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Christianity



# What Is God's Will For Me?



JORDAN M. DAHL



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# God's Will For You Is Joy: A Gospel Foundation

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Have you ever heard a test message from a warning system? I can still hear the robotic voice of this one from several years ago: "This is a test of the Apple Valley warning system. This is a test and only a test." At one time in my life, the Christian walk felt like that—*a test and only a test*. If I didn't make the right decision according to God's will then I failed the test. Every little choice had the power to fracture my relationship with God and bring misfortune into my life.

Thankfully, I now see that this isn't in line with the gospel. If you take only one thing from this booklet, let it be this: the Christian life isn't a test to see if you make all the right choices. God's favor upon you depends on the finished work of Christ, not your ability to figure out what God might be trying to tell you. The Christian life is about freedom in Christ to enjoy life (Gal. 5:1, 1 Tim. 6:17). It's about exerting all the energy he works in you to grow and serve (Col. 1:29, Gal. 5:13). And it's about trusting God's grace in Christ to cover not only all your sins but also all your poor choices (Rom. 8:1).

Many Christians—especially new ones—get excited at the thought of a close walk with the Lord, filled with supernatural activity like hearing God's voice. But before long, this expectation turns into anxiety. *How do I tune into what God is telling me? Through some kind of listening prayer? Maybe a walk in the woods?* Either you convince yourself he's telling you something through random occurrences (is that Jesus in my

pancake?), or you give up.

Dear Christian, this life of anxiousness isn't God's will for you. You can indeed have a close walk with God, but most likely it won't be glamorous. Although God can and does work miracles, he usually works through the ordinary stuff of life. That's where we can expect to meet him.

## **GOD'S WILL IS YOUR SANCTIFICATION**

One of the clearest passages in the Bible about God's will is 1 Thessalonians 4:1–12. In verse 1, Paul says he's talking about "how you ought to walk and to please God," which is something we're after in this booklet. He then says, "For this is the will of God, your sanctification" (1 Thess. 4:3).

Could there be a clearer way of telling us God's will? Paul goes on to explain what he means by "sanctification," and we'll look at that later on. For now, notice what Paul says about this will of God for you: "Aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one" (vv. 11–12).

Do you aspire to live quietly? Sounds boring. But this is part of God's will for your life: The daily grind of doing your day job to serve others and provide for your family and neighbors. To love fellow Christians in your local church. This weekly rhythm of life might be boring in a way, but it has its own sort of beauty when you know that God works in these ordinary things and not in your pancakes. Through the ordinary, God's will is done: your sanctification, your growth in grace.

If we reorient our outlook on the Christian life along these ordinary

pathways, we begin to see that the simple stuff of life is where God intends for us to find enjoyment.

## **GOD'S WILL IS YOUR JOY**

Ever heard this saying? “Beer is proof God loves us and wants us to be happy.” It’s attributed to American founding father Ben Franklin, although he was actually talking about wine. While it’s a bit crass, this claim has some truth to it. God provides rain and causes grapes to grow. The wine that comes from those grapes gladdens man’s heart. So, we can say through the whole process that God indeed provides the good things of life for our enjoyment. Rain and growth of crops are some of the most ordinary things of the natural world, yet they’re used often in Scripture to show how God works and provides for us:

You cause the grass to grow for the livestock  
and plants for man to cultivate,  
that he may bring forth food from the earth  
and wine to gladden the heart of man,  
oil to make his face shine  
and bread to strengthen man’s heart. (Ps. 104:14–15)

God indeed “richly provides us with everything to enjoy” (1 Tim. 6:17). “There is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God, for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment?” (Eccles. 2:24–25).



## GOD'S WILL IS YOUR FREEDOM

But there is greater proof that “God loves us and wants us to be happy.” He sent his Son to die for you and me (John 3:16). Christ took the curse of death that we deserved for our sin so that we can have the blessing of joy he earned by his obedience. By his wounds we have been healed (1 Pet. 2:24). We as Christians should never get tired of hearing the gospel of God’s love, forgiveness, and new life in Christ. This good news isn’t merely the entry point of the Christian life; it’s also the daily wind in our sails. The knowledge that God is for us renews and strengthens our spirits so that we can face each day with the confidence of conquerors (Rom. 8:31, 37).

Though we’re indeed saved by faith in this good news, I wonder if we tend to forget the freedom it gives. “For freedom Christ has set us free,” Paul writes (Gal. 5:1). Paul strongly opposed those who said faith in Christ wasn’t enough. The opponents he addressed in Galatians taught that you needed to add law-keeping (circumcision in particular) to have favor with God and a welcome place among his people. But, Paul said, going back to law-keeping would mean failure to live in the freedom Christ purchased for you. Instead, he urged them: “Do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1).

When we forget the freedom Christ purchased for us and fret over finding God’s will, we live in functional slavery. I once lived this way. In college, I lived on the 8th floor of a dorm which had both an elevator and a stairwell. Each time I left the dorm, I agonized over whether God wanted me to take the elevator or the stairs. Perhaps there was someone God wanted me to meet and evangelize on the elevator, I thought. But often the stairs were faster, and standing around waiting for the elevator might make me late for class (and I probably needed the exercise). Eventually, I realized this decision was unimportant in the grand

scheme of things. I was over-spiritualizing a very minor thing.

Maybe you've agonized over similarly trite decisions. But your freedom in Christ means you don't have to. Even in the worst-case scenario, God won't condemn you (Rom 8:1). We'll look more closely at this in our next chapter, but to be clear, no biblical text says you must find the one right way God wants you to live. You don't have to fear your decisions will condemn you to a life that's less than "God's best." God's redemption is greater than all your sin, including all your foolish decisions.

## SIN BOLDLY

Now, you might be thinking, *But I really want to make a good decision! Or, I really just want to live in God's will!* It's good and right to want to honor the Lord with our obedience. "We make it our aim to please him," Paul writes (2 Cor. 5:9b).

But some things aren't a matter of sin and obedience. Some things are indifferent before God. Often, our decisions concern areas of life where God has given us freedom to choose as we please. We need to be able to distinguish matters of obedience from matters of indifference: "For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God" (1 Cor. 7:19).

Even in matters of indifference, we still ought to apply wisdom to make good choices. Is it a sin to make a bad decision? For the sake of argument, let's say it isn't. In that case, just do your best to make a good decision and don't fret about it. On the other hand, if it *is* sin, then we have good news: Christ's blood covers it. So, whether it's sin or not, you can relax a bit, knowing you're in God's hands. You have freedom in Christ to make decisions—even bad ones.

This is the context of the Protestant Reformer Martin Luther's famous saying, "Sin boldly." The reality is that there's likely some sinful motives in every decision we make. Of course, we should not sin intentionally, and in the coming chapters we'll talk about what wise decision-making looks like. But when we've considered all the factors and still aren't sure what we should do, instead of "analysis paralysis," we can move forward, pull the trigger on the decision, and "sin boldly," knowing God will orchestrate beauty out of all our mistakes.

God has a sovereign plan for everything that happens. He "works all things according to the counsel of his will" (Eph. 1:11). Your bad decisions can't jeopardize that plan. In fact, his plan accounts for everything you've ever done and will do. He's working through every little event and decision to weave a tapestry of history whose beauty we'll one day behold. On that day, he'll wipe away every tear and make all things new (Rev. 21:4, 5).

Maybe we don't see the goodness of God's plan right now, but we can trust our good Father to do good (Ps. 119:68). He's wise enough to shape all our foolishness unto his glory and our good (Rom. 8:28).

## **EXERCISE WISDOM**

As we trust in God's wisdom to orchestrate our lives according to his purposes, we should exercise our freedom in Christ with wisdom. In later chapters, we'll look at how God's word guides us in wise and righteous living. But here, let's briefly dig in a little more to what wisdom is.

Wisdom is the skillful ability to achieve your goals. And the goal we're all after, unbeliever and believer alike, is the good life, a life of flourishing and happiness. This is the end for which we were created. What the

unbeliever doesn't know is that our true happiness is found in God. The Heidelberg Catechism describes our purpose as attaining "eternal happiness," and this purpose is connected with glorifying and praising God:

**Q. 6. Did God then create man so wicked and perverse?**

**A.** By no means; but God created man good, and after his own image, in true righteousness and holiness, that he might rightly know God his Creator, heartily love him and live with him in eternal happiness to glorify and praise him.

So, wisdom defined as the skillful pursuit of happiness is on the right track, but there is more to it. The book of Proverbs helps us to understand the nature of wisdom and the ways we're called to practice it.

### **1. Wisdom needs to be integrated with the fear of the Lord.**

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 9:10a). The fear of the Lord directs us in the way of true happiness. This fear of the Lord isn't merely fear of his punishment. If you fear God's punishment, you must first believe he exists and can deliver on his threats and promises. The fear of the Lord, then, is a belief about the kind of being God is—all powerful. The fear of the Lord also entails a belief that God's words are true. Fearing the Lord means believing what he says about the best way to happiness, especially when you think you know better. And what he says is about sin and holiness.

### **2. Wisdom discerns the truth about sin's false offer of happiness.**

The pursuit of happiness in the fear of the Lord starts with the conviction that sin leads to misery and death while holiness leads to joy and flourishing (Rom. 6:21–22). Much of Proverbs 1–8 seeks to get this

message across. Sin is deceptive and offers us happiness, but wisdom is being smarter than sin's deception: "For the lips of a forbidden woman drip honey, and her speech is smoother than oil, but in the end she is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword" (Prov. 5:3–4). In this sense of wisdom and folly, the fool is the one who falls for it.

### **3. Wisdom avoids the circumstances of temptation.**

The fool is the one who goes near to temptation. But why flirt with sin? "Keep your way far from her, and do not go near the door of her house" (Prov. 5:8). The proud person goes near temptation thinking he'll be fine, but pride comes before a fall. The simpleton walks into temptation because he's just not thinking. Both are fools. "Can a man carry fire next to his chest and his clothes not be burned?" (Prov. 6:27). We're not to toe the line with sin but instead to "flee from sexual immorality" (1 Cor. 6:18a).<sup>1</sup>

There's an important caveat to note here. Although there's wisdom in avoiding temptation, this sort of advice can get out of hand. We must be careful not to add laws to what God has revealed or bind one another's consciences. What is wise for one person might not be what's best for another. It was from this sort of wisdom that some Jews came up with "hedge" laws that went beyond God's law to ensure you never came close to sin. Such rules quickly devolve good religion into legalism.

Jesus addressed this when some Jews confronted him about not washing hands before meals, which was apparently one of their hedge laws (Matt. 15:1–20). He quoted Isaiah: "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Matt. 15:8–9, quoting Isa.

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1 Although all these verses are about sexual sin, the principle applies to all sin in general.

29:13). We must be careful that our application of wisdom in avoiding sin doesn't become new laws, mere "commandments of men." We ought to pursue holiness and not try to get as close to sin as we can without crossing the line, but we must also maintain a clear distinction between sin and the wise avoidance of sin. In other words, there's no sin in merely walking up to a door, but if it is the prostitute's door, that sure is foolish for the temptation it presents.

#### **4. Wisdom discerns best practices in matters indifferent.**

Wisdom isn't always about sin. Sometimes it's about things that are indifferent. Some things have no moral value—it isn't a sin either to do or not do them. Protestant Reformer John Calvin identified one aspect of Christian freedom as "regarding outward things that are of themselves indifferent." About these he says, "we are not bound before God" but can use them as we please.<sup>2</sup>

Now, as with the other senses of wisdom, we're still pursuing happiness. If something is indifferent morally, we might as well choose the way that leads to greater happiness. If you've ever sanded wood, you know it's best to go with the grain. Similarly, all of nature has a "grain" to it, and it's wisest to go with the grain. Some things in life lead to ease and happiness, and others to difficulty. If you make a choice in an indifferent matter that leads to difficulty, that's not something to feel guilty about. It's just something to deal with as we do all challenges in life. But it's wiser to go with the grain.

Scripture offers a good example of the application of wisdom to an indifferent matter in 1 Corinthians 7. In this passage, Paul addresses singleness and marriage, and he makes a distinction between a command

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2 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Battles translation, 3.19.7.

from the Lord and his own judgment: “Now concerning the betrothed, I have no command from the Lord, but I give my judgment as one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy” (1 Cor. 7:25). Paul says whether you marry or not, you’re not sinning. There is no command from God. It’s something indifferent. But in wisdom we should choose what’s best.

When Paul offers his “judgment,” he shows how he applies wisdom to the situation. Notice the goals he seeks in decision making: freedom from anxiety (v. 32), happiness (v. 40), “good order,” and “undivided devotion to the Lord” (v. 35). He doesn’t say the things we might today, like finding the “center” of God’s will for your life or “the one” spouse God has chosen for you. He wants us to have freedom from anxiety and not more of it!

Paul reveals some of the factors to consider when applying wisdom to an indifferent matter. And the concern he ends the chapter on is happiness: “Yet in my judgment she is happier if she remains as she is” (1 Cor. 7:40).

## **GOD’S WILL FOR YOU IS JOY**

In summary, wisdom concerns sin and obedience as well as things we might consider indifferent. In all cases, we’re pursuing the life of flourishing—the way to happiness. Ultimate blessedness is found in communion with God and others, being holy and perfect like God. With that as our aim, God’s wisdom tells us to flee from sin and pursue righteousness. This is God’s will for us. God’s will for you is joy.

Ultimately, however, we don’t attain the goal of “eternal happiness” by our own power. Anything good comes only as a gift from God. And eternal life is a gift that comes not by our great wisdom but by faith in Jesus: “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in

Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23).

Even as we strive towards holiness, we do so knowing our righteous acts don't earn our right standing before God. Rather, as we receive the righteousness of Christ by faith, we become, as Calvin writes, "freed from the law's yoke" to "willingly obey God's will."<sup>3</sup> And we can rest knowing that God will use even our failures to accomplish his purposes.

Believer, God's will for you is a life of joy doing ordinary things in the freedom Christ bought for you. This is not a test.

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3 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Battles translation, 3.19.





# God's Twofold Will: His Plan and Law

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Despite everything I've written so far, I know you'll still go hunting for God's will. And for good reason—Scripture guides us toward God's will. There are several times that the Bible uses the language of "God's will." Consider these examples:

- » "For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be **God's will**, than for doing evil." (1 Pet. 3:17)
- » "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the **will of God**, what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Rom. 12:2)
- » "For this is the **will of God**, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality." (1 Thess. 4:3)
- » "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the **will of God** in Christ Jesus for you." (1 Thess. 5:16–18)
- » "Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the **will of the Lord** is." (Eph. 5:17)
- » "For this is the **will of God**, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people." (1 Pet. 2:15)

## GOD'S HIDDEN AND REVEALED WILL

If we're to understand these verses correctly, it's helpful to establish some categories. There are two different ways to speak of God's will.

Sometimes the Bible uses the term "God's will" to refer to God's law and our moral duty to do what pleases him. Other times, the phrase refers to God's plan for what will happen in our lives and the world. For example, look back at 1 Peter 3:17. There's no question that doing good is God's will, so when Peter refers to God's will with a sense of uncertainty ("if" it should be God's will), he's not wondering if doing good is God's will (of course it is); rather, he's referring to our ignorance of the future. In this verse, "God's will" refers to the suffering that may or may not come to you. We could paraphrase Peter this way: "For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God's plan for you, than for doing evil."

Knowing these two senses of "God's will" helps avoid confusion. This distinction isn't a category we impose upon Scripture. The Bible teaches us, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:29).

The "revealed things" in this verse refer to God's law given to Israel through Moses, which is recorded in the first few books of the Bible. For us today, the concept of the "revealed things" extends to the entire Bible and the way God's law is further explained in the New Testament. The revealed things "belong" to us, which is both a privilege and a responsibility. It's a great privilege to have the Bible in our possession, the very words from God himself. It's also a great responsibility to heed what God has said and to teach it to the next generation (since it belongs "to our children forever").

The “secret things” in this verse refer to the future and the fear of what might happen. We don’t need to fear bad things that could happen because these secret things “belong” to God—they are his responsibility. He’ll take care of his people and all that might happen. This is similar to the dynamic between parents and children. Parents handle the family’s plans and make those plans happen, through both day-to-day decisions and long-term plans about how to make a living, manage the finances, train children for adulthood, etc. All that’s left for the children to do is to obey their parents, trusting that their parent’s commands are for their good. The secret things (family plans and goals) belong to the parents, and the revealed things (the commands, guidance, and advice from parents) belong to the children.

Theologians refer to God’s plan as his “secret will” and his law as his “revealed will.” The secret will of God is his plan for all of history—both the past and what’s to come. It includes his sovereign orchestration of all people and events to bring that plan to reality. We don’t have any responsibility to find this will of God—it “belongs” to him and him alone.

The revealed will of God, on the other hand, is our responsibility to know and do. Thankfully, we don’t have to climb to heaven or excavate the depths to find this revealed will. God has given it to us. “The word is near you,” Deuteronomy 30:14 says. His revealed will is right there in the Bible. Through the ministry of the church in translating, preaching, and teaching the Bible, God ensures his revealed will is accessible to his people.

Perhaps this is disappointing to you. Maybe you want to climb the mountain to attain special knowledge from God—a literal mountain-top experience. Studying words on a page is so boring in comparison. Maybe you want personalized instructions—for God to tell you exactly what he wants you to do. But the sort of instruction we get in the Bible is

general, not personalized. Biblical principles are the same for all of us—things like honor your father and mother, don't steal, etc. The challenge comes when we try to apply these general principles to the situations of life unique to each one of us.

So what do we do?

## HOW TO KNOW GOD'S WILL

God made us in his image, and part of that image is the ability to reason and exercise wisdom. He would rather have us think and consult together than treat us like robots by just telling us exactly what to do. We saw in chapter one some of the biblical principles concerning wisdom, but the point is, God wants us to apply ourselves with the brains and hearts he gave us, and he wants us to take a posture of humility by listening to the wisdom of our church community. This is God's design. It glorifies him when people express his image by exercising wisdom. But we're prone to want something more exciting, like signs and wonders. And, as we read the Scriptures, we might think this desire is warranted. But here are a few things to keep in mind:

### **1. Desiring miraculous signs is itself contrary to God's revealed will.**

Jesus chided many of his hearers who refused to believe in him without a sign:

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you." But he answered them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish,

so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here. (Matt. 12:38–42)

Jesus's preaching should have been enough. He contrasted his audience, who would not repent, to the people of Nineveh who repented at Jonah's preaching. People came from distant lands to hear Solomon's wisdom, and Jesus has even greater wisdom than that, yet the people didn't care to hear him. They wanted to see a sign, and not listen to words. Similarly, you don't please God by praying for a sign while neglecting what he's already said in the Bible.

**2. The only way we come to know God's secret will, his plan, is in hindsight—when time progresses and his plan turns into history. But even then, we can't "read" God's providence.**

We can't interpret events as moral justification for our actions. Consider the man born blind in John 9:1–7. In Jesus's day, a child born with a disability led people to wonder if God was punishing the parents for something they did wrong. "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" they asked Jesus (John 9:2). But Jesus's answer was, essentially, *neither*. The child was born blind "that the works of God might be displayed in him," (John 9:3). In other words, the man's blindness had a purpose in God's plan and had nothing to do with someone breaking God's law. As tempting as it is to figure out what God is saying through all the various things that happen in life, it simply doesn't work that way. When God reveals through nature or events, he doesn't leave us wondering but accompanies the

event with an explanation in words. Even the greatest event in history, the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, wasn't without words. God explained its meaning in the New Testament.

Consider another example, this time from church history. In England in 1382, an earthquake interrupted a church council which was set to critique John Wycliffe's controversial teachings. Both sides interpreted the earthquake in their own favor. Wycliffe's opponents took it as a sign that God was behind them. Those siding with Wycliffe took it as a sign that God condemned the council. Each side took the earthquake as divine approval of their own view.

The moral of the story is there's just no way to know how to interpret events. Your interpretation will say more about your pre-existing bias than it does about God's will. We can only judge rightly by applying what we have from God's revealed will, the Bible.

### **3. God reveals his will in the Scriptures and not in random occurrences.**

Some ancient pagan peoples practiced divination or interpreted omens, things that God commanded his people to reject: "There shall not be found among you anyone who . . . practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens" (Deut. 18:10). Instead, God said he would guide them through the words of prophets: "It is to him you shall listen" (Deut. 18:15). God's people were to be different in this regard from the nations around them. Likewise, we today shouldn't seek guidance in random occurrences around us but in the words of God.

The ancient historian Josephus tells the story of Mosollam. Mosollam was a Jew, an archer and horseman, who lived around the fourth century BC. As he was guiding a large crowd of Greeks traveling toward the Red Sea, someone made the crowd stop due to a bird on the road. The

augur among them (“augury” was the practice of interpreting omens from birds) said if the bird flew forward, then the crowd could continue on. But if the bird flew backward then they all should turn back. Mosollam, having been taught from the law of Moses, didn’t believe in such things. Without a word, he drew his bow and shot the bird! When the augur and crowd got angry at him, he said that if the bird could truly predict the future, it “would have been afraid lest Mosollam the Jew should shoot at him, and kill him.”<sup>4</sup>

While that story might seem outlandish to our modern ears, I sometimes see Christians seeking God’s guidance in similar ways. I once heard a well-meaning Christian describe his experience of seeking God’s will about a possible move to Texas. After fervently praying for a sign, he saw a car with a Texas license plate. With great enthusiasm he took this as a sign from God that he should indeed move to Texas.

Now, that strikes me as superstitious. On the one hand, God is indeed sovereign over the smallest details of life. On the other hand, we shouldn’t expect him to guide in ways as random and arbitrary as a license plate. When it comes to seeking guidance through such things I’d tell you, like Mosollam, to shoot the bird. That is, don’t treat random events as omens.

We also shouldn’t use the Bible in random ways. We should try to understand passages within their historical context. I once heard a pastor announce to his congregation that he was leaving the church to serve a church in the state where he grew up. He explained that as he prayed for God’s guidance, he flipped in his Bible to Genesis 31:3, which says, “Return to the land of your fathers and to your kindred, and I will be with you.” This pastor understood the “land of your fathers” to be the

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4 Flavius Josephus, *Against Apion*, trans. William Whiston (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987), 1.22.



place he grew up, and God was telling him to go. One problem with this is the first part of the verse, which says, “Then the LORD said to Jacob.” This command of God has a historical context within the book of Genesis, directed to Jacob in particular. Such a significant life decision that affects many people shouldn’t be decided so carelessly. The Bible isn’t a magical book. This was a misuse of God’s words. We don’t honor him when we treat the Bible this way.

#### **4. God can communicate any way he chooses, but usually he does it in ordinary ways.**

What about when Scripture says God spoke to people through dreams, visions, signs, or the “still small voice”? First, note that events are recorded in the Bible because they are the exception, not the norm. God can communicate with us in any way he chooses, but we may not presume upon him to act towards us in those extraordinary ways. Those who received such miraculous communications usually weren’t looking for it and couldn’t possibly miss it when it happened. Further, for every person who received a vision there were thousands of other followers of God at the same time in history that aren’t even mentioned in the Bible. They simply relied upon the Lord and struggled to use wisdom in the decisions before them. I hate to break it to you, but we too are among the insignificant of history.

Additionally, the storyline of the Bible focuses on God’s unfolding plan of redemption, which culminated in Jesus Christ. That redemption is complete. We now live in the era of its application, which means God’s ways of relating to us follow the ordinary and regular patterns of life. This is like when the people of Israel had to switch from eating the miraculous manna from heaven back to the work of farming and ranching for food—they went back to acquiring food the same as the rest of the world: “And the manna ceased the day after they ate of the produce of

the land. And there was no longer manna for the people of Israel, but they ate of the fruit of the land of Canaan that year” (Josh. 5:12). This didn’t mean God abandoned them. To the contrary, this signaled that their redemption was complete and life could go back to “normal.” God still provides, but he does it in ordinary ways.

The same is true of God’s communication to his people. We shouldn’t expect visions and dreams any more than a cloud by day or a pillar of fire by night. The miraculous ways God spoke to his people in Scripture aren’t what we should expect for ourselves. We should look for God to speak in ordinary ways—through his revealed will. This involves reading, studying, and applying the Bible, in conversation with the church community of both the past and present.

Maybe you think you can hear God by quieting yourself and tuning into a “still, small voice.” This phrase is in the King James Bible’s translation of 1 Kings 19:12. From this verse, some Christians have gotten the idea that we can hear God’s leading as a nudge or whisper if only we quiet ourselves enough and listen.

But is that what this passage actually teaches? The biggest problem with this interpretation is that God didn’t whisper his message—he spoke it loud and clear. Elijah heard the whisper, which beckoned him to come listen. Then God said a bunch of words:

And when Elijah heard [the still, small voice], he wrapped his face in his cloak and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” He said, “I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.” And

the LORD said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus. And when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Syria. And Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel, and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place. And the one who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu put to death, and the one who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha put to death. Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.” (1 Kings 19:13–18)

Sorry for the long quote, but it makes my point. People who say they’ve heard God’s still small voice never get this much information from God. They only get a nudge or a single word. Now, I don’t want to discredit this sense of a nudge entirely, because we can indeed get a clearer sense of moral conviction when we pray and read Scripture daily. But that’s different from what Elijah experienced in this account, so we shouldn’t claim we’re hearing God’s “still, small voice.” If you feel a nudge from God to go to church and hear the faithful preaching of the Bible, that’s the prompting of the Holy Spirit you should follow.

What about throwing a fleece? This concept comes from Judges 6:36–40 where Gideon asked God to wet a wool fleece with dew overnight while keeping the ground dry, and vice versa the next night. Should Christians follow this example? Trusted theologian J. I. Packer gives us six reasons why we shouldn’t.<sup>5</sup>

First, our context is different. We have a complete canon of Scripture readily available to us, whereas Gideon had little, if any, access to the Bible. At best, he had the books of Moses (the first five books of the Bible). God might still guide in these miraculous ways today in cultures

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5 J. I. Packer and Carolyn Nystrom, *God’s Will: Finding Guidance for Everyday Decisions*, 31–35.

without the Bible, but that isn't you if you're reading this.

Second, we usually deal with decisions regarding our personal lives, whereas Gideon faced a battle to defend Israel, God's chosen and covenanted nation. The angel of the Lord had already spoken to Gideon and given him a sign of confirmation (Judg. 6:11–24). “The destiny of the nation was thus the agenda item, not some private personal decision,” Packer writes.<sup>6</sup>

Third, Gideon's test of God came dangerously close to what Deuteronomy 6:16 forbids: “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.” Gideon seemed to know he was on shaky ground when he said to God, “Let not your anger burn against me” (Judg. 6:39). Even so, God was merciful and showed favor to doubting Gideon. As Packer explains, “It would be wrong to see in Gideon's plea for reassurance evidence of an irreverent and presumptuous heart, but it would be a different story if you or we ‘put out a fleece’ for guidance in buying a car or choosing a school. Gideon's was clearly a special case.”<sup>7</sup>

Fourth, the desire for spectacular signs reflects spiritual immaturity. Again, Packer writes, “Was Gideon spiritually immature? Undoubtedly. Did his immaturity restrict God's blessing of him in his God-appointed leadership role? Not in the least. But is his immaturity something for Christians to cultivate and imitate? Surely not.”<sup>8</sup>

Fifth, the fleece method of guidance is particularly lazy given our rich resources: access to Scripture and to two thousand years of wise Christians writings on Scripture. Biblical scholar Bruce Waltke comments, “I think ‘laying out a fleece’ is generally the lazy man's way to

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6 Packer and Nystrom, *God's Will*, 31.

7 Packer and Nystrom, *God's Will*, 32–33.

8 Packer and Nystrom, *God's Will*, 34.

discern the will of God. It requires no work, little discipline, and almost no character development. God has a different program of guidance.”<sup>9</sup>

Sixth and finally, seeking signs opens you up to Satanic deception. Both Jesus (Mark 13:22) and Paul (2 Thess. 2:9–10) remarked that Satan is capable of signs and wonders and he does so to deceive and lead astray. God ultimately protects his people, but there’s no sense toying around here. Packer concludes, “From no standpoint whatever, then, are we to expect signs to litter a properly God-guided path.”<sup>10</sup>

## **GOD’S WILL DESPITE OUR SIN AND FOOLISHNESS**

One of the most mysterious things about God’s will is that God accomplishes his plan despite our foolishness and sin. We can take comfort in the knowledge that God uses our bad decisions to fulfill his purpose. That doesn’t give us license to be fools, but it should relieve our anxiety that it all depends on us.

We see this concept, for example, in Acts 2:23. Peter preached to a crowd in Jerusalem where just 40 days earlier Jesus was crucified. He said, “This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.” Here we see both principles of God’s plan and God’s law. It was part of God’s eternal plan for God the Son to become incarnate in human flesh and then crucified for the sins of the world. This event is the centerpiece of God’s plan for human history. It took place according to his plan and foreknowledge.

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9 Bruce Waltke, *Finding the Will of God: A Pagan Notion?* (Gresham, OR: Vision House, 1995), 67–68, quoted in Packer and Nystrom, 34.

10 Packer and Nystrom, *God’s Will*, 35.

Yet, at the same time, the crucifixion of Christ was the worst act of injustice in history. It was a great sin committed by “lawless” men. God’s law, his perfect moral standard, requires human governments to act justly by punishing the guilty and approving the upright (Rom. 13:1–4, Gen. 9:5–6). In this case, we have the very opposite: the most upright man ever to live was wrongly accused, condemned, and executed. The rulers of that time didn’t comprehend what they were doing, “for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor. 2:8). Jesus is the Lord of glory, deserving of all praise and honor, but he got crucifixion instead.

God’s plan isn’t just distinct from his law; it can even involve people breaking his law. Why he does this is mysterious, and we must remember this doesn’t implicate God in evil. In every case, humans sin and not God. Yet, God orchestrates all events according to plan. In a sense, the entire Old Testament illustrates this fact. In the stories of God’s people, we find God’s plan of redemption unfolding. That plan doesn’t come to fruition because God’s people were holy and wise. To the contrary, God achieved his purposes despite his people’s sin and foolishness.

This should encourage us. God will fulfill his purpose for us even if we make bad decisions. Of course, this doesn’t mean our sins are good. We shouldn’t intentionally sin thinking it makes grace abound (Rom. 6:1). Some sense of regret over our past sins and decisions is appropriate. But we don’t need to dwell there. As we think about our poor decisions, we should turn our regret and shame into prayers of thanks that we’re forgiven in Christ’s blood. We can also pray that God will use all things for good, and then rest in the certain hope that he’ll do just that.

## GOD'S WILL FOR YOU: SANCTIFICATION

Now that we have some categories in place, let's look at some of the verses that talk about God's will. One we've mentioned already is 1 Thessalonians 4:3: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality." This reference to the will of God clearly refers to God's law. His moral standard is the same for all people, and it includes abstaining from sexual immorality (vv. 3–8) and pursuing brotherly love (v. 9). Sanctification refers to growth in holiness. God's will for you is that your life—your character and actions—increasingly align with his holiness, his moral standard. That moral standard is expressed in Scripture as God's law.

The great thing about this aspect of God's will is that it's easy to know. We don't need to search for signs to know God's law. God has told us in the Bible. Furthermore, he has imprinted a sense of right and wrong on the human conscience (Rom. 2:14–15), although it can be overly sensitive (1 Cor. 8:7, Rom. 14) or suppressed (Rom. 1:18). The solution to those problems, once again, is God's word in the Bible. By meditating on it, God continually renews our minds, so that we discern what's right (Rom. 12:2). In this way, he makes us into a more acceptable living sacrifice unto him (Rom. 12:1).

For generations upon generations of Christians, the Ten Commandments have served as a guide to God's law (and thus God's will). Basic Christian instruction for children and new converts has historically involved training in three things: the Apostles' Creed (what to believe), the Lord's prayer (how to pray), and the Ten Commandments (how to live). These correspond to the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love (1 Cor. 13:13). Love is the greatest of these, and God's law can be summarized as love. Jesus taught that the two greatest commands are love God and love your neighbor. Paul said the law is fulfilled with love:

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. (Rom. 13:8–10)

When we read the Ten Commandments, it might be hard to understand how to apply them. That’s one reason why Christian catechisms can be helpful. Christians before us who have studied Scripture have distilled its teaching into a digestible form. Just as training in the early church involved the three parts mentioned above (the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s prayer, and the Ten Commandments), so also Reformation-era catechisms included these same three parts in its pattern of discipleship. I commend them to you for further study of God’s will for you as expressed in his law: his moral standard that is the same for all people. You might find them surprisingly enlightening for the various decisions you’re facing.

For example, the Westminster Larger Catechism explains for each commandment that there is both a positive and negative side. “Thou shalt not steal” is stated negatively (with a “not”), but it also implies a positive command: you shall give and lend freely (WLC 141). In Martin Luther’s Large Catechism, he speaks similarly about this commandment: “It is commanded that we advance and improve [our neighbor’s] possessions, and in case he suffers want, that we help, communicate, and lend both to friends and foes.” This teaches us that God’s will isn’t merely to avoid doing bad things but also to do good things. Indeed, we’re to love, even as God himself has first loved us.

Later in 1 Thessalonians, Paul mentions God’s will again:



Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil. Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it. (1 Thess. 5:16–24)

Notice that word “sanctify” here, (1 Thess. 5:23) which expresses the same idea as “sanctification” (1 Thess. 4:3). Conformity to God’s holy standard as expressed in his law is the same goal for all of us. This is God’s will. It involves things like rejoicing always and giving thanks in all circumstances. Very simply, we should do what is good (Peter also says this is God’s will for us in 1 Peter 2:15). God himself is the one who does the sanctifying—he’ll keep us blameless. Take comfort and courage in your effort to do good because that effort comes from God working in you. He’ll bring to completion both aspects of his will for you: both his plan for your life and the molding of your character to his law. “He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.”

## CHAPTER THREE

# Finding and Following God's Will: Making Decisions

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In this chapter, we'll look at how to make decisions. Even if this is the main thing you wanted from this booklet, I hope you don't skip the other chapters. A big part of making decisions according to God's will is studying the Bible with an understanding the two aspects of God's will. You'll need the previous chapter to help you do that well.

Also, since fear and regret often hover over our decision-making, you'll need chapter one to remind you of God's grace and forgiveness. The next chapter will help with that too. We'll see that the decisions you make aren't quite as important as the kind of person you're becoming—your character and virtue. God's will is to form you into the image of Christ.

Nevertheless, life is full of decisions, and we want to make good ones that honor the Lord. So, how do we do that?

### PRAY

The first, middle, and last thing to do is pray. We don't always need to understand God's mechanisms for giving us guidance. We just need him to do it. Pray that God would guide you into the best choice for the decision you face. Pray that you would honor him both in the decision-making

process and in the decision itself. Pray that you would humbly listen to wise people around you. Pray for understanding of God's law in Scripture. Pray that you would handle the Bible well.

Sometimes people define prayer as a conversation with God. That can be unhelpful, because often that perspective on prayer creates an unreasonable expectation to hear from God in a tangible way. You'll either fool yourself into thinking your upset stomach is God talking to you, or you'll get frustrated and wonder if you're doing it wrong. Prayer is better defined as offering up your desires to God. Just tell him what's on your heart and ask him for things. The Westminster Shorter Catechism puts it this way:

Q. 98. What is prayer?

A. Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, for things agreeable to his will, in the name of Christ, with confession of our sins, and thankful acknowledgment of his mercies.

You might notice the reference to God's will here: we're to pray "for things agreeable to his will." How can we do that if we don't know what his will is? Wasn't that the point of praying? This idea in the catechism is drawn from 1 John 5:14: "And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us." Once again, remember that God's will often refers to God's law, which we can find in the Bible. The next catechism question says exactly that:

Q. 99. What rule hath God given for our direction in prayer?

A. The whole Word of God is of use to direct us in prayer; but the special rule of direction is that form of prayer which Christ taught his disciples, commonly called the Lord's Prayer.

Prayer and Bible study go hand in hand. They're mutually reinforcing. We should pray according to God's will (law) as revealed in Scripture, and we should pray for God to help us in our study of Scripture. This is how the "conversation" works. We pray, asking God to give us understanding, and God "speaks" in the form of his word as we study it and hear it preached.

The Holy Spirit works through these outward means over time to conform us to God's will. And even when we don't know how to pray according to God's will, we have the assurance that "the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us ... the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God" (Rom. 8:26–27).

## **STUDY THE BIBLE**

Having prayed, turn to Scripture. When we're considering the right course of action, the first question we must ask is whether it's allowed by God's law as revealed in Scripture. Start with the ten commandments and a catechism or trusted commentary that helps explain them.

While it's good to search Scripture for specific questions about God's law, be careful not to misuse Scripture by picking and choosing verses. The best antidote to that is to dwell on Scripture regularly. We don't just want to make good decisions here and there; we want our hearts continually reformed according to God's truth.

In Deuteronomy, God gave principles for what a king of Israel should be like. One thing the king was required to do was make a copy of the law and study it regularly:

And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests. And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them, that his heart may not be lifted up above his brothers, and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, either to the right hand or to the left, so that he may continue long in his kingdom, he and his children, in Israel. (Deut. 17:18–20)

You and I aren't kings, but we long for the same wisdom in life, and God has abundantly provided his word to us. Why not seek it out in a similar way? Psalm 119 captures the sort of attitude we ought to cultivate: "Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day" (Ps. 119:97). Loving God's law doesn't just mean studying the books that contain God's codified law, like Leviticus. Loving God's "law" in this context means the entire canon of the Bible. Even though the first five books of the Bible are called the Law (Torah), they actually contain both laws and historical narratives. Likewise, in our new covenant context, we have the Gospels and Epistles in the New Testament, in addition to the Law, Prophets, and Writings of the Old Testament. God works through all these genres to shape and grow us in various ways.

However, this whole-Bible approach can create some challenges for us, since the Old Testament has all kinds of laws that don't apply to us. The general approach for interpreting these matters in Scripture is to assume it all applies unless a later text says otherwise. Exodus says not to murder, and the Bible nowhere changes that (Exod. 20:13). On the other hand, Leviticus says not to eat shellfish (Lev. 11:9–12), but the New Testament teaches in several places that the food laws are no longer in force (Mark 7:18–19). Leviticus also gives specific directions for how priests were to perform animal sacrifices (Lev. 16:15). The New

Testament teaches that Christ's sacrifice made all the animal sacrifices obsolete. In fact, Christ's sacrifice is the one true sacrifice to which all the Old Testament sacrifices pointed, and going back to animal sacrifices would be a denial of Christ (Heb. 10).

We can recognize three aspects of Old Testament laws: civil, ceremonial, or moral. Food laws and sacrifices were ceremonial aspects of the law of Moses that are fulfilled in Christ. Therefore they don't apply to us. The law of Moses also had a civil aspect, meaning it regulated the nation's justice system. Although God's revelation in these matters offers much wisdom, nations today aren't required to follow Israel's civil codes. The moral aspect of the law, however, applies to all people at all times. For example, murder is always forbidden.

There can be other challenges in applying Scripture. Sometimes commands seem to conflict with each other. For example, is there ever a good reason to tell a lie? In Exodus 1, when Pharaoh commanded the Hebrew midwives to kill newborn baby boys, they disobeyed him and then lied to him about it. They faced a dilemma between the commandment against murder on the one hand and the commandments against lying and disrespecting authority on the other. Although this was before God gave Israel the ten commandments, the moral law reflects God's holy nature and therefore never changes. It applied to the midwives just as it later applied to God's people after Sinai.

We know God approved of their choice because the text says, "God dealt well with the midwives" (Exod. 1:20). What made their choice correct? The Hebrew midwives feared God (Exod. 1:17) and knew that taking lives, especially the lives of God's people—newborn babies no less—was evil. Christian thinkers have long recognized that a lie or half-truth can be necessary and right when used to save a life. Sometimes people, by their own crimes or evil intent, forfeit their right to the truth. As for

disrespecting authority, we must obey God rather than men when people command us to do something contrary to God's moral will (Acts 5:29).

(Notice how we applied Scripture here: We took an example from a narrative, Exodus 1, and looked for God's approval of the midwives' actions, which we found in verse 20. That's the sort of thing to do as you study Scripture for moral principles.)

Chances are, however, that your situation isn't a dilemma. Be careful of using these sorts of principles as excuses to break God's law. Consult with wise Christian leaders and others around you who can help you discern if your motives are the fear of God and the good of others or your own sinful desires. If you're afraid of consulting with others, the answer might be obvious.

If you're considering an action that's against God's law, the answer is easy: don't do it. This shouldn't need to be said, but sometimes in our sin we can convince ourselves we're the exception. For example, I've come across people who convince themselves they can commit adultery because they're in such a "unique" situation. That's a lie. God's law is clear on such things. Again, we need to consult with others around us; they can see our situation more objectively.

## **SEARCH YOUR CONSCIENCE**

In your search for the right decision, you should heed your own conscience. Whether or not you've figured out what the Bible says regarding your decision, if it violates your conscience, then it's sin. The apostle Paul taught, "[W]hatever does not proceed from faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23). Paul is talking in this passage about clean and unclean foods. In the new covenant, things like food regulations from the law of Moses

are no longer binding on God's people. We have freedom in Christ. Paul was convinced that no foods are now unclean before God: "I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean" (Rom 14:14). But, he warned, if you lack that knowledge of freedom in Christ and you go ahead and eat something you think is unclean before God, then it's sin.

Paul speaks similarly in 1 Corinthians 8 where he uses the language of a "weak conscience." The "weak" conscience is an overly sensitive one. The lesson for us is twofold: Never do something that your conscience says is sin, because then it really is sin. But also seek to develop your conscience according to Scripture because you might be overly sensitive, unaware of the extent of your freedom in Christ.

We also ought to guard against a "seared" conscience. Paul says to watch out for:

... the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer. (1 Tim. 4:2–5)

While some interpreters think the seared conscience is one that's insensitive to sin, it's actually a conscience burning with guilt. People with a seared conscience prop up laws that go beyond God's law (1 Tim. 4:3). They're insincere liars and hypocrites. Sometimes, if we're burdened with guilt, it's easier to make up laws and pat ourselves on the back for keeping them than it is to deal with our deeper guilt. To make things worse, we can turn and impose those laws on others. But you can't atone for your sin by fabricating righteousness through your own laws. Paul again



points us to freedom from such man-made laws, teaching that “everything created by God is good.” And the solution to that burning guilt of a seared conscience is not new laws but rather honesty and humility before God about your sin, knowing Jesus paid for your sin with his blood.

There is indeed a ditch on the opposite side, where your conscience can be calloused and insensitive, resulting in license to sin rather than legalism (Rom. 1:18–23; Eph. 4:17–19). In this case, a person continually suppresses the sense of guilt in his conscience for breaking God’s law. This “hardness of heart” (Eph. 4:18) means such people refuse to humble themselves before God in repentance. I doubt that sense of guilt ever goes away, but such people become “darkened in their thinking” (Eph. 4:18; Rom. 1:21), convincing themselves that their sin is okay. They come up with complex reasoning and thought patterns to justify it. They think themselves wise (Rom. 1:22) even though their sinful behavior is self-destructive.

But that is not the way you learned Christ (Eph. 4:20). Put off the old self and “put on Christ” by faith in him (Eph. 4:22–24, Gal. 3:26–27). You might be drawn back to sinful habits, but you know they’re wrong. Revisit again and again the gospel truth of Christ’s work for you, and “be renewed in the spirit of your minds,” as Paul writes (Eph. 4:23). Seek to recognize in yourself when you manufacture reasons to legitimize your sin. Put off that darkened way of thinking and pray for the Holy Spirit to work in your conscience. Study and meditate on Scripture that tells you of the good news, like the books of Ephesians or Romans.

Whether your conscience is weak or calloused, the solution for growth is always the gospel message in Scripture and the Spirit working through that message. And when you make decisions, pay attention to your conscience.

## EVALUATE YOUR MOTIVES

The tenth commandment—"You shall not covet"—teaches us that sin against God's law might happen in the heart, even if we don't act on it. This is also the sort of thing Jesus talked about in the Sermon on the Mount when he said lustful intent in the heart incurs the guilt of adultery, even if you haven't committed that sin externally (Matt. 5:28). This applies not just to lust but to all sorts of things. So, even if you obey on the outside, it's possible to break God's law in your heart. It follows, then, that we need to examine our motives when considering a decision.

Pray for God to search your heart and make you aware of any unholy motives in you. Search the Scriptures, trusting God's word to pierce to the intentions of your heart: "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4:12).

Often, after considering the biblical teaching, we end up with options in a decision that are all within God's law. If you're deciding whether or not to move, for example, there's nothing in Scripture saying you can or can't live in a certain place. However, you need to look deeper and examine your motives. When considering where to live, perhaps you're motivated by discontentment or fear. Scripture calls us to contentment with a comforting promise that God will never leave us: "Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you'" (Heb. 13:5).

On the other hand, Scripture isn't against improving your lot in life as the opportunity comes. For example, Paul instructed slaves to gain their freedom if they had the chance (1 Cor. 7:21). The key consideration in these matters is whether your heart is motivated by selfishness

or service. “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit,” Paul warns us, “but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Phil. 2:3–4). Does your open door provide an opportunity to improve your own condition and enable you to serve others better? Then go for it.

When evaluating your motives, keep in mind that our motives are never entirely pure. This side of glory, sin always clings to us. There’s some degree of selfishness in everything we do. Don’t let that reality freeze you into inaction. It’s best to be aware of it, ask God to root it out of you, and move forward with a decision, trusting in the Lord’s patience and mercy.

## **ASSESS YOUR EXISTING RESPONSIBILITIES**

The next thing to consider when facing a decision is how it affects your various responsibilities in life. You’re embedded in a community of people who mutually support one another. How might your decision affect them? There’s a sense in which the place you already find yourself is a calling from God. You don’t need to go looking for a neighbor to serve when God has already placed them around you. It’s God’s will for you to serve where you already are.

Paul talks about this sort of thing in 1 Corinthians 7:10–24. It seems that some new Christians were getting the idea that they had to change their circumstances radically in order to be faithful to God. Perhaps they converted to Christianity but their spouse didn’t. Must they leave the marriage? After all, we know a believer shouldn’t marry an unbeliever. So maybe they need to divorce?

To that line of thinking, Paul says no, no, no. “Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him” (1 Cor. 7:17). In a sense, your life circumstances are God’s “assignment” for you. If you’re married when you become a believer, you should stay married, since wherever you are in life is from God. This applies not only to marriage but all aspects of your condition in life.

This is where we get the word “vocation.” It derives from the idea that God “vocally” calls you to do something. It doesn’t only refer to your career or day job, although it includes that. Every area of life in which you have responsibilities towards others is a vocation. This includes being a child, sibling, parent, spouse, grandparent, next-door neighbor, student, church member, or citizen. All these roles locate you in relation to other people and are the various ways God calls you to serve. Thinking of it in reverse, all the people around you have vocations towards you and are the ways God himself provides for you.

Of course, this doesn’t mean you’re stuck. “God has called you to peace,” Paul writes; you’re “not enslaved” (1 Cor. 7:15). It isn’t God’s will to force you to stay in a bad situation. We must simply remember to consider how our decisions affect the people around us. If we make a change in life that leaves a void, sometimes that void is the very opportunity others need to change and grow. But we shouldn’t take an action lightly that will significantly affect people who depend on us. All these things take time to pray and ponder and consider with wise counselors.

## **CONSIDER YOUR CALLING**

Let’s consider the concept of calling a little more. Too often, Christians can use “calling” as a trump card against wisdom and insight from others. Though no one says it outright, the implication is often, “God has called

me to this, so you can't stop me." We sometimes convince ourselves of a sense of calling out of a genuine desire for clarity and certainty in our choices. But it could just be adrenaline. A better approach to discern calling involves four aspects: desire, ability, opportunity, and community confirmation. Let's unpack these.

First, a calling requires the desire to do the task. God doesn't want us to do things out of compulsion or reluctance. We see this, for example, when Scripture talks about giving funds to the church: "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Cor. 9:7). Likewise, Scripture teaches the need for desire regarding a call to serve in church leadership: "Shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly" (1 Pet. 5:2). Note the word "eagerly." God desires us to serve "not under compulsion, but willingly."

Sometimes we get the idea that a true calling from God must be the task we fear the most, but this is exactly backward. Yes, there are examples of that in Scripture, such as God telling Jonah to preach good news to his enemies. But as we observed in the previous chapter, those are extraordinary cases. So extraordinary, in fact, that it involves surviving inside a fish. As you pray, study the Scriptures, discern your conscience, evaluate your motives, and assess your existing responsibilities, you can be sure that if God wants you to do the thing you really don't want to do, he will make it clear to you. Otherwise, he wants you to do the things you want to do.

Of course, our desires need continual formation and reformation by God's Spirit through his word. But as our desires little-by-little grow in conformity to God, we can do as Augustine quipped: *love God and do as*

*you please.*<sup>11</sup> Pursuing your desires should only come after consideration of God's law. That's the "love God" part. Obviously, we shouldn't follow our desires into sin. Instead, we're talking about desires like choosing a career. In the modern West, each person generally has their career choice wide open to them. So a good first question is this: What do you *want* to do?

The second thing to consider is ability. If you don't have the ability to do what you desire, maybe it isn't the thing for you. God made each of us unique with various kinds and degrees of natural ability. We are all "wired" differently. One of the great challenges of maturing as a person is knowing yourself, but it's so helpful when you do. It's easy to get discouraged when you can't seem to find what you're good at. Part of that probably comes from the pressure in our culture to be amazing. Every film makes us want to be the hero. But you may just be average at what you're called to do, and that's okay. Jesus is the hero of history; you're a background character.

Having ability doesn't mean you're perfectly ready. You might have natural ability, but training is often necessary to develop that ability. Sometimes we think, *if God has called me, then he'll make me ready*, but that's presumptuous. God called Moses to speak even though he lacked the natural ability to do so, but does that mean he'll do the same for you? Remember: you're a background character, not Moses. Apart from direct revelation from God, he ordinarily guides us by giving us natural abilities. And he designed humans to start small and grow to maturity. When it comes to calling, start with the raw material of ability and then get training from those who can prepare you for the work. Take the time to learn. God's will for you is patience and diligence. But if you have both the desire and the ability to do a particular kind of work, that's a good indication

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11 Augustine, *Homily 7 on the First Epistle of John*. The more accurate quote is, "Love, and do what thou wilt." His main point in context was that external actions are good and right when the root motivation is love.

that you might be called to it.

Opportunity is the third consideration to discern calling. There are different seasons in life, and sometimes God's calling changes with the season. It might be that you graduate with a degree for a certain career, but then no one is hiring. Don't despair! Maybe God's answer is just "not yet." God is sovereign over our circumstances, so if the opportunity isn't there, it's safe to say God isn't calling you to it now. On the other hand, there's room to push to make things happen. We shouldn't give up too easily. It takes wisdom to know when to push and when to move on. When it comes to discerning this, the people around us are often better observers than we are.

That brings us to the fourth consideration: the confirmation of the community around you. This aspect is closely related to having opportunity. Sometimes, opportunity involves having material resources (like money). If you don't have enough money yourself, fundraising is an option. Is that forcing the issue? Not if the community comes together and shows you support with their funds. The people around you also can help you recognize your abilities and grow in self-awareness. Parents and educators can usually discern early in a child's life what that child is best at. If you announce what you believe is your calling and people say, "That makes sense. I can see you doing that," then that's a great encouragement. If the response is less affirming, you might want to think twice.

On the flip side, we should observe others in our families and churches to see what they're good at and then tell them what we see. We should use our resources to create opportunities for those with desire and ability. Discerning one's calling is a community effort. As we've seen, God's will in your vocations is for you to serve other people, and it's through other people that God himself serves you. If you think you don't need other people to help you discern your calling, you're wrong. When we invite

others into our lives and encourage one another, it's a beautiful thing: the body of Christ "builds itself up in love" (Eph. 4:16).

## EXERCISE YOUR FREEDOM

Finally, after you've considered all these things and prayed for God to make your efforts fruitful, you have freedom. You don't need to fret about finding the perfect will of God for your life. He gives us freedom to enjoy.

In his book, *Decision Making and the Will of God*, Garry Friesen imagines a scenario: Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden preparing "the first supper."<sup>12</sup> We know that God gave Adam the command, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:16–17). Given the great variety of fruit trees available to them, how did they choose what to eat? Friesen imagines Eve fretting over this choice, much like how we might fret over decisions today. So Adam goes back to God, asking for direction, but God only repeats the same command as before. Perplexed, Adam chooses apples for this meal because they give him a sense of peace. However, Eve worries again that she'll miss God's will because there are so many different ways to prepare apples. Adam asks God, and again he just gives the same answer. Realizing that as long as they stay away from the one forbidden tree, they have freedom to eat whatever they want, they decide on a fruit salad!

Of course, that's probably not what really happened. But it illustrates the nature of the situation: as long as we're within God's moral law, we have freedom. The diversity we find in nature itself suggests this. God

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<sup>12</sup> Garry Friesen with J. Robin Maxson, *Decision Making and the Will of God: A Biblical Alternative to the Traditional View* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2004), 139.



made a variety of fruit trees and other foods. Surely he did this for us to enjoy them as we please. God invites us to delight in the range of colors, textures, and smells he has created. And that extends beyond the table to all of life's experiences and to the choices we face. Life is an opportunity for a smorgasbord of sensations and emotions. As long as we're within the bounds of God's revealed moral will, enjoy it. *Love God and do as you please.*

# God's Will For You Is Cruciform: Another Kind of Wisdom

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What is wisdom? Usually we use the word (and I used it in previous chapters) to mean something like “skill at life.” It’s the ability to look at a situation, recognize all the possible outcomes, and choose the course of action that will lead to the best outcome.

This ability usually comes with time and experience. You grow in the ability to anticipate outcomes by having experienced similar situations in the past. Much of the book of Proverbs is about this kind of wisdom, which is like parents teaching their children from life experience: “Hear, my son, your father’s instruction, and forsake not your mother’s teaching” (Prov. 1:8). The Proverbs are parental observations about how the world works. They teach children in the hope that children will be better equipped to navigate this world. As God’s children, we need the book of Proverbs to teach us how to live. Unfortunately, we—like most children—are often too stubborn to listen and would rather learn by making our own mistakes. But we would do well to listen to this wisdom from God in Scripture.

However, there’s another kind of wisdom—the “Christ crucified” kind:

For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles,

but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (1 Cor. 1:22–25)

Christ crucified is the wisdom of God.

The problem with the “skill at life” kind of wisdom is that, put in the hands of sinners, we use it for selfish gain. If we get good at it, we become proud of ourselves. This pride is self-destructive; God alone deserves praise. In his design of the gospel, God subverts selfish human wisdom “so that no human being might boast in the presence of God” (1 Cor. 1:29). It would be foolish to think that a king would achieve victory by being executed as a criminal. God’s trick on Satan and on all the pride of men was to make his Messiah triumphant by dying. We might even say that in the “Christ-crucified” kind of wisdom, we win by losing.

## **OUR SUFFERING IS HIS SUFFERING**

In Acts 7, we read of the first Christian martyr, Stephen. On trial before the Jewish officials, he recounted Israel’s history, how time and time again God’s people were persecuted and mistreated. He described the lives of Abraham, Joseph, those enslaved in Egypt, Moses, and so on. Perhaps these Jewish leaders were pleased with Stephen’s telling of their people’s history, but then he flipped the script on them: “Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered” (Acts 7:52). Stephen claimed that Jesus was another in the line of Israel’s prophets to suffer persecution. That means the Jewish leaders—much to their surprise—were actually playing the part of the oppressors, those opposed to God and his people. In a

further irony, Stephen himself joined that line of God's true suffering people, as the enraged officials stoned him to death.

Although some Christians suffer more than others, we all participate in the sufferings of Christ. Our suffering is his suffering. Jesus is the ultimate paradigm of one who attains glory only after enduring suffering.

What does this have to do with God's will for us? We might be tempted to look at our suffering and think that we've somehow taken the wrong path. Perhaps, we think, we've fallen outside of God's will and therefore out of his favor. But our suffering isn't evidence that God has forsaken us; rather, suffering has always been the plight of God's people (see Rom. 8:35–39). It's God's will that all those united to Christ will follow this same pattern. Since the crucifixion is the main place we see Christ's sufferings, a good word for this pattern of life is "cruciform."

God's will for you is cruciform. He intends your life to conform to the image of Jesus in his suffering and subsequent glory. Paul described his own deepest longing in just these terms: "That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Phil. 3:10–11). This should be our desire as well. God will indeed bring it about in our lives.

## **WHY SUFFERING?**

Why does God's plan include our suffering? It isn't that God likes to make people feel pain. No, suffering has a purpose. It's part of his wisdom. Trials grow our character in patience, resilience, and dependence on God: afflictions "make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead" (2 Cor 1:9). The testing of our faith develops perseverance

in us, making us mature and complete (James 1:2–4).

Those who have never known trials are often selfish, stubborn, and proud people. They're like spoiled children. In our sinfulness, we'd all be like that if not for God's gracious discipline which comes through life's trials. We need training to grow out of our selfish inclinations. The book of Hebrews describes God's care for us in our trials as fatherly discipline: "It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? . . . For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it" (Heb. 12:7, 10, 11).

This passage comes shortly after the great "hall of faith" passage that lists Old Testament saints who lived by faith (see Heb. 11). Similar to Stephen's telling of Israel's history, this passage emphasizes how all these saints suffered in this life and yet persevered by believing God's promise of a better life to come. They were seeking a "better country, that is, a heavenly one," and God has indeed "prepared for them a city" (Heb. 11:16):

Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy. (Heb. 11:35b–38a)

All such people lived a cruciform life. God was conforming them to the image of Christ even in that Old Testament time before Christ came. In fact, Moses embraced "the reproach of Christ" long before Christ

came (Heb. 11:26). It's the same for us now after the cross.

Jesus himself is "the founder and perfecter" of this kind of faith that perseveres through trials and finally attains to glory (Heb. 12:2). He set the pattern and paradigm for all the saints united to him both before and after the cross. As we experience trials, we're to look to Jesus as our example, "who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:2).

We've said that part of God's reason for allowing our suffering is to grow our character—our holiness. We need this because we're fallen sinners. But how does that work for Jesus since he was sinless? Did he need to grow in character? Although Jesus was without sin (Heb. 4:15), he still grew. He grew from childhood just like us: "Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man" (Luke 2:52). Hebrews is so eager to show us Christ as the paradigm for our lives that the author tells us, "Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered" (Heb. 5:8), just like we do.

Because he suffered even to the point of shedding his blood, he can sympathize with all of us who suffer. In fact, because we're united to him, our suffering is a "participation in Christ's sufferings" (1 Pet. 4:13). Just as we share in his sufferings, so we'll also share in his glory (Rom. 8:17). The prospect of that future joy can enable us to rejoice in our sufferings even now: "But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed" (1 Pet. 4:13). Paul also said we can rejoice because we have hope of the glory of God—the hope of being glorified with Christ one day, free from all pain (Rom. 5:2).

Further, we can rejoice amidst our pain right now because we know God

is at work in us through our trials: “Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope” (Rom. 5:3–5). God is developing endurance in us, the virtue of fortitude. That endurance is part of growing our character, which, Paul says, produces hope. So, our rejoicing always comes from our focus on future glory, a hope for that day to come. And our pain in the present, as we wait for that day, serves to further strengthen our hope. Jesus suffered with hope, too, as he trusted his Father’s promise to deliver him unto glory and grant him the reward: his bride, which is the church. He endured “for the joy set before him” (Heb. 12:2).

## **SUFFERING FOR COMFORT**

Just as suffering enables Jesus to sympathize with us, so our suffering enables us to sympathize with others. In 2 Corinthians 1, Paul speaks of having a great burden. We don’t know many details, but he says he and his companions “were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself” (2 Cor. 1:8). Despair of life itself is about as low as you can get. But he experienced God’s comfort, and in turn wants others to know that comfort. Just as we’ve been talking about sharing in Christ’s sufferings and then glory, Paul speaks of sharing in God’s comfort:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ’s sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for

your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken, for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort. (2 Cor. 1:3–7)

Suffering becomes an opportunity to experience God's comfort and for the community of faith to be knit together in the giving and receiving of God's comfort. Cling to him in your trials; he'll show his strength when you're weak. Then, as you see others in hardship, comfort and encourage them. We might not always have the perfect words to say, but we can be in it together. The church is to be those who "rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep" (Rom. 12:15). Suffering is an opportunity to bind us together in love, to remind us we aren't meant to go it alone. And that sharing together in hardship as a body is a reminder that Christ himself, the head of the body, is with us and sharing in our suffering, too. He is indeed "with [us] always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20).

## FORMATION IN VIRTUE

In previous chapters we've focused on God's will in terms of his law. Another approach to God's will is to consider virtue and directing our lives toward proper goals. Virtue focuses on character—the kind of person you are. The fruit of the Spirit is a good example. The fruit listed in Galatians 5:22 is a list of virtues, like patience, gentleness, and self-control. Peter also commends virtue to us when he says to "supplement your faith with virtue":

For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with



godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Pet. 1:5–8)

Scripture also tells us our goals in all we do should be the glory of God and the good of others. Paul exhibits this twofold focus when he says to do all unto God's glory, that others might be saved: "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved" (1 Cor. 10:31–33). While this means living a cruciform life and dying to yourself, it also means joy for you. The Westminster Shorter Catechism's first question orients us to the right goal when it asks, "What is the chief end of man?" The answer: "To glorify God and to enjoy him forever." God's glory and our joy are two sides of the same coin.

In fact, all people seek after joy and happiness, regardless of their religion or beliefs. The difference is the way to get there. When we pursue our own happiness as the ultimate goal, disconnected from a concern for God's glory and others' good, we'll find that misery is the result. On the other hand, when we selflessly pursue love for God and neighbor, we'll find it results in our joy. This is what Jesus taught when he said he who seeks to save his life will lose it, but he who loses his life for Jesus's sake will actually find it (Mark 8:35). The cruciform life means taking up your cross and following Christ, with joy to be found therein.

## **AND YET THE WICKED PROSPER?**

This perspective on life is counter-intuitive. Sin is deceptive. It claims you

can be truly happy now by elevating yourself over God and others. Sin can indeed deliver short-term happiness, but later it leaves you worse off. “What fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed?” Paul asks, adding, “The end of those things is death” (Rom. 6:21). Moses faced this temptation of sin’s “fleeting pleasures” and chose rightly, as Hebrews describes:

By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. (Heb. 11:24–26)

This approach to life requires faith, believing God’s promises that he’ll bring justice and relief from all the wrongs his people endure in this life. Secular people who don’t believe in an afterlife seek whatever makes them happy here and now. This is short-sighted, and such people sometimes reap the destructive consequences in this life. It results in fighting and quarreling: “For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice” (James 3:16).

Other times, it seems the wicked prosper and never face any consequences. Ecclesiastes laments this reality: “In my vain life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing” (Eccles. 7:15). Again, “There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity” (Eccles. 8:14). In view of this reality, we need faith to press on. We need to trust that God is good and does good (Ps. 119:68). The writer of Psalm 73 struggled when he saw the wicked prosper, but he snapped out of his jealousy when

he realized the true end for the wicked—judgment: “Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches. But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end” (Ps. 73:12,16–17).

It’s likely that when he went into the sanctuary of God, he was reminded of the animal sacrifices. The death of those animals, and ultimately the death of Christ, show us what our sin deserves. Those who aren’t in Christ will bear God’s judgment of death upon themselves. The ultimate end for those far from God in this life is to be truly far from him forever—in misery. But for those who trust in God and in the atonement he provides in Jesus, our end is to be near to God in fullness of joy. “But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge” (Ps. 73:28). While we should seek God’s glory and the happiness to be found there as our end goal, we get there by way of the cross, being formed in the virtues of faith, hope, and love. This is God’s will for you.

Jesus’s beatitudes line right up with this manner of thinking. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” (Matt. 5:3). When Jesus said “blessed are,” he was saying that God’s covenant blessings are upon such people already, right now, despite their lack of external prosperity. These people are counted among God’s people and destined to receive the eternal inheritance. The beatitudes were surprising to Jesus’s audience and will be to anyone fixated on material blessings here and now (Matt. 5:3–12):

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Just as Stephen told all about the persecution of “the prophets who were before you,” so here Jesus says not only the prophets but all his people experience the same trials in life. God has destined for us to be conformed to the image of his son (Rom. 8:29). This “image” consists not only in a holiness of character but also the crucible of life experience where such character is forged.

## CONCLUSION

# God Will Do His Will For You

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As you endure trials of various kinds, it's God's will for you to knit together in love with the church community. It's his will that you experience comfort. It's his will to strengthen your hope for the world to come and loosen your grip on the deceitful passing pleasures of sin in this life (Heb. 11:24–26). It's his will to grow and shape your character in the virtues of patience, fortitude, and humility. He is forming you to the image of Christ, the founder and perfecter of this way of life. God's will for you is cruciform.

Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God. (1 Pet. 4:1–2)

Don't forget where we started in this booklet: God's will for you is joy. We can walk through this life in the valley of the shadow of death, our Shepherd near us, trusting that this is the best and only way to arrive at deep and lasting joy in the end. This is his wisdom, and he always knows the right course of action to attain the best outcome. May he train us all to do the same.

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. . . Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your

whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it. (1 Thess. 5:16–18, 23–24)

*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18)*

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Thanks for being an important part of Core Christianity!

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