

Misconceptions in discovering God's will

Additional study material

A discipleship training to equip Christians for works of service, so that the Body of Christ may be built up (Ephesians 4:11-16).

34

MISCONCEPTIONS WITH REGARD TO DISCOVERING THE WILL OF GOD

1. BEING UNABLE TO TRUST GOD THE FATHER.
2. ASKING FOR A SIGN FROM GOD.
3. WAITING FOR A CALL FROM GOD.
4. FEELING PEACE IN YOUR HEART.
5. RECEIVING A BIBLE VERSE.
6. GETTING A DREAM.
7. GETTING PUNISHED.

Often Christians struggle to know or understand the will of God. The following misconceptions with regard to finding the will of God may help to better know and understand the will of God.

1. Being unable to trust God the Father.

Misconception.

If I give myself to will of God, it will result in sacrifice or suffering. Therefore I cannot really trust God.

Correction.

Because we all live in a broken world full of broken people, suffering will happen to every one of us, both Christian and non-Christian. Pain and suffering for Christians will only end at the second coming of Christ (Revelation 21:4-5). Especially people who come from broken or abusive families find it difficult to trust God as *Father*, because sometimes their human fathers abused them or were always absent.

In the Bible, God the Father is radically different than earthly fathers. He is compassionate, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love, ... he does not treat us as our sins deserve, ... he removes our transgressions from us, ... he knows how we are formed and remembers that we are dust (Psalm 103:8-14). He shows no partiality, accepts no bribes, defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien ... (Deuteronomy 10:17-18). Note that God especially defends the cause of the fatherless. Replace your fear of what might happen by remembering the wonderful things which God has done for you in the past and by deliberately considering what he promises to do for you in the future (Philippians 1:6).

2. Asking for a sign from God.

Misconception.

I can discover God's will by asking for a sign.

Correction.

In Judges 6:17-22, Gideon asked for a sign and in a sovereign way the angel of God gave him a sign: fire flared from a rock and consumed his sacrifice. In Judges 6:36-40 Gideon asked God twice to confirm his previous guidance with a sign. Gideon's fleece test was a supernatural event, *not a spiritual principle regarding God's guidance*. From start to finish it was a divine revelation to Gideon and *not an example* for God's people to follow. God first gave a sovereign message through the angel; then he gave a sovereign sign to confirm his message; and finally he gave a sovereign victory over the enemy through a small band of men.

God can and does guide you through circumstances, *sometimes* even through a specific circumstance which you ask him to set up as an indicator (Genesis 24:12-14). But when you try to confine God's guidance within the arbitrary limits of a *sign* which *you* set up, then it becomes a veiled attempt to manipulate that event (and thus God's so-called 'sign') in your favour. Moreover, you spend more time praying for particular circumstances (signs) to guide you than steeping yourselves in the wisdom of God's Word (the Bible).

3. Waiting for a call from God.

Misconception.

I must first receive a calling from God before I can go into any service or even fulltime ministry for God.

Correction.

People who go into fulltime ministry for God do not need a more special kind of calling than those who go into fulltime secular career (for example as an engineer or a nurse).

Ecclesiastes says, “Follow the ways of your heart ...but fear God and keep his commandments.” (Ecclesiastes 11:9; Ecclesiastes 12:13). As you submit yourself to God and his Word, your desires, needs, experience and training will guide or *call* you into a suitable career. If you have a strong desire (1 Timothy 3:1) and possess the biblical qualifications for entering into fulltime Christian ministry (1 Timothy 3:2-7; Titus 1:5-9) or any other career, you should not wait for some kind of additional, exceptional *call* like for example that of Moses (Exodus 3:1-12) or the disciples (Matthew 4:17). You should ardently pursue that course as far as God allows you. If God has other plans, he will certainly bring them to pass (compare Acts 15:36-41 with Acts 16:1-3)! Most important is to realise that your own personal *relationship* with God and not your *calling* is the true source of purpose and fulfilment in your life. Apart from seeking God, even the noblest vocation (calling) is *vanity*.

4. Feeling peace in your heart.

Misconception.

I have a feeling of peace about the matter and therefore I know that this is God’s will.

Correction.

Peace in my feelings as a sense of rightness about my decision or action is not a good indicator of God’s guidance.

Feelings of peace are not always a good indicator of God’s guidance. If we understand *peace to be a feeling that is free from fear or misgivings or conflict* after we have made a decision, then this kind of peace is NOT always an indicator of God’s guidance! God-given peace cannot be reduced to *tranquil feelings* or even *a sense of rightness* about our actions.

Peace in my relationship to God as a calm confidence when doing what is right in God’s eyes is a good indicator of God’s guidance.

Even spiritually sound decisions can cause great anxiety simply because of their serious consequences. For example, standing up against a dishonest boss or refusing to engage in an unlawful business practice is the right thing to do. Yet it might keep you awake all night wondering about the outcome.

In the Bible, *peace* is nearly always connected to your *relationship* with God. In Romans 5:1 is written, “Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” The will of God in a Christian’s life primarily concerns his relationship to God and to God’s Word. If you understand *peace to be a calm confidence in God’s goodness and sovereignty*, in his ability in all things to work for the good of those who love him and have been called according to his purpose, then this kind of peace is the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22). In Isaiah 26:3-4 is written, “You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you. Trust in the Lord forever.” Peace is a calm confidence in God, in God’s Word and in God’s guidance through the Word in spite of uncertainty or emotional upheaval due to the difficulties in your circumstances or opposition from other people. Not peace in your feelings, but peace in your relationship to God is a good indicator of God’s guidance. In Isaiah 32:17 is written, “The fruit of righteousness will be peace; the effect of righteousness will be quietness and confidence forever.” ‘Righteousness’ means having the right relationship with God through Jesus Christ and doing what is right in God’s eyes (i.e. doing what is written in the Bible).

5. Receiving a Bible verse.

Misconception.

God gave me a verse from the Bible and therefore I know it is God’s will.

Correction.

God sometimes guides you by impressing you with a special Bible verse that seems exactly suited to your situation. Or God sometimes confirms guidance already given with a specific Bible verse. However, the Bible does not always address you! And what the Bible says is not always a command or a promise! You must recognise the subjective element in this form of guidance.

The subjective element in God’s guidance through a Bible verse.

You must ask yourself:

Is this God speaking, or am I making the Bible say things that I want to hear?

Do the other principles of discovering God’s will confirm my impressions or do they cast doubt on their accuracy?

Am I only looking for Bible verses that leap out at me and confirm my wishes or am I considering the overall teachings of the Bible?

Do I misuse the Bible for instance as a horoscope, as an easy method of quickly finding the will of God, or do I carefully interpret the Bible and determine what God purposes me to know, to believe, to be and to do?

Sometimes people find promises in the Bible and *interpret them* as specific assurances about their future. However, when things do not turn out as they expected, they become disillusioned, start to doubt the trustworthiness of the Bible and perhaps even blame God for not keeping *his promise* (i.e. what they took to be a promise of God to them). They fail

to realise that *they* have misinterpreted what God said and that *they* have wrongly claimed a particular Bible verse as God's promise.¹

The objective element in God's guidance through a Bible verse.

There are two useful questions for correctly interpreting Scripture (prophecies, promises, threats, commands, etc.):

First question: "Who does God intend to address in this Bible passage?"

- All people in the world? (e.g. Mark 1:15; 8:34-38; Lucas 14:25-27)
- All Christians? (e.g. John 13:34-35; 2 Peter 1:1)
- A particular individual? (e.g. 1 Chronicles 17:7,11-14; Mark 10:17,21)
- A particular group of people? (e.g. Malachi 1:1; 3:6-10; Isaiah 6:8-11; Matthew 8:11-12)
- People living at a particular time? (e.g. Genesis 17:9-14; Galatians 6:12-15; cf. Hebrews 9:6-10 and Hebrews 10:1-4)
- People living in particular circumstances? (e.g. Jeremiah 18:5-17; Ezekiel 33:11-20; Revelation 2:4-7)

The Bible addresses various kinds of people. Sometimes the truth in a Bible passage is directed to everyone in the world, sometimes it is directed to a limited group of people, e.g. Israel or Christians and sometimes it is directed to a specific individual. Therefore determine who God intends to address in this passage. This is an important rule for the interpretation of promises and threats, prophecies and commands in the Bible.

Second question: "What is the emphasis of this passage?"

- Is it *teaching doctrine* (cf. John 14:6)? If it is doctrine intended for you, then you should believe it.
- Or is it *commanding action* (cf. John 13:34-35)? If it is action intended for you, then you should obey it.
- Or is it *relating history* (cf. Acts 17:11)? If the example in history is bad, then you should avoid it. But if the example in history is good, then you *may* follow the good example. However, you *may not* require others to follow that example, unless that example is taught or commanded elsewhere in the Bible.

6. Getting a dream.

Misconception.

I had a dream or a vision and therefore I know that it is God's will.

Correction.

Not you, but God determines the way he guides you.

God can and sometimes does guide in miraculous or spectacular ways. He guided Israel by means of a pillar of cloud or fire (Exodus 13:21). He guided a prophet by a speaking donkey (Numbers 22:21-33) and the wise men by a star (Matthew 2:1-11). He guided Mary by a visitation of an angel (Luke 1:26-38) and Joseph by means of a dream (Matthew 1:20-21; 2:13-14). He guided Peter and Cornelius by means of visions (Acts 10:1-6,9-16).

However, all *these ways of communication were not asked for, but were given in a sovereign way* at the discretion and wisdom of God. It is not for you to ask that God will guide you in some miraculous way. If in his wisdom God knows that you need such miraculous or spectacular guidance, he will surely give it. But if you constantly seek spectacular or dramatic ways of God's guidance, you are likely to miss the usual ways of communicating his will, which is through his Word in the Bible.

When you feel that you are guided in some spectacular way, you must test this guidance.

When you do receive a dream or vision, you still need to test it with the clear objective commands, prohibitions and teachings of the Bible! What God reveals by means of a dream or vision *will never contradict* his revelation in the Bible. If it does contradict what the Bible says, the dream or vision does not come from God (cf. Jeremiah 23:16,18, 21-22,25-29).

7. Getting punished.

Misconception.

Because all kind of bad things happen to me, I must have made the wrong decision or choice. Therefore, I conclude that I am not following God's will and God is punishing me.

Correction.

Why do bad things happen to good people? And what can people do when they have not followed God's guidance?

Sometimes Christians do suffer as a consequence of their own sins.

When your actions or attitudes conflict with the revealed will of God in the Bible, you can experience unpleasant circumstances (e.g. adversity, sickness, an accident. etc.). When you confess and repent of your wilful sin, fellowship with God is restored (1 John 1:9), but this does not always remove the consequences of your bad decisions or disobedience (cf. David's sin with Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11, his repentance and forgiveness in 2 Samuel 12:1-13. Nevertheless, there were consequences of his sin in 2 Samuel 12:14-23 and 2 Samuel 13).

¹ Read Delta study 7: "Living with God's promises".

It is good to realise that when you are walking in intimate fellowship with God and are committed to obey the Bible, *not* following the will of God is much harder than you are sometimes led to believe.

Bad things do happen to good people and Christians.

We live in a fallen world where pain, difficulties and suffering will happen to Christians and non-Christians alike (Genesis 3:16-19). Christians get sick too (2 Corinthians 12:7-10; 2 Timothy 4:20) or lose a good job. Christians feel the pain of a family member who turns his back on God (cf. Matthew 23:37). Christians also experience suffering in trials (James 1:2-4) or in persecution (Matthew 5:11-12; 2 Timothy 3:12).

The book of Job teaches that God's people do suffer. Job's initial ethical concept of God was that "God blesses the God-fearing and punishes the godless". But he finally realised that *his concept of God was wrong* and that he could not fully grasp God's ways and purposes with regard to suffering. Job realised that a much greater concept of God was "God's sovereignty". God will do what he will do, simply because he is God! His sovereignty over suffering, even the suffering of his obedient followers, is perfect, whether or not they can see any reason for it. Job proclaimed, "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted" (Job 42:2). Only in heaven will we know that there was a reason for everything that happened.

But God is not only sovereign. He is also holy, righteous, merciful and loving. He promised that *in all things that happen* he works for the good of those who have a personal relationship with him (Romans 8:28).

Self-examination is important, but when circumstances crash in around you, you need not panic and think that you are not following God's will. Instead, you can commit yourself to remain in God's will and say, "Not my will, but your will be done (Matthew 26:39)!"

Whatever the circumstances, by continuing to love God and people, we set our hearts at rest in God's presence. God is greater than our hearts and he knows the "why" and the "how long" of every situation (1 John 3:18-20)!
