

# The Will of God

The events surrounding Paul's conversion show us how God dramatically revealed his will for the apostle's life (Acts 9:3-19). For most of us, discovering God's will is less extraordinary. Finding God's will is not, however, any less important for us than it was for Paul. Today we will discuss the subject of God's will, focusing particularly on how to discern it. We will begin by defining what we mean by "the will of God."

## **Defining the Will of God**

New Testament references to God's will can be classed into three categories—general, specific, and individual.

### *General components*

- Sanctification: It is God's will that we grow progressively holier, ever more dedicated to his service (1 Thess 4:3). The more specific elements of God's will will never hinder our sanctification.
- Testimony: It is God's will that we present to the world a consistently positive witness for Christ (1 Pet 2:15). God will never lead us to do otherwise.
- Spiritual growth: It is God's purpose for us to grow in the knowledge of Christ (Col 1:26-27). His plan for our lives will never jeopardize this overarching goal.

### *Specific components*

- Sexual purity: We are specifically told that fornication and lust are contrary to God's will (1 Thess 4:3-5).
- Freedom from greed: It is God's will that we abandon greed, dishonesty, and the drive to get ahead of others (1 Thess 4:6).
- Thankfulness: On the other hand, we are specifically instructed to cultivate the expression of gratitude (1 Thess 5:18).
- Other components: Ephesians 5:17 states: "Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is." Given that this command is given in the middle of numerous other instructions (4:17-6:20), one can assume that these instructions may aptly be referred to as the will of God. By inference, every command of God expresses his will.

### *Individual components*

Christians may be called to carry out specific tasks that others may not be commanded to perform. The New Testament cites two examples of such ministries: Paul's service as an apostle (1 Cor 1:1; Eph 1:1; etc.) and David's service as a God-fearing king (Acts 13:22, 36).

## **Discerning the Will of God**

Following is a review of seven biblical principles related to the discovery of God's will:

*Determine to yield to God's will before you discover it.*

We are to live our lives in function of the providential activity of God (Jas 4:15; cf. 1 Cor 4:19; Acts 18:21).

*Recognize that discerning God's will is your responsibility.*

We are commanded to be wise and understand God's will (Eph 5:17). Furthermore, we are told to "prove" (i.e., examine, scrutinize, approve) the will of God (Rom 12:2). In other words, we should test each possible course of action to determine whether it is truly God's will.

*Submit to the general and specific components of God's will.*

We should not expect God to lead us to understand his individual plan for our lives if we are failing to follow his general plan for all believers.

*Seek the will of God in prayer.*

Jesus instructed us to pray for the fulfillment of God's will (Mt 6:10). Praying like this makes us shareholders in the enterprise of divine activity. Following Christ's example, we should yield ourselves in prayer to God's will (Mk 14:36). We should commit our plans to God's approval (Rom 15:30, 32). And we should pray to receive "the knowledge of his will" (Col 1:9).

*Separate yourself from worldly commitments.*

A key to the discovery of God's will is revealed in Rom 12:2: We must disentangle ourselves from the world and its values. 1 John 2:15-17 confirms this principle by showing that it is impossible to love the world and do the will of God at the same time (cf. Jas 4:4).

*Consider God's use of circumstances to reveal his will.*

God often leads us by circumstances, offering or hindering opportunities in particular areas of life. This is perhaps the most subjective part of discerning God's will. What we are looking for is a pattern of confirmation that a proposed activity is or is not God's will. Thus we may not necessarily rely on a single instance—or even a few instances—of success or adversity.

*Pursue the desires of your heart.*

Psalms 37:4 says, "Delight thyself also in the LORD; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart." While the word *desires* literally means "requests," one's requests are merely reflections of one's desires. If we are truly seeking God's kingdom and are following the known will of God, we may choose freely according to our own desires. Of course, as we seek God's will, he cultivates within us desires that honor him.

### **Doing the Will of God**

We must guard against the tendency to spend so much energy on *discerning* the will of God that we forget to *do* it. It is imperative that we apply the knowledge that we have, for "to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin" (Jas 4:17).