

LESSON 10

How to Discover God's Will

One of the most important keys for a successful Christian life is learning to know God's will. His will includes a long-term plan as well as specific details about decisions we make, places we go, the person we marry, jobs we take, talents we use, skills we develop, ministries we do, and many other aspects of life. God wants His children to understand His will and to be joyful in fulfilling it. Failure to discern or carry out God's mandate can mean great disappointment because His will is always the best for us.

People have many interesting ideas on how to determine what is best for their lives. Many today still believe in some undefined force called "luck" to lead and guide them. If they feel lucky, they might buy a lottery ticket. They base decisions on so-called "lucky feelings." Others go to fortunetellers or psychics. Large numbers of people are hooked on horoscopes. Others who do not believe in God, luck, or horoscopes say, "I believe in myself. I make my own plans. Nobody is guiding my life!"

According to the Bible, God does not want His children to be disoriented spiritually. He wants us to have clear direction. In Ephesians 5:17, we read, "Do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is." As a Christian, you must have confidence that God has a plan for your life—one that is very exciting and fulfilling. God says through Jeremiah, "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future'" (Jeremiah 29:11). It is thrilling to discover your God-given destiny.

LESSON OUTLINE

The New Birth and God's Will
Prayer and God's Will
Godliness and God's Will
The Role of Scripture in Determining God's Will
The Holy Spirit and Christians
God's Use of Circumstances and People

LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. *Explain why being born again is vital to discovering God's will.*
2. *Explain why prayer is essential to knowing God's will.*
3. *State the relationship between godliness and knowing God's will.*
4. *Show how studying Scripture aids in determining God's will.*
5. *Explain the role of the Holy Spirit in leading Christians.*
6. *Discuss how God uses circumstances to direct the lives of His people.*

The New Birth and God's Will

Objective 1:

Explain why being born again is vital to discovering God's will.

Before we can expect God to guide our lives, we must willingly surrender to Him. The Lord does not promise guidance and direction to those who will not commit to Him. Consider the unsaved; they are described in Scripture as being in darkness, lost, and without God. The unsaved person lives as though in a fog. Have you

ever been in a fog so thick that you could not tell where you were going? You could not see landmarks. You might have felt disoriented and unsure about whether you were moving in the right direction. Traveling in dense fog can be very dangerous. In the same way, the unsaved person runs the risk of not only being in dangerous situations but of missing the good that God has for him or her.

Only true Christians can be assured of constant divine guidance. The apostle Paul wrote, “Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God” (Romans 8:14). The relationship between being born again and knowing God’s will can be likened to the relationship between getting on the right airplane and arriving at the correct destination. If you board the right airplane—even though it may fly high above the clouds with no land in sight—you do not have to worry about navigation. You can rest assured that the pilot knows where he is going. In the same way, once you are safely in God’s family through faith in Christ, He will be constantly on duty to guide your life and reveal His will.

So, being born again is the first step in finding God’s will. If you are backslidden or have never surrendered your life to Christ, ask Christ to come into your heart today, forgive your sins, and be your Lord and Savior. At the end of this book, you will find a simple prayer that can serve as your guide in asking Jesus into your life.

Prayer and God’s Will

Objective 2:

Explain why prayer is essential to knowing God’s will.

Prayer is also a very important part of the process of receiving divine guidance. Philippians 4:6 says, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” Christians need to talk to God about all that is on their hearts. That means we should request guidance and understanding of God’s will. James writes, “If any

of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5).

But, sadly, pray is the last thing some people want to do. Prayer should never be a last resort; rather, it should be a regular part of our lives. Prayer draws us closer to the Lord and strengthens us. It releases the blessing and the anointing of God. As we pray, we find ourselves exercising faith. It has been said that daily prayer is the gymnasium of the soul (Zwemer 1923).

Still, two cautions need to be pointed out. First, when you pray, do not automatically assume that God is going to show you all at once everything you need to know and do for the next thirty years. God does not work that way. He certainly does know the future completely, but His guidance comes to us in measured quantities. In the same way that He supplies our "daily bread," He also gives us guidance bit by bit, as we need it. Why? God in His wisdom wants us to come to Him often, not just in emergencies or after great stretches of time in which we ignore Him.

Second, when you pray, be open and willing to accept God's will. Sometimes we go to God, and instead of asking Him to show us His will, we end up telling Him what we want Him to do. This is not truly being yielded to Him. For example, a young lady might be praying for God to guide her to the man she should marry. She prays, "Dear Lord, you know who the man is that I should marry. You've prepared him for me and guided his life. I'm willing, Lord, to accept whoever you have for me, but don't let him be too short, and please don't let him want to be a missionary, and I would appreciate it if he wasn't lacking in money." Do you see the problem with this kind of request? What if God has for this young lady a wonderful man who is 5 feet 2 inches tall and who has little financial resource, but a burning passion to reach the lost in India?

The story is told of a preacher of the gospel who received an invitation from two churches to serve as pastor. One church was in Edinburgh, Scotland, and the other was in Glasgow, Scotland. The preacher prayed,

“Lord, show me which one of these two churches you want me to go to, but please let it be Glasgow.” That man already had his mind made up. When we pray in faith, trusting the Lord for guidance, He will give it to us. It is up to us to follow through on God’s will.

Godliness and God’s Will

Objective 3:

State the relationship between godliness and knowing God’s will.

The apostle Paul reveals an important key to knowing God’s will. He writes,

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:1–2)

The key to knowing God’s will is godliness. Godliness refers to being God-centered. It carries with it the idea of living in a way that pleases God. As Christians, we are called to love God with all our hearts. This love is demonstrated daily by a life of obedience to the Lord’s commands. Jesus said, “‘If you love me, you will obey what I command’” (John 14:15).

Paul compares living a godly life to the Old Testament concept of offering sacrifice. In obedience to the Law of Moses, the ancient Israelites slaughtered animals and presented them to God as sacrifices. As the blood of sacrificial animals was shed for their sins, repentant Israelites could be assured of God’s forgiveness. These sacrifices were a type or symbol of the final sacrifice Jesus would make on the Cross for our sins. No more

animals need to be offered now. He paid the price for our complete forgiveness.

Godliness implies that we offer ourselves to God as living sacrifices. How do we do this? Our lives are to be holy and pleasing to God. We cannot live as we did before knowing the Lord. The transformation must start with our minds and be reflected in our attitudes and behaviors.

A person cannot genuinely expect to receive guidance from God unless he or she is born again, praying, and—with God's help—being transformed into a godly person. This does not mean that one must be perfect to hear from God. No one on earth is faultless; we will make mistakes. However, when we fail as Christians, we go to God as soon as the Holy Spirit convicts us of our wrong. We confess our sin. John writes, "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8–9). The godly, prayerful follower of Christ can rest assured that he or she is on God's "radar screen." God has such an individual in sight and knows how best to lead him or her. Being in God's will is worth any sacrifice or challenge that comes with living a godly life.

The Role of Scripture in Determining God's Will

Objective 4:

Show how studying Scripture aids in determining God's will.

Some people think the Bible ought to reveal what color socks to wear, what kind of car to buy, or whether to take a vacation in Miami or Moscow. They may even open the Bible randomly and put their finger on a verse and read it, thinking that God will speak to them that way.

Please understand this—the Bible is a book of principles. If you come to God's Word to find out whether to buy a blue chair or a green chair, or to discover whether to ride the train to work or drive your car, you

will probably be very disappointed. But if you come to God's Word to learn the great principles of Christian living, you will be richly rewarded. These principles serve as the foundation for understanding God's will. They throw tremendous light on the decisions we need to make. David wrote, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path" (Psalm 119:105).

What are examples of these great principles? One principle is to always put God first. Jesus said, "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:33). What we are talking about here are priorities. In the Christian life, the most important duty is to put God first. Nothing else will work unless He is first.

Think about what or whom you are putting first in your life. Is it God? Is it your job, hobbies, friends, money, or something else? God is not against your experiencing joy in all these other things, but He does not want to compete with anything. He must be first! A lot of questions, or even confusion about God's will, evaporate when you keep your priorities right. C. S. Lewis taught that if we put first things first, we will get second things thrown in. However, if we put second things first, we will end up losing both first and second things (1970, 280).

Another very important principle is discipleship. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). We are called to follow, serve, and obey our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Disciples keep their eyes focused on Jesus. He must be the center of the picture.

In a Berlin art gallery is a famous painting by Adolf Menzel (1815–1905). What makes the painting unique is that it is partially finished. The artist intended to show Frederick the Great speaking with some of his advisors. He painted the advisors and background but left a place in the center of the canvas to paint the king, outlined in charcoal. However, the artist died before he finished the painting, and Frederick was never in the picture.

Is Jesus truly in the picture of your life? Is He your focus? When death comes, the most important question

will not be how much money you accumulated, or even how many friends you have in the world. The most important question asked will be if you faithfully loved and served your Master.

So, how do you learn the great principles of the Bible? You need to spend time reading and studying it. You listen carefully when God's Word is being preached. It takes time and effort, but the rewards are certainly worth it.

The Holy Spirit and Christians

Objective 5:

Explain the role of the Holy Spirit in leading Christians.

There are many verses in the Bible that reveal how much the Holy Spirit does for us. Here are two examples. Romans 8:14 says, "Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God." Jesus says, "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13).

What is the significance of this? True Christians have an internal guidance system in the person of the Holy Spirit. For many centuries, boats and ships relied on external methods of guidance. Sailors would look at the stars, and they would follow the shoreline when possible. Then, compasses were invented. Later, sailors began to use radio, sonar, and radar to help them navigate. These were all external forms of guidance. Then in the 1950s, a new means of guidance was implemented. It did not require stars, land, radio waves, or anything external to function. This new "internal guidance system" was based on gyros. As a result, one nuclear-powered submarine was able to leave Hawaii, travel to the North Pole under the ice, and then cruise on to England—using its internal guidance system, and all the while submerged. Think of the Holy Spirit as the internal, living, all-knowing, all-powerful personal navigator guiding your life.

Let us be specific now. What does it mean to have the Spirit guide us? Does He always speak audibly to us? Too

many people go around claiming, “The Lord said...” or “The Lord told me...” when in fact the Lord said nothing specifically to them at all. Do not ever get into the habit of talking that way. It borders on blasphemy. Occasionally, the Spirit speaks audibly, but this is not the usual method.

What does the Spirit reveal to us? Does He tell us what brand of deodorant or toothpaste to buy? That is doubtful. Early in the Christian life, most of us realize that the Lord gives quite a bit of liberty in the ordinary routine matters of daily life. People who want the Lord to tell them how to comb their hair or what color socks to put on need to mature spiritually. God has given us brains to figure out those mundane activities. We do not have to be afraid that somehow we are going to sin by not asking the Lord what brand of toothpaste to use.

Here are four things to keep in mind about the Spirit's guidance.

- Normally, the Holy Spirit's guidance comes as a steady impression that does not leave us. It is more than just a passing whim or feeling. The call of God to full-time ministry often comes that way. The Spirit continues to cause someone to think about that call day and night; it does not leave.
- The Holy Spirit's impressions on our heart and mind will often guide us away from a dangerous course of action.
- The Holy Spirit's communication will guide us to a place where He can use us. In Acts 8, Philip is led by the Spirit to witness to an Ethiopian eunuch about Christ. As a result, the Ethiopian traveler is won to Christ and baptized.
- The Holy Spirit will give us peace and confirm to us when we are on track doing God's will. If we get off track, the Spirit will be quick to show us that, too.

Ask the Lord to lead you by His Spirit daily, and expect His help. As a safeguard, carefully compare any impression that you think may be from the Spirit with the principles already revealed in the Bible. If the impression

is really from the Spirit, it will always conform to God's revealed will in Scripture.

God's Use of Circumstances and People

Objective 6:

Describe how God uses circumstances to direct the lives of His people.

God's Use of Circumstances

Circumstances are the events that happen around us and to us. In Acts 19, Paul arrives in Ephesus. He is greatly used by the Lord there, but he also faces tremendous opposition. However, Paul understands that it is God's will for him to stay in Ephesus and not flee. How? Circumstances. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 16:8–9, "But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me." Paul did not necessarily hear a voice from heaven saying, "Remain in Ephesus." He saw by the way God was moving and saving souls in the city and the need to disciple new converts that it was not yet time for him to leave.

Think of circumstances as God's traffic lights. What are traffic lights for? If you are driving, they tell you when to go and when to stop. Many accidents occur when people in their cars do not pay attention to the traffic lights. In the Christian life, God will often use circumstances to guide us.

Here is an example. Let us say that you feel it is time to relocate to another area. You would like a change in scenery. You want to do something for the Lord in another city or maybe even another country. However, there are some circumstances that hinder you from making that move: no job or housing in the new location; your mate is dead-set against it; and you do not have complete peace. So, you pray diligently, "Lord, show me if this move is your will." You patiently wait for God to give you guidance. In the end, you see that the circumstances do not change. No job opens up. Your

mate is not in agreement with you. You have no lead on a place to live. And you still do not have peace about it. These circumstances are very good indicators that God does not approve of your relocating.

It is foolish to charge ahead and do something when God has tried to show you through circumstances that you should not attempt it. In Proverbs 22:3, we read, "A prudent man sees danger and takes refuge, but the simple keep going and suffer for it."

You may ask, "But can't the devil sometimes try to hinder us and destroy our faith by placing obstacles in our way? How do I know if the circumstances are one of God's red lights or one of the enemy's obstacles?" It is true that Satan often seeks to hinder us, especially when we are eager to do God's will. The Bible makes it clear that our enemy is like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8). Paul wrote that we should put on the whole armor of God so we can take our stand against the devil's schemes (Ephesians 6:11). That is why we must maintain a close walk with God and be spiritually strong.

But keep this mind—the devil is not all-knowing like God. Satan and his network of demons, though ruthless and fierce, are finite beings with limitations. The enemy is not aware of all the intricacies of God's wonderful plan for our lives and cannot know simultaneously how the Spirit is leading every child of God throughout the world. The apostle Paul writes, "For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God" (1 Corinthians 2:11–12). All the enemy can do is harass us, attempt to confuse us as we seek to discern God's will, and hinder us with obstacles after God has given clear direction.

To dispel confusion, review what many godly Christians have learned over the centuries:

- Recognize that God is not the author of confusion;
- Stay in God's Word;
- Keep praying to God for clarity of thought;

- Claim God's promises for guidance;
- Share your concerns with mature believers who care about your spiritual well-being and can give you guidance;
- Persevere until the uncertainty lifts;
- Do not make any rash decisions.

Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only can you do what was done to the fig tree, but also you can say to this mountain, "Go, throw yourself into the sea," and it will be done" (Matthew 21:21). Jesus said this because He knew that challenges would arise and that the devil would throw up obstacles to keep us from doing God's will. The Lord wanted us to know that we had authority to tear down anything the enemy would put in our way.

There will be indicators of caution throughout life as we are led by God. Aren't you glad that you are not alone, trying to navigate the road ahead? Take time today to consider if God might be showing you something important through circumstances. It might be helpful now to make a list of circumstances that you need to evaluate.

God's Use of People

How do you feel about taking advice? Some people do not like to do it for fear someone is going to tell them what they do not want to hear—like the truth. Others are afraid to receive advice for fear that they are going to be led astray. Other people are embarrassed to ask advice or counsel because they think it will make them look foolish. This is probably one of the worst reasons not to seek advice. It is not a sign of weakness or ignorance to seek advice. In fact, the Bible reveals that it is a wise thing to do.

Consider these two verses:

- "The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice." (Proverbs 12:15)
- "For waging war you need guidance, and for victory many advisers." (Proverbs 24:6)

No matter who you are—rich or poor, educated or uneducated—whenever you are making a major decision about the will of God that will affect your life and that of others, you should seek the input, advice, and counsel of godly people. By talking it over, you allow God to intervene and speak into your life.

The key is talking to the right people—individuals who truly love God, who are full of the Spirit, demonstrate the fruit of godliness, serve the Lord faithfully, who want God's very best for your life, and who are known for wisdom. If you ask an unspiritual or foolish person for advice, you are liable to get bad counsel. A Danish proverb says, "He who builds according to every man's advice will have a crooked house." In your Bible-believing church, there are likely several people that would be happy to listen to you and offer their insights to help you; your pastors and elders, deacons, teachers, and other leaders are prime choices.

Conclusion

Knowing and doing God's will does not have to be a fearful, mystical experience filled with uncertainty. It is God's desire to give us direction and guidance. The most fulfilled people are those who know God's will and do it. David Livingstone, the famous Scottish missionary and explorer of Africa, spent many years in remote corners of that continent. He was often sick and faced innumerable hardships. Once, he was attacked and mauled by a lion, leaving one of his arms virtually useless. Although he lost friends and loved ones, he declared, "I had rather be in the heart of Africa in the will of God than on the throne of England out of the will of God" (Trivette, under "Stay in this Field").

If you are seeking direction from God about His will for your life, remember the following:

1. The process starts with being saved and earnestly desiring to know God's will.
2. You need to pray and ask God to show you His will.

3. You should endeavor to maintain a godly life with God's help.
4. Go to the Word of God for guidance, and be led by its principles.
5. Trust the Holy Spirit to lead and guide you.
6. Pay attention to what God may be doing in your life through circumstances.
7. Seek godly people for guidance.

Reference List

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Trivette, Ken. Stay in this Field. <http://www.sermonsearch.com/content.aspx?id=15759> (accessed Aug. 2, 2007).

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SUGGESTED SCRIPTURES TO MEMORIZE:

Psalm 119:105
Proverbs 12:15
Proverbs 22:3
Jeremiah 29:11
Romans 8:14
Romans 12:1–2
Ephesians 5:17
James 1:5

SELF-TEST

After studying the lesson, please read each study question carefully and circle the correct response. There is one correct response for each question.

1. *How can we be sure God wants us to know His will?*
 - a) *It makes sense.*
 - b) *The Bible tells us so.*
 - c) *All religions of the world emphasize the importance of knowing God's will.*

2. *What is the fundamental requirement for receiving guidance from God?*
 - a) *You must be born again.*
 - b) *You must be baptized.*
 - c) *You must go to church every Sunday.*

3. *How does prayer help in discerning the will of God?*
 - a) *Through prayer, you express your need for guidance and have faith that God will answer your request.*
 - b) *Through prayer, you experience peace and feel better.*
 - c) *Prayer is the only way to gain God's favor.*

4. *God will not reveal everything about His future plans for us all at once because*
 - a) *God likes to see His children struggle before He offers guidance.*
 - b) *He does not know the complete future, only parts of it.*
 - c) *God expects us to come to Him often and depend on Him.*

5. *Which response indicates a correct attitude when praying about God's will?*
 - a) *"God, I want to know your will, but please show me a few other options."*
 - b) *"God, I want to know your will and obey, no matter what it is."*
 - c) *"God, I want to know your will as long as it does not interfere with my plans."*

6. *Godliness is key to coming to know God's will because a godly person*
 - a) *never makes mistakes or sins.*
 - b) *demonstrates that his or her life is a living sacrifice unto God.*
 - c) *knows he or she is superior to most others.*
7. *The value of the Scripture is that it*
 - a) *serves as the foundation for understanding God's will.*
 - b) *is burdensome and irrelevant.*
 - c) *shows us what color and style of clothes to wear each day.*
8. *In the lesson, the Holy Spirit is compared to*
 - a) *a meteorologist.*
 - b) *a salesman who tries to convince you to buy his product.*
 - c) *an internal, all-powerful personal navigator.*
9. *When seeking God's will, turning to fellow Christians for advice is a*
 - a) *sure sign that you do not really trust God.*
 - b) *sign of weakness and immaturity.*
 - c) *chance to let God intervene and speak into your life.*
10. *What characteristics should you look for in someone who might offer you counsel?*
 - a) *He or she should have at least an advanced degree in counseling, three years of clinical experience, and serve on staff of a large church or private counseling center.*
 - b) *He or she should love God, be full of the Spirit, demonstrate the fruit of godliness, serve the Lord faithfully, want God's best for your life, and have wisdom.*
 - c) *He or she should be at least sixty-five years of age, a baptized church member, sing in the choir, teach a Sunday School class, and enjoy listening to other people's problems.*

ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

Note: You can check your answers by using the answer guide. The numbers in the parentheses indicate which objective in the lesson to check.

1. *b (10.1)*
2. *a (10.1)*
3. *a (10.2)*
4. *c (10.2)*
5. *b (10.2)*
6. *b (10.3)*
7. *a (10.4)*
8. *c (10.5)*
9. *c (10.6)*
10. *b (10.6)*

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