

We are in the second week of a sermon series I am calling “The Way of Wisdom,” looking at selected topics from the book of Proverbs. Today we will look at what Proverbs and the Bible has to say about decision making and the will of God. Certainly when we talk about wisdom, one of the main areas we find ourselves asking for wisdom is when we are faced with difficult decisions that are not moral or immoral: what school should I attend? Should I marry this person or not? Should we have another child? Should I hire this person or not? When should I retire? Which of these 200 shampoos before me at the grocery store should I buy? Apparently, the average person makes about 35,000 decisions every day according to Psychology Today... not sure where they got that number from, but certainly it raises the question for a follower of Jesus, who calls Him Lord, about how we are to go about making wise decisions. Does God care whether I have oatmeal or an egg for breakfast? Does he care what kind of shirt I wear to church? Does he care who I marry or what job I take? And if so, how does He guide, and how can I do my best to follow His will? That is what I will attempt to discuss today.

First of all, if we are going to answer the question of how to know God’s will, we need to clarify, what do we mean when we say “God’s will”? There are three potential answers to that question:

### **1) God’s will of decree**

This encompasses all that God has ordained. Everything that comes to pass is according to God’s sovereign decree. And all that He decrees will eventually come to pass. No one can thwart this.

**Proverbs 16:33** - The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD.

**Isaiah 46:9–10** – “Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. <sup>10</sup> I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say, ‘My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.’”

**Ephesians 1:11** - In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will

There is a sovereignty to God that no one can oppose. And yes, this will include evil.

**Acts 4:27–28** - Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. <sup>28</sup> They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.

As Peter says in this passage, God's will of decree means that the same God that told human beings "Do not kill" ordained the death of His Son Jesus. God's will of decree means that what He has ordained will come to pass, and nothing can thwart it.

## **2) God's will of desire**

This is what God has commanded, what He wants to happen, how things ought to be. But the major difference between God's will of decree and God's will of desire is that God's will of desire can be opposed. For example:

**1 Timothy 2:3–4** - This is good, and pleases God our Savior, <sup>4</sup> who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

God wants everyone to be saved, but not all will be saved.

**Matthew 7:21** - "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven."

**1 John 2:17** - The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.

The will that John is referring to is God's will of desire, which we can choose to either do or not do. In the areas of God's moral will, his will of desire, he is clear in His Word. Do not lie. Do not steal. Do not commit adultery. Forgive. You do not need to ask Him what His will is on these matters; you just need to obey. And even in nonmoral situations, God's moral will can help. For example, as you consider what kind of job to take:

Do not have any idols or gods above Him – it doesn't matter what kind of job you take if you make your job an idol

You can not serve both God and money – it doesn't matter what job you do if you put money above God. Is your motivation to take this job greed?

The Bible also says that if anyone does not provide for his family he is worse than an unbeliever – will this job help me provide for my family?

This means that the best way to walk in God's will is to know His Word. But God's will of desire does not always come to pass, because we have free will.

Before we get to the third definition of God's will, take a moment to consider why these two definitions of God's will are so important, especially in the light of human suffering. For example, say that you were abused as a child. How do you understand that horrible event in the light of God's will? If you understand that God has both a will of decree and a will of desire, it means this: God's will of desire is clearly that no one would ever abuse another person. He has clearly taught us to love one another and not to use others for our own purpose. This means that if someone abused you, that was not God's will of desire for you, but the actions of evil men or women.

But God's will of decree means that in God's sovereignty, that abuse is not the final word. It can be redeemed. Something good can come out of something unspeakably evil. Because God is on the throne and is always working all things together for good.

**Romans 8:28–29** - And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup> For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

This is why Joseph, after being sold into slavery by his brothers, left for dead, unjustly imprisoned, and finally restored by God to a place of second in command over all of Egypt, when he stood in front of his brothers again, he said:

**Genesis 50:20** - You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.

And as Peter said in his Pentecost sermon:

**Acts 2:22–23** - “Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. <sup>23</sup> This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.”

So take heart – the evil that happens to you is completely the fault of those who choose to do evil against you. And yet somehow, what has happened to you is not out of God’s will of decree, but can be used for good.

Now that we’ve established two definitions of God’s will, let’s consider a third:

### **3) God’s will of direction?**

I added a question mark because this is the question - **does God have a secret individual will for our lives that He wants us to figure out before we do anything?** Yes, we understand that God does not want us to steal, or lie, or commit adultery. But what about all of those nonmoral decisions we have to make every day – what job to take, where to go on vacation, what to eat for dinner? Does God have a will of direction that we are to seek and obey?

In *The Will of God as a Way of Life*, Gerald Sittser explains this outlook like this: “Conventional understanding of God’s will defines it as a specific pathway we should follow into the future. God knows what this pathway is, and he has laid it out for us to follow. Our responsibility is to discover this pathway – God’s plan for our lives. We must discover which of the many pathways we could follow is the one we should follow, the one God has planned for us. If and when we make the right choice, we will receive his favor, fulfill our divine destiny, and succeed in life... If we choose rightly, we will experience his blessing and achieve success and happiness. If we choose wrongly, we may lose our way, miss God’s will for our lives, and remain lost forever in an incomprehensible maze.”

This is a very common view on God’s will, that He has a specific pathway that we should follow – spouse, kids, jobs, etc. – and we are to seek Him in order to find out what it is. And if we choose wrong, we will be on the wrong path for the rest of our lives. The question is, is this a Biblical view? Does God have a will of direction that we are to seek and obey, a specific pathway for us to discover and walk in?

**My understanding, looking at the Bible and at Proverbs, is that the answer is largely no.** Yes, God has a plan for our lives – His will of decree – and yes, looking back, we will often be able to trace God’s hand in bringing us to where we are. And yes, He will help you make decisions as He gives you wisdom. However, we are very rarely going to be told this will ahead of time. I do not believe there is a “Center of God’s will” when it comes to nonmoral decisions that we can miss and

therefore have to settle for an alternate ending to our lives. I do not believe that God wants us to spend an inordinate amount of time trying to figure out his specific direction for the decisions we are facing in life.

Instead, I believe Proverbs gives us a better, more Biblical way to making decisions and following His will. Three things in particular:

**1) God's usual method of guidance is to transform us into holy and wise people who make increasingly godly and wise decisions**

In other words, instead of having a specific pathway that we must figure out by seeking Him, lest we end up on plan B for the rest of our lives, God's main focus is on us becoming more like Jesus, sanctifying us, making us more holy, so that we have His mind and His heart and His will, so that we make increasingly godly and wise decisions.

This is how Proverbs puts it:

**Proverbs 11:3** - The integrity of the upright guides them, but the unfaithful are destroyed by their duplicity

Notice that the upright are guided by their integrity – as you become a person of integrity, that integrity will guide your decision-making. The focus is on who you are, not on learning some technique to know God's will. Again:

**Proverbs 12:5** -The plans of the righteous are just, but the advice of the wicked is deceitful.

Once again – those who are righteous make just plans; the implication is, become a person of righteousness and your plans will be just. God's focus is on your character, not on learning techniques and shortcuts. God's usual method of guidance is to transform you into a person of wisdom and holiness who will increasingly make godly choices.

To give a New Testament parallel, consider how Paul put it in **Romans 12:1-2** - Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God-- this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is-- his good, pleasing and perfect will.

How do you come to understand and know God's will? You offer yourself to God as a living sacrifice, in worship to Him. Lord, whatever you tell me, I will obey. And whatever you bring my way, I will accept. You stop conforming to this world, and you let Him transform your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – that is, His will of desire, how He wants you to live. Once again, the focus to knowing the will of God is not on learning and using specific techniques, but on who you are.

**This is both good and bad news for us.** The good news is that following God's will and making wise decisions is not about trying to figure out the plan from a sneaky God who plays hide and seek with us, and then ending up on some second-best pathway because we missed what God wanted for us and married the wrong person or took the wrong job. The bad news is that this approach to decision-making takes time. There are no shortcuts, no techniques. It is about seeking God, being transformed by Him through prayer and reading His Word and obeying Him into a person of holiness and wisdom, so that your heart and mind are increasingly aligned with His, so that you more instinctively make godly and wise decisions.

If I'm correct, this means that many of the techniques for determining God's will that you may have come to believe are Biblical may not be as Biblical as you think. For example:

**Impressions/feelings** – trying to pay attention to impressions and saying that they are from God is a very subjective practice without Biblical support.

**Listening for the still, small voice** – this comes from Elijah's experience with God in 1 Kings 19

**1 Kings 19:11–13** - The Lord said, "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. <sup>12</sup> After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. <sup>13</sup> When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.

But this is a descriptive passage, not a prescriptive one. Nowhere does God instruct us to listen for his audible voice or whisper. If you do follow this approach, it is very easy to confuse "hearing from God" with hearing your own voice.

Just to be clear, I do believe that some people have the gift of spiritual discernment and are more aware of spiritual reality, both evil and good, and often more readily hear from God. But that is a gift, just like others are given other gifts, and is not to be expected of everyone. There are many people who claim “God told them things” when it was just a thought that popped into their head. Most people, however, will hear the Lord through His Word.

**Feeling peace about a decision** – often people look for God to give peace with a decision. But you have to interrogate the peace. Sometimes the lack of peace may be your conscience stopping you from doing something – that’s good. But sometimes your lack of peace may be because you have to do something hard, and it is making you very anxious. After all, do you really think Jesus had peace on the way to the cross, when he was sweating blood in the Garden of Gethsemane?

**Open doors** – Does an open door always mean God’s will and a closed door mean it is not his will? No. An open door does not always mean it is God’s will.

**2 Corinthians 2:12-13** - Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, <sup>13</sup> I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said goodbye to them and went on to Macedonia.

And a closed door does not mean it is not God’s will. Consider **the Israelites at the banks of the Jordan River, or the parable of the widow and the unjust judge in Luke 18**. Sometimes a closed door means persevere or trust God to open it, and an open door is just one possible avenue

**Putting out the fleece** – This was one example of seeking God’s will, by Gideon in the book of Judges 6:36-40 – if there is dew on the fleece in the morning, then I’ll obey you. But this is really like divination, putting God to the test. I would not follow this as a rule of how to seek God’s will.

**Open the Bible and point** – And, of course, some people just hope that if they point to a random verse, God will give them the answer they are looking for. But that is not how the Bible was meant to be used. Don’t treat the Bible like divination or a Magic 8 ball; let it teach you wisdom and holiness.

The point is that God’s usual method of guidance is not to teach us techniques by which we figure out what he wants, lest we end up on a secondary path in life.



God's primary method of guidance is to transform us into holy and wise people who will increasingly make godly decisions because we love God and want to honor Him.

Think about it this way. When my son was five years old, he might ask me, "Dad, can I go outside and play?" And I would answer him yes or no depending upon the time of day, the weather, and if there were any chores he needed to do. But if my 20-year-old son were to call me up from college and ask "Dad, can I go outside and play?", I would say "Why are you asking me?" My hope is that, if I have raised him to be a wise person, he will be able to make wise decisions. He will not need to consult me on every decision. Similarly, I believe that God's will is that we would be so one with Him, so holy, that we would become the kind of people who know what our Father would do and do it. We still pray for wisdom and discernment and ask Him for help, but we trust Him to lead us as we focus on growing in godliness and holiness.

## **2) God's primary concern is that you would follow His will of desire, not be consumed by figuring out His will of direction**

If you read the Bible, you see that God's main concerns are moral purity, theological fidelity, love for Him and for others, our witness to the world, faithfulness. It really isn't about nonmoral decisions like who you will marry or what job you will do, which too often become our preoccupation.

**Proverbs 3:5–6** - Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; <sup>6</sup> in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.

Consider other places in the Bible that highlight God's will:

**1 Thessalonians 4:3** - It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality;

**Ephesians 5:17–20** - Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. <sup>18</sup> Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, <sup>19</sup> speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, <sup>20</sup> always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.



**Micah 6:8** - He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

**1 Thessalonians 5:16–18** - Rejoice always, <sup>17</sup> pray continually, <sup>18</sup> give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

The bottom line is that I believe that God is much more concerned about your character – what kind of lawyer or doctor or teacher or engineer we will be – then about whether you become a lawyer or doctor or teacher or engineer. He is much more concerned that you love and are faithful to the man or woman to whom you have committed your life rather than who you marry. “I married the wrong person” is a worldly concern, not of God. And He is much more concerned that you train up your children to be godly than whether you have 2 or 3 or 4 children.

God has promised to work all things together for good for those who love Him, and that includes even our mistakes. You can seek Him and rest in His sovereign will of decree, knowing that He is working all things together for good.

**Romans 8:28–29** - And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup> For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

Jesus tells us to concern ourselves with seeking Him first, and He will take care of us.

**Matthew 6:31-34** - So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ <sup>32</sup> For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. <sup>33</sup> But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. <sup>34</sup> Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

His primary concern is that you would follow His will of desire, not be consumed by trying to figure out His will of direction.

**3) Wise decision-making increases with Scripture reading, prayer, and wise counsel**

As we seek God and grow in holiness, we learn not only that God is the source of all wisdom, but that we are fallen and can not trust our own hearts. We need to know God's Word, seek Him for wisdom, and seek wise counsel.

**Proverbs 14:12** - There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death.

**Proverbs 19:2** - Desire without knowledge is not good— how much more will hasty feet miss the way!

And so, if we want to make wise decisions and walk according to the will of God, we need to seek wise counsel.

**Proverbs 12:15** - The way of fools seems right to them, but the wise listen to advice.

**Proverbs 15:22** - Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.

If you want to make wise decisions, take time to ask others who you trust and listen to their advice. We often have blind spots, faulty motives, and desires that are not based on knowledge.

Do you want to walk in the will of God? Concern yourself with His will of desire; get to know what He requires of you in His Word, and obey it. And as you become more like Jesus, you will make wiser and godlier decisions. Ask Him for wisdom and discernment, and trust that He is sovereign and is working everything together for good in His will of decree. And seek wise counsel, knowing that you are prone to self-deception and need the counsel of godly men and women.