



A practical guide to

# Discovering God's Will

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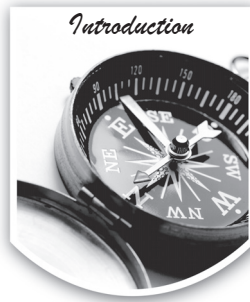
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# Core Beliefs

I'm curious about the questions that burn in people. I'm equally sensitive—maybe oversensitive—to what people don't care about as well; call it insecurity, or chalk it up to something missing in my childhood. The point is, I can't stomach the thought of writing about stuff that others think is meaningless. But if there is one question that stirs inside both believers and seekers, it's the issue of discovering God's will. Over and over again, I hear people ask, "What does God want from me, and how will He reveal His plan for my life?"

Rarely are people "preoccupied" with any one topic, so, to suggest that everyone is "thinking" or "asking" a certain question about "only one thing" is somewhat dubious. However, when I've raised the topic of "knowing God's will," I've found that people are eager to hear about it. The Barna Research Group discovered that nearly two-thirds of Americans were facing decisions about which they wanted some direction from God.<sup>1</sup> My personal experience confirms the depths of the desire to know what God wants with our lives.

The topic is especially pressing for young adults because they make most of their long-term decisions in the span of a few stressful years. Here are a few of the questions about God's will that I've collected from students:

- "What does God want from me?"
- "Why does God make it so hard [for us] to know Him?"

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- “Does the Bible tell me everything I need to know to make good decisions?”
- “Does God have a specific plan for my life, or is it up to me?”
- “Will doing God's will make me happy, successful, and secure?”
- “How do I determine what God wants me to become?”
- “How will I know that God's will for me is His will and not my own?”
- “How does God reveal His will to me?”
- “Will my bad choices in the past disqualify me from knowing and living God's will now and in the future?”
- “Why doesn't God answer my prayer for direction in life when others get swinging doors that open and shut, not to mention fully functioning windows when the doors aren't working?”

And my all-time favorite . . .

- “What ever happened to the Urim and Thummin, that ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ jacket the priests used in the old days? I could use one of those about now (in a neutral color, of course).”

However, discovering God's will is not only a quest for young adults. It matters to anyone seeking God's input on major decisions. Coming to an understanding of how He guides is just as important to those who are, let's say, young at heart as it is to those who actually are young. At every stage of life, we make pivotal decisions. So, if God has something to say, most people I know want to hear it.

When I began to speak on the topic of God's will for our life, people swooped down from nowhere to join the fray. The flood of comments and questions made it clear that the imprecise language and the barrage of obtuse clichés about God's guidance we frequently hear have made some of the issues unintelligible. So, before we begin this journey, I must tip my hand as to the core beliefs I hold about discovering and living God's will.

*Core belief #1: There must be a will . . . and therefore a way.*

Jesus stated, “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Matthew 7:13). Isaiah promised, “Whether you turn to the

right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, ‘This is the way; walk in it’ ” (Isaiah 30:21). David sang to God,

You have made known to me the path of life;  
 you will fill me with joy in your presence,  
 with eternal pleasures at your right hand (Psalm 16:11).

And the wise guy who wrote the book of Proverbs warned us to be careful of our own wisdom, claiming, “There is a way that seems right to a man, / but in the end it leads to death” (Proverbs 14:12). Clearly, if there is a will, then there must be a way.

The prophet Jeremiah affirmed this, saying,

This is what the LORD says:  
 “Stand at the crossroads and look;  
 ask for the ancient paths,  
 ask where *the good way is*, and *walk in it*,  
 and you will find rest for your souls” (Jeremiah 6:16; emphasis added).

However, that verse in Jeremiah’s book contains one more line: “But you said, ‘We will not walk in it.’ ” Ultimately, the path we walk is our choice to make.

There are many examples of individuals whose lives seem to march across the landscape on a divine path. As I consider the storied lives of people who have chosen to follow God, I’ve found it increasingly believable that there is a God who has a will and a way to live.

*Core belief #2: God has communicated His will in a way that we can understand and know how to follow.*

Communication with God is the tipping point in our relationship with Him. I have a friend with whom I communicate regularly. While our interaction may be regular, it is anything but normal. I send him e-mails, and he writes me with pen, ink, and stamp. I don’t understand this phenomenon—he has e-mail! (He’s one of those e-mail joke “forwards.”) One time I received a note from him enclosed in a motion-sickness bag from the airplane he was on. He’s weird and even a bit eccentric, but he replies to me; I’m just not certain of the method by which he’ll choose to communicate. I’m waiting for the day I see a small plane

flying over my house trailing white smoke that says, “Hey Troy, got your e-mail. Do you wanna golf tomorrow?” The trick will be knowing when to look up in the sky.

What do you expect to see or hear when you ask God to “show me Your will”? A dream? A feeling? A sign? How will you interpret a seeming “no answer”? In what form do you think the answer will come? Our expectations about God's guidance have everything to do with communication actually taking place. If we are expecting guidance, it won't escape us.

God hasn't abandoned us to guessing games or left us with only cryptic riddles as to the way through the darkness. He's a communicator par excellence! But communication is effective only if both parties pay attention. This leaves us with the task of looking at God's chosen communication process—from *how* He communicates to *what* He communicates. The promise remains for everyone: “ ‘You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart’ ” (Jeremiah 29:13).

You will discover God's will for your life as a result of deliberate seeking and courageous living. It doesn't just happen. You must value God's will more than anything else. In a way, the journey will cost you everything. But if you believe that the plans God has for you are better than your own, seek God with all your heart. And remember, God is more persistent and more creative than you or I will ever be. Ray Pritchard said, “God wants you to know His will more than you want to know it, and therefore He takes personal responsibility to see that you discover it.”<sup>2</sup> Communication involves a conversation in which two parties are listening. While God takes the initiative in starting the communication process, there will be work for you in discovering and doing His will.

*Core belief #3: Knowing God's will for our lives is more about knowing God than about knowing the future.*

Getting guidance from God rarely involves a vision of the future; it's more a matter of having a relationship with God in the present. While searching for a place called Chain Lakes just outside of Yosemite National Park, I got lost on the logging roads. I pulled over to the side of the dusty road I was on to ask directions from a man who was securing the logs on his truck. I inquired, “Am I on the right road to get to Chain Lakes, or is there another road?”

He smirked and snorted and said, “You can't get there from here.”

I couldn't believe he actually said that. Obviously, this guy watched too much TV. In my mind, a person should be able to get to anywhere from anywhere. After all, this is America.

I waited until it was clear that he didn't intend to unpack his prophetic maxim. Then I pressed him to elaborate. "Why? How can you say that?"

He replied, "You can get to Chain Lakes only by hiking or horseback, young man."

He was right. Neither the road I was on nor any other road on that mountain would take me to the place called Chain Lakes. I would have to take a walk—a five-mile hike through the mountains—to get there.

This principle applies to so many aspects of living. Strong marriages don't happen accidentally. Good grades don't find their way onto a transcript unless you study and do the work. You can't become skilled in sports without training, no matter how athletic you might be. Playing the cello requires practice. Saving money happens when you choose to go without something you want. Shortcuts and the easy way don't exist on this journey. As the guy said, "You can't get there from here." The narrow way referred to earlier is a walk—a hike—a hand-to-hand journey with Jesus Himself. There is no other way. If you want guidance without the Guide, seek out the wisdom waiting for you in the center of a fortune cookie. Knowing God's will is more about knowing God than about knowing exactly what to do at every crossroad in your life.

### **Thinking about giving up?**

Not only does the Bible convey that there is a will for us to live, but I feel the truth of this idea intuitively. I think one of the crazy paradoxes of the postmodern world is that our experience is supposed to be the source of authority for what is real and right. But we've learned that trusting only in our experience may not be wise. Perhaps our experience has let us down when it comes to believing that God is good. Unanswered prayers. Tragedy. Silence. Obstacles. Loneliness. Mean people. Cancer. Abuse. Alienation. If our experience alone determines what we think is true, then I can't imagine how some could even choke out a prayer to God.

Here's something that is only a theory—but think about it: I believe most people struggle more with questions about who God is and what He's like than with whether or not He exists. If God is so good, why do

so many bad things happen? If God is in control, why does evil reign? If God is so close and loving, why do I feel as if there's a Grand Canyon between us? In moments of disaster, unbelievers will often shake their fists at a God they don't believe in. They stew in anger at the Something or Someone who should have prevented the disaster.

Sometimes God's quietness can steal the hope from the strongest seeker. A personal relationship with God can sour quickly when we seek but don't find. The whole experience of intimacy with God seems far too unreal and unattainable. Unfortunately, it is common for us to receive a busy signal when seeking His guidance in our lives. For some, the lack of an answer quickly rouses a resounding "I don't care" or "I'm not interested" or "I don't have time for this," and we dismiss God from the equation of our lives because "obviously" He has dismissed us from His.

People hate being ignored more than they hate being hated. To hate requires an emotional commitment toward the other person. To be indifferent administers the ultimate slap in the face, virtually saying, "You don't matter." I'm guessing that some feel like they don't matter to God because the Almighty doesn't return their calls. No direction. No guidance. But I testify that God has not been silent. He is anything but indifferent. God has been trying harder to get to us than any one of us has ever sought Him. It may even be that He is more preoccupied with our future than we are. The essence of God's interaction with humanity is to guide us into a meaningful relationship with Him. But the message can get lost if we aren't looking in the right places.

*Discovering God's Will* doesn't attempt to provide magical formulas for choosing the right college or tips to get God to tell you whom you should marry. While I am being forthright about the beliefs that underpin this book, I am also keenly aware of how many unanswered questions I have about God's guiding ways. If I am certain about anything, it is that I am a child on a journey. In many ways, this book is a conversation. While it sounds part story, part sermon, and part personal struggle, I'm hoping that you can interact with the ideas in such a way that it is helpful for you. My prayer is that this conversation can remove some misconceptions about God's guidance and deepen our commitment to live each day in step with the Savior.

Count on it: There is a God who cares, and He is prepared to answer a few of our questions. There is a God who deeply feels our emptiness, and He longs to fill us with meaning and purpose. There is a God who



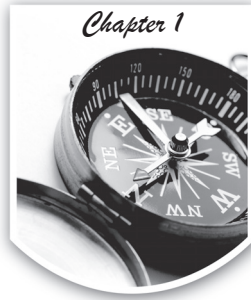
claims to be able to give us perspective in our confusion and comfort in our pain. There is a God who will make good on all His promises. God knows us and seeks us. Actually, He comes right out with it: “ ‘I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart’ ” (Jeremiah 29:11–13).

With all my heart, I believe God has a will for us to live. I believe it is possible to know His will for our life. And I believe walking confidently in God’s will is well within reach of every believer.

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1. Robert Jeffress, *Hearing the Master’s Voice: The Comfort and Confidence of Knowing God’s Will* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: WaterBrook Press, 2001), 17.

2. Ray Pritchard, *The Road Best Traveled: Knowing God’s Will for Your Life* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1995), 18.



# Questioning the Myths

Once you miss the first buttonhole, you never manage to button up right.

Growing up, I rarely wore shirts that had to be buttoned because I'd become frustrated when I found I'd buttoned my shirt crookedly. I'd started by putting the wrong button in the buttonhole. This is why I'm a T-shirt guy. But the principle of starting by making all the right adjustments is one we should apply to finding God's will. We'll make one of those "adjustments" by checking our assumptions about the way God reveals His will to people.

Assumptions are tricky. They shape the way we view the world around us. Sometimes, if our assumptions are faulty, unbalanced, or uninformed, we think things that simply don't work. And we may even defend completely irrational ideas.

Consider the television show *Candid Camera*. The purpose of the show is to get random people to do absolutely ridiculous things—captured for our viewing pleasure by a hidden camera. The show is hilarious because the actors get participants to do the most ridiculous things but treat the behavior in a way that compels the participants to mindlessly embrace their actions as normal.

For example, they might ask someone walking down a busy street to honk an antique bike horn (the kind that clowns use) every time someone else walks by without looking at the participant. Amazingly, the show's personnel actually find people willing to do it. And every time an unsuspecting passerby doesn't make eye contact with the horn-blower,

the obnoxious noise scares them into eye contact—and sometimes into an energized conversation. Even more amazingly, the more irrationally the dupes behave, the more vigorously they defend their behavior. Essentially, the abnormal becomes normal simply out of mindless repetition. This illustrates that there are always unspoken assumptions that guide (or misguide) our behavior.

Whether we like it or not, our assumptions about what is normal and expected frame how we perceive God communicating His will to people. And much like the people on *Candid Camera*, as life becomes complicated, we find all kinds of ways to defend our assumptions about the way God works. So, the first step to understanding God's will better is to be clear about our assumptions on the matter. Without a thoughtful check on our own preconceptions, we might base our beliefs about God's guidance on happenstance—like the puppy mentioned in the following story:

A couple brought a puppy home and let him play in the backyard. The puppy saw a baby squirrel in a tree and ran over to the base of the tree, sat down, and began to bark. The barking scared the baby squirrel, so it tried to jump to another branch farther away. But the poor squirrel missed his jump and fell straight into the open mouth of the puppy. Then, for the next fifteen years, the dog sat at the base of that tree and barked, waiting for another squirrel to fall from the sky into his open jaws.

As we look at some of the myths that grow out of our assumptions about God's will, it is important to note that each myth has at least a kernel of truth to it. If we were to bank our expectation of discovering God's plan for our life all on one approach, we would be like the dog under the tree waiting for a squirrel to drop miraculously into his mouth. Examine the following myths, and consider what you know about God's guidance, leaving room for what you don't know.

*Myth #1: God's will is a mystery we need to solve.*

When I was in college, a church member slipped a hundred bucks in a card and mailed it to me anonymously. Well, *almost* anonymously. During church, he asked from the pulpit if there was anything we wanted to thank God for this week, and then he peered intently at me. At first I was thankful, but the more he stared at me, the more uncomfortably suspicious I became. He continued to juggle praise from the congregation and to look at me as if I were going to pop with gratefulness at any

moment. I was so embarrassed that I wanted to crawl under the pew. It was as if he were trying desperately to keep a secret and shout it to the world at the same time.

Some contend that God knows the secret about His plan for our life, but He's not allowed to tell. They think that it is up to us to discover His plan by figuring it out from a few cryptic hints sent from heaven. I don't think so. God is unmistakably clear about what He knows and what He tells people:

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD,  
“plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you  
hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11).

“I make known the end from the beginning,  
from ancient times, what is still to come.  
I say: My purpose will stand,  
and I will do all that I please” (Isaiah 46:10).

There is surely a future hope for you,  
and your hope will not be cut off (Proverbs 23:18).

“So there is hope for your future,” declares the LORD.  
“Your children will return to their own land” (Jeremiah 31:17).

But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever,  
the purposes of his heart through all generations (Psalm 33:11).

I don't see God's plan as a puzzle. He has a plan, and it will come to pass. He has a will for your life, and He declares it, conveys it, commands it, and reveals it freely to those who are eager to know it.

I struggle to see 3-D pictures. Others stare into them, and the image emerges rather clearly and without much drama. Not me. I squint, blink, search, scan, imagine, and peer into those pictures with all I've got, but I can never see the image within the speckles.

A fourth-grader took it upon himself to educate me about 3-D pictures, and, behold, my eyes were opened! The first trick he showed me was to start by reading the instructions. It is amazing how much valuable information clearly marked instructions contain. The next trick was to stare patiently into the picture. I hadn't been looking at the picture

continuously, waiting for the hidden image to emerge. Sure enough, the little rascal of a fourth-grader succeeded in coaching me to see the image clearly.

Is knowing God's will like knowing the secret to seeing the hidden image in 3-D pictures? Does God conceal Himself beyond the apparent reality, playing hide-and-seek with humanity? According to Scripture, God has made His will known to the world by His Word and through His Son. Listen to what the writer of Hebrews said: "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word" (Hebrews 1:1–3).

I don't think God is playing with our life as though His will were a riddle to be solved or a puzzle to be put together. Although discovering His will involves searching, we are not seeking out a God who is hiding.

*Myth #2: God has a very specific plan for our lives.*

"What if this is *the one*?" Carly pleaded.

"Which one?" I replied.

Apparently, Carly's boyfriend was moving to another college, and she had to decide whether to transfer with him or to break up and remain at home. She loved him—this was evident. But her current dilemma confused her, and she was hoping God would have some direction for her.

"Do you mean *the only one*?" I pressed.

"Doesn't God have the perfect match out there for us? I mean, I'm sure there is more than one person I *could* marry, but is there one person I *should* marry?"

Is there some perfect master plan in heaven that would enable us, if we were to make just the right choices, to experience blissful living? Is God's plan for our life a chess match in which every decision determines the destiny of the player?

That notion seems absurd. If God's will is one specific life scenario or a projected master plan of minute, detailed experiences, then what happens when I make one bad choice? Am I out of the plan? Do I descend to an inferior track of life where my potential might be OK but not as good as it would have been had I chosen better? Do I go from plan A to plan B to plan C and so on? If God's will for me is a story already written

that simply requires matching the right choices with the right situation, how do we know how and when to choose appropriately? What happens if I make a mistake? What happens if I have a bad day?

J. I. Packer maintains that the idea that God has a specific, detailed plan for our life is a misconception analogous to traveling with an itinerary drawn up by a travel agent: “As long as you are in the right place at the right time to board each plane or train or bus or boat, all is well. But miss one of the preplanned connections, and the itinerary is ruined. A revised plan can only ever be second-best compared with the original.”<sup>1</sup>

If this myth is prominent today, it is no wonder that frustration and unrest cripple people. Everything depends on discovering God's specific path for you. If figuring out how to discover that Mount Everest-sized morsel of information were not enough to worry you, what about the fact that you still have to make the right choice, not just sometimes or once in a while, but always. Initially, this idea of a prepackaged plan might sound comforting, but follow this branch out from the tree trunk, and it's just downright bad for your health.

Jerry Sittser likens this model of understanding God's will to a maze: “In this model, then, when a decision has to be made, life suddenly becomes like a maze. There is only one way out. All the other ways are dead ends, every one of them a bad choice. . . . If we choose rightly, we will experience his blessing and achieve success and happiness. If we choose wrongly, we may lose our way and miss God's will for our lives and remain lost forever in an incomprehensible maze.”<sup>2</sup>

Again, when you ask people to question the assumption that an all-knowing and loving God would wire up one ideal plan for us to discover and choose, the folly of such a plan eventually emerges. One of the most basic concepts we must get before digging too deeply into His plan is that God can be all-knowing all the time, yet be completely free to let humans choose as they please. The fact that God knows doesn't mean that God chooses or determines a course for us. I don't want to meander down the path of thinking that I know what God knows and doesn't know. Some theologians—although I think well intentioned—have sought to determine what God knows and what He is incapable of knowing based on what they conceive. The problem is obvious: God's knowledge, power, and abilities are well beyond the limits of our understanding:

“My thoughts are not your thoughts,  
neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD.

“As the heavens are higher than the earth,  
so are my ways higher than your ways  
and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8, 9).

The problem is not what God knows or doesn't know. It's how limited we are as finite beings to comprehend it. I don't know how much God knows, and I'm not sure I want to be the one to try to delineate it—simply because I have a hard time understanding it.

It is true that God does declare ahead of time aspects of a person's destiny. He told Abraham to go and become the great-grandfather of the One who would save the world:

“I will make you into a great nation  
and I will bless you;  
I will make your name great,  
and you will be a blessing” (Genesis 12:2).

Moses was saved miraculously in a basket and brought up with the training of a king to prepare him to lead God's people out of slavery and into the Promised Land. There is no question that Moses was hand-picked at birth for a specific purpose in life. After Moses had been prepared by the wilderness, God said, “ ‘I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. . . . I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt’ ” (Exodus 3:7, 10).

As the need for a new king arose in Israel, God had one man in mind: “ ‘Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king’ ” (1 Samuel 16:1). After Samuel looked over all the brothers, young David was brought in before the prophet, and the Lord said to Samuel, “ ‘Rise and anoint him; he is the one’ ” (verse 12).

Esther, a woman whose life is characterized by one special moment of courage, was the right person in the right place at the right time: “ ‘If you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?’ ” (Esther 4:14).

Even before John the Baptist was conceived, he had a specific destiny. The particulars of his life were clear in God's mind right down to his gender, name, dietary habits, and most of all, his mission in life:

“Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:13–17).

Special people? Yes! Born with a specific destiny? It seems so. But if the psalmist speaks for all of us, then what is true for John, Esther, Moses, and Abe is true for you and me.

You created my inmost being;  
     you knit me together in my mother's womb.  
 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;  
     your works are wonderful,  
     I know that full well.  
 My frame was not hidden from you  
     when I was made in the secret place.  
 When I was woven together in the depths of the earth,  
     your eyes saw my unformed body.  
 All the days ordained for me  
     were written in your book  
     before one of them came to be.

How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!  
     How vast is the sum of them! (Psalm 139:13–17).

You remember David, the chosen king of Israel? If our decisions make and break whether or not we are in the specific plan of God, how can the following be said about David, who became a willful adulterer and a murderer: “ ‘After He had removed him, He raised up David to be their king, concerning whom He also testified and said, “*I HAVE FOUND DAVID* the son of Jesse, *A MAN AFTER MY HEART*, who *will do all My will*” ’ ” (Acts 13:22, NASB; emphasis added). Surely, that little issue with Bathsheba and Uriah hadn't been written into the grand scheme of



things. Yet the book of Acts records David as a man who did “all” God’s will.

Surely a theologically moderate theologian like Paul would have a more realistic spin on the specific nature of God’s will. But he wrote, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves” (Ephesians 1:3–6).

From our perspective, Abraham, Moses, and David all made choices that should have stymied God’s grand design. Abraham forfeited his bride when times got tough. Moses lost his temper when tensions were high. David stole another man’s wife after sneaking a peek on the rooftops.

Does God’s will change as a result of our decisions? All decisions do have consequences. To what degree did their decisions—do our decisions—affect God’s ultimate goal? This is what we know:

- God has a plan for every individual.
- God works in all manner of ways to see His plan through.
- God’s plan allows people to choose freely.
- Our choices don’t necessarily change God’s plan—only our position in reference to His ultimate goal. (If I choose to live outside or completely away from God’s will, His ultimate purpose is not thwarted; see Job 42:1, 2.)

Since God will not allow His ultimate purpose to be thwarted, He guides in a number of ways, and His methods of revealing His will often change. Consider the methods through which God chose to guide people:

- The sanctuary in the desert
- A cloud and a pillar of fire
- Balaam’s donkey
- A trumpet blast
- A jeweled vest worn by the high priest
- A flood of water

- The absence of water
- Fire from heaven
- A still, small voice on a mountain
- Parted waters, impossible victories, unmistakable miracles, and events that scream, “By this you will know that I am God.”

At times, God is very specific about what He wants us to do. Sometimes He adjusts His approach because of people's failures. Divorce was never God's plan, but Jesus explained that since human hearts have become hardened, God has allowed people to divorce (see Matthew 19:3–9). Is part of God's ultimate plan people staying faithful to each other? Will that day come? As humanity learns the lessons of their choices, they will soon discover the best way to live as children of God's kingdom.

I think we will discover that God's plan—His will for our lives—may involve something entirely different from the color car you drive or the house you choose to live in or even which company you work for. God does very specifically reveal His will. We'll talk more about that later in the book.

*Myth #3: If God wants to communicate with you, He'll give you a sign.*

Khun Paot, a teenage girl, escaped the butchery of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia after trekking through dangerous terrain with one hundred others who were seeking freedom. Filling the area between the company of travelers and safety were Communist soldiers, darkness, and a thorny jungle. The majority of the escapees had no shoes to protect their feet and no light to guide their way. Darkness hampered the tired group as they crossed a valley between two mountain ranges. When the blackness of night made them unable to take another step, hundreds of fireflies swarmed around the group. The fireflies produced enough light around the travelers that they could see each other, and most importantly, find their way. Later, in the refugee camp, Khun Paot was invited to a Christian gathering. Pointing to a picture of Jesus that hung on the wall, she exclaimed, “He's the One who showed us the way to Thailand and freedom by the light of the fireflies.”

Stories like this prompt a wide assortment of responses, ranging from misty-eyed awe to the suspicious pause that wonders if the storyteller took an extra preaching class instead of Introduction to Ethics. Does this stuff really happen? Does God really enter into the time and space of our lives to communicate, guide, and reroute our steps?

Sometimes He *does* interrupt the routine with shiny displays of glory or a dramatic bombardment of His power. While most people never get to experience events such as this, they have happened and they do happen, and my guess is that they will happen again. But if you always expect it to happen *to you*, you might be disappointed. One enduring reality colors every glorious epiphany—God dramatically intervenes when you least expect it.

Often, a divine interruption is an attention-getting device. Anyone who wants God to write His message on their dining room wall should consider the nature and purpose of those little events: warning, rebuke, correction, instruction, intimidation, judgment. (Think about Daniel 5.) Be careful what you ask for. Do you really want to know what God sees in the future?

Throughout the Bible, we see moments in which God clearly gives people supernatural evidence of His plan. The New Testament alone contains many instances in which God makes clear what His will is:

- The disciples on the road to Emmaus
- Philip and the Ethiopian
- Saul on the road to Damascus
- Paul and Silas in prison

These were moments when God stepped in—not metaphorically, not figuratively, but unmistakably. The reason we need to check this myth is that sometimes we think that since God has done this before, He must do it the same way, always. When God does speak and intervene dramatically, it tends to be when we are about to make a grave error or when He has a unique request.

If God can best communicate His purpose by fire, then fire is fine with Him. But Elijah’s experience is an important lesson that God doesn’t always choose to communicate with people the same way. As a matter of course, He shakes things up a bit. On one mountain that Elijah climbed, God spoke through fire. So, Elijah waited on another mountain. But God’s voice wasn’t in the fire, the wind, or the earthquake. Instead, He chose to speak in what the Bible says was “a still, small voice” (see 1 Kings 19:9–14). The Hebrew word can be translated as “calm” or even “silent.” Either way, the idea is that God spoke profoundly in a not-so-dramatic way.

Some signs can distract instead of communicating. When I went to Australia on a speaking assignment, I noticed a sign that read “Uniting Church Meets at Deception Bay.” I thought that was interesting. Still more confusing was the sign I saw posted by a driveway at Taco Bell that read “Drive Thru Window.” I hadn’t considered driving through the window to get a quick, cheap meal, but it sounds like an option. I had often wondered why highway workers always look so dejected until I read signs littering the road that announced “Slow Men at Work.” And I was amused by a sign that was attached to a fence in an industrial yard. The sign read “No Smoking Hazardous Chemicals.”

The point is that signs can communicate messages that weren’t intended. For people to operate under the assumption that God will give us a sign when we have to make an important decision or when we don’t know what to do may be one of those faulty notions to which we cling.

### Guidance from the gut

The saying “What does your gut tell you?” isn’t just a saying. The ancients considered examining internal components of living beings an acceptable method for seeking a sign from the gods. In Ezekiel, we get a glimpse of pagan rituals for seeking wisdom: “The word of the LORD came to me: ‘Son of man, mark out two roads for the sword of the king of Babylon to take, . . . For the king of Babylon will stop at the fork in the road, at the junction of the two roads, to seek an omen: He will cast lots with arrows, he will consult his idols, he will examine the liver’ ” (21:18–21).

OK, that’s gross. But the pagan world made a science of determining the will of the gods. Shooting an arrow into the air to discover which way to go is a method called *rhabdomancy*. Idols to which people offer sacrifices for the purpose of gaining favor or seeking advice were called *teraphim*. But at that time, the method of choice for seeking heavenly wisdom was to examine the liver of sheep. Bruce Waltke discusses this phenomenon: “Pagans devised all sorts of special tasks to help them determine the mind of God. Each of those tasks included searching for some special sign given by the gods. The most popular was *hepatoscopy*, the study of the liver. Pagans believed that memory and intelligence resided in the liver, not the brain, and they created an entire course of study to read livers. The liver was the heaviest organ, and therefore if God was going to reveal His mind to man He would do so through the heaviest and supposedly most important organ.”<sup>3</sup>

Many innocent sheep have been slaughtered in times of war or uncertainty for the purpose of discovering God's plan. Laugh all you want, but it was a common practice.

The ancient assumption that God will and must speak through a sign is a powerful underpinning to the thought process of believers and unbelievers alike. Daniel Schaeffer muses, "Signs are hard to figure sometimes. We think we know what they mean, but what happens when they don't turn out to mean what they thought? We are a sign-conscious people, constantly looking for them to determine what to do next."<sup>4</sup> Think about how many times you have wondered whether an event was a sign from God. The unexpected phone call. An unanticipated visitor. A check in the mailbox. An acceptance letter. A job offer. A random act of kindness. A clean bill of health.

Several questions surface when you stir up the conversation about miraculous communiqués from the finger of God. What determines whether a sign is a sign? How does a person distinguish between supernatural events and coincidences? Even if God were to give you a sign for guidance, how would you know what it means? Why doesn't God give you a sign every time you are confused? Are some moments in life more "sign-worthy" than others?

The bottom line is that signs may be impressive, but they aren't always what they seem to be. Schaeffer illustrates this truth:

During the war, the logistics of supply in the Pacific Theatre were complicated by the fact that U.S. pilots had to fly long distances over open water. Cargo planes were often forced to crash-land, or simply crash, on remote islands, some inhabited by natives who had never seen an airplane up close, much less the stuff we Americans packed in one: food in cans, ready-made clothes, radios, medicine. After the war this phenomenon ended. But the hope did not. A kind of religion grew up called the "cargo cult." Believers worshipped the big metal birds, those that were rusting away in the jungle, and those that flew overhead—praying they would crash and bestow their magical cargoes on them again. They never did.<sup>5</sup>

While the Bible contains examples of God directing people with signs, are these the exception or the rule? Look at the purpose of the signs and wonders throughout the Bible and ask, "What is God's purpose in this

event?” Paul explained, “Since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom *did not know him*, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified” (1 Corinthians 1:21–23, emphasis added). According to Paul, God is mostly interested in being known.

Some “believe” only when it makes sense; others “believe” because of a miracle. But there’s no guarantee that knowledge or even a truckload of supernatural fireworks is going to cause people to respond to God. Consider this principle at work in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man pleads with Abraham to send Lazarus to his family and personally warn them to avoid the predicament in which his selfish lifestyle has landed him. But Abraham reminds the rich man that his family has “Moses and the prophets” (God’s revealed Word) to consider as a guide for life. Pressing the issue one step further, the rich man begs Abraham to send someone from the dead, for surely a representative from the hereafter would convince them to live right. But Abraham soberly reminds the rich man, “ ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead’ ” (Luke 16:31).

Clearly, the lesson is that the sign had already been given in the pages of God’s Word. Not even a ghost from the afterlife will cause people to change. Steven Curtis Chapman wrote this truth in the song “Waiting for Lightning.” He sings,

The sign and the word  
 Have already been given  
 And now it’s by faith  
 That we must look, and we must listen.

And his song warns, “You’re listening for thunder / While He quietly whispers your name.”

Signs and wonders are dangerous places to put your trust for two reasons: First, because we may simply be looking for “signs” that justify what we want. And second, because Satan’s agencies may be able to fabricate wonders to draw us away from God’s revealed Word. Jesus warned His disciples, “ ‘False Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect—if that were possible’ ” (Matthew 24:24). And referring to the satanic agencies that will deceive

the world in the final events of earth's history, John the revelator said that in his vision they "performed great and miraculous signs, even causing fire to come down from heaven to earth in full view of men. Because of the signs he was given power to do on behalf of the first beast, he deceived the inhabitants of the earth" (Revelation 13:13, 14).

Looking for a sign is exhausting. When do you look? Where and how long? What constitutes a supernatural message? Some say, "You will know when it happens." Frankly, that is the most unsatisfying answer I have ever heard. At best, we tend to be inconsistent with what we trust to be truth in our lives. In our day and age, it isn't surprising to change from being a hardcore skeptic one moment to being phenomenon-focused and sign-silly the next.

A friend of mine, who happens to be a self-proclaimed atheist, barely survived a horrible automobile accident. Everyone from the emergency responders to the insurance agents deemed the fact that he survived the accident evidence of divine intervention. In the hospital, my friend's first statement to me was "Do you think God is trying to get my attention?" He was somber and teachable, willing to be open to new ideas—until he was back on his feet. Then his testimony changed from God seeking to get his attention to the effectiveness of airbags. How fickle.

As we look at God's will for our lives, we need to recognize that He may choose to guide people to trust in Him through the miraculous, or He may not. Jesus soon tired of trying to "prove Himself" through the miraculous signs people persistently demanded:

- " 'Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders,' Jesus told him, 'you will never believe' " (John 4:48).
- "Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, 'Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you.'  
"He answered, 'A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah' " (Matthew 12:38, 39).
- "Then the Jews demanded of him, 'What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?'  
"Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days' " (John 2:18, 19).

Again, if we consider what we know from Scripture about "signs and wonders," it seems that signs can often distract people from what

God has already declared. To be fair, it is notable that signs often helped some people believe that Jesus was worth listening to. (See, for example, John 2:23, 24; 6:14; 10:40–42; Acts 2:22, 23.) However, one of the problems with seeking signs is the tendency to focus on the sign alone instead of what it is pointing to. One of my students returned from visiting a church that believes the spiritual gift of speaking in tongues is a sign of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Church members had asked him, “Have you received the Spirit?” The question puzzled him because it was clear that they considered “having the Spirit” and speaking in tongues to constitute a package deal. How troubling it is when people emphasize attaining a specific spiritual gift rather than the purpose of the gift.

It's clear in Scripture that God uses these miraculous moments of communication to serve His purpose. He chooses when He will communicate through signs and wonders. If you find yourself wondering if your flat tire is a sign from God about who you should marry, you might reconsider some of your assumptions about how God guides. Sometimes we get a flat tire because there was a nail in the road. With such strong warnings from Christ Himself about looking for signs, it behooves us to examine how reasonable it is to expect God to light up a bush every time we need some direction.

Remember . . .

- God determines when signs and wonders are necessary to our understanding and believing His will.
- While God has used signs to demonstrate His goodness and power, He has clearly communicated His will in tangible, less sensational ways for the purpose of fostering our faith in Him.
- When supernatural interruptions do occur, they are usually unmistakable and serve the purpose of getting someone's attention.
- Jesus downplays signs and wonders, especially if they take the place of obedience to His Word.

Some roads where I live have rumble strips that warn you when you're crossing into oncoming traffic or off the side of the road. But not all of the roads where I live have those bumps. Sometimes staying on the road means keeping your eyes open and your hands on the wheel.



Unfortunately, the business of seeing God's will is rarely ever perfectly clear. It is important to note that although we can't see the way perfectly, we can still see well enough.

*Myth #4: God gave you a brain, and He expects you to make it the basis of all your decision-making.*

If the modern world has gifted humanity with anything, it is an increased opinion of its own opinion. We call it reason and rational thinking, but boil it down to its most central element and you'll find "logical" or "scientific" guesses about what is good, right, real, and meaningful. As the Age of Reason dawned on humanity, people shifted their thinking from "God is the source and center of human experience" to "God is peripheral, and my perceptions are what is most real." The human mind, with its ability to reason, invented solutions to some of our problems and discovered answers for some of our questions. This became our focus during the period often referred to as "the Enlightenment."

While human thinking moved many away from the notion that there is a God, it gave others, who remained believers, a strong sense that if God has a plan for our lives, the way to discover it is through good decision-making and wisdom. They concluded that miraculous interpositions are simply not to be expected or believed.

These underpinnings of the modern age are still alive and well today. One study reports that nearly 60 percent of respondents "strongly agree/believe that 'when you make a major decision, God wants you to make the best possible decision based on logically evaluating all of the options.'" Another 24 percent agree 'somewhat with this notion.'<sup>6</sup>

Throughout the history of humankind, God has expected people to use the brain He has given them to discern right from wrong and what is best from what is not good at all. In the same way that providence and signs can be modes of God's guidance, so can our minds. But if you depend entirely upon one mode of communication alone, you narrow the options of communication in the same way the puppy did when it waited for squirrels to drop from the tree. When you determine that you will listen only one way, you are predetermining the way God can speak to you.

One way you can always count on God speaking to you is through His Word. One of the qualities Scripture credits the Bereans as having was their willingness to test the words of people against the Word

of God: “Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11, 12).

The Bereans’ “eagerness” was a teachable spirit that was hungry for truth and direction. This stood in contrast to the spiritual leaders in Christ’s day who knew the Scriptures backward and forward but failed to connect their knowledge to the person of Christ who stood before them: “ ‘You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life’ ” (John 5:39, 40). How could they not see? I think the wise man captured it well when he said, “There is a way that seems right to a man, / but in the end it leads to death” (Proverbs 14:12). Reason plays a role in understanding the will of God. But there are times when all the clear thinking in the world doesn’t make God’s will any easier to understand and do:

- Building an ark when no one has ever seen rain, a flood, or even anything remotely resembling a natural disaster
- Assembling an army based upon the drinking style of the soldiers
- As a teenage boy, taking on a giant in battle
- Sacrificing on an altar the son whom God sent to be the father of a whole nation
- Dipping seven times in the river to remove the disease of leprosy
- As a virgin, conceiving a child by the Holy Spirit

At some point, we simply have to throw the book of human wisdom out because the wisdom of God confounds the wisdom of man. God can lead those who are teachable in the same way He led Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Mary. In all their stories, it was never a case of brains versus God’s mysterious leading but a cooperation between the two. Consider David for a moment. When we read in 1 Samuel 17:24 that the Israelites ran from Goliath’s challenge “in great fear,” it becomes clear that they all had done the math and had come to the same conclusion: Fighting Goliath wasn’t wise—a clear and fast “no brainer.” But sometimes everyone is wrong. What appears to be human wisdom can be a very dubious form of knowledge.

In a classroom experiment, teachers wrote several words on the blackboard. Then they pointed to a word and asked if it was spelled correctly, and the class voted thumbs up for Yes and thumbs down for No. However, before the class met, the teachers had prompted all the students but one to vote No on a word that was spelled correctly in the last list. In most of the classrooms where this experiment was conducted, the solitary students voted with the majority in spite of their initial sensibilities.

David wouldn't be swayed in the same way. He wasn't listening only to the data displayed at the battlefield. He was also hearing the Voice to which he accorded authority. David measured the words of Saul the king, Goliath the giant, and all the men of Israel by what he knew to be true about God.

However, taking on Goliath wasn't a *mindless* leap of faith when you consider the encounters David had experienced with lions and bears. It must have looked mindless to some, but imagine how heaven roared with pride as David "ran quickly to the battle line to meet him." When he chased down Goliath, he wasn't on some spiritually psychotic rampage. Rather, he was listening to a different voice—a voice that is not easily heard by conventional wisdom.

In the life of David and of many others throughout history, God sometimes makes a mess of human wisdom and causes us all to leave a little room for the unimaginable to happen. While there are moments when God has called people to trust His Word more than conventional wisdom, these moments rarely involve suspending the sense of discernment. The two never seem to be mutually exclusive. Maybe the assumption that God wants us to use our brain and make good choices isn't faulty at all. But knowing what we know about humanity, can we be totally confident in human wisdom alone?

All of this reminds me of a true, yet tragic, World War II story. The *Lady Be Good* was a famous bomber flown by a team of well-seasoned, combat-savvy airmen. After their final successful mission, they made their way home during the night. The instruments and other navigational aids were available to help the crew reach their destination. But they had flown this route so many times before that they barely consulted them.

As the bomber proceeded through the night, the crew was unaware that a strong tailwind was propelling them more rapidly than usual. They were shocked when the instruments signaled it was time to land. Refusing to rely on the accuracy of the gauges, they continued through

the night, confident that they still had many miles to go. They became concerned when they couldn't see the lights and the markers they usually used as a guide on their journey. By the time they realized that they had significantly overshot their destination, their fuel supply was so depleted that they couldn't make it back to the airfield. The *Lady Be Good* was found several days later in the desert, well beyond their destination. The entire crew perished because they rested entirely on their own wisdom.

It is possible to be sure of something that seems so right but proves to be so wrong. What happened in the air back in the early 1940s is happening in principle when we base our decisions solely on brainpower. Brains can be wrong.

Have you considered the many stories and scenarios that occurred in Scripture that simply were not logical, reasonable, or rational according to human wisdom? Note the insight that comes from God to a wise guy,

“Blessed is the man who listens to me,  
watching daily at my doors,  
waiting at my doorway” (Proverbs 8:34).

Listening, watching, waiting at the very doorway of God. This might be the most salient wisdom available on being guided by God.

What do you believe about the way God will convey His will to you? What are your expectations? What are the methods you think He will use? Which do you tend to rely on the most? Understanding our assumptions about God's will and the way He guides us is an essential step to discovering God's will and living it.

While God's will may seem like a mystery to us or a puzzle full of missing pieces, God doesn't play hide-and-seek with His children. He does have a dream for each person, and He claims to know the future, but He also meets people in their mistakes as well as in their moments of greatness, and He leads them into a good life.

Can God's perfect plan really be about making the right decision all the time? Does one mistake disqualify me from plan A? Is it really His standard operating procedure to reveal Himself through signs and wonders? I can think of many times I was so sure I was right, but my human wisdom failed me. So, before we go much further, it's time that we check our assumptions at the door.

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1. J. I. Packer, *God's Plans for You* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2001), 91.
  2. Jerry Sittser, *Discovering God's Will* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2000), 17.
  3. Bruce Waltke, *Knowing the Will of God for the Decisions in Life* (Eugene, Ore.: Harvest House Publishers, 1998), 31.
  4. Daniel Schaeffer, *The Bush Won't Burn and I'm All Out of Matches: How to Find God's Will When You Have Looked Everywhere* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Discovery House Publishers, 1995), 8.
  5. *Ibid.*, 7, 8.
  6. Robert Jeffress, *Hearing the Master's Voice: The Comfort and Confidence of Knowing God's Will* (Colorado Springs, Colo.: WaterBrook Press, 2001), 211.

### Questions for Reflection

1. What are some myths or urban legends that you assumed were true?
2. Of the myths about God's will discussed in this chapter, which do you think is most pervasive?
3. In what way has God's will seemed like a puzzle to you?
4. Think of a time in your life when you perceived that one decision could establish you in or break you away from God's will.
5. To what degree do you think God expects people to use their brains to find His will for their life? When have you faced a dilemma in which the "logical choice" turned out not to be the best choice?
6. Have you ever experienced what you thought was a sign from God? How did you respond?