

DISCIPLESHIP. SUPPLEMENT 18

[LORDSHIP]

MISCONCEPTIONS WITH REGARD TO DISCOVERING THE WILL OF GOD

Often Christians struggle to know or understand God's will. The following misconceptions with regard to finding God's will may help to better know and understand God's will.

1. Being unable to trust God the Father.

(1) Misconception.

If I give myself to God's will, it will result in sacrifice or suffering. Therefore I cannot really trust God.

(2) Correction.

Because we all live in a broken world full of broken people, suffering will happen to every one of us, both Christian and non-Christian. Pain and suffering for Christians will only end at the second coming of Christ (Revelation 21:4-5). Especially people who come from broken or abusive families find it difficult to trust God as *Father*, because sometimes their human fathers abused them or were always absent.

In the Bible, God the Father is radically different than earthly fathers. "He forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your life is renewed like the eagle's. The LORD works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed. He made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel: The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbour his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve, or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust" (Psalm 103:3-14).

"For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the alien, giving him food and clothing" (Deuteronomy 10:17-18). Note that God especially defends the cause of the weak and the stranger. Replace the fear of what might happen by remembering the wonderful things which God has done for you in the past and what he promises to do for you. For example, "Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6).

2. Asking for a sign from God.

(1) Misconception.

I received a sign from God and therefore know that this is the will of God.

(2) Correction.

In Judges 6:11-22 God first gave to Gideon an assignment: he must first free Israel from serving the idol Baal and afterwards from the Midianites.

Only after this assignment was given, Gideon asked God for a sign to confirm his assignment! In a sovereign way God gave him via an angel a sign: fire came out of a rock and consumed the food placed on it. Thus, asking for a sign was not something arbitrary from the side of man, but was *to confirm a specific assignment of God!* Christians should rather wait until God has given them a specific assignment, before they ask God for a sign.

In Judges 6:36-40 Gideon asked God twice to confirm his previous assignment with signs: first a wool fleece had to be wet due to dew, while the surrounding floor would remain dry. Then the wool fleece had to remain dry, while the surrounding floor became wet due to dew.

- First God gave an assignment.
- Then God decided which sign he would give to confirm his assignment.
- Finally, because of his small faith, Gideon asked God to confirm his assignment twice and God complied.

These three signs were unique supernatural acts in God's history of salvation with his people Israel and not a spiritual principle for Christians to ask God for an arbitrary sign for some issue in their personal lives!

In Genesis 24:12-14 the servant of Abraham asked God for a sign that would show which girl were to be Isaac's wife. In this case the servant determined the nature of the sign. The girl would give him water to drink and then offer to also water his camels. But note, the sign which the servant asked was not only confirmed by God, because the father of the girl (verse 50-51) and later the girl herself (verse 57-58) had to agree to accept the marriage proposal!

If Christians today limit God's guidance in a personal matter to asking God for an arbitrary sign, then the asking of signs would become a camouflaged attempt to manipulate an act to one's own advantage. Then Christians would spend

more time on asking God for a sign (to order some of their circumstances) than to study the Word of God (the Bible) to discover God's wisdom.

3. Waiting for a call from God.

(1) Misconception.

I must wait until God gives me a specific calling before I can serve him.

(2) Correction.

Christians who go into fulltime service for God (e.g. becoming a missionary) do not need to receive a more special calling from God than a Christian who wants to serve God in a secular job (e.g. a teacher).

The Bible says, "Follow the ways of your heart and whatever your eyes see, but know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment" (Ecclesiastes 11:9). Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man" (Ecclesiastes 12:13). And whatever you do, whether in word or in deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Colossians 3:17). "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men" Colossians 3:23).

As we submit ourselves to God and his Word, our thoughts, desires, needs, experience, and training will guide and *call* us into the right and a suitable career. Men with a strong desire to be a leader (1 Timothy 3:1) and fulfil the biblical requirements for a leader (1 Timothy 3:2-7; Titus 1:5-9) do not need to wait for an additional and specific calling as for example Moses (Exodus 3:1-12) or the disciples of Jesus (Matthew 4:17) received, in order to do a Christian ministry, even a fulltime ministry. They should sincerely and ardently pursue that course as far as God allows them. If God has other plans, he will certainly bring them to pass (compare Acts 15:36-41 with Acts 16:1-3)!

If you want to be a leader in the church, the church must first call you too. A person cannot appoint himself as the leader of the church. A calling has three elements:

- the Word of God
- the guidance of the Holy Spirit in your heart
- and the invitation (calling) from the side of the congregation.

Most important is to realise that our own personal relationship with God, not our calling, is the true source of purpose and fulfilment in life. Apart from seeking God, even the noblest vocation (calling) is vanity.

4. Feeling peace in your heart.

(1) Misconception.

I feel peace in my heart about the matter and therefore I know that this is God's will.

(2) Correction.

Peace in our feelings is peace as a sense of rightness about our actions.

But feelings of peace in our heart are not always a good indicator of God's guidance. If we understand "peace" to be a feeling that is free from fear or misgivings (doubt) or conflict after we have made a decision, then this kind of peace is NOT always an indicator of God's guidance! God-given peace cannot be reduced to "tranquil feelings" or even "a sense of rightness" about our actions.

Peace in our relationship to God is peace as a calm confidence that our action is the right one in God's eyes. Even spiritually sound decisions can cause great anxiety simply because the consequences of the decision can be very serious. For example, standing up against corruption or injustice can cause sleepless nights in which we struggle with thoughts about the consequences.

In the Bible "peace" is nearly always connected to our relationship with God.

• **Peace in our relationship to God.**

"Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1)

Only faith in the completed work of salvation of Jesus Christ in our place can bring peace in our relationship with God. "Peace" is here the deep assurance and rest that you have forever become a child of God.

• **Peace in relationship to God's Word.**

"The fruit of righteousness will be peace; the effect of righteousness will be quietness and confidence forever" (Isaiah 32:17). "Peace" is a calm confidence in God, in God's Word and in God's guidance through the Word in spite of uncertainty or emotional upheaval due to what God may ask of you to do, or due to the opposition of people, or due to the difficulties in our circumstances. It is not the peace in my feelings, but peace in my relationship to God that is a good indicator of God's guidance.

• **Peace in relationship to circumstances.**

"You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you. Trust in the LORD forever, for the LORD, the LORD, is the Rock eternal" (Isaiah 26:3-4). "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). "Peace" is here a calm trust in the sovereignty and goodness of God that sees to it that all your circumstances work together to realise God's best plan for your life. This peace is the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22).

5. Receiving a Bible verse.

(1) Misconception.

God gave me a verse from the Bible and therefore I know it is God's will.

(2) Correction.

God sometimes guides us by impressing us with a special Bible verse that seems exactly suited to our situation. Or God sometimes confirms with a Bible verse guidance he has already given in another way. But we must recognise the subjective element in this form of guidance.

The subjective element in God's guidance through a Bible verse.

We must ask ourselves:

- Is this God speaking, or am I making the Bible say things that I want to hear?
- Do the other principles of discovering God's will¹ confirm my impressions or do they cast doubt on their accuracy?
- Am I only looking for Bible verses that leap out at me and confirm my wishes or am I considering the overall teachings of the Bible?
- Do I misuse the Bible for instance as a horoscope, as an easy method of quickly finding God's will, or do I carefully interpret the Bible and determine what God purposes me to know, to believe, to be and to do?

Sometimes people find promises in the Bible and interpret them as specific assurances about their future. However, when things do not turn out as they expected, they become disillusioned, start to doubt the trustworthiness of the Bible and perhaps even blame God for not keeping his alleged promise. They fail to realise that they have misinterpreted what God said and that they have wrongly claimed a particular Bible verse as God's promise.

The objective element in God's guidance through a Bible verse.

There are two useful questions for correctly interpreting Scripture (prophecies, promises, threats, commands, etc.):

- Who is the audience God intended? Is this particular truth in the Bible:
 - intended for "all people in the world" (cf. Mark 1:15) or "only for all the people in the context" (cf. Acts 17:7, compare verses 11-14 and Mark 10:21),
 - intended for a particular group (cf. Isaiah 6:8-10; Matthew 8:11-12),
 - intended for a particular period (cf. Genesis 17:9- 14 and Galatians 6:12-15; cf. Hebrews 9:6-10 and Hebrews 10:1-4)
 - intended for a particular condition (cf. Jeremiah 18:1-17 and Ezekiel 33:11-20; cf. Revelation 2:7)?
- What is the emphasis of this passage?
 - Is it teaching doctrine that must be believed? (cf. John 14:6)
 - Or is it commanding an action that must be obeyed? (cf. John 13:34-35)
 - Or is it relating an event in history that may be followed? (cf. Acts 17:11). A bad example in history may not be followed. A good example in history may be followed, provided others are not forced to follow it.

6. Getting a dream or a vision from God.

(1) Misconception.

I had a dream or a vision and therefore I know that it is God's will.

(2) Correction.

Not you, but God determines the way he guides you.

God can and sometimes does guide in miraculous or spectacular ways.

- He guided Israel by means of a *pillar of cloud or fire* (Exodus 13:21).
- He guided a prophet by a *speaking donkey* (Numbers 22:21-33)
- He guided the wise men by a *moving star* (Matthew 2:1-11).
- He guided Mary by a *visitation of an angel* (Luke 1:26-38)
- He guided Joseph by means of a *dream* (Matthew 1:20-21; 2:13-14).
- He guided Peter and Cornelius by *means of visions* (Acts 10:1-6,9-16).

Nevertheless, none of the above people had asked for a sign! God guided each as he saw fit. If in his wisdom God knows that you need such miraculous or spectacular guidance, he will surely give it. But if you constantly seek spectacular or dramatic ways of God's guidance, you are likely to miss the usual ways of communicating his will, which is through his Word in the Bible.

¹ Cf. Dota manual 4, lesson 43.

When you feel that you are guided in some spectacular way, you must test this guidance.

When you do receive a dream or vision, you still need to test it with the clear objective commands, prohibitions and teachings of the Bible. Whatever God reveals by means of a dream or vision will never contradict his revelation in the Bible. If it does contradict what the Bible says, the dream or vision does not come from God (cf. Jeremiah 23:16,18,21-22,25-29).

7. Getting punished by God.

(1) Misconception.

Because all kinds of bad things happen to me, I must have made the wrong decision or done something wrong. Therefore, I conclude that I am not following God's will and God is punishing me.

(2) Correction.

Why do bad things happen to good people?

And what can people do when they have not followed God's guidance?

Sometimes Christians do suffer as a consequence of their own sins.

When our actions or attitudes conflict with the revealed will of God in the Bible, we can experience unpleasant circumstances. Confessing and repenting of wilful sin restores us to fellowship with God (1 John 1:9). However, all the consequences of our wrong decision or disobedience are not necessarily removed (cf. David's sin with Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11, his repentance and forgiveness in 2 Samuel 12:1-13 and nevertheless the dramatic consequences of his sin in 2 Samuel 12:14-23 and 2 Samuel 13).

However, if we are walking in intimate fellowship with God and are committed to obey the Bible, then *not* following God's will is much harder than we are sometimes led to believe.

Often bad things do happen to good people and Christians.

We live in a fallen world full of broken people. Difficulties, problems, oppression and persecution, pain and suffering will happen to Christians and non-Christians alike (Genesis 3:16-19). Christians too get sick (2 Corinthians 12:7-10; 2 Timothy 4:20) or lose a good job. Christians feel the pain of a family member who turns his back on God (cf. Matthew 23:37). Christians suffer in trials and temptations (James 1:2-4) and also in oppression and persecution (Matthew 5:11-12; 2 Timothy 3:12).

The book of Job teaches that God's people do suffer. Job's initial ethical concept of God was that "God blesses the God-fearing and punishes the godless". But he finally realised that *his concept of God was wrong* and that he could not fully grasp God's ways and purposes with regard to suffering. Job began to realise that God was absolutely sovereign and did things or allowed things to happen simply because he is God. God's sovereign purposes with regard to suffering of people, even the suffering of his followers, is perfect, no matter whether they can see any reason for it or not. Job proclaimed, "I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted" (Job 42:2). Only later in heaven will we know that there was a reason for everything that happened.

But God is not only sovereign. He is also a holy, righteous, merciful and loving God. He promised that in all things that happen he works for the good of those who have a personal relationship with him (Romans 8:28).

Self-examination is important, but when circumstances crash in around us, we need not panic and think that we are not following God's will. Instead, we can commit ourselves to remain in God's will and say, "Not my will, but your will be done (Matthew 26:39)" And God will do his perfect will! Whatever the circumstances, by continuing to love God and people, we set our hearts at rest in God's presence. God is greater than our hearts and he knows everything. He knows the "why" and the "how long" of every situation (1 John 3:18-20)!