

# TOUGH TOPICS:

## How Do I Discern the Will of God?

### INTRODUCTION

#### I. WHAT IS THE WILL OF GOD?

The Bible uses “the will of God” or a similar concept in several different ways.

**1. God’s sovereign will:** “the will of God” is used refer to God’s sovereign decree of all that happens in all creation among all creatures.

- *In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will.* Eph. 1:11
- *All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, “What have you done?”* Dan. 4:35
- *I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.’* Isa. 46:9b-10

God’s sovereign decree of all that happens includes the specific circumstances of our lives.

- **Your hair:** *Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered.* Mt. 10:29-30
- **Your days:** *Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.* Psa. 139:16
- **Your plans:** *Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.”* James 4:13-15 (Others Acts 18:21)
- **Your desires:** *“Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.”* Luke 22:42 (Others Rom. 1:10)
- **Your callings:** *Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God . . .* Col. 1:1 (Others 1 Cor 1:1, 2 Tim. 1:1)
- **Sovereign Grace Statement of Faith:** From all eternity, God sovereignly ordained all that exists and all that occurs in his creation, in order to display the fullness of his glory. God’s plans are efficacious, always coming to pass, and they are universal, encompassing all the affairs of nature, history, and individual lives. These decrees are an exercise of his free, unchangeable, wise, and holy will.

**2. God's revealed will: "the will of God" is used to refer to God's good desire and purpose for all creatures through his acts and commands.**

- **The revealed will of God is:<sup>1</sup>**

- (1) **God's will is for you to be saved:** *"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."* Mark 1:15
- (2) **God's will is for you to be filled with the Spirit:** *Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit.* Eph. 5:17-18
- (3) **God's will is for you to keep his commandments:** *For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.* Mark 3:35 (Others: Psa. 40:8; Matt. 7:21; Eph. 6:6; Heb. 10:26, 1 Pet. 4:2)
- (4) **God's will is for you to be sanctified:** *For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God.* 1 The. 4:3-5 (Others: Rom. 8:27, Phil. 2:13)
- (5) **God's will is for you to submit to earthly authorities:** *Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God . . .* 1 Pet. 2:13-15a
- (6) **God's will is for you to suffer:** *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. . . . Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.* 1 Pet. 4:12-13,19
- (7) **God's will is for you to be thankful in everything:** *Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.* 1 The. 5:18

**3. God's subjective will for us: "the will of God" is often used by believers to refer to God's specific desire and plan for our lives.**

- *When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.* John 16:13
- *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.* Rom. 12:2

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<sup>1</sup> Much of this framework was drawn from a sermon series by John MacArthur entitled "If God's will is so important, why can't I find it?"

## II. HOW TO DISCERN THE WILL OF GOD?

### 1. Read the Bible.

- *But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.* 2 Tim. 3:14–17.
- *How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word. With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments! I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.* Psalms 119:9-11

### 2. Develop a heart for God.

- *Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.* Phil. 2:12-13
- *Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.* 2 Cor. 9:7 (Others: Acts 20:16, Rom. 15:20, 1 Cor. 10:27, 1 Cor. 16:4)
- *“The true way to honor the Holy Spirit as our guide is to honor the holy Scriptures through which he guides us. The fundamental guidance which God gives to shape our lives—the instilling, that is, of the basic convictions, attitudes, ideals and value judgment, in terms of which we are to live—is not a matter of inward promptings apart from the Word but of the pressure on our consciences of the portrayal of God’s character and will in the Word, which the Spirit enlightens us to understand and apply to ourselves.”* J.I. Packer

### 3. Seek wise counsel.

- *Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed.* Pro. 15:22
- *Plans are established by counsel; by wise guidance wage war.* Pro. 20:18
- *“Don’t be a spiritual lone ranger. When you think you know God’s will, have your perception checked. Draw on the wisdom of those who are wiser than you. Take advice.”<sup>2</sup>* J.I. Packer

### 4. Recognize God’s providence.

- *Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches.* 1 Cor. 7:17
- *Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.”* James 4:13-15

### 5. Do what you want to do.

- *“Love God and do what you want.”* Augustine

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<sup>2</sup> J.I. Packer, *God’s Plan for You*, 95.

### III. ENCOURAGEMENTS IN DISCERNING THE WILL OF GOD

1. God's good purposes will *not* be frustrated by your sin or your sins.
2. God guides us by open doors and closed doors.
3. God usually guides one step at a time.
4. God's guidance often includes waiting.
  - *"'Wait on the Lord' is a constant refrain in the Psalms, and it is a necessary word, for God often keeps us waiting. He is not in such a hurry as we are, and it is not his way to give more light on the future than we need for action in the present, or to guide us more than one step at a time. When in doubt, do nothing, but continue to wait on God. When action is needed, light will come."* J.I. Packer
5. God sometimes guides us to do what we do like & will later change our hearts to like it.
6. Discerning the will of God is more of a matter of judgment than of spiritual fleeing.
  - *Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Eph. 5:8-10*
  - *"Knowing God's will is a matter of judgment. That is why it is not an unspiritual practice, when faced with alternative ways of proceeding, to set down the pros and cons of the situation; the reasons, possibilities, problems of one decision in contrast with another. When we begin to evaluate those against a background of a general knowledge of the Lord's will in Scripture, we often find our minds drawn in a particular direction. As time passes we begin to feel the weight of one course of action rather than another."* Sinclair Ferguson
7. God sometimes gives us internal "nudges" & assurances towards the right way the way—but not always.
8. God's guidance often includes risk.
9. Don't be surprised if you find making a decision difficult.
10. Peace is found in the providence of God working in & through & over your decisions.
  - *For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. Eph. 2:10*

### IV. RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

#### Books

- *Just Do Something*, by Kevin DeYoung
- "Chapter 20: Thou Our Guide" from *Knowing God* by J.I. Packer
- *God's Will and Making Decisions* by Andrew Naselli (Available for free below)<sup>3</sup>
- *Discovering God's Will* by Sinclair Ferguson

#### Messages

- Sermon series by John MacArthur: "If God's will is so important, why can't I find it?" (Available for free below)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> [https://thementoringproject.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/GodsWill-minimal\\_V4.pdf](https://thementoringproject.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/GodsWill-minimal_V4.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.twr360.org/programs/view/id,1140128/lang,1>