

DECISION MAKING AND THE WILL OF GOD

["After You've Prayed, Then What?" Colossians 4:12]

by William E. Paul

Introduction:

Being fully assured of knowing and doing the will of God is a desire of all genuine Christians. A number of years ago a survey was taken to determine what topics people most wanted to hear about in a sermon. From the 5,000 persons who responded, the computer tabulated the "Ten Most Wanted" sermon topics. Number 2 on the list was "How Can I Find God's Will For My Life?" (No. 1 was "Where Are We in Bible Prophecy?").

George Truett once said, "To *know* the will of God is the greatest knowledge; To *find* the will of God is the greatest discovery; To *do* the will of God is the greatest achievement."

Jesus was very concerned with doing the will of God. He taught His disciples to pray "May Your [i.e., God's] will be done on earth as it is in heaven." (Matt. 6:10). In the olive garden, as He faced His final agony, Jesus prayed, "Nevertheless, not my will but thine be done." (Luke 22:42).

The apostle Paul encouraged his readers in the same way when he wrote to the Ephesians, "So, do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord wants you to do." (Eph. 5:17).

A person can succeed in every other endeavor in life, but if he fails to learn and follow the will of God, he is a miserable failure.

While Jesus urged His disciples to seek the will of God in their lives, He Himself also prayed earnestly to know and do God's will. Even so, we should be very concerned about making all decisions in life in harmony with God's will. Certainly, as a Christian you will be much in prayer about what God wants you to do. But, what about *after* you've prayed? What then? Are there specific things you can do to assure that when you make a decision it will be in the will of God?

Here are five specific things you can do --- tests to which you can submit every potential decision you must make in life. Only after you have submitted every perplexing problem, every issue of indecision, every matter of momentous import to these five tests, can you expect God to grant your heartfelt prayer for guidance in making the right decision. Let's look at them.

I. STUDY THE BIBLE CAREFULLY

Psalms 119:104-106 says, "Your [i.e., God's] word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path. I have taken an oath and confirmed it, that I will follow your righteous laws." A careful, prayerful reading and study of the Scriptures is an absolute necessity

for learning the will of God in every situation of life. Sometimes God's word declares His will in *specific commands*, ("Pray without ceasing" [I Thess. 5:17]; "Flee from idolatry" [I Cor. 10:14]; "Don't give up meeting together" [Heb. 10:25]). Sometimes God's will is conveyed by following *the example of the inspired apostles* who led the early church in doing His will (Weekly communion) [Acts 20:7]; (Teaching publicly and from house to house) [Acts 20:20]. Still at other times, and most frequently, the will of God can be determined by applying *Biblical principles* (Doing good to everyone) [Gal. 6:10]; (Purifying ourselves from everything harmful) [II Cor. 7:1]; (Doing everything in the name of Christ) [Col. 3:17].

But, what about those decisions in life that you are faced with for which there appears to be no clear-cut Bible command, principle or example? What about those decisions which may not involve any moral, ethical or spiritual element? Even after you have read the Bible carefully, you are still faced with decisions about taking your vacation (When should you go? Where should you go? Can you afford it at this time?). And what about those constant decisions related to cars? (Get the old one fixed? Trade it in? Which one should you buy?). Then, there are always those more important, perplexing decisions about jobs, school, and...marriage! How can you be certain you are making the right decision concerning details in these matters...details which are not *specifically* spelled out in the Bible?

There are at least four criteria that you can apply to every matter about which the Bible does not *specifically* speak. (1) Your decision must not cause anyone to stumble [I Cor. 10:32; Rom. 14:21-22]; (2) Your decision must build up and not tear down anyone [I Cor. 14:26c; Rom. 14:19]; (3) Your decision must not violate your conscience [Rom. 14:23]; (4) Your decision must be for the glory of God [I Cor. 10:31].

But, besides praying and consulting the Bible, what other things can you do to help you make right decisions?

II. SEEK MATURE COUNSEL

The old adage recommended when you are lost is...ask directions! The Bible is very clear on the importance of asking for help, for guidance, for direction from others when you are in doubt. The book of Proverbs is literally full of encouragement to seek advice and counsel from others before making decisions. "The way of a fool seems right, but a wise man listens to advice" (Prov. 12:15); "Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisors they succeed" (Prov. 15:22); "Make plans by seeking advice" (Prov. 20:18a). Proverbs seems to say "ask someone who may know more about the matter than you do."

But, why should wiser, more mature people be involved in decisions that are primarily *yours* to make? (1) First of all, they are likely to be better qualified by reason of their extensive *experience* and observation of life. They've seen it; done it; been there...in many cases. (2) They are also likely to have a broader base of *Bible knowledge* than you have. Their understanding of the commands, principles and examples presented in the Bible *could* be greater than yours. So, why not avail yourself of informational input from God's people to help you make that all-important decision? (3) Also, such persons are likely to have spiritual *stability and maturity* acquired from years of walking with God and seeing Him work out His will in their lives through providence and answered prayer. (4) Being removed from the matter that concerns you, they are more likely to view situations with *greater objectivity* and less bias than

you do. They are not as likely to be affected by their emotions in the matter either, since they have nothing to gain or lose by the advice they give you. So, these and other reasons could be given as to why you should ask others before you decide.

“Accountability” to others is a clear teaching in the New Testament. God ordained that we are to “obey” and “submit” to our church leaders because “they keep watch over you as men who must give an account” concerning your spiritual progress [Heb. 13:17]. Sometimes it is our *pride* that keeps us from conferring with others before making important decisions. The danger of feeling that we “know it all” has led to many heartaches over hasty, immature, and even foolish decisions.

Many are the problems that people could avoid if only they had consulted someone older or wiser before making their move. Talk to someone you trust, ask them questions, listen to their suggestions, consider their counsel. This is not only God’s plan, but it works!

III. USE GODLY WISDOM

Not everyone who *knows* Bible verses exercises *wisdom* in applying their teaching. Wisdom is the “practical use of knowledge.” The Bible is clear: Wisdom comes from God, “But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace loving; considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.” [James 3:17]. Look at those qualities again. If any decision you make about a matter does not include these qualities, it is not the wisdom of God but is “earthly, unspiritual, of the devil” [James 3:15].

The wisdom of God, so necessary for making right decisions, comes through *prayer* and *faith*. “If any of you lacks wisdom he should ask God who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But, when he asks, he must believe and not doubt...” [James 1:5-6a]. There it is...a *prayer of faith* is essential in order to receive wisdom from God.

It is only when you have wisdom from God that you will understand what God wants you to do. “Be very careful, then, how you live---not as unwise, but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is.” [Eph. 5:15-16]. See it? When you are wise, you can understand what the Lord wants and will be able to make decisions that are pleasing to Him.

Paul makes it clear in I Cor. 10:23 that not everything that is permissible is necessarily *beneficial or constructive*. It takes wisdom to make right choices about matters. What seems best to us may not be best as God views things. Let’s try to look at things the way God does... that’s true wisdom!

But how can you know if you are *exercising* wisdom in a given matter? What all needs to be taken into consideration before deciding? Wisdom asks questions like these. “Do I have enough information to make the best decision in this matter?” “Have I made adequate preparation for making a decision about such an opportunity?” “Can I afford it (money-wise, time-wise)?” “Will this decision expose me to physical dangers that could pose a realistic threat to my life or health?” “Will this decision expose me or my family to spiritual dangers that could have eternal consequences?” “Do I have any particular gift or talent in this area that would suggest how I decide in this case?” “What effect would this decision have on my personal witness for Christ? On the congregation

where I meet?” “Are there any real and formidable obstacles that I have not considered carefully enough?” “Am I spiritually strong enough, or mature enough to face the consequences of such a decision?” “Will the decision I am considering produce a lasting spiritual growth in me? In my family?” “Have I seriously counted the cost which such a decision would require of me?” These and other similar questions need to be asked and answered satisfactorily before you take any action. Wisdom requires it.

Beware of using false or foolish wisdom! The story is told of a college student who dreamt that everything around him was yellow. He was in need of a car so went to a number of used car lots in hope of finding reliable transportation. But, because of his dream, he decided to consider only a car that was entirely yellow, inside and out. Finally, he found one, and without checking it out any further, he bought it on the spot. You guessed it! It turned out to be a lemon!

Don't make decisions by shortcutting wisdom. Ask God and ask questions!

IV. OBSERVE PROVIDENTIAL CIRCUMSTANCES

God is able to work things out in such a way as to make it easier to decide about a certain matter. The Scripture says, “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.” [Rom. 8:28]. God can and does open or close *doors of opportunity* for His people who love Him and who are dedicated to follow whatever He wants for them. He *providentially* sees to it that things seem to “fall into place” in a certain way so that you are able to see clearly just what your next step should be.

This could be called the “open or closed door principle.” Here's how it works. When we are devoted to Him in prayer and a searching of His word; when we consult with spiritually-minded Christians; when we ask the hard questions demanded by wisdom, only then are we prepared to make *His* purpose *our* purpose, He can and does open the way for us to accomplish or achieve a particular goal or objective in life.

Paul speaks of “open doors” in the Lord's work in several passages of Scripture. “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us too, that God may open a door for our message...” [Col. 4:2-3]. “Now when I went to Troas to preach the Gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me...” [II Cor. 2:12-13]. See also Acts 14:27 and I Cor. 16:8-9. An open door is a situation where the prospects look bright and promising, where success appears likely, where everything seems to be “working out” favorably. A closed door would be just the opposite.

Before making a decision you should carefully look for certain things: (1) Are things “falling into place” for deciding in a certain way? (2) Are the needed resources, knowledge, and finances becoming readily available? (3) Are formidable obstacles seemingly “melting away?” (4) Are prospects for moving ahead in a certain way opening up? (5) Are people and circumstances cooperating so as to point in a certain direction? (6) Is the advice you are receiving developing a consensus?

But again, caution must be exercised. It is easy to “read into” a situation what we want to see in order for it to turn out a certain way. So-called “providential circumstances” can be misread. A lady received a brochure telling in glowing terms of a forthcoming Bible lands trip. It had been her life-long dream but she wasn't sure if she could afford it. But her desire to go was overwhelming. In

reading the brochure she noticed that the party would be traveling by Boeing 747. She spent a sleepless night questioning if it was the Lord's will to go. She had to make a decision by the next morning. Finally she fell asleep and awakened rather suddenly, looked at her digital clock...it read 7:47. She was convinced that this was God's way of telling her to "go." Be careful that you do not interpret mere coincidences as certain direction when they may not harmonize with Scripture, wise counsel and wisdom.

But, what might be the legitimate use of this "open door principle?" Suppose you received a specific invitation to decide about a particular matter? This might be considered an open door. Were you offered a certain job? Did you receive a scholarship to a certain school? Were you asked to teach a Bible class? Were you presented with a promising business opportunity? Any situation where you are specifically *asked to do or accept something* might be an open door. But, give the matter careful consideration (Ask God about it, Search the Scriptures, Consult with trusted counselors, Exercise wisdom).

Another possibility of an open door is when an *opportunity presents itself*. Let's say it is a business opportunity. If funds become available, if talented people are interested, if helpful information is acquired, if other conditions seem favorable...this could be an open door. Apply the other criteria so that you can arrive at the will of God for you in the matter.

But consider these important factors when viewing the open/closed door principle. (1) Don't try to open a door which God has clearly closed, or close one that God has obviously opened. (2) A closed door *today* may become an open one in a *month* or a *year*. (3) An open door *alone* must never be the basis for making a decision. It is possible to misinterpret an open or closed door situation. Try to be objective when considering the evidence, for some people see only what they are looking for.

Remember, God is able to work things out for our good. He can and does open and close doors of opportunity. This may not always be easy to discern, but, coupled with the other Biblical elements in decision making, the open/closed door principle is one valid way of helping you decide.

V. FOLLOW YOUR SPIRITUAL DESIRES

God's word promises that we can have the desires of our heart. [Psalm 37:4-5]. So, when it comes to making a decision, there will be *strong feelings* to do a certain thing or to avoid doing it. Many people simply follow their feelings in making decisions and then wonder why things don't always turn out right. But, doesn't this passage promise us that "he [i.e., God] will give you the desires of your heart"? Yes, but *on conditions*. Delighting in the Lord, committing your way to Him and trusting Him are all essentials before you can expect a desire to be granted.

But this is probably the most risky of all areas in decision making. Feelings can stem from Satan, from our emotional state, from mental depression, from influential companions and even from medications. Jesus told His disciples that their resolve to avoid temptation was seriously affected by the demands of their body [Mark 14:36-39]. Sometimes our "flesh" can dictate how or what we decide. It was selfishness that motivated the decision of the rich farmer to build bigger barns [Luke 12:16-19].

Merely following the desires of one's heart can lead to sin, unless such a desire stems from a heart delighted with God,

committed to His service and fully trusting in His love and power. How many young people have allowed their flesh to dictate in matters of sex and found themselves caught in the trap of sin?

But there is a *legitimate place* for feelings in decision making. If you are totally committed to serving the Lord, you can expect your feelings to play a part in helping you to make decisions. People decide to go to Bible college out of a strong feeling to let God use them in His service. People decide on marrying a certain person because they have strong feelings of love and a life-time commitment to that one. People make decisions to go to a foreign field of service for the Lord because they are spiritually motivated to do so. Yes, our feelings, desires, and longings all play a significant part in helping us to make right decisions. It may *feel* right and *still* not be the will of God, but it likely won't be the will of God unless you can feel good about it in your heart as well!

Yes, while feelings and desires are not everything, still they are something. The Bible says that God “fulfills the desires of those who fear Him.” [Psalm 145:18-19]. Certainly, our desires are not the only thing to be consulted when making decisions, but unless we can feel good about a particular matter, we had better hold off. Continue in prayer, search the Bible, seek additional counsel, exercise wisdom and watch for God's open or closed doors before deciding.

Conclusion:

Notice again these five “road signs” for helping a Christian to make decisions in the will of God, after he has prayed: (1) Search the scriptures for they contain commands, principles and examples which, when understood and followed, will certainly lead us to make decisions in the will of God. (2) Seek and consider seriously the wise counsel of mature Christians before making decisions. (3) Exercise wisdom from above by asking the right questions when facing every major decision. (4) Watch for and carefully evaluate God's providential leading, where he may open or close a door of opportunity, before making your decisions. (5) The heartfelt desires of the person who is truly committed to God out of faith and reverence, will serve to *confirm* the decisions made from a careful consideration of the previous four “road signs.”

When all of these signs line up correctly, you can have confidence that you are on the right track. One overcast night a ship was plying rough waters as it approached the narrow entrance to its harbor. To an inexperienced passenger the chances of finding and navigating a safe passage seemed remote. Yet, the captain appeared calm and relaxed as he steered the vessel through the dark, hazy night. A nervous passenger asked, “Sir, how can you be certain you are steering us through the channel safely?” He replied, “Do you see those three bright lights beaming from the shore? I have learned to steer my ship along the coast until those three lights all line up as one. When the three lights agree, I know I am on a safe course.”

So, after we have prayed, studied the Scriptures, asked for counsel, exercised wisdom, observed providential leading and then had a spiritually minded desire, we can be quite certain that we are on a safe course in deciding what the will of God is.

Henry Drummond once said, “Inside the will of God there is no failure; Outside the will of God there is no success; What is the end of life? The end of life is not to do good, although many of us think so. It is not to win souls, although I once thought so. The end of life is to do the will of God.”