

Knowing God's Will

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Fayetteville, Arkansas

Published in the United States of America 1996

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Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Briney, Patrick R.
Knowing God's Will
1. God's will I. Title

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And 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.

—Romans 12:2

That he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh to the lusts of men, but to the will of God.

—1Peter 4:2

God's way is the best way

Making good decisions is the key to happiness. Everyone has experienced the joy of being right and the satisfaction of the consequences. Likewise, everyone has experienced the grief of being wrong. Oftentimes, making choices causes extreme stress for fear of making the wrong choice. Making the right choice is so important that some decisions are postponed indefinitely until there is confidence in the choice. Ultimately, God knows what is best and right for everything you do. Thus, it makes sense to seek the counsel of God when making decisions.

Resources for making good decisions

Fortunately, God loves you and wants only the best for you. He wants you to make good decisions, so He has given you resources to help you: the Spirit of God, the Word of God, and the church of God. Each of these resources are vital to making good decisions.

The Spirit of God guides you into truth. John 16:13 says, "Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will show you things to come." He enlightens you with understanding as you read God's Word and as you minister to others. He also brings to mind thoughts from the Scriptures that apply to particular experiences. By doing this, He exercises your mind to discern good and evil.

The Word of God gives you a framework of guidance to determine God's will. It gives specific instruction on what to do and what not to do. Most importantly, as you read His Word, you learn more about God. The more you study the Bible, the more you become immersed into His thoughts. You become more discerning of His

desires and will. You recognize more readily what decisions are good and bad. In addition, the Word of God is necessary to test the spirit or circumstance that is influencing you. All good decisions will always conform to the principles in God's Word.

The church of God provides an environment of protection, training, ministry, and counseling whereby you can realize the fullness of God's will in your life. Church leaders have experience and gifts to discern good from bad decisions. They are resources for helping you discern the will of God by example and instruction from the Word of God.

Guideline for decision making

Conforming to the will of God is the bottom line for making good decisions. To make good decisions, you need to understand God's plan for you, for others, and for the world. You need to understand what is important to God and what pleases Him. In the broadest context of creation, God has created all things for His own good pleasure (Revelation 4:11). Because His love is pure and eternal, God's pleasure is to love you, to help you, to show you grace and kindness, to please you, and to make you the happiest you can possibly be. God's love is purely unselfish, so His love is sacrificial. He is willing to pay any price required to make you happy, even the price of eternal death. God's love is so extraordinary that He chose to die for you (the consequence of sin) because you made a bad decision to sin. Knowing that God loves you this much, it is senseless to make any decision that is not in perfect harmony with His will. Understanding God's love for you will lead you to conclude that pleasing God is the key to pleasing yourself.

It is not difficult to determine God's general plan for your life. In John 15: 8-11, Jesus says that He wants you to follow Him, to be His disciple, to be like Him, to do what He does. If you do these things, He indicates that He will be very pleased with you and that you will be very pleased with yourself. Jesus is telling you that the secret of experiencing true fulfillment and happiness is to follow Him as a disciple! In other words, life cannot get better than this. History books are full of writings describing man's search for happiness and his many futile attempts to find the utopia of fulfillment. But, the Bible tells us plainly that

following Jesus Christ is the key to maximum pleasure in life. He is the way, the truth, and the life.

Following Christ means that you embrace all that is Christ-like. You adopt as your own His lifestyle, His values, His message, and His ambitions. Because Jesus said His mission was to seek and to save that which was lost (Luke 19:10), your mission in life as His disciple is to seek and to save that which was lost. Because He commands you to be joined to a church, you should do so without hesitation. Because He commissioned His church to go into all nations to make disciples, to establish churches, and to teach His message, you should participate. Because Christ wants you to be fully mature spiritually and to be in a protective and edifying environment, you should make choices that ensure your participation and membership in His church. Because following Christ leads to ultimate fulfillment, the goals of Christ should serve as the general guidelines for all the decisions you make.

As you study the Word of God and nurture your love for Him, your understanding of God's thoughts will mature. In many cases, you will recognize what Jesus would do or would not do even though it is not spelled out in the Bible. The better you know Christ, the better your judgment will be in determining His will.

Good choices are determined by how they contribute to furthering the work of Christ, the saving of souls, the establishing of missions, and the edifying of the saints. Good decisions ensure that your children are raised in a spiritually enriched environment, that you utilize every resource God has provided for you, and that you do not jeopardize the spiritual well-being of yourself or of others.

Doing God's will

The motivation for making good decisions is loving God with all your heart, soul, and mind. If you do not love God, you will not care whether you please Him, you will not have confidence in His plan for your life. Because love casts out all fear (1John 4:18), the test of your love for God, is the peace you have in seeking His will for your life. Many hesitate in seeking God's will or resist knowing God's will because they are afraid that he will ask them to do something unpleasant. They fear that He will alter their plans for success and happiness. They fear that He will deny them peace of mind and personal goals. This is the mindset of unbelief. As a believer, you understand the

foolishness of rejecting Jesus Christ as your Savior. However, rejecting God's will for your life, now that you are a Christian, is just as foolish. God will not ruin your life. He will enrich it. He wants only the very best for you. If your plan for life is not God's plan, it only makes sense to dump your plan immediately so that you will not miss out on something special that God desires for you. The only good plan for your life is God's plan. When you love God, you will settle for nothing less than God's best for you.

The difficulty of knowing God's will

The general plan for discerning God's will is easily discerned and is the same for everyone, such as, to be saved, to be a participant in His church, to be a disciple, to be a good witness to others, to be prayerful, to be a godly example to others, and to study your Bible. However, details of God's personalized plan for you are not as easily discerned. For example, how do you determine God's will for a church home, a job, a husband or wife, a house, a school, a college education, etc?

Discerning God's will in particular begins with doing His will in general. After all, why should you expect God to help you choose a job when you are not joined to a church, or studying His Word, or witnessing, or engaged in ministry? If you are not doing what He has plainly written in His Word, you cannot have confidence that He is guiding you at all. Only when you earnestly follow Him and are obedient to His Word can you have confidence that He will guide you. In Acts 13:2-3, God's Spirit told those who were ministering, fasting, and praying unto the Lord that He wanted to send Paul and Barnabus to do missionary work.

Those who are engaged in ministry are close to the Lord, have experience in discerning His will, and can offer valuable counsel. Thus, Proverbs 11:14 tells you that there is safety in the multitude of counselors. In your church, your pastor and leaders are God's resources to help you discern the particulars of God's will for your life. They can give you wise counsel from experience, the Word of God, and insight from the Holy Spirit.

Also, particulars of God's will can be evaluated from God's Word. God will never lead you to do something that is contrary to His Word, and His will in particular for you will always conform to his general will.

Thus, making choices can be evaluated in light of such questions as, “will my spiritual well-being be jeopardized,” “will I be abandoning my church,” “will I be forsaking responsibilities,” “will I be acting within the proper channels of God’s authority and ministry,” “will I be violating a principle stated in God’s Word?”

Life is full of daily choices, and all decisions should be made to glorify God (1 Corinthians 10:31). However, not all decisions are directly guided by God. That is, God is not a micromanager of your life. He points you in the right direction and expects you to conduct yourself within the guidelines He has given you. For example, Paul was sent by God to establish churches throughout Asia Minor. Having determined to go through Asia Minor a second time, the Holy Spirit prevented him and redirected him to go Macedonia (Acts 16:6-9). Obviously, God was not directing every detail of Paul’s activities. As Paul was working for the Lord, if a change was needed, God intervened directly and redirected him. Thus, all decisions you make should be within the guidelines of glorifying God and doing His work. In the course of doing so, you should always be sensitive to specific direction or change that God brings into your life.

Vulnerabilities

Tension builds in your life when your plans do not conform to God’s will. The will of God does not cater to the lust of the eye, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life (1 John 2:16). For example, praying and fasting earnestly are a challenge to the body. Membership in the church God adds you to is not always ideal for career opportunity. Sexual temptation is a powerful drive that God says is to be controlled and reserved for marriage only. Unfortunately, most forsake God’s plan and yield to the influence of greed, lust, and selfishness. In Luke 14:18-20, Jesus tells of some of the excuses people use to not follow Him. “The first said unto him, I have bought a piece of ground, and I must needs go and see it: I pray thee have me excused. And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them: I pray thee have me excused. And another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.” When God’s will conflicts with your will, you will often find an excuse not to follow Him. Love for yourself is very great. Therefore, the solution to overcoming the influence of your flesh is to love God more than anything else, including yourself. When you love

God with all your heart, soul, and mind, He will be the primary influence in your life. Until this happens, you will follow your carnal desires and the influence of people. This is why Jesus said in Luke 14:26-35 that you are not His disciple (His follower) until you hate your “father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters,” and your own life. Following Christ requires that He be the first and primary influence in your life. He wants you to seek His kingdom first (Matthew 6:33). Until you love God and trust Him with your life, He will not be the primary guiding factor in your life.

Satan knows your vulnerabilities, and he designs “snares” to keep you ineffective for the Lord. Ultimately, he wants to ensure that you will not be saved (2Corinthians 4:4). However, once you are saved, he wants to prevent you from winning others to Christ. To do this, he comes as an angel of light to redirect you from doing God’s will (2Corinthians 11:14). He appeals to your carnal desires and offers excuses to appease your Christian principles. He offers religious activities and excuses to confuse you and to deceive you into thinking that you are doing something for God. For example, the Pharisees refused to help their parents in the name of God (Matthew 15:4-6). Christians find religious excuses to avoid prayer, fasting, witnessing to others, or participating in a true new testament church. Because such things are done in the name of the Lord, God gets blamed for many things that He does not approve of. Satan uses many tactics to disengage you from the work of ministry. His goal is to lure you away from your church, your Christian friends, God’s Word, and the influence of the Holy Spirit. He knows how to redirect your love away from God with temptations of wealth, status, comfort, and lust. Do not underestimate the power and subtlety of Satan. He is very capable of making you think that you are doing the will of God when in fact you are doing the will of Satan. Genuinely loving God and relying on His resources are necessary to protect you from Satan’s deception.

Recognizing the will of God

Sometimes, God will allow particular decisions to be decided by you. His interest in doing this is to exercise your mind to discern good and evil (Hebrews 5:14). Some choices are between right and wrong, but others are between two good choices. In such cases, the Lord is

more interested in why you made your choice than what choice you made. When the Lord does give clear direction, how can you recognize it?

As mentioned previously, God's will in particular will always conform to His general will described in the Bible. If a choice involves compromising or violating a scriptural truth, it is not approved of God. If an opportunity arises that does not involve apparent compromise, counsel from your pastor and church leaders will help guide you. These leaders are selected by God to give advice and to discern the will of God. They have had their senses exercised to discern good from evil, and their decisions are trustworthy. Further, God gives them gifts and abilities to protect the flock and to discern danger (Ephesians 5:28; Hebrews 13:7 & 17). Thus, the counsel of church leaders is vital to your spiritual well-being and should not be taken lightly. Proverb 12:15 cautions that, "the way of a fool is right in his own eyes: but he that hearkeneth unto counsel is wise." If you disagree with the counsel of church leadership, you should postpone your decision and reexamine the choice more carefully.

Emotions and feelings are not reliable indicators of God's will especially when there is confusion or disagreement about what choice to make. However, James 3:13-18 explains that wisdom from above is peaceable, meek, gentle, merciful, objective, and considerate. Though having these feelings are not proof that a choice is God's will (because Satan can mimic these qualities), you should expect them to be associated with every choice that is right. If these emotions are not a part of the decision, then you need to reconsider your choice or postpone your decision until there is evidence that God is in control. James points out that bitter envying, strife, and confusion are associated with evil and devilish works. These feelings are a warning that God is definitely not in control.

Also, beware of the deception of "open and closed" doors. God's will is not determined by ease, convenience, and comfort. When the Apostle Paul was stoned and cast out of the city of Lystra, he recovered and went back into the city to preach the Gospel (Acts 14:9-20). Likewise, Peter and John were not deterred to preach the Gospel in Jerusalem even though they were threatened with imprisonment and bodily harm (Acts 4:17-21). Many Christians think of hardship as a closed door and flee to open doors of ease and safety. Circumstances are viewed as signs to determine God's will. As a result, these Christians are not led by the principles of God's Word, but by convenience and whim. The result is a lifestyle that is unstable and unreliable. No wonder Jesus discouraged relying on signs to know His

will (Matthew 12:39). The danger is obvious because Satan can offer many open doors of opportunities, and one still has no basis to determine whether a circumstance is of God or of Satan. After all, God may require you to suffer hardship like He has for so many others (1 Peter 3:17). Ultimately and regardless of circumstances, in order to recognize the will of God, you must love God, rely on His Word, His Spirit, and His church leaders.

When you disagree with pastoral counsel

There will be times when you question the counsel of your pastor or church leaders. In such cases, you must determine how important the decision is to you. If it is of little consequence, then the matter can be dropped. If the decision is important, then you must pursue the matter with your counselors humbly, cautiously, and prayerfully. Remember, that God gave you a pastor to protect you spiritually. Rejecting his counsel is not to be done lightly because you remove yourself from God's provision of spiritual protection. The worst thing to do is to get angry, bitter, or resentful. These are the emotions that the Devil works with to deceive you. When this occurs, you know you are in trouble and unable to discern the will of God no matter how sincere you are.

The correct response to counsel that you disagree with is to reexamine your choices with concern and care. Counsel that is contrary to your decision should be viewed as a warning of potential danger. You should have a thankful attitude that those counseling you have been bold enough to express their thoughts. Counselors are not your enemies. Your pastor and leaders are your friends and concerned for your spiritual well-being. Listen carefully to the counsel and compare it to the Word of God. Respect the counsel (whether you agree or disagree) because it comes from those who have been approved and appointed by God to help you make good decisions. If you feel that the counsel is wrong, then make your appeal to God. This is a real test of your faith in God and His ability to take care of you. Because God has placed you in a church and appointed spiritual leadership over you, He is responsible to make sure that you get the counsel you need. You should pray that He will grant your pastor and leaders wisdom and discernment. Trusting God to solve your conflict with counsel is the

safest approach to making a good decision. Taking matters into your own hands is a direct defiance toward God's protective hedge which He has placed you in. Once you remove yourself from His protective resource, you increase your vulnerability to Satan's snares.

Do leaders always give the right counsel? No. But, this is not an excuse for you to do wrong. Regardless of what anyone else does, you should always do right in order to be blessed by God. It is wrong to cause division and to encourage rebellion in God's church. It is wrong to be bitter and resentful. When leaders are wrong, you need to be right. God will deal with leaders who give bad counsel. He will defend you and protect you from bad counsel if you are right with Him. However, if you decide to take matters into own hands and to yield to carnal impulses, God will not help you. Thus, to protect yourself from bad counsel, always do right, trust in the Lord, pray for His protection, pray for your leaders, and guard your mind from slipping into evil attitudes.

The consequences of decisions

Decisions that you make affect you and the people around you. The results will be an increase in spiritual growth and ministry to others or a loss of spirituality. Doing God's will guarantees that God's plan for your life will be accomplished and that you will be greatly blessed. On the other hand, rejecting God's will can lead to spiritual chastisement and loss of blessings. Rewards gained from your own efforts are temporary. However, the rewards of God are forever.

In the parable of the sower, Jesus tells how the lives of some produce a hundred fold for Him, whereas others produce only sixty fold, thirty fold, or nothing. Some are lured away from serving God by greed and lust for the wealth of the world. Some fail to experience God's will in their lives because they do not grow spiritually and are unprepared to resist trials. Whatever the reason for failing to follow Christ, you will suffer loss of blessings, spiritual enrichment, eternal rewards, and God's pleasure. The cost of rejecting God's will is not worth the temporary pleasure of the world. Jesus exhorts in Matthew 6:19-21, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal." In

verse 21, He says that "...where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Knowing God's will for your life begins with loving Him first of all.

Questions to ask yourself when making decisions

- Am I at peace with God and the saints (James 3:13-18)?
- Have I examined the Scriptures for guidance?
- What is the counsel of my spiritual, church leaders?
- Am I compromising biblical principles?
- Am I relying on God's resources or on signs and feelings?

General guidelines for common questions

Whom shall I marry? Anyone who is married will tell you that marrying the right person is worth waiting for. Consider the following verses to guide your decision about marriage. (2Corinthians 6:14; Genesis 24; Ephesians 5:22-33; Proverbs 31:10-31)

What church? There are many counterfeits with sincere people. However, more is needed than sincerity. Though the following verses will be helpful, you need to realize that there is much more involved in determining which church God wants to add you to, including doctrinal soundness, a literal interpretation of Scripture, and authoritative succession of churches. (Acts 2:41; Acts 2:47; 1Corinthians 12:13; 1Corinthians 12:18; Ephesians 4:11-16)

What career? God's work is not determined by secular careers. In some cases, the Lord may use you in a very lucrative position. In other cases, He may use you in a very menial working situation. Paul said of himself, "Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content" (Philippians 4:11). Seizing opportunities to enhance the work of the Lord is the goal to pursue. (1Corinthians 7:20-24; Genesis 45:5-9; Daniel 1:4-8; Acts 18:3; 1Corinthians 10:31, 33; 1Corin-

thians 9:22)

Is it all right to drink alcohol? Consider the following verses, and think about the association alcohol has in our society. (Romans 14:21; Proverb 20:1)

Where to live? (Ephesians 4:11-16)

What about physical intimacy before marriage? (1Corinthians 7:1)

How do I know if God is calling me to preach? (Jeremiah 20:9; 1Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9)

How do I know which mission field God is calling me to? (Acts 13:2-4)

