



FIGURING
OUT

GOD'S
Will

Weekly Devotions

written by Pastor Steve Blumer

HOW TO GET THE MOST FROM THIS SERIES

We are excited for you as you study along with us in seeking God’s Will for our lives. Our prayer is that you will not only learn a few things about God, yourself, and His Will, but that you would be transformed and make changes in your life according to His Will.

As you begin this study, ask yourself, “What do I want to gain from this study?” Write out any troubling issues or problems or decisions you are asking God for His guidance. Come back to this page from time to time and see how God is answering or if your prayers need changing.

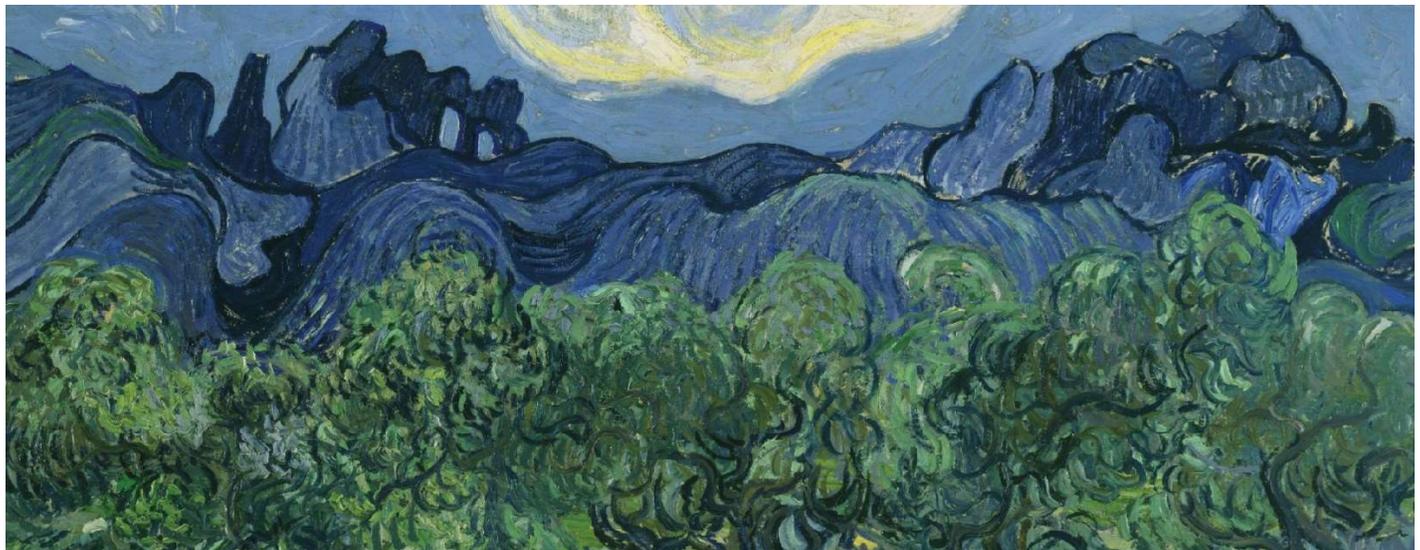
There are 4 ways to get the most from this series. The first way is through Life Groups. We hope that you are plugged into a Life Group as all the groups will be having further study and discussions around this topic. If you’re interested in joining a group, you can view all the available groups online at hopechapelsterling.org/life-groups If you’re involved in your own group of friends and would like the study guide, you can find it with our Life Group Leader Resources at hopechapelsterling.org/suggested-studies

The other ways are highlighted through this packet below:

NOTES - SUNDAY SERMON + 3 DEVOTIONS + BOOKLET READING:

From Sept 30 – Oct. 21, our Sunday morning sermons will center on “Figuring Out God’s Will.” There is ample space within this packet to take notes during those sermons, so you can keep all your study in one place. During the week, there are 3 devotions to give you a closer look at a principle of God’s Will. And there is a small section of reading in the booklet, “What is God’s Will for My Life?” by John Ortberg. The reading plan on the bookmark will help you read the booklet in smaller, manageable pieces.

Thank you again for joining this study. Please don’t hesitate to reach out if you have any questions. God Bless.



NOTES - SUNDAY SERMON + 3 DEVOTIONS + BOOKLET READINGS:

Week 1, Day 1

As we get into this series about God's Will, it will be important to understand exactly what we are talking about. For some people, nothing happens outside of God's Plan. Meaning, whatever happens to you, God wanted it to happen. We don't really have free will to make decisions. For some other people, God is only concerned with the big issues of the universe and doesn't have time to be our daily driver. Life is something we need to figure out and the choices are up to us. Make the wrong choice and you end up at the wrong destination. So which one is it? Does God reach down and specifically, personally direct us? Does He communicate direction and information to us that we would not know otherwise unless we seek out to discover it? And if He does, how does He do it? Is there a secret code hidden in the pages of Scripture? Will it happen in a dream? And how can I enjoy the benefit of such direction? Does God have a detailed and ideal plan for every person's life or just the big movers and shakers of the world? Does a wrong choice send a person down a completely different direction unfulfilling God's *individual* plan for their life resulting in a permanent detour?

These are important questions to consider. In this study, we are going to see that it's not always "black and white." We are going to see God's Will as a combination of things He has already revealed for all people to follow and a guidance of personal/individual decisions. We are going to see it as a blend of an ideal "Plan A" with a design of many good options to pick. We are going to see that our decisions need to be weighed carefully as they come with blessings and consequences while God's sovereign control works it out to be how God wanted it to happen all along.

What is for certain is that God's Will is always good. For example, Jeremiah 29:11 says that God has a plan for your future that is filled with hope and prosperity. It's a plan that is not meant to harm you or to destroy you. Yet, at the time this was written, God's people weren't living with hope and prosperity. They were disobedient and needed to endure some hard times because of their unfaithfulness. However, God was not leaving them to forever suffer in their bad decisions. His disciplining hand was not to harm them, but to correct them. Their path was a combination of their choices and God's strategy for restoration.

Romans 12:2 says that with the renewing of our minds and not being transformed by the ways of the world, we would be able to discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God. Part of our job is to continually learn about God's ways to continually discern His Will for our life. It's not simply asking for His guidance when we have a decision to make. The work upfront is better than trying to figure it all out at the last minute.

Therefore, our task in seeking God's Will is to gain more knowledge, wisdom, and understanding of God's ways by disciplining ourselves to know God and how He works. The apostle Paul put this whole idea together in his prayer for the church at Colossae:

For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints of light." (Col. 1:9-12)

PAUSE AND PRAY

Take a few moments and think through how you would answer those questions above. What does "God's Will" mean? How do you find out "God's Will?" Then spend some time in prayer, asking God to guide you in understanding of what His Will is. Pray that your desire to know and to follow His Will would grow over the next several weeks.

In day 1, we mentioned how God's Will was a combination of His clearly stated commands in Scripture for all people along with His specific individual guidance. We will see more of this further in the study. God's Will is also a combination of His sovereign plan and strategy along with our ability to make decisions. The Apostle Peter uses both ideas in his first letter.

For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be *God's will*, than for doing evil. (1 Pet. 3:17)

Therefore, since Christ suffered in the flesh, equip yourselves also with the same resolve-- because the one who suffered in the flesh has finished with sin— in order to live the remaining time in the flesh, no longer for human desires, but for *God's will*. (1 Pet. 4:1-2)

The first occurrence above is something out of a person's control. It is included in God's sovereign plan and strategy. Here, a person is doing what is right and should expect in return something good, pleasing, and perfect. They are following God's clearly stated commands in Scripture. Yet for some reason God is allowing them to suffer instead. Peter is saying that if the suffering happens even while you are doing good, then understand it as God's sovereign plan and strategy. There's no need to get upset about it. He's in control, He knows about it, and His plans are always for good. If you're suffering for doing good, it will turn out for good. If you're suffering for doing evil...then perhaps you are receiving what you deserve.

So, ask yourself, are you getting what you "deserve"? If you're not doing the right thing, then perhaps you are experiencing the effects of your actions. If you're doing the right thing and suffering occurs, then let God's sovereign plan and strategy finish. God may be using your decision to do good even when you suffer to display His Glory and "silence the ignorance of foolish people" (1 Peter 2:15). Unbelievers are watching you and asking, "how can you follow a God who allows suffering in this world?" Your determination to follow God, no matter what, shouts loudly to those who are eager to mock God. It communicates a huge trust in God. It communicates a belief that God is really good in spite of the current events and circumstances when things are out of your control. We never know how God is using us to speak to others.

The latter occurrence above instructs the Christian therefore to be like Christ and to live for God's desires and ways instead of for our human desires and ways. Here, it is something within a person's control. They have the ability to decide to live for their wants or for God's wants. This is similar to Matthew 26:39 where Jesus asked for the "cup of suffering" to not happen if at all possible as He was about to die on the cross for the sins of the world. Yet, He went on to say, "not as I will, but as you will." On one side, the desire of Jesus was not to die on the cross. Jesus had a desire to not bear the weight of the world's sin on Himself. It would be too painful to go through. Yet, Jesus was willing to give up that will/desire/want for God's will/desire/want. He wished there was another way, but since God said it needed to be done...He did it.

That's the same attitude we must have as we seek out His Will for our lives. Sometimes, we can hear God's instructions, but we can push it aside because it doesn't look pleasant. We must be willing to say "ok, I don't understand what's happening or why you're asking me to do this, but God, I will do what you are asking me to do."

PAUSE AND PRAY

Take a few moments and think about your situation. Are the effects of your decisions deserved? Have you not done what God told you to do? Have you done what God told you not to do? In those areas, ask God to forgive you. Confess those things to Him. In those areas where it seems like you're doing good but the outcome isn't good, pleasing, or perfect, ask God to enlighten your mind to that truth. Resolve in your heart to proclaim your confidence in God that He has a plan and strategy to not harm you, and to give you a hope and future. Determine to do God's Will rather than your human will and to look beyond the immediate results.

Week 1, Day 3

We've seen how God's plan is always for good. We've also seen how our circumstances could be the result of our own actions or they could just be the effects of living in a sinful world with sinful people. Whatever the cause, God always wants us to do the right thing (if at all possible – Romans 12:18, Philippians 3:13-14). God will use our decisions, our obedience, and our surrounding circumstances to display His glory (1 Peter 2:12) as well as to shape us into the image and character of Jesus Christ (Romans 8:28-29a). There's more to our life than dating the right person, going to the right school, or taking the right job. God may be less concerned with the options we have and more concerned with our attitudes and actions as we live out with whatever choice we take.

So, even before we seek out God's Will for those hard decisions in life, we must make sure we are also seeking to know how we should act on a normal basis. We can simply open the Bible to nearly any page and see God telling us things we need to know and do. We've already seen several of those. 1 Peter 2:15 – God's Will is to do good. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 – God's Will is to rejoice, pray, and give thanks. 1 Thessalonians 4:3 – God's Will is to be sanctified (set apart as holy), avoid sexual immorality, and control yourself. Romans 12:18 – God's Will is to live at peace with all people. Ephesians 5:22-25 – God's Will is for a husband to love his wife and a wife to submit to her husband. And the list goes on and on.

What makes those commands hard to keep is when the situation to apply those commands is more difficult and not so delightful. "Love your neighbor as yourself" can be more difficult to follow when we share property lines with someone who isn't so pleasant, or when we discover that God calls anyone we cross paths with to be our "neighbor." There's a lot of value in seeking God's instructions and guidelines when there isn't a decision to be made. So, when a decision needs to be made, we aren't having to dig so wide and deep into Scripture to discern what we need to do.

How happy is the man who does not follow the advice of the wicked or take the path of sinners or join a group of mockers! ² Instead, his delight is in the LORD's instruction, and he meditates on it day and night. ³ He is like a tree planted beside streams of water that bears its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers. ⁴ The wicked are not like this; instead, they are like chaff that the wind blows away. ⁵ Therefore the wicked will not survive the judgment, and sinners will not be in the community of the righteous. ⁶ For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to ruin. (Ps. 1:1-6)

Psalms 1 sets the stage for the entire book of Psalms. There are two general paths to take: the path of seeking God's instructions and the path of going where ever the wind takes you. The first path leads to happiness, stability, productivity, prosperity, and the ability to endure. The second path leads to instability and of one's life falling apart. The first path is accomplished by delighting and meditating on God's commands. This person can identify between sensible and foolish advice. They can determine if the next step is safe or if it's full of trouble. And isn't that what we are trying to find out as we are searching for "God's Will"? Aren't we searching for the best path? Aren't we searching for the best practical advice?

God didn't intend for His Will to be something difficult to find. He has laid out so many commands and principles right in the Scriptures. And even if we need help, we can simply ask for wisdom and He freely gives it (James 1:5).

PAUSE AND PRAY

Take a few moments and evaluate your normal study time in God's Word. Are you regularly reading and thinking about how to apply that daily wisdom? Are you taking something you read (or heard from the Sunday message) and thinking about it throughout the week on what it means for your situation and context? Begin seeking out a Bible reading plan if you don't already have one. Determine to start one after this study. If you need help finding a Bible reading plan, check with others in your Life Group or ask one of the pastors at Hope.

NOTES - SUNDAY SERMON + 3 DEVOTIONS + BOOKLET READINGS:

Week 2, Day 1

Last week, we talked briefly about how God may allow our path to be bumpy even if we choose to do the right thing (1 Peter). It seems counterintuitive that the “good, pleasing, and perfect Will of God” would include a wild ride. There are many reasons why God would include such a road on our path. Peter suggests that one of the reasons would be to display our belief that God is good, and that our surroundings don’t alter that trust, and would therefore “silence the ignorance of foolish people”. Paul says that crazy things happen because we live in a broken world with sinful people; yet, God uses those situations for our good by transforming us to be more like Christ (Romans 8).

The Bible is full of stories of people whose path wasn’t always pleasant. Sometimes, they were receiving the disciplining hand of God as they were disobeying His clearly stated commands (Deuteronomy 29:24-28). Sometimes, God was leading them into a wild ride because He knew they really weren’t ready for the alternative route (Exodus 13:17). Sometimes, God was weaving His plan to save His people with the events of this broken world (Genesis 50:20). And in a few cases, we see God allowing unpleasant experiences just so He could display His power and ultimate control (Job – lost everything to show Satan that Job loved God without the material blessings; John 9 – man born blind so Jesus could heal Him and show He was the Son of God). These last few cases are hard to accept if we’re honest.

The point is that “you can’t judge a book by it’s cover”. We can’t make decisions based upon the level of expected pleasantness. Jesus knew His path on earth lead to the destination of death on a cross. He knew the path would be filled with hatred, disbelief, and betrayal from even His own family and friends. Yet, He took the path for what laid at the end of it. The apostle Paul was willing to be tortured and ridiculed if it meant that another city was reached with the Gospel. The Holy Spirit was still guiding him to each region in his journey even though adversities awaited him. Often times, if a choice seems difficult or filled with too many unknown variables, we decide that perhaps it isn’t God’s Will. That isn’t a good way to discern His Will.

This plays out in one occasion in Paul’s journeys. As Paul was feeling compelled by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem and then to Rome, he wasn’t sure what would happen when he got there other than the Spirit warned him of the hardships he would face wherever he went:

And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. ²³ I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. (Acts 20:22-23)

Not only did the Holy Spirit reveal that he would experience hardships, but the Spirit revealed that same information to others about what would happen if Paul went to Jerusalem:

... We landed at Tyre, where our ship was to unload its cargo. ⁴ We sought out the disciples there and stayed with them seven days. Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. (Acts 21:3-4)

It would seem that Paul’s zeal to share the Gospel caused him to disobey the Spirit’s leading. However, the Spirit was merely telling Paul what would await him, not to stay away. Paul’s fellow believers used that information to urge Paul not to go because they didn’t want him to get beaten, imprisoned, or worse. If Paul would have stayed away from Jerusalem because of the warning, then he would have been disobeying God’s Will for him at that moment.

PAUSE AND PRAY

Take a few moments and think about a decision you’ve made or need to make. What were or are the risks involved? Did you make decisions in the past based upon avoiding the risk involved? How did that match up with the Holy Spirit’s leading? Spend some time in prayer, asking God to not only reveal what can happen in your choices, but also to know if the path that leads to unknown hardships is where you need to go.

The Apostle Paul's boldness to persevere through lots of suffering as God's Will for his life is certainly inspiring and daunting. When we look at his life and others like him, we can put them into a different category than ourselves. We can view them as super spiritual people chosen by God to do special spiritual missions with God's uncommon guidance. However, the Bible is full of people who were not ready and who disobeyed and were still used by God in an impactful way. In one sense, you may never be ready for what God has planned for you to do. And in another sense, God has already been preparing you (unknowingly) for what He has planned for you to do.

Feeling prepared and ready is also not a good way to discern if it is God's Will. Moses, whom God used to rescue His people from slavery in Egypt, felt unready. He felt unequipped for the task. He listed off numerous reasons why he was not a good fit for God's plan (Exodus 3-4).

But Moses replied to the LORD, "Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent-- either in the past or recently or since You have been speaking to Your servant-- because I am slow and hesitant in speech." ¹¹ Yahweh said to him, "Who made the human mouth? Who makes him mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, Yahweh? ¹² Now go! I will help you speak and I will teach you what to say." ¹³ Moses said, "Please, Lord, send someone else." (Exod. 4:10-13)

We do similar things all the time. Perhaps we are asked to serve in a ministry at church and we decline because we feel unequipped. Perhaps we feel the Spirit of God telling us to go talk to someone in the grocery store, but we feel weird about that so we don't. Whatever it may be, feeling ready and equipped is not what God is looking for. God is looking for obedience. For Moses, God wanted to use him not for his eloquent speech, but for his lack of eloquent speech. God wanted it to be clear that it was God who was speaking and God who was making this all happen. It's also no coincidence that Moses, who was raised in a palace home, who learned the ways of the Egyptian people and the political system, was chosen by God to speak to Pharaoh of Egypt. God was preparing him for what He had already planned for him to do.

Perhaps your upbringing, your family structure, your experiences, and your inabilities are all part of God's plan to use you to bring spiritual light into a spiritually dark place? Consider the story of Esther. Esther was a young woman who was chosen to be queen in the land of Persia during the exile of the Israelites. She was chosen to be queen because of her extreme beauty. Through some further unfortunate events, the Jews were sentenced to extermination. Mordecai, her cousin and who raised her as his adopted daughter, convinced Esther to go before the king and share that she was also a Jew. Approaching the king was not common and could result in her not being queen anymore or worse. Of course, she was hesitant. Then came these famous words from Mordecai:

"Who knows, perhaps you have come to your royal position for such a time as this." (Est. 4:14)

Esther certainly didn't feel up to the task. A lot was riding on her shoulders and the only thing she had going for her was that her beauty pleased the king. Mordecai's words of "perhaps you have come to this position for such a time as this" is something that should echo in our minds. Perhaps you are in a place in your career when you can take on an area of ministry that needs someone to fill in. Perhaps you are in a place where you are more passionate than others (because of your past) about seeing a justice done when the others around you are ignorant of what's happening and ignorant of what needs to happen.

PAUSE AND PRAY

Take a few moments and think about your past. What has happened in your childhood, your family upbringing, your education, and your relationships that makes you who you are. Ask God to reveal how those experiences have been used by Him to prepare you for something He has been planning for you to do. Ask God for boldness to say yes when He calls you to the task.

If you've ever made a bad decision, you aren't alone. Every human, except Jesus, since the original creation has made many bad decisions. Every spiritually strong leader found in the Bible and throughout history has made a critical error. John Ortberg says it well: "If only people who made correct choices were used by God, the Bible would be a much shorter book, and Jesus would be the only character" (p. 29).

It's important to know that God can still use, in a mighty way, someone who has made some bad choices in life. Certainly, it may not be in the same way God would have used them if they made a different decision. Our decisions do carry consequences. For example, King David (in the Old Testament) committed adultery and even though he repented and restored his relationship with God, he experienced consequences such as the death of that son born from infidelity, family feuds, and his wives having sexual relations with others publicly (2 Samuel 12:10-14). Yet, King David still went on to do things for God, had other children, and wrote many Psalms that are found in the Bible.

We see a similar story of repentance and redemption following a bad decision in the parable of the two sons as told by Jesus in Luke 15:11-32. Here Jesus tells this story to illustrate how God is not looking for perfection, but for repentance and a turning back to God. The younger son disgraces his father and leaves town with his early inheritance. The son spends all the money on foolish living to the point of poverty, begging for food. The son decides to go back home and repent of his ways hoping to be at least a hired servant for his father because they get fed. Upon his arrival back home, the father is ecstatic and restores the son to all the previous privileges of being the owner's son along with a grand celebration. The older son was quite upset. He didn't understand why the father would treat the younger son so nicely after he made so many hurtful and bad choices. However, the father responds:

'Son,' he said to him, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'" (Lk. 15:31-32)

Some people believe that God gives us one grand plan to follow, "Plan A". And if we mess up or make a bad decision, we have lost our ability to be used by God and receive His blessings. There's no doubt that God does have a high desire for us to always live within His ways, commands, and principles. He does know which ways are best. We saw that in Psalm 1 (Happy is the man...) and when we deviate from His ways, we do experience a bumpier road. However, God does not give us only one chance with no side paths or abilities to get back. God is not so cruel that we become ineffective and invaluable once we sin, choose a different path, or stall.

The key is a heart that repents. When a heart repents, they admit they made a sinful or wrong decision and admit that following God's ways are best. They resolve to seek God's ways going forward. They may not be able to get back on the original path, but they can still experience the blessings of following God. In Psalm 51, King David records his transition from repentance to restoration. He says:

The sacrifice pleasing to God is a broken spirit. God, You will not despise a broken and humbled heart. (Ps. 51:17)

Our ability to discern God's good, pleasing, and perfect Will has direct relationship to our desire to offer ourselves to His ways (Romans 12:1). We must remain humble and turn back to God when we make a bad decision. The consequences may linger for a while, but God is ready to put you back on the path and back to work.

PAUSE AND PRAY

Take a few moments and thank God for giving you another chance and another chance when you failed to follow His plan. Write down any further steps God is asking you to take to fix what was broken from your decisions. Resolve to know that God has gladly welcomed you back and is excited for the plan He has for you.

NOTES - SUNDAY SERMON + 3 DEVOTIONS + BOOKLET READINGS:

So far, we've seen that God's Will is good and is not meant to be difficult to discern. God gives us many clearly stated commands in Scripture to follow and direct access to His wisdom by simply asking Him for it (James 1:5). Yet, God is not in existence merely to guide us to the best plan. And we are not in existence just so He can tell someone what to do. God's desire is to be in relationship with us. Part of our error comes when we go to Him only for what He can do rather than for who He is.

Sometimes this looks like when people begin to make "deals" with God or try to discover God's Will through signs, wonders, penance, payments, and means of verification (cleromancy – rolling dice, casting lots, flipping a coin). People become so overburdened with the decision at hand. They don't want to make a mistake and they don't seem to be getting a clear answer from God. Sometimes, people aren't comfortable with where God seems to be leading them that they begin to question God and ask for a clearer sign of "go" or "no" (i.e. Gideon – his request for signs displayed his mistrust and doubt in God's guidance – Judges 6:36-40).

King Saul (in the Old Testament) made his grave mistake by trusting in the ritual of offering a sacrifice to hear from God rather than trusting in the God-given process of seeking Him through obedience and patience (1 Samuel 13:8-13). To God, this is the same as divination which is trying to get revelation about the future and about God's secret plans by using demonic means or means that involve transactions with the dead. King Saul also does such a thing later in life by asking for a medium, so he can talk to the deceased prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 28).

The Apostle Peter and John (in the New Testament) lead Simon, a magician, to Christ and Simon followed them around. During their ministry journeys, they laid their hands on some Samaritans to receive the Holy Spirit after their conversion (God was showing them how His salvation was not only for the Jews). Simon seeing that people received the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands, asked to receive such ability and he would pay them for it. Peter responded:

"May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could acquire God's gift with money!"
(Acts 8:20)

See, the problem with asking for signs and wonder for direction is that it puts more trust in the object than in God. It is why God forbid the use of superstition practices (Deuteronomy 18:10-11). The Old Testament prophet Isaiah warned the people against using charms, incantations, and astrology to guide and protect them (Isaiah 47:11-15). Those things can do nothing against or to alter God's Will.

People today still use many such forms of trying to understand the future and to protect themselves from calamity rather than seeking and trusting God. There are palm readers, fortune-tellers, and even Jesus bobbleheads. People wear cross necklaces, keep a Bible in their car, or light a candle to a saint. People can even use religious activity such as prayer, giving, and serving as a hope to gain God's favor for protection or for an answer to their decisions. Just as the prophet Samuel told King Saul, God is more concerned with our obedience than with our sacrifice. He's concerned with our hearts and our relationship with Him. We may never experience guidance from God if the only time we go to God is to get guidance.

For I desire loyalty and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. (Hosea 6:6)

PAUSE AND PRAY

Take a few moments and ask God to reveal any ways you have trusted in objects or even religious activity to seek His guidance more than seeking Him in a personal way. Ask God for forgiveness in the way you have done that. Take comfort that God's Will is not meant to be difficult to find and there is no need to put your trust in those things.

Week 3, Day 2

There are some decisions in life that carry a lot of weight such as our salvation, marriage, divorce, having children, adopting children, or moving to a foreign country. There are other decisions that are life changing but can be changed again without too severe implications such as changing jobs, buying a house, or even dating. The more life alternating a decision seems, the more stress we feel in making the right decision.

Yet again, if God's Will is good, pleasing, and perfect and His Will is not meant to be difficult to discover and God can even use wrong decisions to work for the good of our character and for His ultimate strategy and plan ...then the question arises whether we are putting too much weight on our decisions?

If God made it simple for us to make the greatest decision in our life, which is our salvation, why would He make other decisions so difficult? In Matthew 11, Jesus talked about how astonishing it was that so many people did not repent after the clear signs and messages from John the Baptist. The simplicity of his message was to "Repent" as opposed to trying to achieve salvation by following the over 660 laws implemented by the religious leaders. Jesus went on to praise God for revealing His plan of salvation in such simple terms and requirements that even infants could understand. He says:

"Come to Me, all of you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ All of you, take up My yoke and learn from Me, because I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for yourselves. ³⁰ For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." (Matt. 11:28-30)

Relax. Calm down. Don't stress. That's the message here. The New Testament is full of encouragement about getting rid of anxiety, worry, and fear because God is in control and He cares about you. Jesus talks about how God cares for the sparrows and provides them with food. God cares more for you because you are a part of His creation who was created into the likeness of His own image. Therefore, He'll care and provide for you too.

Look at the birds of the sky: They don't sow or reap or gather into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren't you worth more than they? . . . So, don't worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' ³² For the idolaters eagerly seek all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you. ³⁴ Therefore don't worry about tomorrow, because tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. (Matt. 6:26, 31-34)

Now Jesus isn't saying that we don't need to think about tomorrow or make any future plan. There is value in creating plans and goals. However, as we plan, it shouldn't cause us anxiety, worry, fear, and despair. Nor should we plan without understanding that God may have other plans. Be flexible. James puts the balance like this:

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will travel to such and such a city and spend a year there and do business and make a profit." ¹⁴ You don't even know what tomorrow will bring-- what your life will be! For you are like smoke that appears for a little while, then vanishes. ¹⁵ Instead, you should say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." (James. 4:13-15)

PAUSE AND PRAY

Take a few moments and think about how much pressure you put on yourself for your decisions. Ask God for forgiveness if you've put little significance in His level of care for you for your future. Write out some Scripture that encourages you to not worry or fret and place them in places you can be reminded of God's love and provision.

Week 3, Day 3

Last time, we talked about taking away a lot of the pressure we put on our decisions and live in a balance of planning but leaving space for God to do what He will do. In the previous passage in James, we saw him encouraging that (James 4:13-15). James began that chapter talking about why we fight and quarrel. It has to do with our desires and wants. We make decisions based on what we want for ourselves in the future. Many times, those decisions have people in our path, either helping us get what we want or standing in our way. James says when our wants cause struggles with others (and I would add within ourselves), we are putting so much emphasis on what we want and not what God would want. We become more focused on the things of this world and our kingdom, than the things of heaven and God's Kingdom.

What we need to do is repent for putting our wants above God's. We need to draw near to God and resist the devil (we'll talk more next week about how Satan is trying to get you off focus). We need to humble ourselves and stop being so arrogant and selfish. Arrogant planning doesn't consider that we could die tomorrow. Arrogant planning doesn't consider that God could change it all in a second.

But as it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. (James. 4:16)

When we plan with heaven in view or plan for benefiting God's kingdom, it changes how we evaluate a decision or what decisions we chase. It changes what we put on our calendar and what we spend our money on. It changes the way we view people. The book of Ecclesiastes (in the Old Testament) is a great book describing this life of decisions and pursuits. The author spent a lot of his life in pursuit of possessions, positions, and pleasure. A lot of his experiences showed to be unimportant, unfulfilling, and like chasing after wind. When life was just about those things...it was despairing. Yet, weaved through that book was a recognition of God's activity in the world.

I know that there is nothing better for them than to rejoice and enjoy the good life. ¹³ It is also the gift of God whenever anyone eats, drinks, and enjoys all his efforts. ¹⁴ I know that all God does will last forever; there is no adding to it or taking from it. God works so that people will be in awe of Him. (Eccl. 3:12-14)

Our plans, decisions, and activities are not merely things we can do to occupy our time here on earth. They are meant to point us and others to the Creator. The objects of this world are never to be more valuable than pursuing the Creator of the objects. And still, they are also for us to enjoy. God often gives us plenty of options to choose from because there are many good things to enjoy in His creation. Sometimes, our decisions are between all good and godly options. Most likely, we are not struggling to decide between one perfect choice and one terrible choice. It's between two really good options. And God is saying, "You don't need me to pick for you. They are both good. Pick one and go with it."

The Apostle Paul worked hard in moving people away from seeing how every decision or movement could be a sin against the law. He was renewing their thought process to think about grace, mercy, and the love of God through Christ. In his letter to the church at Corinth, he wrote concerning how some were struggling whether eating certain things were okay since previously it was thought to be a sin. He wrote about the freedom we have, but to also be considerate of those who think it is a sin. In the end, everyone needed to make the personal decision for how they thought it would bring God glory.

Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for God's glory. (1 Cor. 10:31)

PAUSE AND PRAY

Take a few moments and think of all the things God has placed in your life to enjoy. Thank God for those things. Evaluate whether you are pursuing things in life for your own gain or for pointing people to God. Ask God to help you be more grateful for what He has given you and ask Him to help you think how you can use those objects to bring Him glory.

NOTES - SUNDAY SERMON + 3 DEVOTIONS + BOOKLET READINGS:

Week 4, Day 1

All of us have experienced making a difficult decision and trying hard to hear God's leading. A common question is "how do I know when it's God's voice and not just my own thoughts in my head?" This is a valid question because there are often many voices trying to give us advice. We have our own desires (sometimes godly, sometimes not), we have friends and family telling us their thoughts, Satan is also trying to get our attention, and God is guiding. If only God's voice would always be the loudest than it would be easier.

However, in one story in the Old Testament, we see that God's voice is more like a soft whisper. Elijah, a prophet of God, was in despair. Earlier, he did an amazing thing with God, but when his life was threatened, he ran away in fear. He felt alone and was emotionally, physically, and spiritually drained. The story goes that God wanted to talk to him. So as Elijah went to hear from God, some mighty things happened. There was a mighty wind, an earthquake, and some fire. Yet, "the LORD was not in it."

After the earthquake there was a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire there was a voice, a soft whisper. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Suddenly, a voice came to him and said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?" (1 Ki. 19:12-13)

Sometimes, God does need to send a mighty wind, an earthquake, and some fire to get our attention, but then He speaks to us gently and softly. It's because God is a compassionate and loving God. He doesn't speak to us in what could be interrupted as a harsh tone with angry words. And so some people may miss what God is saying because they aren't giving validation to the soft and quiet voice they hear in their spirit. This requires us to push back the clutter and give us mental, emotional, and physical space to listen.

If you have a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ, you'll know when God speaks. It sounds so simplistic, but Jesus says that His own sheep hear His voice and recognize His voice. In this context, Jesus is warning against those who think they can achieve salvation apart from Jesus. Those who have accepted Jesus as their savior know this truth and can recognize when someone speaks an error against this truth.

The doorkeeper opens it for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴ When he has brought all his own outside, he goes ahead of them. The sheep follow him because they recognize his voice. ⁵ They will never follow a stranger; instead they will run away from him, because they don't recognize the voice of strangers." (John. 10:3-5)

God has sent His Holy Spirit to live within a believer to not only convict them of their sinning, but to teach and guide them in truth (John 16:13). Getting guidance from God is something to which a believer has privilege. Those who don't have a relationship with God through Jesus Christ cannot recognize His voice. They try to gain God's guidance in life without going through the gate of Christ, but they won't get it because they are trying to steal something that doesn't belong to them. Remember, the whole matter of God's Will centers around a relationship rather than a program or a technique.

PAUSE AND PRAY

Take a few moments and think about the time you heard the good news of salvation through Christ and accepted it. Think about those times when you "just knew" what God wanted you to do in your life. Take comfort in knowing that the Holy Spirit lives in you to guide you. If you're not sure if you have a personal relationship with God, talk to one of the pastors at church.

Week 4, Day 2

Last time, we heard about listening to God's voice and mentioned that Satan is also trying to get your attention. That's because your decisions don't only have an earthly impact, but an eternal impact. Satan doesn't want you to stay strong in your faith in God. Satan doesn't want you to share with others about the hope that lies in you. Satan doesn't want you to earn any crowns in heaven for your dedication and service to the Lord. It's often hard to remember how there is more to life than what we can see. The truth is that there is a spiritual battle for your decisions. Jesus and the apostles spoke about this spiritual realm that we can't see.

The Apostle Paul commanded the churches to grow in their knowledge of God and to work out that knowledge in the way they lived because Satan was armed with evil strategies to knock them down.

Put on the full armor of God so that you can stand against the tactics of the Devil. For our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the world powers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavens. (Eph. 6:11-12)

Notice that our battle is not against other people. It's not against the competitor down the street. The enemy is not your spouse, your kids, or your employer. There is a bigger battle going on behind the scenes between the powers of darkness and the powers of light. Satan is not just sitting back waiting for you to make a mistake and then attack. He is actively seeking out a person unprepared and primed to slip.

Be serious! Be alert! Your adversary the Devil is prowling around like a roaring lion, looking for anyone he can devour. (1 Peter 5:8)

Satan is going to attack when you are tired, discouraged, anxious, alone, and afraid. He's also going to attack you when you are happy, successful, and enjoying life. He's going to attack whenever you are not being mindful of his tempting presence. As Pastor Neal once said in a message, "never forget when you think you have temptation behind you, you are about to run head first into it. The end is sudden, shocking, and never fun" (Proverbs, June 2017). It will happen unexpectedly. It will happen to anyone including those who are spiritually strong. Jesus warned the Apostle Peter that Satan wanted to scrutinize him and tear him down. And sure enough, Peter made the decision to deny that he knew Jesus to several groups of unbelievers three times in one night.

"Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." (Luke 22:31-32)

What's great is that we are not fighting this battle alone. Jesus not only prayed for Peter, but Jesus is currently in heaven praying for us. He's praying that we would not lose faith. There's great comfort in knowing how much God is on our side.

Christ Jesus who died-- more than that, who was raised to life-- is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. (Rom. 8:34 NIV)

God is bigger than Satan and nothing gets by God. And even if Satan gets to us and we fall, God still finds us useful and important. He calls us to renew our commitment to Him, to be rehabilitated through spending time with Him, and to get working on the next assignment.

PAUSE AND PRAY

Take a few moments and look at how Satan has been attacking you. Rather than seeing your conflicts as the people or projects in front you, look at how those conflicts are hurting you spiritually and taking your attention from pursuing God's Kingdom and His righteousness in your life. Ask God to keep you aware of the spiritual battle and thank Him for interceding for you so that you can stand against Satan's tactics.

What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? (Rom. 8:31)

Throughout this study, I've tried to convey that God's Will is good, even if the circumstances aren't. God can use even the bad situations and our wrong decisions to fulfill His Plan. His ultimate Plan is to build the character of Christ in us and to work out His strategy of telling everyone about the Gospel. God's Will is to give us a hope and a future, even with His chastising corrections.

I've tried to convey that God's Will is not meant to be difficult to discern. He wants us to know His Will. It doesn't mean it will come to us automatically. It does require us to do some work. It requires us to know more about who God is and how He works. It requires us to study His Word to learn His clearly stated commands and principles. It requires us to draw closer to Him through prayer, rest, and fellowship with other believing counsel. And it requires us to arm ourselves with spiritual battle gear against Satan and his desire for us to make bad decisions.

I've tried to convey that it's less about merely asking God for guidance when we have a decision, but more about a way of living according to His wisdom and for His desires. It's being obedient in the little things that set us up to make the right decision for the bigger things. Over time, it becomes more instinctive in knowing what God would have us to do.

I've tried to convey that it's not about knowing exactly what lies ahead. It doesn't mean that God will voice His answer in clear signs and wonders, but He will guide you. It's about faith and trusting in a loving God. It's not about a technique or process to decision-making, but about building a relationship with the Creator.

The only way we can have a life that is built around following God's Will is to keep God a priority. Going through life is not something we can and should try to figure out alone. And if God is willing to guide us, why wouldn't we want to grab that help? Having God's help doesn't mean that life will be a piece of cake, but it does mean that we don't have to be filled with fear, apprehension, worry, anxiousness, debilitating regret and shame, feelings of insignificance, or despair in making decisions or living with the ones we've made.

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding; ⁶ think about Him in all your ways, and He will guide you on the right paths. (Prov. 3:5-6)

There is such assurance knowing that you are on the right path and that you are exactly where God wants you to be. There is such a confidence knowing that you don't have to quit or feel regret when the path gets bumpy because you trusted in God in taking that step. When things don't make sense and they are beyond your understanding, there is such a peace in your heart that you relied on God. There is such a relief that you don't need to have it all figured out. There is such a thrill in knowing that God wants you to enjoy yourself in this journey. And there is an excitement when you realize that sometimes God gives you multiple good options to choose from...so just go for it.

PAUSE AND PRAY

Take a few moments and think about all that you've learned over the past few weeks. What do you need to do to make certain you are staying connected to God? What do you need to keep in mind when you have another decision in life? Ask God to remind you of these truths before you become worried or anxious about a decision.