

Determining the Lord's Will

*"I delight to do thy
will, O my God:
yea, thy law is
within my heart."
—Psalm 40:8*

A CONCISE DEFINITION OF full consecration to God is found in our opening verse. Although these words of the psalmist prophetically speak

of Jesus, they also express the attitude which Jesus' "body" members, "the church," must have fully developed in them in order to enter into the kingdom of heaven. (John 4:34; Col. 1:18; Rom. 7:22) Our "will" includes our desires, our delights, what we take pleasure in and the things we want. When we speak of God's will, we speak of God's desires, his delights, what he takes pleasure in, what he wants and what he approves of and deems acceptable.

The Scriptures point out important features concerning God's will for his people. For example, in order to do the Father's will, we must know what his will is. Note Paul's desire that we "might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding." (Col. 1:9) However, it is not enough to know what God's will is. It is vitally important to do his will. As Jesus said, "Not

every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.”—Matt. 7:21

The apostle further tells us that God’s will must be done from the heart—that is, it must be rooted in our heart’s desire to please him. He states: “Not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.” (Eph. 6:6) Summing up the eternal importance of doing God’s will, the Apostle John writes, “He that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.”—I John 2:17

LEARNING HIS WILL

Those who have taken the step of full consecration to God, whether recently or many years ago, have dedicated their lives to the doing of his will. Yet, actually knowing and doing in full accord with the divine will is often a struggle.

The influences of the world, the adversary, and our own weak flesh hinder us at times from doing the Lord’s will to the extent we would like. As with many endeavors in the Christian walk, the matter of doing God’s will is something we learn over time through experience. Our sentiment in all this is that expressed by the psalmist, “Teach me to do thy will.” (Ps. 143:10) Before we can do the Heavenly Father’s will, however, we must first know what his will is. This is the primary focus of this lesson—that of determining the Lord’s will.

It is true that in many of our day-to-day experiences of life it is quite easy to determine the Lord’s will, both in temporal and spiritual ways. If we are employed, we believe God would be pleased that we go to our job each day and carry it out to the best of

our ability. (Col. 3:23) If we have a home, he would expect us, as part of his will, to take care of it and not let it fall into disrepair. The Lord, we believe, is also pleased that we take reasonable care of our physical bodies and our health, as well as look to the needs of our family. These and many others are temporal things, yet they are part of our stewardship, and it is the divine will that we take care of these responsibilities as part of our consecration vows.—I Tim. 5:8

Likewise, concerning the important spiritual responsibilities of our life, we can easily understand that it is the Lord's will that we come to meetings regularly, attend conventions when possible, spend time in study, prayer and meditation, speak the Gospel message to others, and develop our character in the likeness of our head, Christ Jesus. These are all part of God's will.

GOD'S WILL NOT ALWAYS OBVIOUS

The focus of this lesson, however, is not so much the clear-cut matters described above, important though they are, but on the experiences of life in which the Lord's will is not so obvious. Suffice it to say that in some experiences it may be difficult to determine God's will and, in those cases, we need assistance and help to make such a determination. The Scriptures provide some "ground rules" for helping us determine God's will.

The first of these rules is that we cannot determine God's will in an experience by using worldly, or fleshly, thinking. "Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable,

and perfect, will of God.” (Rom. 12:2) Notice that the will of God is proven by having our mind transformed from “this world” and renewed by the indwelling of God’s Holy Spirit. To express it another way, we must use Godlike, or Christlike, spiritual thinking to determine the divine will.

A second ground rule for determining the Lord’s will is that we must be careful how we live. Paul makes this connection between living carefully and understanding the will of the Lord with these words, “Be careful how you live. Do not be unwise but wise, making the best use of your time because the times are evil. Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is.”—Eph. 5:15-17, *International Standard Version*

A SCRIPTURAL TOUCHSTONE

Even with these two general rules, we sometimes struggle in determining the Lord’s will. However, God, in his great love, has provided additional guidance to help us in our endeavor to know and do his will.

One such tool is found in the scriptural standard, “Thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, This is the way, walk ye in it, when ye turn to the right hand, and when ye turn to the left.” (Isa. 30:21) Notice in this Scripture that God knows we will face experiences in life which present us with a choice to go either in one direction or another. When we encounter such experiences, we should realize that we need to be especially guided by God in our decision making.

The “word behind thee” is not a literal voice, but figurative, referring to the tools available to help

us determine the Lord's will. These tools or methods that may say to us symbolically, "this is the way, walk ye in it," are suggested as follows: 1) Prayer; 2) The Word of God; 3) Our brethren; 4) Family; and 5) Past experience and God's providence.

Having begun by following the ground rules of using spiritual thinking and being careful how we live, prayer becomes an important "word" behind us to assist in determining the Lord's will. Prayer, in fact, should be used in conjunction with all the other tools we will discuss. As Jesus asked in his model petition to God, "Thy will be done."—Matt. 6:10

Paul describes prayer as the final element of the Christian's armor, stating, "Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints." (Eph. 6:18) Notice in this verse we are admonished not only to be praying, but also watching. As we pray to know the Lord's will, let us remember also to look closely for God's leadings, to watch for providences in which his will might be revealed. If we pray and then watch carefully, the Lord's will may become more evident to us.

In the garden of Gethsemane Jesus admonished his disciples, saying "Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation." (Matt. 26:41) In contrast with Paul's words in Eph. 6:18, here Jesus reverses the order and says first to watch and then pray. This means to show our desire, our interest, and our attentiveness before we pray to God about a matter by displaying a watchful attitude. Thus, we are to first watch, then pray, and subsequently continue to watch for his will to be revealed.

Prayer is so very important. We must talk to our Heavenly Father; after all, it is his will that we want to know, and have covenanted to do. We should be prompt to talk to the very one whose will we are trying to do and to whom we are striving to please —“continuing instant in prayer.”—Rom. 12:12

GOD’S WORD AN IMPORTANT TOOL

Another important tool which speaks as a “word behind” us are the Scriptures themselves, the Word of God. Paul states, “Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness: that the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work.”—II Tim. 3:16,17, *American Standard Version*

Here Paul points out that the Scriptures are provided for “teaching” us, so that we might be furnished completely for “every good work.” Good works are part of God’s will for us. Therefore, in order to determine what works he would be pleased to have us engage in, we must go to the Scriptures and find the “instruction which is in righteousness” which they provide.

The primary work which the Scriptures teach us to be engaged in, as part of God’s will for us, is that of sanctification. Paul emphatically states, “This is the will of God, even your sanctification.” (I Thess. 4:3) Here the word sanctification means “to make holy or to purify,” and it includes also the thought of separation to God, as well as separation from evil things and ways.

On the night in which he would be betrayed, Jesus prayed for his disciples, asking his Heavenly

Father to “sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.” (John 17:17) This verse indicates it is God’s Word or “truth” which sanctifies us, and it is his will that this work of sanctification take place. Conversely, that which does not sanctify us, and which does not set us apart for the Lord, cannot be part of the divine will for us.

Another constant truth about the Lord’s will which we find in the Word of God is: “In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.” (I Thess. 5:18) Thus, that which does not inculcate a feeling of thanks to God also cannot have any part in being his will for us.

The Bible is the ultimate and infallible word behind us in decision making. However, we must use it, study it, and make it our own, in order for it to truly help us in determining the Lord’s will. If we do not utilize its help, we place ourselves at a great disadvantage. As we seek to know more fully God’s will, let us go to the Scriptures, continuing also to watch and pray.

BRETHREN AND FAMILY AS ADDITIONAL HELPS

A third tool God has graciously given as a “word behind” us is our brethren, fellow members of the body of Christ. Many times, it is these who assist us in determining the Lord’s will when it otherwise seems unclear. Paul on numerous occasions spoke of the fact that brethren in one place were instrumental in helping those somewhere else, most often by way of example.

One such comment was directed to the brethren of Thessalonica. Paul wrote to them, saying “You became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and

Achaia.” (I Thess. 1:7, *English Standard Version*) We too have the privilege of looking to fellow members of the body of Christ, either collectively or individually, as a source of example and help as we seek to determine the Lord’s will.

Addressing the elders, the Apostle Peter admonished, “Be examples to the flock.” (I Pet. 5:3, *ISV*) At times, it may be helpful to look to the elders of the congregation, either by personal contact with them, or by their example, to gain insight into the Lord’s will. However, this is not just the responsibility of elders, nor should we only look to them for guidance. All the Lord’s footstep followers should be examples and willing to help each other in times when determining the will of God is difficult. We all have the privilege to do as Paul admonished Timothy, “Be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity.” —I Tim. 4:12

This important tool of the brethren cannot be of use to us unless we have regular contact with them. This can be done through regular meetings together and other opportunities for more private fellowship. We can also give, or receive, words of encouragement through cards or letters, phone calls, or email. All of these are means by which we can utilize this tool to assist us in determining God’s will. We should remember Paul’s words, “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.”—Heb. 10:25

Our natural families can also be a useful tool of assistance to us as we seek to determine the Lord’s will, especially if they are consecrated brethren,

members of the household of faith. Paul recounted the great and positive impact that Timothy's natural family had in the development of his faith, saying, "I thank God whom I serve ... as I remember you constantly in my prayers night and day. I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well." (II Tim. 1:3,5 *ESV*) From Paul's words we understand that the faith possessed first by Timothy's grandmother and then his mother had been of much influence in his life, and it likely helped him on many occasions to find needed answers as to what the will of the Lord was.

We should ask ourselves, "Am I giving heed to the words and examples of others around me in my decision making?" Conversely, "Am I showing forth the proper words and examples to others who may need assistance in decision making?" This is a two-way proposition. We can benefit from others in seeking the Lord's will, and we can also help others in doing the same thing, all by both recognizing and being examples one to another.

GOD'S PROVIDENCE IN EXPERIENCES

A fifth tool in determining the Lord's will is in viewing our experiences, both past and present, with a view towards God's overruling providence in them. This is a most valuable and indispensable tool in determining the Lord's will.

Paul also expresses our progression through experience this way, "We glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; And patience, experience; and experience, hope: And

hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which is given unto us.” (Rom. 5:3-5) True maturity, both naturally and spiritually, comes best through experience. Paul spoke of his own spiritual maturity by using the example of the natural man, “When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.”—I Cor. 13:11

We are to claim God’s promises in our experiences, remembering that his providence is always there to guide us if we are submissive to him. “My God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 4:19) Seeing the Lord’s will through our experiences is part of being properly exercised by them. As Paul wrote, “Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.”—Heb. 12:11

If we truly believe our experiences are “tailor-made” by our Heavenly Father, and they are, then we should be on the alert because his will may be indicated in them.

THE HOLY SPIRIT NECESSARY

Another very important element which allows all of the aforementioned tools to work together in harmony is the Holy Spirit, God’s power and influence directed in our lives. Note that Ephesians 5:15-17, previously quoted in our lesson and which spoke of being careful how we live, is immediately followed by the words, “Be filled with the Spirit.”—vs. 18

The power and influence of God's Holy Spirit assists in using all the various tools he has provided to us to help in determining the divine will. Therefore, for example, as we utilize the first tool of prayer and watching, we should include in our prayers the request for more of the Holy Spirit's guidance in seeking God's will.—Luke 11:13

Summarizing these tools as they relate to the touchstone scripture of Isaiah 30:21, we see that we are to use prayer, the Bible, the brethren, our family, and the experiences of life as words behind us, saying figuratively, "Here is the way, here is the Lord's will." The word "behind" also implies that although we have these tools, we must still proceed with the eye of faith. We are not looking for, nor will God give us, a miraculous vision of what his will is, but by faith we should see his direction as we use the tools which he has provided for us. "For we walk by faith, not by sight."—II Cor. 5:7

MAKING NEEDED DECISIONS

Suppose, however, that an experience comes upon us, and in spite of our best efforts to use all the tools provided to assist us in determining God's will, the path to choose remains unclear. Additionally, suppose we are faced with a decision which we must make, and cannot delay further. What should we do?

First, we should continue to pray and watch, and not stop using all of the other tools given to us. Second, we should claim the precious promises, "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee."—Rom. 8:28; Heb. 13:5

Third, we should then make the very best decision we can in the matter, being firm in it, not wavering, but carrying it through. We should be full of faith that God, who knows our heart, will guide our decision in some way. In such cases, we should pray again after making a decision, asking God to overrule, according to his will, so that our actions will be made to work to our best spiritual welfare; and we should watch for his further providences in the matter.

We should always remember that God's hand is not short. He can and will overrule. Through the Prophet Isaiah, the Lord tells us, "Is my hand shortened at all, that it cannot redeem? or have I no power to deliver? behold, at my rebuke I dry up the sea, I make the rivers a wilderness." "Behold, the LORD'S hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear."—Isa. 50:2; 59:1

These promises are all available to us by faith. Furthermore, such experiences in which the Lord's will is not made clear to us may actually be permitted by God to develop and test our faith.

DOING GOD'S WILL, THE ULTIMATE GOAL

One of the matters of greatest importance in remaining faithful to our consecration is not only determining the Lord's will, but actually doing it to the best of our imperfect ability. This requires action on our part. As Jesus admonished his disciples, "If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them."—John 13:17

The Apostle James states the matter with these words, "Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. ... Being not a

forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed.”—James 1:22,25

If we follow the ground rules of spiritual thinking and being careful how we live; if we use the tools of prayer, the Word of God, the assistance of our brethren and families, our present and past experiences and God’s providences in them; if we make the best decisions we can; if we use the guiding influence of God’s Holy Spirit; if we are watchful, claim the precious promises, and have an unwavering faith, we will be successful in determining the Lord’s will. If we then do his will to the best of our ability, we will be found faithful to our vow of consecration with the Heavenly Father.

In seeking to know and to do God’s will, let us echo the words of Jesus, “I can of mine own self do nothing ... I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me.” “My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work.”
—John 5:30; 4:34 ■