

Biblical Decision-Making

Is it God's will to "find" His will?



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by

Joel James

Joel James is a graduate of The Master's Seminary in Los Angeles, California and serves as the Pastor-teacher of Grace Fellowship, Pretoria.

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Word of the Cross
PO Box 39263
Garsfontein East
0060
South Africa
orders@gracefellowship.co.za

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Introduction

You know the feeling. You're running late, so you stop at a fast-food establishment for lunch. At least half the phrase "fast-food" is a lie, but convenience is king. You enter the glass-enclosed monument to cholesterol and sodium chloride, and then it happens. Decision overload.

"Burger, chicken, fish, or salad?" asks the clerk.

"I would like a burger."

"The deluxe edition or the stripped version? One patty or two? Cheese or no cheese? Tomato sauce or mustard? Pickles or onions?"

"I would also like some chips."

"Small, medium, large, or jumbo? With or without salt? Microwaved, fried, or still slightly frozen?" Your mind is starting to feel like a computer hard drive just before it freezes up.

"Something to drink?" asks the attendant. From a list of twenty more options, you select the world's most popular carbonated stomach solvent. "Regular, classic, diet, or lite?" asks the smiling clerk. By now the pain in your stomach has changed from hunger to decision-overload acid burn. But you're still not done.

"Serviettes? Tomato sauce packets? Straw or no straw? To eat here or take away?" Quickly your tray arrives. Should you sit inside and get mauled by the 17-member, five-year-old birthday party or sit outside and enjoy the diesel fumes? Decision overload.

Some decisions are relatively unimportant: pickles or onions. Others, like which job to take, where to stay, where to attend church, and whom to marry are life-changing.

As a Christian, you want to honour God with your decisions. You would rather not make a scrambled egg of your life by making *bad* decisions. But exactly how should you go about making good, God-honouring decisions? Should you just do whatever feels right, study the stars, or read tarot cards?

Apparently some think a Christian's decisions are found in the cards. A woman in one of the large denominations of our country recently published a set of cards which are supposed to help you find God's will for your life. She did so with her minister's full support. Is *that* how Christians should make decisions?

Surely there is a biblical method for deciding whom to marry or what job to take. Making a bad choice about what to wear—brown pants and pink socks—will make you look like a nerd. Making a bad decision about a marriage partner will have rather worse consequences. Surely God has said something about decision-making. In fact, He has.

Unfortunately, many Christians have never taken the time to study what God has said. I once heard of someone who determined he needed to study what the Bible says about decision-making because of the following situation.¹ He was at a Christian varsity, and, as is the habit of many twenty year-old men, he was thinking about marriage. Growing desperate, one day he prayed, "God, let the next woman I see be the one I am supposed to marry. Let that be the sign that she's the one."

At that moment, the elderly, rather large, near-sighted, and already married secretary of the school administrator walked around the corner. "Okay God, let the *second* woman I see be the one." Maybe we do need some more study on the issue of decision-making!

¹I am indebted to my friend Dr. Stuart Scott for this illustration, and for many of the principles for decision-making found in this booklet.

Two Common Approaches

There are two basic (wrong) approaches to decision-making among Christians. One is a **purely pragmatic** approach, the other, a **mystical** approach.

The purely pragmatic approach

The purely pragmatic approach to decision-making is a rational approach. Pros and cons are weighed. The pragmatist reviews all the practical factors and consequences before he makes his decision. There is nothing wrong with that as far as it goes. However, the one factor he gives little or no consideration is what God says in the Bible.

The pragmatist claims to be a Christian. He will tell you that the Bible is important to him. But he makes decisions like a pagan. He is a *practical* atheist. God exists on Sundays and in his doctrinal statement, but might as well not exist on Monday through Saturday or when he considers his bank statement.

Before buying a house, the purely pragmatic person will research interest rates, prices, and styles. He is practical. However, he won't bother to research what the Bible says about debt. He is a practical atheist; he makes decisions as if God did not exist. When deciding if the wife should work outside the home after they have children, the pragmatic couple will weigh income and career aspirations against time with the kids. They are practical. However, they won't go to the many Bible verses on that subject and discover what God has said about ordering a family. They are practical atheists.

It's not that purely pragmatic Christians are against the Bible. Out of ignorance, they believe it has little to say about the practical decisions of life. They believe the Bible is too old-fashioned to be of any use in today's world. Or it might be that they are afraid God will reorder their life in a way they don't like if they really read and apply the Bible.

Are you a purely pragmatic decision-maker? They often make sharp businessmen, orderly housewives, or efficient elders. However, their wisdom is merely a worldly wisdom. They make decisions based on "what works" in their experience, not on what God has said. Because of their thoughtfulness and caution they often seem to be good decision-makers. However, until they actively search out what God says in the Bible about their decision, they are not *biblical* decision-makers.

Mystical approaches

We usually think of a mystic as a starry-eyed eccentric who wears long robes and meditates under a pyramid. Actually, a mystic is anyone who believes he has special, personal knowledge from God that others cannot know or evaluate.

The terminology of your decision-making probably reveals if you have a mystical bent or not. "I just want to *know God's will* so I can make the right decision. I just want to do *what God wants*." Many Christians speak of decision-making in exactly that way. They assume their decisions are to be based on a special, personal, unverifiable, mystical knowledge from God. "I'm praying *to know if it is God's will* for me to take this new job...to marry Bill...to go to varsity."

The purely pragmatic approach to decision-making has little concern for what God wants and great concern for practical matters. The mystical approach is just the opposite. It focuses on what God (presumably) wants and gives little attention to practical details.

The key to the mystical approach to decision-making is acquiring secret knowledge regarding God's plan for the future. "If I can just know God's will, then I can make the right decision." The following five techniques are some of the many ways that Christians try to obtain that secret, unverifiable knowledge.

The lucky-dip method

When facing a decision, the person using this method dips into his Bible at random until he finds a verse or phrase which spurs him to make one choice or another. For example, you are considering emigrating, and one morning you read Genesis 12:1, "Go forth from your land." There it is, God's will. "I used the Bible to make my decision," you say. One wonders, however, if this is exactly what God had in mind when He said,

Present yourself to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling *accurately* the word of truth [emphasis added].

(2 Timothy 2:15)

Would the God who demands *accurate* handling of His word sanction a rape of the context of Genesis 11-12 which turns Abram into you? I doubt it.

"But God led me to this verse," you argue. Are you sure? Genesis 12:1 tells you a lot about what God wanted a Mesopotamian named Abram to do in 2000 BC. But on what basis do you assume it tells *you* what to do? No one else would read that verse in its context and conclude God was speaking to someone in South Africa today. The person lucky-dipping is claiming to have a secret interpretation from God that no one else can see or evaluate. That's mystical thinking.

To be honest, any decision can be proclaimed as God's will if this method of arbitrarily selecting small phrases out of the Bible is used. For example, Joshua 1:15 says, "You shall return to your land." Which verse is the emigrant to heed?

In the same way, a younger brother who is angry at his sister for telling their parents he spray painted her cat purple could justify his revenge against his sister with, "Arise, kill!"—God's words to Peter in Acts 10. The modern sluggard could defend his refusal to get a job with Philippians 2:3, "Do nothing." The worrier could defend her sin with Philippians 4:6, "Be anxious."

Ridiculous? Of course it is. But once you start ignoring the context of God's statements and arbitrarily snip out only the words you want to hear, then you really can make the Bible say anything.

Prophecy

Some Christians make significant life decisions by consulting people in the church who they believe are prophets. Others claim to be prophets themselves by saying, "God told me to do this." That is a claim to direct, verbal revelation from God. Consulting a prophet—yourself or others—would be an excellent option for discovering God's will *if* there were any genuine prophets around today. However, there aren't.²

In the Bible, when a prophet spoke in the name of God, you could be sure that what he said was God's word and God's will. We know that because God gave His definition of a prophet in Deuteronomy 18:18:

I will raise up a prophet from among their countrymen like you, and I will put My words in his mouth.

Since a true prophet spoke God's very words, you knew what he said was God's will. However, because a prophet spoke God's very words when he prophesied, he was also never *wrong* when he prophesied.

You may say in your heart, 'How will we know the word which the Lord has not spoken?' When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him.

(Deut 18:21-22)

According to God, a prophet who claimed to receive revelation but occasionally "missed one" was a fraud and a liar, not to be feared. Understanding that, we must note that even the leaders of

² See author's booklet, *Testing Today's Prophecy*, for a biblical evaluation of today's, so-called prophecy.

today's prophecy movement admit that they are often wrong. Ed Traut, a well-known South African "prophet," has said, "Anyone who flows as a New Testament prophet or in the gift of prophecy and believes he never misses it is in error."³

How different from Paul's attitude when God told him in Acts 27 that all his companions would be saved from an impending shipwreck: "Therefore, keep up your courage, men, for I believe God that it will turn out exactly as I have been told" (Acts 27:25). Paul spoke with a certainty today's "prophets" admit they can't. Why? Paul was a true prophet; his prophecies never went wrong. Today's prophets aren't; theirs often do. Here's God's view of that kind of "prophecy."

An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely...and My people love it so! But what will you do at the end of it?

(Jeremiah 5:30-31)

Do not listen to the words of the prophets who are prophesying to you. They are leading you into futility; they speak a vision of their own imagination, not from the mouth of the Lord.

(Jeremiah 23:16)

Interestingly, Traut admits consulting today's prophets is a rotten way to make decisions.

One should never be led by just one prophecy ... In decision making each one of us is answerable before the Lord for what we have decided. We can never use prophecy or a prophet as an excuse for making decisions.⁴

That sounds like the words of a man who has seen too many people make crazy decisions based on the words of a "prophet," only to have that supposed prophecy fall on its face along with their decision.

Since God said not to listen to a prophet who "misses it," making decisions by seeking God's will through one of today's so-called prophets is not an option.

Seeking peace

This method assumes that God communicates His will through a sense of inner calm. "I have peace about this decision, therefore, it must be God's will. It must be the right decision." The problem, of course, is that inner peace may have nothing to do with a decision being a good decision. I have known people who were completely at peace with committing adultery. Does that mean it was a good decision for them to do so?

³ Ed Traut, *The Truth About Prophecy* (Pretoria: Prophetic Voice Distributors, 1991), 94.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 45-56.

The wife of a seminary student once told me this amusing story. Just after she and her husband married, she decided to surprise him by rearranging his theological books. He had them arranged by topic and books of the Bible. She thought the bookshelves would look much more attractive if the volumes were arranged by colour and size (i.e., all the blue ones on one shelf, descending in size from left to right, then all the green ones, etc.). She worked all day moving the books. Her arrangement was so much more attractive than his. By late afternoon, her task was done, and with a glowing sense of accomplishment she waited for her husband's arrival. She had a lot of peace about her decision to rearrange the books...until her husband arrived home and went into cardiac arrest when he saw the bookcases.

Having peace about a decision might say nothing about whether it is a good decision or a bad one, a godly decision or an ungodly one. In fact, as popular as the seeking-peace method is, the Bible never speaks of peace as a ground for decision-making.

Interpreting circumstances

If you use this method you probably say things such as "God opened all the doors for me to get this new job. It must be His will." What you mean is, "If circumstances make it *easy* for me to do something, then the decision to do that thing *must* be the right decision." That's interpreting circumstances.

As with all the mystical methods of decision-making, "finding God's will" by interpreting circumstances is completely arbitrary. It is not the situation itself, but your state of mind which determines how you "interpret" the situation. The road-weary, prospective missionary says, "We are having so much trouble raising our support. It must not be God's will for us to go." Really? Maybe God is just testing your perseverance.

If Paul had decided whether to be a missionary or not based on how easily things went, he would have quit as soon as he started. In Philippi he was beaten and put in stocks. In Thessalonica there were riots. Those riots followed him to Berea. In Athens he was mocked. It is completely arbitrary to decide that something is not "God's will" because it is difficult.

Does an "open door" indicate God's will? Biblical counsellor Jay Adams has wisely warned, "Open doors can lead to elevator shafts." The fact that something is easy to do doesn't mean it is good or wise to do. David's adultery with Bathsheba "just worked out." The circumstances came together in such a way to make his decision easy. Surely it was God's will! Welcome to the spiritual elevator shaft, King David. Water may follow the path of least resistance, but imitating it can result in disastrous decision-making.

God does control circumstances. But it is unfounded speculation to decide that certain circumstances mean God *wants* us to make one decision rather than another.

Looking for signs

This method for finding God's will looks for special events or coincidences, assuming God secretly shows one what to do through that event.

The problem with sign-seeking is that it also is completely arbitrary. For example, someone might say, "I was crossing the street thinking about what to do with my life when a bus nearly ran me over. When I looked at the bus, there was a picture of a giant globe on its back panel. It must be a sign from God that He wants me to be a missionary! God wants me to "go into all the world."

A missionary? Why not a map-maker? Or, since the bus advertisement was for a newspaper, why not a journalist? Or maybe you weren't supposed to focus on the globe at all. It was the *bus* God wanted you to notice. God wants you to be a bus driver. Or perhaps a traffic officer to hand out tickets to reckless bus drivers. Who's to decide?

The interpretation of signs is completely arbitrary. You will interpret them in the way you want to. Moreover, there is no way of determining if an event really was a sign from God or not. It's *all* arbitrary. To be honest, reading signs borders on divination. It's not quite like sacrificing a goat as the Canaanites did, and examining its liver to decide what to do, but it's not so very different either.

I should say one more thing about sign reading. One of the most popular ways of seeking a sign is "putting out a fleece." This terminology comes from Gideon's actions in Judges 6. Gideon asked God to do a miracle—dry grass, wet fleece; wet grass, dry fleece—to prove that He would keep His word to protect Israel. "Putting out a fleece" is a demand that God do a miracle (i.e., intervene in some special way) to indicate which decision to make.

Unfortunately, those who "put out fleeces" haven't read the Judges 6 account very closely. As is often the case with behaviour in the narrative sections of the Old Testament, Judges 6 is a *report* of what Gideon did. It's not necessarily included in scripture for the purpose of *imitation*.

In fact, Gideon's fleece routine was motivated by *doubt*. Gideon didn't believe God would keep His word until God did a miracle to prove it. Gideon's fleece-laying is no more to be imitated as a decision-making method than Saul's seeking out of the witch of Endor (1 Samuel 28:7ff.).

The truth is, God frowns on demanding miracles from Him. Two times, after being asked for a sign, Jesus said, "An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign" (Matt 12:38-39; 16:1-4). In Deuteronomy 6:16, God said, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test." That command was in reference to Israel's demand in Exodus 17:1-7 that God do a miracle (water from a rock) to prove He was leading them.

Summary

If you are like many Christians, you probably go about decision-making in one of two ways. The first is the *purely pragmatic* approach. You carefully weigh the options and try to make a wise decision based on your experience of what works and what doesn't. However, since you haven't actively considered what God says in the Bible about your decision, you are not a biblical decision-maker.

Or you might use one of a variety of *mystical* approaches. You believe you have a special pipeline of secret knowledge from God, a special way of discovering God's will in advance. However, all such methods involve completely arbitrary interpretations of an event or feeling. Ten people might come up with ten different interpretations of your "sign"—remember the globe on the back of the bus? We got a missionary, map-maker, journalist, bus driver, and traffic officer out of that. There has to be a better way to make decisions.

Are these methods biblical?

Are the purely pragmatic or the mystical approaches to decision-making *biblical* decision-making? It's obvious that being analytical, but ignoring what God said in the Bible about a decision, is not biblical decision-making. God's word is a "lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path" (Ps 119:105). The pragmatist needs to turn on the light and stop stumbling around in the dark of his opinions and experience.

But what about the mystical approaches to decision-making? They are not biblical decision-making either. It's hard for many Christians to accept this. They have been indoctrinated from their youth that the spiritual way to make decisions is to "find" God's will. But did they get that practice from the Bible?

The answer is no. There is no verse in the Bible that directs New Testament believers to make decisions based on whether they have inner peace or not. There is no text that gives us God's method for interpreting circumstances so we can be sure of finding His will rather than our own. There is no verse that commands us to seek a miracle from God so we'll know what job to take or investment to make.

The mystical methods of decision-making—lucky-dipping, fallible prophets, peace-seeking, interpreting circumstances, and sign reading—are all methods made up by men. They seem spiritual, but God never said in His word that He would direct us in those ways. We have decided He should, but those ideas about decision-making are *ours*, not His.

Can I take it a step further? All the mystical methods of decision-making have one goal: finding God's will. However, the concept of finding God's will—*as we usually use it*—is not biblical. Need oxygen? Can't believe I said that? It's true. In the next section you'll see just what I mean.

Is It God's Will to Find His Will?

All the mystical approaches we just outlined assume that finding God's will is the key to decision-making. But finding God's will, as we usually use that phrase, is *not* biblical. It is not God's will that we find His will. Let me explain.

God's revealed will

God's will comes in two different forms. The first can be called God's *revealed will*, the second, God's *unrevealed will*.⁵ Let's first consider God's *revealed will*. The key to this category of God's will is that it is knowable. God has made it known to His creatures in His word, the Bible.

The first sub-category of God's revealed will is His *commands*.

Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven.

(Matt 7:21)

In everything give thanks, for this is God's will for you.

(1 Thess 5:18)

This is the will of God, your sanctification, that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality.

(1 Thess 4:3)

A second sub-category of God's revealed will is His *broad intentions* for all believers.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

(Rom 12:2)

This verse is not a command, none-the-less, it reveals God's broad intention for all believers: non-conformed, transformed, renewed living.

A third sub-category of God's revealed will is *His plan for human history*. For example, it was God's plan to rescue certain sinners from the condemnation of their evil.

⁵ Theologians speak of God's *prescriptive* and *decretive* will. His prescriptive will is what He has prescribed or commanded—do not steal. His decretive will is what He has determined or decreed will happen—the events of daily life. Those are accurate and useful theological terms. However, when discussing decision-making, I find it more useful to use different categories: God's *revealed* and *unrevealed* will.

[Christ] gave Himself for our sins so that He might rescue us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father.

(Gal 1:4)

God's plan for human history includes not only *past* events, such as the death and resurrection of Christ, it also includes *future* events, such as the return and reign of Christ.

He made known to us the mystery of His will...that is, the summing up of all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things on the earth.

(Eph 1:9-10)

Paul said that God has "made known" or revealed His plan for the universe. That plan is to sum up or culminate all the events of human history in the person of Jesus Christ. That includes Christ's return, judgement of evildoers, Millennial reign, and so on.

God's commands, broad intentions, and His biblically revealed plan for human history are the three sub-categories of His *revealed will*. However, when Christians talk about "finding God's will," they usually don't have those things in mind. Do you? No. You are thinking about decisions not specifically mentioned in the Bible: "Should I marry Bill or Ted...pursue a career in accounting or computers...wear a red tie or blue tie?"

God's unrevealed will

In those situations, what you want to know is the second major category of God's will, His *unrevealed will*. Proverbs acknowledges that God has an unrevealed will or plan for every individual. "The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps" (Prov 16:9). "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but the counsel of the Lord, it will stand" (19:21). "Man's steps are ordained by the Lord, how then can man understand his way?" (20:24).

When you are seeking God's will for a decision, it is usually God's *unrevealed will* that you are after. You believe Christ will return at the end of the age (His revealed will). But what you really want to know before you make a decision is which investment will give you the best return at the end of the year (His unrevealed will).

We want to know how God is going to direct our steps tomorrow or next week. Those things weren't important enough for God to include them in the Bible, but they are important to us! Therefore, we seek signs, lay out fleeces, listen for inner voices, seek peace, wait for God's leading, or use the lucky-dip method. Here's the question: does the Bible ever tell us to find God's *unrevealed will*?

In the previous chapter we concluded that techniques like lucky-dipping are arbitrary and unacceptable. Here we are asking if *the whole idea* of finding God's unrevealed will is off target.

Are we told in the Bible to make decisions based on finding out beforehand what God has ordained for tomorrow?⁶ Are we told to "find" God's unrevealed will before we make a decision?

A notable absence

As popular as the practice of trying to find God's unrevealed will is, that concept isn't found in the New Testament. That might come as a surprise, but it's true. The New Testament never tells believers to find God's unrevealed will before they make a decision. That is clear as one studies the New Testament's use of the phrase "God's will."

We have already seen that "God's will" is used in the New Testament of the three categories of His *revealed* will: 1) God's commands, 2) His broad intentions for His creatures, 3) and His biblically revealed plan for human history.

The phrase "God's will" was also used occasionally of God's *unrevealed will*—future, daily events in the lives of individuals. However, when it was used in that way, the concept of *finding* God's will was notably absent. The New Testament authors assumed that God does have a plan or a will. But they also assumed that His will for future, daily events in the lives of individuals is *unknowable*.

For example, Paul believed that God had a plan for his life, and hoped that it included a ministry trip to Rome.

Strive together with me in your prayers to God for me...so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God.

(Rom 15:30-32)

Paul, however, considered God's will for a future trip to Rome to be unknowable.

...I make mention of you, always in my prayers making request, *if perhaps* now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you [emphasis added].

(Rom 1:9-10)

Paul wanted to go to Rome to preach the gospel. He knew, however, that his going depended on whether it was God's will or not. "Perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you." Notice what Paul did *not* say. He didn't say he was trying to *find* God's will about going to Rome. He wasn't seeking peace, or laying out fleeces.

⁶ OT kings sometimes made decisions by consulting a prophet of God. But when they consulted, say, Isaiah, they were seeking God's word from a 100%-accurate, genuine prophet. We don't have that option. Today's prophets are not 100% accurate. God forbids seeking His will from such charlatans (Deut 18:18-22).

"I want to come, and if it's God's will, I'll make it. If it isn't, I won't." For Paul, a visit to Rome was in the unknowable future. Paul didn't know if God had ordained it or not. He made his plans and let God guide his steps (Prov 16:9).

Paul spoke the same way every time he used the phrase "God's will" in connection with his future plans.

When they [truth-seeking Jews in Ephesus] asked him to stay for a longer time, he did not consent, but taking leave of them and saying, "I will return to you again *if God wills*," he set sail from Ephesus [emphasis added].

(Acts 18:20-21)

Now some have become arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon, *if the Lord wills* [emphasis added].

(1 Cor 4:18-19)

Paul considered God's future, daily plans for his life to be unknowable. Paul did, in fact, return to Ephesus and go to Corinth. However, he didn't speak of those decisions in terms of finding God's *unrevealed will* before it happened.⁷

The New Testament book of James also spoke of God's will and an individual's plans or decisions.

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit." Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, "*If the Lord wills*, we will live and also do this or that" [emphasis added].

(James 4:13-15)

If ever there were a text that should speak of finding God's will before making a decision, this is it. We might want to rewrite James' words this way: "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city'... You should first seek peace, put out some fleeces, wait for God's leading, or look for a sign to tell you if it's God's will."

Is that what James said? No. He said, "You do not know what your life will be like tomorrow ... *If the Lord wills*, we will live and also do this or that [emphasis added]." The New Testament authors never considered what most Christians today consider standard practice. While they commended seeking God's *revealed will*—searching the scriptures—they never mentioned "finding" God's *unrevealed will*. What does that tell us? It is not God's will that we find His unrevealed will.

⁷ As a true prophet, Paul was occasionally given revelation about future, daily events (i.e., the shipwreck in Acts 27, etc.). However, these verses show that Paul did not consider seeking divine revelation to be the *norma*/means of decision-making for him or others.

The implications of this are shocking. The New Testament considers God's plans for future, daily events in a believer's life to be *unknowable*. Christians assume "finding God's will" by seeking inner peace, looking for signs, interpreting circumstances, or fallible prophecy is biblical. It isn't.

Hidden, not lost

In the closing chapters of Deuteronomy, God revealed some of His will or plan for the broad scope of Israel's history. If Israel obeyed His law, they would flourish in their new land. If they disobeyed His law, they would languish, and be expelled from their land. In fact, God declared in Deuteronomy 30:1 that national disgrace and exile wasn't just a *potential* development, it would happen. God had revealed His will or plan for the future of Israel.

The curious Israelite was sure to ask when and how Israel would be humbled. However, God wasn't giving out details. In fact, God had Moses tell His people *not* to attempt to discover the detail of future events. Instead, they were to focus on what He had commanded them to do in His law. In a context of future events, Moses said,

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

(Deut 29:29)

When Christians today try to find God's will before making a decision, what are they looking for? The secret things. The things that God says belong to Him alone. We speak as if God's will for future events in our daily lives is lost. It isn't. It's *hidden*. And God told us not to look for it.

Summary

A study of the phrase "God's will" in the New Testament is revealing. It was never used—as it is so often today—of someone trying to discover God's design for tomorrow before making a decision. The Apostles considered God's plans for tomorrow to be unknowable: "*If God wills...*" Not surprisingly, then, God gave no special technique in the New Testament for discovering His plans in advance. We, not God, have made up and promoted such decision-making techniques. The whole idea of trying to discover God's *unrevealed* will for future, daily events in one's life is illegitimate, man-made, mystical thinking.

Why So Popular?

If finding God's unrevealed will before one makes a decision is not biblical, why has it become so popular? There are several reasons. The *first* is that Christians genuinely want to please God, but are misguided regarding how to do it.

Trying to find God's unrevealed will is like robbing a bank so you can please Him by putting more money in the offering at church. We aren't to please God by doing what He said *not* to do. God said, "The secret things are the Lord's." God never intended that we torment ourselves trying to *guess* His unrevealed plan for the future. It is right to want to please God; "finding" His unrevealed will isn't the way to do it.

Here's a *second* reason "finding" God's will is so popular. Let me put it in the form of a question: when someone wants to know God's will before making a decision, is he trying to walk by faith or by sight? Wanting to know God's plan for tomorrow is walking by *sight*, isn't it. That's the second reason finding God's will is so popular, even though the Bible doesn't teach it. We want God to spell it out for us: take this job, marry this person, go to this school, buy this car. We'll trust God to take care of us tomorrow—as long as we know His plan in advance.

Fearful of taking responsibility for a significant decision, we childishly want God to lead us by making the decision for us. There was a time when God led Israel in that way, with spectacular signs. It was during the Exodus. He led the nation with a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Did God do that because of the maturity or immaturity of Israel's faith?

Expecting God to make decisions for you by giving you a sign is demanding to walk by sight, not faith. It is spiritual immaturity, not maturity.

A *third* reason finding God's will is such a popular method of decision-making is this: we want success guaranteed. For example, what does this question mean? "Do you think it is God's will for you to marry Bill?" It really means, "Do you think your proposed marriage will last and be enjoyable [i.e., successful]?"

We are eager to find God's unrevealed will because we believe it is a way of guaranteeing the success of our decisions. We feel better if we can convince ourselves that our choice is a *divine* choice. Often it's a subtle attempt to manipulate God. "If you gave me peace about moving to Durban to start a business, then, God, You better come through!"

If you have used mystical methods to find the unfindable—God's unrevealed will—check your motives. Was it a misguided desire to please God? Was there a deeper problem—a desire to walk by sight rather than faith or a desire to guarantee success?

Proverbial Wisdom for Decision-Making

If God's unrevealed will for daily, future events in our lives is unknowable, then just how are we to go about making decisions? Proverbs puts it most simply.

The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps.

(Prov 16:9)

Proverbs is the decision-making book of the Bible. It shows us the normal way God's people are to make decisions.⁸ Its not-so-common, common sense is the key to biblical decision-making.

Solomon understood decision-making (even if he personally made some bad ones). He knew that the key to making good decisions wasn't seeking perpetual signs or revelation from God. Do you remember what Solomon requested in 1 Kings 3 when God told him to ask for anything he wanted? The young king didn't ask for perpetual signs so he could find God's will for every executive and judicial decision. Solomon asked for *wisdom*. Even as a young man, Solomon was wise enough to know that God intends His people to make decisions based on thoughtful wisdom, not perpetual revelation.

In Proverbs, Solomon shared that wisdom with us. You will seek in vain for mystical, find-God's-hidden-will kind of advice in Proverbs. Instead, it encourages thoughtful, cautious decision-making.

The plans of the diligent lead surely to advantage, but everyone who is hasty comes surely to poverty.

(Prov 21:5)

While he encouraged planning, Solomon also wanted us to realise that God often writes over our plans in red ink.

Many plans are in a man's heart, but the counsel of the Lord will stand.

(Prov 19:21)

And he tells us that there is no way of knowing beforehand what the Lord has ordained for our daily lives (i.e., His unrevealed will).

Man's steps are ordained by the Lord, how then can man understand his way?

(Prov 20:24)

⁸ Exceptional ways in ages past included 100%-accurate, biblical prophecy and the Urim and Thummim of the high priest. Hebrews, however, makes it clear that God has narrowed the funnel of revelation: "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son" (Heb 1:1-2a).

The key to decision-making isn't finding the unfindable—God's unrevealed plan for your life. What does Proverbs teach instead? Let me show you *five proverbial principles* for biblical decision-making. They are practical, but avoid the error of being purely pragmatic. They depend on God without crossing into arbitrary mysticism. They are God's way for making God-honouring decisions.

Principle 1: Pray for wisdom

Difficult decisions begin with prayer. We must ask for God's wisdom right from the start. Solomon spoke of it in terms of committing your works to God.

Commit your works to the Lord, and your plans will be established.

(Prov 16:3)

If you commit your works to the Lord, as a rule, God will establish your plans. He might, and often will, direct your steps to a different path than you planned (16:9), but the establishment of a decision always starts with humbly committing it to God. We do that through *prayer*.

Here's the tricky question: what should we pray for? Don't pray for a supernatural sign—internal peace or a dramatic coincidence. Pray for wisdom. Hoping God will make the decision for you by means of a sign is just trying to avoid the hard work and responsibility of decision-making. Therefore, don't pray for a sign. Pray for wisdom to make a wise decision, and then apply what you asked for.

God's working is always primary in any situation. "The horse is prepared for the day of battle, but the victory belongs to the Lord" (Prov 21:31). Therefore, start the decision-making process by acknowledging He is in control and asking for His wisdom. Humble prayer for wisdom (not a sign!) is the first principle of biblical decision-making.

Principle 2: Gather information

Proverbs loves careful, thought-through, informed decision-making. Without information, you can't know or weigh the options open to you.

Every prudent man acts with knowledge.

(Prov 13:16)

The plans of the diligent lead surely to advantage, but everyone who is hasty comes surely to poverty.

(Prov 21:5)

The naive believes everything, but the sensible man considers his steps.

(Prov 14:15)

This is the practical, no-nonsense side of biblical decision-making. Solomon warned the shepherd-businessman of his day, "Know well the condition of your flocks, and pay attention to your herds" (Prov 27:23). Good decisions are based on knowledge. Decisions are like big American cars: they need lots of fuel. To be a biblical decision-maker, you're going to have to feed a lot of information-fuel into your decision before you start it up and drive it onto the highway of life.

A side-light on seeking counsel

One of the ways you can gather information is by seeking counsel. "Without consultation, plans are frustrated, but with many counsellors they succeed" (Prov 15:22). Proverbs 12:15 says, "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man is he who listens to counsel." We all have limited information or blind spots. Therefore, it's helpful to have someone else contribute some thought to our decision as well.

Seeking counsel also helps when evaluating the information after we get it. We may have forgotten or are unfamiliar with Bible verses that apply to our situation. We may have become stuck in a rut, blindly pursuing one idea without considering other legitimate options. You know what *that's* like. You've tried for hours to get your new computer to work. Finally, in defeat, you call a friend and pour out your insurmountable problem. He says, "Did you try plugging it in?"

Seeking counsel is also important because sometimes your perception of a situation can become distorted. You've seen the girl who wants to marry a guy she thinks is Prince Charming but everyone else thinks is Attila the Hun. Seeking counsel from her parents and spiritual leaders would save her from her wilful blindness. It can save you as well.

Seeking counsel is a good tool to help you gather information and evaluate that information. But make sure you go to people who have proven themselves to be stable, prudent, *biblical* decision-makers. Avoid going only to people you know already support what you want to do. That's lying to yourself. If you take someone's counsel, take responsibility at the same time. Don't point fingers if things don't work out.

Seeking counsel is part of Proverbs' plan for making good decisions. It can help you avoid overlooking the obvious, getting stuck in one-track thinking, or forgetting a biblical principle.

So, up to this point we have prayed in genuine dependence on God. We have also gathered information so that we can develop and evaluate options. What's next?

Principle 3: Ask, "Does the Bible speak directly to my decision?"⁹

We mentioned the purely pragmatic approach to decision-making in the opening section of this booklet, but haven't given it much attention since. Here is where we start to correct that error.

⁹ I am indebted to Dr. Stuart Scott for allowing me to make use of this principle and the next. Both are from his seminars on decision-making.

The pragmatist approaches decisions analytically. However, his puddle of "wisdom" is only as big as his experience. He ignores the ocean of true, authoritative wisdom in God's word.

The mystic is no less guilty. Believing he has a special pipeline of knowledge from God, he often ignores what God has said in His word. The mystic would rather interpret his feelings or circumstances than interpret and apply God's word. He too sits in a puddle of human speculation, ignoring the ocean of God's truth.

Both of them need to become *biblical* decision-makers. When faced with a decision, they must ask the question: *does God, in the Bible, speak directly to my decision?* Before making a decision, we must first check the Bible—God's *revealed will*—to see if God has told us what to do. Why do I say that?

The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but *the things revealed* belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe *all the words of this law* [emphasis added].

(Deut 29:29)

Rather than spend time guessing at what is hidden, God wants us to spend time searching His word to discover and apply "the things revealed."

There is no wisdom and no understanding and no counsel against the Lord.

(Prov 21:30)

No matter how practical a decision seems, it is never right to make a decision contrary to what God has commanded. No matter how convinced we are God is leading us, it is never right to do what God said not to do. Therefore, we must always check the scripture to see if God has revealed His will for the decision we are facing.

For example, a young man might debate whether he should marry a girl who is kind, exciting, attractive, intelligent, but not a Christian. However, 1 Corinthians 7:39 lays down a divine principle regarding marriage: a Christian is to marry "in the Lord" (i.e., another Christian).

That young man might seek signs or weigh his alternatives, but it's all a waste of time. God has revealed His will: believers are to marry in the Lord. God has spoken directly to that situation, and there is no wisdom or counsel against the Lord.

In the same way, God doesn't say in the Bible that you should work for business X or business Y. However, if one boss expects you to cook the books so he can cheat on his taxes, you know God's will for that situation. God revealed it already in the scripture. Romans 13:6 says, "Pay your taxes." Jesus said, "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's" (Matt 22:21). There is no wisdom or counsel against the Lord, therefore, you know you can't accept or stay at a job which demands you to disobey God or to help someone else disobey God.

If God has spoken directly to an issue in His word, then there is no decision. Just do what God said. Here's another example. A man might debate over which job to take, but there is no debate whether he needs to look for a job or not. 2 Thessalonians says,

We hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work...

(2 Thess 3:11-12)

God has made some decisions easy. They are directly addressed in His *revealed will*, the scripture. In that case, we can find God's will. It's written down in black and white. All it takes is a little work studying God's word.

Principle 4: Ask, "Does the Bible speak indirectly to my decision?"

It's easy when the Bible says, "Don't steal." That's a divine directive on whether to continue at a job where you are asked to cheat your customers. But situations in life are not always so clear cut. The Bible may not directly address your decision—"Should I make this difficult phone call now or tomorrow?" However, the Deuteronomy 29:29 principle of seeking the revealed things still applies. God's word is still the lamp unto our feet, even when the path of life seems to have faded right out.

Whatever decision we face, it is certain that God has, at least *indirectly*, addressed it in His word. It is here that a lame, blind, and stumbling "knowledge" of God's word cripples us. We know the basic "Do this, don't do that," commands of scripture. But beyond them, we're floundering in deep water. Unfortunately, that ignorance leaves us thrashing in circles and gasping for breath in decision-making. To be a wise decision-maker, we must be familiar, not just with the obvious direct statements of God, but also biblical instruction which might indirectly guide our choices.

For example, a young man is debating whether to spend the night at his girlfriend's flat. He knows that 1 Thessalonians 4:3 says, "For this is the will of God, your sanctification; *that is*, that you abstain from sexual immorality." Therefore, he plans to sleep on the couch. He doesn't want to violate God's direct command regarding sexual purity.

But is, "Don't fornicate," the only thing God has said about sexual sin? No. For example, Romans 13:14 would certainly apply. In a context of sexual purity Paul wrote, "Make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts." Proverbs warns, "Do not go near the door" of the house of sexual temptation (5:8).

The Bible is bluntly realistic about sexual sin: don't give yourself unnecessary opportunity to fall into it. Indirectly, God has said a lot about that young man's decision to spend the night at his girlfriend's flat, even if there is no command, "Thou shall not sleep on your girlfriend's couch."

Here's another example. God's word doesn't directly say which car you should buy. But does that mean God's word doesn't have *any* input on that decision? Indirectly, it does in many ways.

God's word doesn't say, "Buy this car or buy that car." But it does say a lot of grim things about debt ("The borrower becomes the lender's slave" Prov 22:7b). If you want to take out a Ferrari-sized loan on your Ford-sized income, God *has* commented on your decision to buy a car.

God doesn't say, "Buy this car or buy that car," but He does say a lot about doing things to impress others. That might reshape your decision to buy a hot sports car to "Wow" the guys at the office. God doesn't say whether to buy a blue car or a red car. But what if your wife hates red? God did say, "Husbands, love your wives," and "Do nothing from selfishness." Indirectly, God might have said more about your car-buying decision than you think.

We often get into trouble by not applying this fourth principle. The fact that God hasn't directly said, "Do this, don't do that," doesn't mean God has said *nothing* that would guide your decision.

Help me with this!

What things should you check to see if God has indirectly commented on your decision? Let me list four:

- the *source* of each option you are considering
- the true *goal* of your decision
- your *motives* for making the decision
- each option's obvious and hidden *consequences*

That check list comes from Proverbs 1:10-19. In that text, Solomon's son was considering going out with the gang on a Saturday night. That decision might or might not be bad. God never said, "Thou shalt not go out with thy friends." Notice, however, how Solomon encouraged his son to reject that option based on the source of the suggestion.

My son, if *sinners* entice you, do not consent [emphasis added].

(Prov 1:10)

The source. When his son faced a decision, Solomon warned him to weigh biblically the source of the various options. The source in this case was "sinners," and consulting them is about as wise as asking a hungry shark, "Is it safe to swim at this beach?" In decision-making, the *source* of an option might tell you a lot about whether it is a good option or a not.

Apply that in another realm. A husband and wife are deciding whether she should stay home with her children or pursue a career outside the home. She feels pressure to be a career woman. Question: what is the source of that pressure? God's word always emphasises that a wife and mother should pour her time, effort, and attention into her family. The pressure to pursue a

career outside the home is from the *world*. Weighed biblically, the *source* of that option makes it dubious from the start. "If sinners entice you, do not consent."

The goal. After the source, the goal of a decision needs to be weighed biblically.

If they say, "Come with us, let us lie in wait for blood, let us ambush the innocent without cause...my son, do not walk in the way with them."

(Prov 1:11, 15)

The initial invitation was, "Come with us." God never said, "Don't go out with your friends." But what do you suppose God thought about the *true goal*—ambushing the innocent—of their apparently innocuous plan? In the Mosaic laws on assault in Exodus 21, God had commented on the what-to-do-on-Saturday-night decision of Solomon's son. The true goal was ungodly, even if the decision itself seemed innocent.

In the same way, a businessman might decide to transfer his personal investments into his wife's name. On the face of it, there is nothing immoral about that decision. But what if his business is failing, and his goal is to hide that money from the creditors whom he gave personal surety? Because of his sinister goal—hiding money that rightly belongs to others—his decision is contrary to God's revealed will: "Render to all what is due them...Owe nothing to anyone" (Rom 13:7-8).

To discover God's indirect instruction about your decision, it is important to ask, "What does God's word say about the true goal of my decision?"

The motives. A third question to ask in order to help you find God's indirect comments on your decisions is, "What is my motive?" Notice how the motives of the friends of Solomon's son were highlighted in Proverbs 1.

Come with us...We will find all kinds of precious wealth, we will fill our houses with spoil.

(Prov 1:11, 13)

God may not have said, "Don't go out with your friends," but He has said a lot about a lust for money, i.e., greed. In the same way, God might have commented indirectly on your decision to resign and take a new job. Your salary will double, but your time with your family will be halved. Church involvement will be pressed out of existence. Some of your responsibilities will push the line of integrity.

In that case, your desire for a larger salary might be a love of money. Indirectly, God has addressed your decision by frowning on your greedy motives for making it. "But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare...the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil" (1 Tim 6:9-10).

Here's another example of weighing a decision based on its motives. "If we move to Durban," a resentful husband thinks, "I'll be farther away from my interfering, insufferable mother-in-law." Do you think God is honoured by a decision whose motive is bitterness?

Hidden consequences. A fourth way to consider how God might have indirectly commented on a decision is by asking this question: what are the obvious and hidden consequences of my decision? Notice Solomon's warning to his son about the hidden consequences of the gang's Saturday-night behaviour.

But they lie in wait for their own blood; they ambush their own lives. So are the ways of everyone who gains by violence.

(Prov 1:18-19a)

Wisdom sees how things really work. Therefore, Solomon advised his son against going out with the gang. There were hidden consequences (self-destruction) tied up in their behaviour. This is what the young man who wanted to sleep at his girlfriend's flat missed. He didn't see the hidden consequence of giving sexual lust unnecessary opportunity.

The hidden consequences of decisions are an important theme in Proverbs. In Proverbs 7:1-23, you meet the naïve youth who decided to take an evening stroll past the house of the town prostitute.

And I saw among the naive, and discerned among the youths a young man lacking sense, passing through the street near her corner; and he takes the way to her house... With her many persuasions she entices him; with her flattering lips she seduces him. Suddenly he follows her as an ox goes to the slaughter.

(Prov 7:7-8, 21-22)

The Bible doesn't tell you what route to take on your evening stroll. Or does it? "Keep your way far from her [i.e., the adulteress] and do not go near the door of her house" (Prov 5:8). If that young fool had considered the hidden consequences of walking past the prostitute's house, he might have avoided disaster.

One of the consequences we often don't consider is how our decisions will affect others. I had a friend in seminary who had to drop out and return home halfway through his first year. He hadn't considered how the move to a huge city like Los Angeles and a move away from her family would affect his wife. She was struggling to cope, and so—"Husbands love your wives"—he made a good second decision and moved back to Colorado.

Considering how the Bible *indirectly* comments on a decision is critical to biblical decision-making. Like Solomon in Proverbs 1:10-19, you must be able to see not just the options before you, but their *source*, their true *goal*, your *motives*, and the obvious and hidden *consequences* of each option. I can guarantee you that God has said something about *them*.

Principle 5: All other things being equal, do what you want

The first four principles of biblical decision-making are...

- Pray for wisdom.
- Gather information.
- Search the scripture to see if God has spoken *directly* to your decision.
- Search the scripture again to see if God has spoken *indirectly* to your decision.

That leads us to our fifth principle. Let's say you have prayed for wisdom and gathered as much information as was reasonably possible. You have considered God's direct and indirect statements in the Bible about your situation. Now what?

Often the direct or indirect principles of God's word will make even complicated decisions obvious. The friend I mentioned earlier thought moving to Los Angeles to go to seminary was a good decision. But when he saw how it affected his wife, he realised it was a bad decision. God's principle for considering his wife more important than himself (Phil 2:3) made the decision to move home obvious.

But what if there is no clear-cut favourite? What if biblically and practically there are two (or more!) options you could choose? In that case, all other things being equal, do what you want.¹⁰ It seems shocking, but that's what it comes down to.

You can't know God's unrevealed will in advance—no use doing a war dance trying to find *it*. If God's revealed will (the Bible) doesn't directly or indirectly rule out all options but one, if practical considerations are essentially equal, then all that is left is your desire. It's a carefully scrutinised desire to make sure it isn't selfish or ungodly. But if all other things are equal, then you are free to do what you want.

Freedom, of course, is never a license to be sinful or selfish. "You were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another" (Gal 5:13).

Proverbs 14:23 says, "Mere talk leads only to poverty." When everything has been evaluated biblically, there is a point where you just make the decision. God's will will happen. Don't worry about that. Your job is to think through matters wisely and biblically.

¹⁰ Dr. John MacArthur explains this principle well in his excellent book, *Found: God's Will*, Victor Books, 1999 (first pub. in 1973 as *God's Will is not Lost*).

When decisions go bad

Sometimes decisions go bad. They smell like a dead fish simmering in a trash bin on a summer afternoon. Often there is an obvious reason for that: lack of information or an outright disobedience of God's revealed will. At other times we may not have weighed carefully enough the biblical principles that indirectly applied, i.e., my friend who didn't consider how his wife would respond to moving halfway across the country to a city like Los Angeles. In those situations we need to learn from our mistakes or repent from our sin (whichever is necessary), and then make a decision to correct the situation.

Sometimes you do your best and things still fall apart. You tried to be biblical, careful, and informed. But the whole thing collapsed like a house of cards. When decisions go bad, we need to trust God's sovereignty.

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will make your paths straight.

(Prov 3:5-6)

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.

(James 1:2-3)

God's will is not defeated by our puny decisions. When a decision doesn't work out, it was God's will for it to fall on its face. Some of God's lessons can be learned only through failure.

Rest in God's sovereignty when things go wrong. Of course, it would be wrong to *assume* you did everything rightly. Do a careful self-evaluation to see if sinful or foolish decision-making on your part unnecessarily contributed to the failure. And then make a good second decision—one that corrects the errors of the first one.

Conclusion

When my wife and I decided to come to South Africa in 1995, the decision-making pattern outlined in Proverbs was the one we followed. We prayed for wisdom, and in gathering information we found that Grace Fellowship wanted us to come. I could preach in English the first day off the plane and be understood. The opportunity seemed to match my gifts—shepherding and training men for ministry.

As far as God's direct and indirect comments on the decision, we were on solid ground. The elders of our church were in favour of it. Our families were supportive. We weren't running away from any problems in the States, and the church we were moving to was biblically sound. Practically speaking, the money to pay for the move was available. And we wanted to go.

Was it God's will for us to come? Yes. We're here. But we didn't torment ourselves trying to find the unfindable—God's unrevealed will—beforehand. The secret things are the Lord's. We just did our best to apply God's biblically revealed wisdom, and trusted God to guide our actual steps.

And now you...

God wants you to make wise, biblically guided decisions. First, pray humbly, asking for wisdom. Next, put the wisdom you asked for into action by gathering information. Then evaluate the options. Has God directly or indirectly commented on your decision in His revealed will, the Bible? After weighing the spiritual and practical implications—seeking counsel if necessary—do what is biblically right or wisest. If there is no clear-cut course of action, all other things being equal, do what you want.

It's practical without falling into the error of the purely pragmatic approach. It's dependant on God without the arbitrary, find-the-unfindable approach of Christian mysticism. Most important, it's biblical. It's what Proverbs, the decision-making book of the Bible, teaches us about making decisions.