
DISCOVERING GOD'S WILL FOR YOUR LIFE

Why Does God's Will Seem So Difficult to Discover?

by Daniel A. Brown, PhD

When I was a little boy, I had a humorously mistaken concept of God's will that I picked up inadvertently by overhearing a phrase used by older people talking about someone recently deceased: "*Having accomplished what God gave them to do...*" Though I understood it to mean the person had done *well* (reinforced by another quote, "*Well done good and faithful...*"), I felt somewhat ambivalent about God's will—as though it was a set plan for me to be in the right place at the right time so I could accomplish some particular feat in His Name—and then die! Maybe I could just do *most* of His will?!

After I decided, in college, that Jesus was worth the surrender of everything (even my life), my childish perspective about His will deepened, and I hungered to know what He wanted me to do with my life. He had a plan, and I wanted to discover it. I felt like a spiritual explorer in search of buried treasure; *give me a map, a few clues and I would be on my way. See you where "x" marks the spot.*

Oops! It wasn't as easy or as straightforward as I had imagined. Though I earnestly inquired about *which* courses, roommates, or jobs fit into His design, and about *when* He wanted me to do the (you know) really big stuff in that plan, I rarely got any answers. It was puzzling and frustrating. I tried praying *harder*, louder, (a silly notion) and longer. Often, those extended prayers became little more than *thinking harder* with my eyes closed, and trying to figure out for God what He should be doing, or at least what His options for me might be.

Sometimes, I broke open my Bible-as-fortune-cookie, randomly jabbing my finger on hapless verses, then trying to interpret those obscure texts (usually from *Ezekiel* or *Nahum*), in a direction-giving manner until one day I heard the joke about the guy who was stuck on the verse about Judas

hanging himself. The rules of this game to seek God's will, allow 2-3 tries before you conclude that He isn't saying anything, so on his second go, the man's index finger randomly came to rest on Judges 9:48: "*Hurry and do likewise.*"

Though I would not have recognized it at the time, I would have to confess to a degree of frustration (translate that *anger*) with God. Was He playing (cheating at) "Hide and Seek" with me, or mocking my pitiful attempts to connect with Him? Was this a cosmic joke, and I was the only one not in on it? I remembered playing "*Marco Polo*" as a kid in the pool; and it felt similar, like God kept slipping under the water to get away from me when I headed in His direction. Or worse, maybe He and all His Heavenly buddies had climbed out of the pool...

Occasionally, I lapsed into a surly, "*This-is-nuts,*" attitude. I thought doing His will was going to be the hard part, not finding it! I never aimed this thought at Heaven. I just pointed it at the ground and pretended He couldn't hear what I was thinking: "*If you aren't going to tell me what to do in this great plan of Yours, you can do it Yourself!*"

But mostly, I just ambled along from decision to decision with an understanding between Him and I that I took from Proverbs 16:9. "*The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps.*" I would do my best to ascertain whatever I thought His will was, and if it wasn't His plan for me, He was free to redirect my path.

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The answer to this question probably is because we're looking for the wrong thing. Let's take a step back and see if we might be able to better understand just what we're looking for, and perhaps that will help us discover it. As with all things spiritual, our natural notion of God's will differ radically from His conception of it.

I'm certain we would all agree that restoring our relationship with Him is God's highest purpose for us—the most significant component of His will for our lives. When Jesus said that we must be "*born again,*" He did not mean to re-emerge from the womb. Though the actual expression is to be born "*from above,*" we understand that Jesus was not referring to a physical direction. God's will (our salvation) had little to do with where we lived at the time, what job we had, or what course of study we were pursuing—except as those physical situations may have led to our conversion. If salvation has so little to do with physical particulars, then it is probably misleading to focus most of our search for the rest of God's will in the tangible realm.

Most believers will acknowledge that the majority of their prayers about God's will pivot around material questions of location, occupation, and timing. Often that is because of a sincere worry about "missing" His plan due to a wrong decision; like taking the job in Santa Barbara as an electrician, instead of quitting the electrician job in Santa Fe to open a sandwich shop. I think that's why the expressions "*the perfect will of God*" or "*His permissible will*" were coined. They are not in the Bible, but they help alleviate the *one-false-move-and-you're-out* worry Christians live under—by assuring us that even if we miss God's best choice (the "center" of His will), all is not lost—as though His will is a giant bull's eye painted on the Earth and we still score points if we hit somewhere near the target.

I'm not saying that where we live or what career changes we might make are unimportant to God. He cares about us, and all the particulars of our lives, but Jesus put those things in perspective when He encouraged us to "*But seek first the Kingdom...and all these things will be added to you. So do not worry about tomorrow...*" (Matthew 6:33-34). He also said we ought to seek qualitatively different things from what "*the Gentiles eagerly seek*" (vs. 32). Physical realities and decisions do loom large in our lives, and God knows we need them answered. He loves to take care of them. But those sorts of big, physical happenings rarely get at His overarching will for you and me.

Though God's will for our lives sometimes highlights where to live, when to make a change, and what to do for a living or a ministry, it is not like a spot marked with an "X" on a map. Jesus zigzagged His way throughout Galilee and Judea in a seemingly random or circumstance driven circuit, and it was anything but a well-ordered itinerary with scheduled stops. And yet, many Christians insist in their search for God's will on being given a personalized travel program, complete with destination arrival and departure times. We don't ever arrive, and even in the case when God makes it clear to us that we are supposed to move to Portland, His real interest is in how we live our daily lives there.

God's will for us is more akin to a direction or a disposition than to a destination. Where and when Jesus went during His earthly ministry mattered little compared to what He did wherever or whenever:

"You know of Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power, and how He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him." ~Acts 10:38

When we realize that most of God's will does not revolve around where we end up physically, we begin to grasp what it really means and get over our fear and frustration.

God's Favorite Implements

So, what does God want to do with us? Simply put, He wants to change us and use us. You might say, He wants to position us, and that does involve a certain degree of timing and physical placement. But rather than thinking in terms of “*being in the right place at the right time,*” we will discover God's will far more readily in terms of “*being in right alignment with Him, ready to be useful to Him.*” People are God's tool of choice to accomplish His will on the earth. You and I are His favorite implements, and He uses life's circumstances to shape us. A *Master Craftsman*, He plans to use us frequently, and He wants to have us sit easy and familiar in His hands. The goal is to line up our lives with Him and to become more and more like He is.

Hence, He changes us and increasingly conforms us to the image of Jesus. That is the “great good” toward which “*God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose*” (Romans 8:28). The more that we are yielded to God; the more we can be wielded by Him. Though we may have felt some corresponding physical or emotional sensations when we were born again, we felt nothing at the spirit level (which remains beyond our physical antennae). The huge change from spiritual death to life barely registered on the sensory scale.

But as time passed, we became increasingly conscious of just how big this was for the rest of our days. We began to find ourselves transformed as our thoughts were renewed, and as we surrendered to His will—letting go of some things, grabbing on to others (see Romans 12:1-2), Looking back on our lives—we can see how even painful or confusing events fit into His plan to change us deeply and profoundly. His plan is not for bad things to happen to us, but He is so focused and resourceful in His plan for us, that He even takes advantage of disadvantageous circumstances, and uses them for our good—and for the good of others.

Another useful way to think about discovering God's will for our lives is to see ourselves as investment accounts into which God puts significant sums. He loves to invest in us, to see us grow and yield a profit that can be shared with other people. The more we yield to Him, the more we yield for the sake others. God is, therefore, much more interested in teaching us to walk in His (spiritual) ways and paths than He is in getting us to walk in a particular city or state, or in an office corridor somewhere.

False Statements Vs. True Declarations of Truth

That also explains one of the biggest lies hurled at us throughout our lives by an opportunist enemy who seeks to subvert God's will for us. Though it has several variations, the essence of this lie announces in a condemning voice, “*God will not use you!*” That is followed by a reasonable-

sounding, double-edged rationale for why He won't: 1) it's too soon, and we need more time, understanding, and experience before God will use us; and/or, 2) it's too late, and we have missed the chance because of our age, or a mistake, or some other *can't-change-it* item of our lives. The lies spout, "God won't start with you" or "God is finished with you."

That's why Paul kept coming back with declarations of truth, and why I remind myself of them frequently:

"By the grace of God I am what I am..." ~1 Corinthians 15:10

"...Forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal..." ~Philippians 3:13-14

"But even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith..." ~Philippians 2:17

*"...For it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure."
~Philippians 2:13*

The simplest way to discover God's will is to continuously present ourselves to Him, like young Samuel did, and say, "Here am I, Lord." And, keep living *the life ahead*, not rehearsing *the life behind*.

God will lead us with a combination of whispered promises from His word, confirmations by more than one witness, and those little inner promptings of faith. But giving Him complete freedom to reshape every aspect of our lives (inside and out) is what guides us most surely in His will, and what qualifies us most adequately for accomplishing His will in the world around us—be that in Boise or in Baltimore, as a banker or a beautician.