

# DISCERNING GOD'S LEADING

**"if any of you lack wisdom, ask of God"**

## Introduction

1. Virtually every story in the Bible involves man's decisions to do right or wrong.
  2. **The traditional view of discerning God's will for one's life.**
    - a. **Premise:** For each of our decisions God has a perfect plan or will.
    - b. **Purpose:** The goal of the believer is to discover God's individual will and make decisions in accordance with it.
    - c. **Process:** The believer interprets the inner impressions and outward signs through which the Holy Spirit communicates His leading.
    - d. **Proof:** The confirmation that one has correctly discerned the individual will of God comes from an inner sense of peace, an agreement of all the signs, and outward (successful) results of the decision.
  3. Is the traditional view of God's will correct?
- A. **Reexamining the evidence for the view that God will supernaturally reveal a specific plan for each believer's life.**
1. **The model of parental guidance**
    - a. **Gal. 4:1-11**

“1 Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything, 2 but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father. 3 So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world. 4 But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, 5 in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. 6 And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” 7 Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God. 8 However at that time, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those which by nature are no gods. 9 But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? 10 You observe days and months and seasons and years. 11 I fear for you, that perhaps I have labored over you in vain.”
    - b. How should we expect a loving heavenly Father to relate to His children?
      1. Should we expect that He tell us exactly what to do in every situation?
      2. Should we expect that He give us direction and principles through which we would grow in wisdom?
  2. **The key to fruitfulness**
    - a. **Joshua 1:7-8**

“7 Only be strong and very courageous; be careful to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, so that you may have success wherever you go. 8 This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success.”

- b. The key to success is not always being in the right place at the right time.
- c. The key to fruitfulness is being faithful and wise where we are.

### 3. The inner promptings of (?)

#### a. I Cor.12:1-3

“1 Now concerning spiritual {gifts,} brethren, I do not want you to be unaware. 2 You know that when you were pagans, {you were} led astray to the dumb idols, however you were led. 3 Therefore I make known to you, that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus is accursed;” and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.”

- b. Very few people testify to a consistent record of knowing God’s will through dramatic inner prompting or “a still small voice.”
- c. Impressions can come from so many sources other than God’s Spirit.

### 4. The Biblical examples

#### a. Were not the Biblical characters led in specific details?

1. In many cases there was direct personal guidance.
2. It is interesting to note that there is no indication that it was ever presented as “God’s individual will” for a person.
3. The number of recorded cases is not sufficient to constitute normative experience for every believer.
4. Most of the recipients of specific guidance occupied a special place in the outworking of God’s program.
5. The examples of direct guidance are limited to a few decisions and these examples do not apply to all of life’s choices.
6. In most cases there was a supernatural revelation of God’s will that could not be mistaken.

#### b. SUMMARY

1. Direct, supernatural guidance for specific decisions was the exception to the rule.
2. Direct guidance was given to people who played a strategic role in the drama of world evangelization.
3. Direct guidance was provided only at critical points in Israel’s history and during the formative years of the church.
4. Direct guidance was always communicated by means of supernatural revelation.

## B. Reexamining Scripture used to teach that we are to expect guidance regarding an individual will for our lives?

1. **Prov.3:5-6** “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.”
  - a. “He will make your paths straight” is a Hebrew expression which means “your life will have success.”
  - b. This passage speaks of God’s blessing on those who trust Him. It does not imply that there is a specific path carved out just for them.
2. **Ps.32:8** “I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go; I will counsel you with My eye upon you.”
  - a. Again, the “way which you should go” refers to the course of life one should follow.

- b. The King James Version's translation "I will guide thee with mine eye" is misleading and has been corrected by newer translations.
- 3. **Isa.30:20-21** "Although the Lord has given you bread of privation and water of oppression, He, your Teacher will no longer hide Himself, but your eyes will behold your Teacher. And your ears will hear a word behind you, 'This is the way, walk in it,' whenever you turn to the right or to the left."
  - a. The translators have capitalized "Teacher" and "He" suggesting that God is in view. It is more likely that a prophet of God is referred to. One who would give Israel moral guidance. (The context Isa. 30:1-26 suggests that God would bless Israel with the voice of the prophet when they repented.)
  - b. The fact that they would see as well as hear their teacher suggests that a human figure was in view.
- 4. **Col.1:9** "for this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding."
  - a. The context (vs.10-12) makes it clear that it is God's moral will that is in view, not an individual plan for the believer's life.
  - b. Parallel passages support the fact that it is God's moral will that is in view. (Eph.4:1; I Thess.2:12; 4:1-3; II Cor.5:9-10; Rom.14:18; Eph.5:10,17)
- 5. **Other N.T. passages** (Rom.12:1-2; Eph.2:10; 5:15-17; Col.4:12) fall into the same category — the moral will of God, not the individual will of God.

### C. Applicational difficulties of the traditional view

- 1. **Anxiety** is often the logical result when I cannot know for sure that I am in God's will.
  - a. Can I ever know for sure that I have found God's will for my life?
  - b. Most folks admit that they cannot know for certain.
- 2. **Frustration** can result when I do not always get a clear reading of the signs.
  - a. How does one avoid the frustration of not being able to get a clear reading on God's will?
  - b. What do I do when the signs change?
- 3. **Ordinary decisions** are made without giving attention to this view.
  - a. At some point, everyone abandons the traditional view's approach to making decisions.
  - b. We might use it for important decisions (like who I marry or where I live) but not for ordinary decisions (like what I wear today or how I get to work).
- 4. I may have several **equal options**.
  - a. Insistence upon only one "correct" choice generates anxiety over missing "the perfect will of God" rather than gratitude for more than one fine opportunity.
  - b. The signs are seldom pointing in the same direction. Which signs do I give the most value to?
- 5. The traditional view can promote **immature decisions** —
  - a. By permitting believers to justify unwise decisions on grounds that "God told me to do it."
  - b. By fostering costly delays because of uncertainty about God's individual will.
  - c. By influencing people to reject personal preferences when faced with apparently equal options.

- d. By encouraging the practice of “putting out a fleece” — letting circumstances dictate the decision.
- 6. **Subjectivity** in reading the signs or sensing the inner promptings of the Spirit is unavoidable.
  - a. How can I be certain that an inner impression is from God and not from some other source?
  - b. What do I do with changing impressions?

## The Way of Wisdom

### Introduction

1. God’s will is to be viewed in a number of different ways.
  - a. His **DETERMINED WILL** or His **SOVEREIGN WILL** is that which is preordained and mysterious to us until after the fact.
  - b. His **DECLARED WILL** or His **MORAL WILL** is that which is expressed as His desire for what people should believe and how they should act and why they should do so.
  - c. His **DYNAMIC WILL** or His **CHANGING WILL** is that response to our actions that is in keeping with the personal interrelationship between God and His people (who are free moral agents).
  - d. His **DETAILED WILL** or His **PERSONAL WILL** is that specific life plan for an individual. It is this expression of God’s will that we are examining.
2. The following statements summarize my understanding.
  - a. Where the declared will of God is known, it should be followed by God’s people.
  - b. In those areas where the Scripture gives no command or principle (no moral direction), the believer is free and responsible to choose any one of a number of options.
  - c. In making decisions on non-moral issues, the believer is called to exercise wisdom and spiritual common sense.
  - d. In some unusual circumstances God’s Spirit may guide an individual to specific decisions. This is not the norm; it cannot be demanded and should not be expected.
  - e. In all decisions, the believer should humbly submit, in advance, to the outworking of God’s sovereign will as it touches each decision.

### A. **Where the declared will of God (moral issues) is known, it should be followed.**

1. **The declared will of God** is the expression, in behavioral and attitudinal terms, of God’s character.
  - a. The essence of God’s moral will is — love.
  - b. This love is defined by the moral instructions of Scripture.
  - c. This love is modeled by Jesus.
2. **The declared will of God** touches every aspect and moment of life: goals, attitudes, and means (why, how, and what).
  - a. **Mandates** (normative and universally applicable)
    1. Our callings or goals
      - a. Exalting Christ as Creator, Redeemer, and Lord
      - b. Exemplifying the values of His Kingdom
      - c. Edifying His body — the church

- d. Evangelizing His world
- 2. Our attitudes or motives
  - a. Love, not selfishness — Mk.12:28-31; Rom.13:14; 14:13-19; I Cor.13:1-3
  - b. Reliance, not independence — Prov.3:5-6; Gal.5:16
  - c. Humility, not pride — Jas.4:6; Phil.2:5-8
  - d. Gratitude, not presumption — Col.3:17
  - e. Clear conscience, not guilt — Rom.14:22-23
  - f. Integrity, not irresponsibility — Col.3:17,22
  - g. Diligence, not laziness — Col.3:23
  - h. Eagerness, not compulsion — I Pet.5:2
  - i. Generosity, not stinginess — I Tim.6:17-19
  - j. Submission, not domination — I Pet.5:5-6
  - k. Courage, not cowardice — Jn.16:33; Matt.10:26-28
  - l. Contentment, not greed — Heb.13:5; Phil.4:11
- b. **Principles** (applied by individuals in individual circumstances)
  - 1. The principle of Glory to God (I Cor.10:31; Rom.15:6)
  - 2. The principle of Liberty (I Cor.6:12; Gal.5:13)
  - 3. The principle of Expediency (I Cor.6:12)
    - a. In relation to self —
      - 1) Conscience (Rom.14:22-23)
      - 2) Control (I Cor.6:12)
    - b. In relation to others —
      - 1) Selflessness (I Cor.10:24; Phil.2:3)
      - 2) Love (I Cor.8:13; Rom.14:15)
        - 1) Not to cause a brother to stumble (I Cor.8:13)
        - 2) Not to cause an unbeliever to stumble (I Cor.10:27)
      - 3) Union (Rom.15:5-6; I Cor.1:10; II Cor.13:11; I Pet.3:8; Col.3:14; Eph.4:3)
  - c. **Examples:**
    - 1. Christ (Rom. 8:29; I Pet.2:21; Jn.13:15)
    - 2. Old Testament (I Cor.10:6; Jude 7; Jas.5:10)
    - 3. Saints (I Pet.5:3; I Tim.4:12; Phil.3:17; 4:9; I Cor.4:16)
- 3. **The declared will of God** is fully revealed in Christ through the promises of Scripture. II Pet.2:3-4
  - a. The correct understanding of the Scripture is not always the simplistic reading of Scripture.
    - 1. The role of the teacher is to be respected.
    - 2. The insights of the whole community of believers are to be respected.
    - 3. The experiences of life are to be respected.
  - b. It is all too easy to read into Scripture our cultural and personal biases.
    - 1. Cross-cultural exposure can be helpful.
    - 2. Perspectives from different points in history can be helpful.

3. Humility is always in order.
  4. **The declared will of God** is able to equip believers for every good work. II Tim.3:16-17
- B. In those areas where the Scripture gives no command or principle (no moral direction), the believer is free and responsible to choose any one of a number of options.**
1. **Rom.6:14** “you are not under law, but under grace.”
    - a. Living under the new covenant means that many things are lawful (I Cor.6:12; 10:23), clean (Mk.7:19; Rom.14:14,20), and pure (Titus 1:15).
    - b. The principles of love (Rom. 14; I Cor.8) and new life in Christ (Rom. 6) constrain our freedom.
  2. **Rom.4:15** “Where there is no law, neither is there violation.”
  3. **ILLUSTRATIONS:**
    - a. **Marriage** — I Cor.7:39 “A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord.”
    - b. **Giving** — II Cor.8:13 “For this is not for the ease of others and for your affliction, but by way of equality”
    - c. **Sabbath** — Rom.14:5 “One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind.”
  4. St. Thomas Aquinas defined three aspects of moral decision making.
    - a. **ACTION** — objective behavior.
    - b. **MOTIVE** — subjective intent.
    - c. **CIRCUMSTANCE** — situational context.
  5. NOTE: **All three factors must be morally right for a response to be good.**
    - a. **LEGALISM** — respects only the first. “What does the law tell me to do?”
    - b. **SUBJECTIVISM** — respects only the second. “If my motives are right, I’m OK.”
    - c. **SITUATIONALISM** — respects only the third. “What is appropriate in my life may be inappropriate in yours. There is no common standard.”
- C. In making decisions on non-moral issues, the believer is called to exercise wisdom and spiritual common sense.**
1. We are to make decisions by applying wisdom to life’s challenges.
    - a. **Eph.5:15-16** “Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men, but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil.”
    - b. **Col.4:5** “Conduct yourselves with wisdom toward outsiders, making the most of the opportunity.”
  2. **ILLUSTRATIONS:**
    - a. **I Thess.3:1-2** “Therefore when we could endure it no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone; and we sent Timothy, our brother and God’s fellow worker in the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith.”
    - b. **Phil.2:25-26** “But I thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger and minister to my need; because he was longing for you all and was distressed because you had heard that he was sick.”

- c. **I Cor.16:3-4** “And when I arrive, **whomever you may approve**, I shall send them with letters to carry your gift to Jerusalem; and if it is fitting for **me** to go also, they will go with me.”
  - d. **Acts 6:2-4** “And the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, ‘It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. **But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom**, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.’ ”
  - e. **Acts 15:28-29** “**For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us** to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell.”
  - f. **Acts 16:10** “And when we had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, **concluding that God had called us** to preach the gospel to them.”
  - g. **I Cor.6:1-6** “If then you have law courts dealing with matters of this life, do you appoint them as judges who are of no account in the church? I say {this} to your shame. {Is it} so, {that} there is not among you **one wise man who will be able to decide between his brethren**, but brother goes to law with brother, and that before unbelievers?”
  - h. **I Cor.7:39-40** “A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, **she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. But in my opinion** she is happier if she remains as she is; and I think that I also have the Spirit of God.”
3. **How does one acquire wisdom?**

- a. The attitude that fosters wisdom

#### 1. **REVERENCE**

**Prov. 9:10** “The **fear of the Lord** is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.”

#### 2. **HUMILITY**

**Prov.11:2** “When pride comes, then comes dishonor, but with the **humble** is wisdom.”

#### 3. **TEACHABLENESS**

**Prov.9:9** “**Give instruction** to a wise man, and he will be still wiser, teach a righteous man, and he will increase his learning.”

**Prov.15:31** “He whose **ear listens** to the life-giving reproof will dwell among the wise.”

**Prov.19:20** “**Listen to counsel and accept discipline**, that you may be wise the rest of your days.”

#### 4. **DILIGENCE**

**Prov.8:17** “I love those who **love** me; and those who **diligently seek** me will find me.”

#### 5. **UPRIGHTNESS**

**Prov.2:7** “He stores up sound wisdom for **the upright**; He is a shield to those who **walk in integrity**.”

#### 6. **FAITH**

**Jas.1:5-8** “But if any of you lacks wisdom, **let him ask of God**, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him **ask in faith** without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed

by the wind. For let not that man expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, {being} a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways."

b. The proper approach

1. **PRAYER** (Ask God for it)

**Jas.1:5-6** "But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him **ask of God**, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him **ask in faith** without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea driven and tossed by the wind."

2. **SCRIPTURE** (Know the Bible)

**Ps.119:97-100** "O how I love Thy law! It is my meditation all the day. **Thy commandments make me wiser than my enemies**, for they are ever mine. I have more insight than all my teachers, for Thy testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the aged, because I have observed Thy precepts."

3. **GENERAL INFORMATION** (Become informed)

**Lk.14:28-32** No one builds without counting the cost.

4. **COUNSELORS** (Draw on the experience and insights of others)

**Prov.11:14** "Where there is no guidance, the people fall, but in **abundance of counselors** there is victory."

**Prov.13:20** "He who **walks with wise men** will be wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm."

**Prov.15:22** "Without consultation, plans are frustrated, but with **many counselors** they succeed."

5. **EXPERIENCE** (Learn from life itself)

**Prov.30:24-28** "Four things are small on the earth, but they are exceedingly wise: The ants are not a strong folk, but they prepare their food in the summer; the badgers are not mighty folk, yet they make their houses in the rocks; the locusts have no king, yet all of them go out in ranks; the lizard you may grasp with the hands, yet it is in kings' palaces."

**Heb.5:12-14** "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food is for the mature, who **because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.**"

D. **In some unusual circumstances God's Spirit may guide an individual to specific decisions. This is not the norm; it cannot be demanded and should not be expected.**

E. **In all decisions, the believer should humbly submit, in advance, to the outworking of God's sovereign will as it touches each decision.**

1. **Eph.1:11** God "works **all things** after the counsel of His will."

2. **Deut.29:29** "The **secret things belong to the Lord our God**, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law."

3. **ILLUSTRATION:**

a. **Acts 2:23** "This {Man}, delivered up by the **predetermined plan** and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put {Him} to death."

- b. **Acts 4:27-28** “For truly in this city there were gathered together against Thy holy servant Jesus, whom Thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, **to do whatever Thy hand and Thy purpose predestined to occur.**”
- 4. **NOTE:** There are certain things that God has revealed through prophecy and promise that give us a hint about what is in His plan.
- 5. **God's sovereignty does not exclude the need for planning; it does require humble submission to His will.**

**Jas.4:13-16** “Come now, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow, we shall go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit.’ Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, ‘**If the Lord wills**, we shall live and also do this or that.’ But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil.”

- 6. **Circumstances define the context of the decision and must be weighed with wisdom . . . not “read” as road signs to God’s individual will.**

**Eccl.11:5-6** “Just as you do not know the path of the wind and how bones are formed in the womb of the pregnant woman, so you do not know the activity of God who makes all things. Sow your seed in the morning, and do not be idle in the evening, **for you do not know** whether morning or evening sowing will succeed, or whether both of them alike will be good.”

- 7. **Open doors are God-given opportunities for service . . . not specific guidance from God requiring one to enter.**

**Col.4:3** “Praying at the same time for us as well, that God may **open up to us a door for the word**, so that we may speak forth the mystery of Christ, for which I have also been imprisoned.”

**II Cor.2:12-13** “Now when I came to Troas for the gospel of Christ and when **a door was opened for me** in the Lord, I had no rest for my spirit, not finding Titus my brother; but taking my leave of them, I went on to Macedonia.”

- 8. **“Putting out a fleece” is an invalid practice that should not be trusted.**

**Judges 6:36-40** “Then Gideon said to God, ‘If Thou wilt deliver Israel through me, as Thou has spoken, behold, **I will but a fleece of wool on the threshing floor**. If there is dew on the fleece only, and it is dry on all the ground, then I will know that Thou wilt deliver Israel through me, as Thou hast spoken,’ And it was so. When he arose early the next morning and squeezed the fleece, he drained the dew from the fleece, a bowl full of water. Then Gideon said to God, ‘Do not let Thine anger burn against me that I may speak once more; please let me make a test once more with the fleece, let it now be dry only on the fleece, and let there be dew on all the ground.’ And God did so that night; for it was dry only on the fleece, and dew was on all the ground.”