

The Will of God and the Call of God

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First, the Short Answer

[The long answer is the same as the short answer, it just takes longer.]

There are three statements I would like to make about knowing God's will — two premises and a conclusion.

1. We know God is involved in His creation and that He is involved in the circumstances of our lives (Roman 8:14 &16; Psalm 139:1-5).
2. We do not know what God is doing through the circumstances of our lives (Ecclesiastes 3:11; 11:5; John 3:8), except that He is conforming us to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29).
3. Conclusion: Therefore, we cannot use our circumstances as a message from God for decision making (Deuteronomy 29:29).

The Individual Will of God

I suggest that the Bible nowhere teaches us to look for an individual will of God for our lives. There is a sovereign plan of God being worked out in the lives of believers individually, and the righteous character of God is revealed in the Bible for everyone to follow individually. But there is no personal will of God which we should try to identify in (non-moral) areas not revealed in the Bible—such as, taking a certain job, going to a certain school, buying or selling a house or marrying a certain person.

People in the Bible Who Were Individually Led

The individual-will view argues that many people in the Bible were individually led by God, implying the Bible teaches an individual will of God for our lives. There are two problems with that.

The Bible is the specific record of God's revelation given to certain individuals. The Bible nowhere implies all believers should expect or attempt to find an individual will of God. We are not prophets, kings of Israel, apostles, or authors of the Bible. The point of the Bible is that God revealed certain things to certain people, not that God continually reveals things to everyone.

There was over 1000 years between the revelation to Adam and the revelation to Noah. There was about 500 years between the last revelation to Noah and the revelation to Abraham. There was about 500 years between the revelation to Abraham and the revelation to Moses. (What was life like in your town 500 years ago? What will life be like 500 years from now?)

Next, God gave verbal revelation to Moses, Joshua, the Judges, and the prophets (for about 1000 years). Then there was another 400 years of no revelation until the time of Christ and the apostles. Now there has been 2000 years without verbal revelation from God (which seems to be consistent with the prediction of Peter in 2 Peter 3:3-10). But there is no thought in the Bible that God will reveal Himself to believers on a regular basis.

The individual will of God in the Bible was given directly, verbally, and supernaturally. Consider Abraham (Genesis 12:1; 18:1), Moses (Exodus 3:14), Joshua (Joshua 1:1), Gideon (Judges 6: 14, 36-37), David (2 Samuel 2:3-31), and Paul (Acts 9:5). These people had direct verbal revelation from God. But they did not look at their circumstance to determine the leading of God.

For example, Gideon was given a verbal revelation from God. Then to confirm it he put out the fleece. The fleece was not to find God's will but to confirm that the revelation, which he had already supernaturally received, was from God (Judges 6:36-37).

- **Judges 6:14** *The LORD looked at him and said, "Go in this your strength and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian. Have I not sent you?"*
- **Judges 6:36** *Then Gideon said to God, "If You will deliver Israel through me, as You have spoken,*
- **Judges 6:37** *behold, I will put a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece only, and it is dry on all the ground, then I will know that You will deliver Israel through me, as You have spoken."*

Many point to the "still small voice" (KJV) that spoke to Elijah (1 Kings 19:12). But remember that still small voice was a voice, not a leading from circumstances.

- **1 Kings 19:12** *And after the earthquake a fire; but the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice.*
- **1 Kings 19:13** *And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entering in of the cave. And, behold, there came a voice unto him, and said, What doest thou here, Elijah?*

When Elijah followed circumstances, he was fleeing from Jezebel.

When David followed circumstances and the advice of his friends, he repented of it. We read:

- **1 Samuel 24:4** *The men of David said to him, "Behold, this is the day of which the LORD said to you, 'Behold; I am about to give your enemy into your hand, and you shall do to him as it seems good to you.'" Then David arose and cut off the edge of Saul's robe secretly.*
- **1 Samuel 24:5** *It came about afterward that David's conscience bothered him because he had cut off the edge of Saul's robe.*
- **1 Samuel 24:6** *So he said to his men, "Far be it from me because of the LORD that I should do this thing to my lord, the LORD'S anointed, to stretch out my hand against him, since he is the LORD'S anointed."*

We Should Not Look to Circumstances to Find What God Has Revealed

God criticized Job for only one thing — looking to his circumstances to find out what God was doing (Job 38:2; 42:3).

David refused to decide God's will for his life through circumstances (1 Samuel 24:4-17; 26:8-10; 2 Samuel 10-15). When David followed the circumstance and the advice of his friends he repented of it. We read:

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The Apostle Paul followed direct verbal revelation from God (Acts 9:1-6; 16:16; 18:9-10), not the circumstances of his life (Acts 21:4, 10-14). If Paul had determined God's will through circumstances, he certainly would not have gone on missionary journeys, preached in synagogues, and revisited cities where his life was threatened.

How should Peter and John discern the will of God through circumstances when they were arrested and imprisoned for preaching the Gospel (Acts 4:1-20)? Should they have concluded that God was telling them not to preach the Gospel? Should they conclude that God was testing them to see if they would continue to preach the Gospel? Should they conclude that God is telling them not to preach in Jerusalem? Should they conclude that God is telling them to continue to preach the Gospel in Jerusalem as an example? Which is it? Buy circumstances there is no way to know. It was revelation from God, not circumstances, that guided the apostles.

A man I disciple has some friends who are missionaries in Brazil. Recently, the wife was up to Michigan on some family business and my friend took her back to the airport. On the way he asked her how it was going. She said that they were having money problems and could not tell if God was telling them to return to the States or if He was testing their faith.

Well, of course, she couldn't tell what to do because they determined the will of God through circumstances. There is absolutely no way to tell if a lack of money is a leading to move or stay.

We Should Look to the Bible to Determine God's Revealed Directive Will

Our task is *handling accurately the word of truth*, not pursuing an individual circumstantial will of God (2 Timothy 2:15, also see Hebrews 4:12 and 2 Timothy 3:16-17). Traditional "God's will" passages refer to following God's biblically revealed directive will, not looking for an individual circumstantial will (Psalm 32:8-9; 119:101-104; Proverbs 3:1, 5-6; Colossians 1:9).

- **Psalm 32:8** *I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go; I will counsel you with My eye upon you.*
- **Psalm 32:9** *Do not be as the horse or as the mule which have no understanding, Whose trappings include bit and bridle to hold them in check, Otherwise they will not come near to you.*
- **Psalm 119:101** *I have restrained my feet from every evil way, That I may keep Your word.*
- **Psalm 119:102** *I have not turned aside from Your ordinances, For You Yourself have taught me.*
- **Psalm 119:103** *How sweet are Your words to my taste! Yes, sweeter than honey to my mouth!*
- **Psalm 119:104** *From Your precepts I get understanding; Therefore I hate every false way.*
- **Proverbs 3:1** *My son, do not forget my teaching, But let your heart keep my commandments;*
- **Proverbs 3:5** *Trust in the LORD with all your heart, And do not lean on your own understanding.*
- **Proverbs 3:6** *In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He will make your paths straight.*
- **Proverbs 3:7** *Do not be wise in your own eyes; Fear the LORD and turn away from evil.*

Notice there is nothing here about using our circumstances as a leading from God for decision-making.

Problems with Seeking an Individual Will of God

- (1) When we pray for something and look for something, we tend to find something, whether or not it exists. When I ask, “Should I buy a different house?” something will come along sooner or later which I will interpret as an answer. Of course, God may specifically give us what we specifically ask for, and we should give thanks in everything (1 Thessalonians 5:18). But there is no conclusive way to know any specific event is that answer. We cannot determine God’s individual involvement. God is God, not a “Jeannie in a bottle.”
- (2) Circumstances and feelings (often interpreted as “the work of the Holy Spirit”) can lead to frustration when we get mixed signals.
- (3) Foolish, even disastrous, decisions are justified by “God led me to...”, thus removing personal responsibility.
- (4) In non-moral areas, there is no simple way to tell if circumstances are from God, the Devil, or wishful thinking.
- (5) Circumstances and hindrances to circumstantial leading might be a closed door or a test of faith, each requiring the opposite response.
- (6) Foolish delays can be incurred while “waiting on God.”
- (7) The individual-will mentality must be subjectively abandoned at some point. We do not usually look for “guidance” in putting on our socks in the morning.
- (8) Seeking one right individual will, can keep us from gratitude for several good opportunities.
- (9) To add something to the Bible (like circumstances or feelings) only tends to color or negate the Bible’s input. Circumstantial opportunities might justify sinful debt, an unbiblical marriage, or illegitimate leadership.
- (10) Using the Bible out of context, by, say, opening it to a chance verse or phrase, is to use it as a pair of dice or a deck of cards, such as the old joke, “Judas hanged himself ... go thou and do likewise.”

Finding God’s Will—The Way of Wisdom

Possibly the biggest problem with seeking the illusive individual will of God through circumstances, experiences, and feelings is that it distracts from focusing on the wisdom of God’s directive will revealed by studying the Scriptures (2 Timothy 2:15; 3:16-17). Since God has only revealed His sovereign plan (realized through what actually happens) and His directive will (stated in the Bible), then we can assume these are sufficient for decision making. In other words, the teaching of the Bible dictates our moral actions, and wisdom derived from the Bible directs our non-moral decisions.

Here Are Some Suggestions for Decision Making Based on Wisdom

- (1) Look back at your past decisions. What have been the results of those decisions? Maturity comes from training yourself to make good decisions (Hebrews 5:14).
- **Hebrews 5:14** *But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil.*
- (2) Look for the consistent patterns of life. Wisdom comes from knowing the regular patterns of events (Proverbs 1:1-5, 21, 22; 6:6-11, 30:24-28). So, following unusual circumstances (like unexpected phone calls, gifts, or coincidences) runs contrary to wisdom. Wisdom is a firm grasp of the obvious.
- **Proverbs 1:1** *The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel:*
 - **Proverbs 1:2** *To know wisdom and instruction, To discern the sayings of understanding,*
 - **Proverbs 1:3** *To receive instruction in wise behavior, Righteousness, justice and equity;*
 - **Proverbs 1:4** *To give prudence to the naive, To the youth knowledge and discretion,*
 - **Proverbs 1:5** *A wise man will hear and increase in learning, And a man of understanding will acquire wise counsel,*
 - **Proverbs 1:21** *At the head of the noisy streets she cries out; At the entrance of the gates in the city she utters her sayings:*
 - **Proverbs 1:22** *How long, O naive ones, will you love being simple-minded? And scoffers delight themselves in scoffing And fools hate knowledge?*
- (3) Evaluate life's patterns from God's point of view. There is worldly wisdom and godly wisdom (1 Corinthians 2:13, 14). Godly wisdom comes from practicing the attitudes revealed in the Bible (like in Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Sermon on the Mount [Matthew 5-7], the Fruit of the Spirit [Galatians 5], the characteristic of love [1 Corinthians 13], etc.).
- **1 Corinthians 2:12** *Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God,*
 - **1 Corinthians 2:13** *which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words.*
 - **1 Corinthians 2:14** *But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.*
 - **1 Corinthians 2:15** *But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no one.*
 - **1 Corinthians 2:16** *For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, THAT HE WILL INSTRUCT HIM? But we have the mind of Christ.*
- (4) Make the most of every opportunity for the Kingdom of God (Ephesians 5:15-16; Colossians 4:5).
- (5) Study the situation. Use the circumstances as a context to guide your decision making, not as something pointing out God's individual will. That includes counting the cost (Luke 14:28), being well informed (Hosea 4:6), and using wise counsel (Exodus 18:19, Proverbs 19:20). Examine the situation like Nehemiah examined the walls of Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2:11-16; see also Joshua 2).
- (6) Study the Bible for God's attitudes (Micah 6:8). The actions of God supply a basis for decision making even in non-moral areas (Psalm 119:97-105).
- (7) Look for what is closest to the heart of God, not what you can get by with or away with. Settle for second-best financially and organizationally but not morally (1 Corinthians 6:9-10).

Determining the Call of God for Our Lives

Defining a Call of God

The Apostle Paul wrote ...*whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified* (Romans 8:29-30). So the call of God is the predetermination of our salvation.

The call of God deals with our salvation, not our service

Os Guinness put it this way:

“There is not a single instance in the New Testament of God’s special call to anyone into a paid occupation or into the role of a religious professional” (“The Call,” p. 52).

The only call of God to a position of service in the New Testament was to the original apostles (Romans 1:1; 1 Corinthians 1:1). The apostles were given unique miraculous power by the Holy Spirit to bring the Gospel to the world to start the church (Matthew 16:19; Acts 1:8; 5:1-11; Romans 15:15-19). But after Paul told the Corinthians he was called to be an apostle, he wrote:

to the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours (1 Corinthians 1:2). He went on to say: *God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord* (1:9). So Paul was called to be an apostle, but the church was called to a position of fellowship with Christ.

The exhortation Paul gave the church for service was not to look for a “call” of God but to pursue a **worthy walk** with God. He said:

I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, entreat you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called (Ephesians 4:1).

So the question we should be asking is not, “What is our calling?” but “How can we walk worthy of our calling?”

How Not to Determine the Walk of God

Christian leadership throughout history consisted of people like Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Spurgeon, Moody, C. S. Lewis (and the list could go on and on). These people clearly walked worthy of their calling. Yet they did not focus on mystical voices, dreams, visions, etc. And doesn't it seem a bit odd that those who claim such things are usually a bit odd?

How to Walk in a Manner Worthy of the Call of God

Here are 12 ideas:

1. It will always be in a direction which conforms us to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29).
For example, a worthy walk will never include sex outside of marriage, divorce, cheating on your taxes, being a woman elder or homosexuality.

2. It will always be in the direction of building the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33).
For example, a worthy walk will not build something which is based upon pride.

3. It is framed by our physical situation (1 Samuel 2:6-8).

That includes things like our race, parental background, physical size, strength, age, culture, and wealth. For example, my worthy walk will not include being an Olympic athlete. Walking worthy for me requires physical exercise but not athletic competition.

4. It is blooming where we are planted (1 Corinthians 8:20, 24).

Not that we will always stay where we currently live, but our walk begins in our own Jerusalem, then extends to our Judea, Samaria, and remotest part of our world (Acts 1:8).

5. It is tuned to our personality (Daniel 1:3-4).

That means our intellect, emotions, and will. My worthy walk will not be as a salesman, a surgeon, or an actor. Your worthy walk might be those occupations, but they don't fit my personality. Personalities can be developed, but they also have real limits. We are defined, in part, by our limitations.

6. It considers our talents (Exodus 36:1-2).

We are also defined by our assets. We all have certain natural abilities we were born with. Those are usually determined by (a) what comes easiest to us and (b) what motivates us. For example, I am a teacher, not a musician.

7. It considers our spiritual gifts (Romans 12:6-8).

All believers also have spiritual abilities we receive at our spiritual rebirth. These are not always obvious to a new believer and cannot be located with some personality test. These become evident as we walk worthy of our call to salvation (Ephesians 4:1; Romans 12:1-2).

8. It includes our Godly desires (1 Corinthians 9:23).

Don't overlook the crucial question, "What do you **want** to do?" Even the apostles were men who did what they wanted to do (John 21:15-17; Acts 15:35-37; 16:3).

9. It is outlined by our opportunities (Genesis 41:39-44; 50:20).

God gave each of us certain life situations, not available to others. For example, I was invited to teach the Bible in Eastern Europe and Russia beginning in 1983. I could have never created those opportunities.

10. It is expanded by our convictions (Nehemiah 1:4-11).

This develops our walk beyond "blooming where we are planted." This takes us from our personal Jerusalem to the remotest parts of our earth. As we observe the state of the church around us, we feel convicted to address certain issues. For example, in 1981, I was convicted of the need to disciple men.

11. It is sensitive to what is going on in our own generation (Acts 13:36).

Each generation is to focus on reaching its own. We can learn from the past. When we die, we hand off the baton to the next generation. But neither of those are our assignment. We are called to be used of Christ as He builds His church now.

12. It looks for opportunities to serve God (Isaiah 6:8; 1 Thessalonians 1:6-8; 3 John 5-6).

We should not be waiting around for God to call us into service. We should look for ways to serve God in our present roles and life situations.