his word. In this sense, when I ask what God’s will for my life is, I’m simply asking what I can do to please God. Second, we have to include the concept of *things God plans and works to make happen*. This way of thinking about God’s will might be the one that most often gets our thoughts churning. In this sense, sometimes when we ask what God’s will for our lives is, we’re actually asking “what’s going to happen to me?” That’s the issue we’ll address in this booklet.

But before we look at the question directly, maybe we should address something which may or may not have occurred to you. Human beings actually have no way of finding out what God wants unless he tells us. How else could we have access to his thoughts?² But fortunately for us, God *has* spoken. And since he’s God, he knows how to speak to us in ways we can grasp...*and* in ways that could be written down and preserved through history, so everyone could have access to his thoughts, and not just the people who originally heard it. So when we want to know the will of God, we first turn to the one place where we know God’s thoughts can be found. We turn to the Bible.³

If you have a history with Christianity, you’ve probably had times in your life when you found yourself scanning through the Bible hoping to find an answer to some specific question about your life. Maybe you needed direction for a decision about your romantic life (admit it). Maybe you had a difficult job decision to make. Some burning question sent you looking past Jeremiah 29:11 and flipping through the Psalms, the Prophets, *anything* to try to get your answer.

And, of course, like a Magic 8-ball, sometimes you can find a saying in the Bible that seems to nail it. But of course, that's not how the Bible really works. The Bible is not a Magic 8-Ball, and that's why it's often impossible to find answers to specific life decisions such as who you should marry or where you should work. And yet the Bible does tell us what God's will is, and even what God's will for your life is. So how do you open the Bible and actually find it?

THREE KEYS TO UNDERSTANDING GOD'S WILL FOR YOUR LIFE

There are three important things to remember when you want to think about the plan of God for your life.

1. God's will for *your* life is part of God's will for the whole *world*.

One of the first things you may notice when you open the Bible is that you're not a character in the Bible. You won't find your name in the concordance in the back, and you won't find yourself in any of the stories. Instead, you'll find a lot of letters and poems and prophecies and history written a long time ago by (and about) people who died before you were born. And even when you find a verse that sounds like it could be addressing you directly ("I know the thoughts I think towards you..."), a little reading will show you the original audience wasn't you, it was whoever the letter or prophecy or poem was written to, or whoever the history records facts about.

But the fact that the Bible isn't about you shouldn't make the Bible seem distant or irrelevant to you. Not at all. Why? Because even though the Bible wasn't written about you, it was written about the same world you live in, about people whose history you may become a part of, and by people inspired by the same God we can know. The things God was doing and saying all those years ago, the things written down and preserved for us in the Bible, still have massive implications for today. Because the Bible was written in and about our world, the story it tells is our story—we're part of the story because we're part of the world who's story the Bible is telling. Of course, someone might point out that, while this is true, it's even closer to the reality of the Bible to say it this way: The Bible is about the same God who is alive and reigning over our world, and it's about what he did in the same world we live in, within the same history we're a part of.

That puts the focus where the Bible does—on God.

This is where we encounter the first principle for understanding God's will for your life. When we come to the Bible with our personal concerns at the front of our thoughts, or with our personal questions burning in our minds, we might feel like the Bible is stonewalling us. It's almost like we get to stand in front of God's throne and ask him directly what His will for our lives is, and he begins his answer like this—*"Well, in the fifth year of the reign of Hezekiah, the king of Judah..."* You could imagine the frustration that might rise up in that moment—*what does this have to do with my life?* But what if we slow down and assume God knows what he's doing? What if he *is* answering the question? But what if he knows that before we can even begin to understand his answer, we have a lot of work to do? What if we need context, and back story, and definitions for terms, and a different focus—just for starters?

If we grant God the benefit of the doubt, we will quickly find that that's exactly what the Bible is doing for us. It's refocusing us, and getting us to think thoughts where "He" is the center, and not "me." Letting God begin to refocus us this way is the first step to understanding his will. The Bible provides this needed refocusing. Nothing could be better for us than reading a story in which we're not the main character. When we've let ourselves be refocused this way, we come to see something about the way the Bible talks about God's will. And here's what we notice: when the Bible explains God's will, it almost always does it in big, global terms. It tells us God's will for the world. And here's the first key to understanding God's will for your life. God's will for your life is part of God's will for the whole world.

So here are the real burning questions: Do you know what God is doing in the world? Do you know where you are in the timeline? Do you know where you fit in? Are you part of the plan at all?

Consider these four verses from the book of Matthew:

From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matt 4:17)

"Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you." (Matt 6:33)

"When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory." (Matt 25:31)

*"All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."
(Matt 28:18-20)⁴*

Notice a theme? It's a major theme of the entire Bible. It's the idea that God is establishing a kingdom that will rule the whole earth. If your future plans involve living on the earth, Jesus is pretty clear that you need to factor the kingdom of God into your plans. In other words, even if the Bible doesn't tell you what will happen in your life, it does tell us what will happen for the whole world. And here's the key—seeing things from the perspective of God's kingdom (and not the perspective of your own life) is the big change that can help you begin to understand God's will for your life.

What does the future hold for the world? What's God going to do? He's going to establish a kingdom which rules everything. That's God's will for the world: that Jesus Christ would be king of everything.

And so the first question to ask yourself is, *how do you relate to God's plan?* Do your future plans have anything to do with God's kingdom? When they do, you're on the road to beginning to find God's will for your life, because all you have to do is play a part in the big thing God is doing. In other words, we know for sure that God's will is for you to play a part in doing His will. What part will you play?

2. God's will for *parts* of your life is part of God's will for your *whole* life.

Here's another issue that's common to face when trying to find God's will for your life. Often we're really interested in the answer to a couple questions, or finding direction for those big issues—especially the crucial issues like whom we will marry and what kind of work we will do in life. Often those are the issues we pray about the most. And of course, if we search the scripture for answers to those questions, we won't find direct answers. However, we do find a lot of statements about God's will, statements like these:

“Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” (Romans 12:1-2)

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” Jesus said to him, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” (Matthew 22:26-37)

Notice, both of these verses talk about what God’s will is in terms of the totality of your life. In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul calls it “offering your body as a sacrifice,” by which he means your *whole* self, fully given to God, with no parts excepted or held back. In Matthew’s account of the Gospel, we learn that Jesus taught that God’s will (His “command”) was for our entire being (our “whole heart, whole soul, and whole mind”) to be directed towards the love of God.

In other words, what is God’s will for your life? Well, first things first—God wants your whole life. He has a will for everything you are, physically, spiritually, and even historically. God’s will encompasses everything you do, everything you love, and everything you will become, for all eternity. Christ calls for whole-life discipleship. So you could read the Bible and say, “What’s God’s will for my life? That I give myself totally to God.”

And then, as you read scripture with this in mind, you’ll start to see all kinds of smaller, clear statements about God’s will for your life which fit into this larger plan. Things like: it’s God will for you to live in purity, especially sexually (1 Thessalonians 4:1-8), it’s God’s will for you to live a life of joyful asking and thanksgiving (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18), it’s God’s will that we prefer suffering to sin (1 Peter 4:1-3).

So whether you’re wondering if you should go to college, or whether you should move to another state, or who you’re going to marry, or which career path to pursue, here’s a sure thing: before you try to read the tea leaves for all the details in life, have you settled the big things? Is God’s will shaping the overall course of your life? Have you committed your entire self to him, consciously and explicitly?

Honestly, those are crucial questions to nail down before you make any

big decisions in life. And once you settle them with God, it often makes the life-decisions easier. You begin to see that, even if the Bible doesn't give you specific answers to life's questions, it does offer these clear guidelines. Whoever you marry, wherever you work, wherever you live, whatever you do, if it's part of God's will, it will fit into his overall will for your whole life, and we know that it is God's will for your whole life to be given over to bringing him glory. And that leads nicely into the last point.

3. God's will for what you *do* is part of God's will for what you will *become*.

Most of our questions about God's will for our lives—school, marriage, work, travel—revolve around things we may do in our lives. Surely, what we do is important. Once again, however, we see that the Scriptures have a different emphasis. Consider this famous passage:

“We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.” (Romans 8:28-29)

Don't miss the clear statement of God's will in there. It is God's will for you to become like Jesus—or, as it says here, to be conformed into his image. Notice the same emphasis in this passage:

“We all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.” (2 Corinthians 3:18)

What is God's will for your life? It's God's will that you become human in the way Jesus was human. It's His will for you to be cast in the mold of *Jesus'* humanity—that you become like Jesus in terms of his love, his connection to God, his honoring of his Father, his integrity, his purpose, his diligence, and on and on. He was the supreme example of what it means to be human, and God wants to make each one of us that kind of human. He wants us to be conformed into the image of Christ. If you want God's will for your life, you want to be made like Jesus.

APPLYING THIS KNOWLEDGE

And now we're ready to apply all of this to actual situations in life. Take, for instance, the issue of relationships, including whom you should marry (for those of you who are still single), or whom you should date. You won't find a verse in the Bible (even in the Psalms) telling you a specific answer to that kind of question.

But when you're faced with a decision about whether or not it is God's will for you to begin (or continue) a relationship with someone, just apply the things we know from the scriptures.

First, consider the truth that *God's will for your life is part of God's will for the world*. Will pursuing a relationship with this person help your ability to pursue God's global agenda of spreading the knowledge of Christ? Will it help you be part of doing the work of that kingdom? Does this person know about, or care about, or want to be actively part of that work? When you're with them, do you tend to forget God's kingdom, or are you, together, pointing your lives in the direction of participating in God's work in the world?

Second, consider the truth that *God's will for parts of your life is part of God's will for your whole life*. Does this relationship help you pursue a whole-life commitment to Christ, or does it create a need for you to partition off your life into "God" spaces and "other" spaces? Does it foster a whole heart for God, or a divided heart? Does it make sense as part of a life given over to worship and service to God? Is it, in fact, an act of worship and service to God in itself?

Third, consider the truth that God's will for what you do is part of God's will for what you will become. Does this relationship tend to lead you to be more, or less, like Jesus? Is God able to use it to do his will in your life—to make you more like Jesus in his love, his connection to God, his integrity, his purpose, his diligence, and the way he honored his father with his whole life? Or, does it tend to lead to distraction, to a lack of focus, to cultivating things in your life that are less and less like Jesus?

It can be very clarifying to give honest, thorough answers to these questions, whatever issue in life you're wondering about. Maybe you've been stressed out, because you *think* your job, or school, or relationship, or life-path is a good one, but you just haven't really

heard God's voice about it or received that sense of confirmation we're so often looking for. But then—just apply the scriptural criteria. If you honestly work through these things and realize that (for instance) this relationship really does promote Christ-likeness and kingdom focus and joy in God in your life, well then, maybe God wants you to stop stressing out. Maybe he hasn't given you a vision or dream or prophecy because you don't need one—you've let the written word of God shape your way of moving through life, and so when you began to make this decision, you did it in conformity with his will as you best understood it. Your direction and desires were *already* shaped by God's word, and so yes—you *are in God's will*. Go for it. Enjoy it.

On the other hand, maybe when you apply the clear scriptural teachings on God's will to an aspect of your life or a decision you have to make, you realize some other things. Maybe you realize that you've been wondering if it's God's will for you to pursue a certain path, but you've already discovered that it tends to make you more self-focused, and less able to think or care about God's work in the world.⁵ Maybe you know that this thing divides your heart and mind...and life, and that you can't really be whole-hearted towards God if you keep pursuing it. Maybe it makes you forget about Jesus and love other things. Maybe it even brings sin or laziness or meaninglessness into your life, and drives you further from likeness to Jesus. If that's the case, then you don't need God to give you a special dream or prophecy or vision to tell you to get out of the situation. He's already clearly spoken in his word. Typically what he's saying to us in these situations is some form of, "*Repent.*"

PRACTICAL STEPS FOR FINDING GOD'S WILL

Now that we've tried to get a handle on a proper understanding of God's will, how would someone go about actually finding, or discovering it for their own lives? The scriptures point to a few different ways God typically shows His will. These are tried and true areas where, if we look, we'll find what God wants.

First, there's the nature of **creation** itself. It's assumed through the whole Bible, but some passages (like Psalm 19 and Romans 1) say it explicitly—We can learn important things about God and what he wants for our lives just by looking at the way he's made things. In the seventeenth chapter of Acts, Paul says that the way God has placed humanity in the world should prompt us to seek him. And all of

creation works this way, really. Our bodies tell us important things about God's will for our lives. Our respiratory system tells us it's not his will for us to live underwater, or in outer space. The way we respond to gravity tells us that it's generally not God's will for us to walk off cliffs. The gendered nature of our bodies tells us part of God's will for us.⁶ In other words, there are some obvious realities about the earth and our bodies you shouldn't ignore. And it goes further—for instance, if you only end up to be five feet even, maybe you're not meant to be in the NBA.⁷

Our circumstances work the same way, and are also part of creation. If, through God's providence, you never actually meet someone, you can be pretty sure it wasn't God's will for you to marry them, or even be their friend. There are some opportunities that never come your way; some doors that close before you can walk through them. We can rest assured in those instances—it wasn't God's will for me to walk down that path. On the other hand, the things in our life that are beyond our control may also present opportunities and invitations to pursue new paths that may actually be God's will. And here is one of those places where different ideas about God's will among Christians may emerge. Many people conceive of God's will as one precise pathway through life, as if God has one plan and you just need to find it. And perhaps it is that way. But what if, instead, God likes to work by giving us options—and there are times (maybe all the time) when we have real choices between two or more things that all are within God's will? Certainly nothing in the Bible makes that idea impossible. Think about it: *what if God gives you real choices in life?* This would be another pointer to the important role the scriptures play in helping us find God's will, especially in shaping our desires so that they are the kind of desires that will choose God's will.

Second, we know that God often uses **other people** to show us his will. For instance, Hebrews 10:24-25 tells us that Christians should be “stirring each other up to good works.” It also tells us that it is God's will for us to be in regular fellowship with other believers. Clearly it is God's will for us to be doing good things, and these verses tell us that God wants to use other people, who we regularly meet with, and who are truly part of our lives, to remind and encourage us to do those good works (and maybe even to suggest good works to us we've never thought of before). In other words, God wants to use other people to show us his will for our lives. God regularly speaks to us through others to point us towards his will (and not even always with some special prophecy). This kind of thinking is all over the New Testament.

Third, God uses **His word** to show us his will. Now, this might be the first place you think to look for God's will. But here we need to be very clear. Unless your question is one that is directly addressed by a passage in scripture (like, "should I quit my job and not work?"⁵) the way to use the Bible to find God's will is not to scan it to find verses that seem to address you directly and personally. When the Bible addresses something directly in your life, it's for one of two reasons:

1. Either the passage applies to everyone, in all times, or,
2. Your life in some way matches the situation the passage was addressing, therefore, because of the overlap, it applies to you just as directly.

For example, the Thessalonian Christians needed to be told that it was God's will for them to abstain from sexual sin. When you read that, you can understand that this part of the will of God is universal for all humans. And so you can know it is God's will for you too. But right there is where we discover how it is, in reality, that the Bible tells us God's will for our lives. It's not by half sentences and phrases, lifted out of their context, that are vague enough that we can make them say what we want, like a fortune cookie. No, the Bible isn't written for us to take pieces of its thoughts into our world to make them mean what we want. Instead, we find God's will in the Bible by allowing it to draw us into God's world.

Now all this should encourage you, because it means that there are some practical steps we can take to discover God's will in the Bible. For instance, you might try something like this: Read the gospels, and write down every command Jesus gives, and pray about how to keep it. As you read, remind yourself that you're watching Jesus do things and listening to him teach. Get to know him! And when you seek to live out the things he teaches you, you'll be directly in God's will! Read the rest of the scriptures that way too—once you learn something, find ways to live it out daily. Use the Bible to seek to understand God's *thoughts*—learn what's important to God; learn what Jesus is doing in the world. And continue, for the rest of your life, reading and learning what Jesus taught through what the Apostles wrote. Do this personally and in community with others. Seek to practically obey these teachings so that your life becomes one which is totally shaped by the things revealed in the Christian scriptures. I can't say I want God's will for my life, and at the same time ignore the obvious, clear commands God's given me in His word. The surest way to find the answers I don't know is to get serious about living according to the parts of God's will that I can know.

Notice, this is very different than another way people typically have of pursuing God: using the Bible to find inspiring verses for each day. I am arguing for you to practice something much more systematic—something like the deliberate and systematic way Jesus trained the disciples. Instead of only hoping for some daily inspiration or that “Magic 8 Ball” verse, I think the scriptures lead us to embark on a lifetime journey of methodically learning what Jesus wants us to know, and becoming who he wants us to be, by daily adding small pieces to what we already know. It’s a day-by-day, year-by-year commitment to allow the commands of Scripture to shape our life. This includes verses that specifically tell us God’s will for us, and verses that tell us God’s will for the whole world. It’s a lifelong learning to learn, and a lifelong learning to live.

One way to sum this all up might be to say, if I want to know God’s will for my life, am I going where I know it can be found (the Bible) and am I faithfully putting into practice what I already do know?⁸

GOD IS NOT MAKING IT HARD FOR YOU TO FIND HIS WILL

The Apostle Paul prayed this prayer for the church in the ancient city of *Colosse*: “*that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will, in all wisdom and spiritual understanding.*”⁹ Don’t miss that—the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to pray that Christians would know God’s will. In other words, God wants us to know God’s will. He’s not a God who hides away with some secret plan that He won’t tell us. He’s not playing games or seeing if we luck our way into figuring out what He wants from us. He’s not waiting for us to say some secret prayer or guess the magic words. He’s a God who communicates clearly, and who has shown that He wants His people to know what He wants.

So we just need to make it our goal to find out what He has already clearly shown us. Then we need to go do those things. It’s a great question to ask yourself: What things do you already know God wants of you? And—Is there anything you’re not doing? Instead of wasting time worrying about the things He hasn’t shown us yet, we can spend our lives being busy doing the things He has shown us.

And as we make it our aim to find out what He’s said, and then to do it, we’ll find the answers to the other questions becoming more clear.

And maybe it's this simple: The more we read the Bible, the more it starts to seem like God wants to refocus us from thinking about ourselves (as in "What does God want for my life?") to thinking about Him (as in "What does God want?"). And that kind of thinking leads us to all kinds of information and guidance.

SUMMING IT ALL UP

Let's reduce all this down to a few bullet points:

- Attend to what is already revealed.
- Let your mind be shaped by God's word and obedience.
- Let God's thoughts be your thoughts
- Banish pride.
- Be open.
- Cultivate the Life of the Spirit.
- Love God, and...
- See what happens.

And here's one final, encouraging promise. Jesus said, in John 7:17 that wanting to do God's will is the secret to knowing. He was speaking about a specific piece of knowledge at the time, but the principle holds true generally, as well—loving God, and wanting to honor him, and taking practical steps to do those things, is the great prerequisite to discovering his will for your life.

If you will to do, you will know.

It's that simple.

Hopefully now, armed with these thoughts about God's will, you can begin to seek His will in line with the way that He actually shows us his will. God definitely wants us to live and think with understanding. He wants us to know what he's revealed, and he wants that knowledge to help us. God wants to be known, and he wants us to know ourselves and our place in his plan too. And so, with our perspective shaped by the scriptures, we can turn to the Bible and find our place in God's world—and in doing so, we can discover his will for our lives.

"Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen."

NOTES:

- ¹ If you are not a Christian at all (not a follower of Jesus), then this whole subject might seem odd to you. But I would like to suggest to you that you may still find some benefit from thinking through these things, for two reasons. First, you may discover the amazing truth that the universe is alive with the presence of the God who made you, knows you, and, yes, has a plan for your life. Second, you may realize that, whatever your concept of freedom has been up to this point, you may be already following other people's will for your life. And you might find God's will for your life more healthy, and more freeing, than those other plans. After all, it is.
- ² This is the line of reasoning people are following when they say things like, "God is so big, and so beyond us, we could never understand him." And they're right—unless of course that all-powerful God uses his power to clearly communicate to the people he created. Then, it's not only possible for us to know his thoughts, it's imperative.
- ³ See the booklet *What is the Bible?* For more on this idea.
- ⁴ All scripture quotations are from the New King James Version
- ⁵ Of course, sometimes people quit working because they think their job is taking time away from serving Jesus. Sometimes they start wandering the streets to preach the gospel, without any plan of how they're going to support themselves. It can sound spiritual...except for the fact that work itself is one of the things God has been very clear on. In the two letters to the Thessalonians, Paul instructed the church to make sure they were working to support themselves, going so far as to write: "If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat." So is it God's will for you to quit your job without a plan to get another job or support yourself in some other way? No.
- ⁶ Maybe the first few examples seem trivial or obvious. It depends on what kind of culture you live in, though. Notice how charged this last example gets. See the booklet *What is a Human?* for further exploration along these lines.
- ⁷ Maybe.
- ⁸ Here are a few verses that say specifically what God's will is for us: 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18; 1 Peter 4:1-3. Here are a few verses that tell us God's plan in general for everyone: Romans 8:28-29. And here are a two direct commands from Jesus that apply to all his followers: Matthew 6:33 & 28:18-20. All these things are God's will for your life.
- ⁹ That's Colossians 1:9.

