

**Series:** Hard Questions for Thoughtful Christians and Inquiring Skeptics

**Sermon:** How Do I Find God's Will for My Life?

**Scripture:** Various

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This third sermon in our series on Hard Questions could do one of two things: It could liberate you in an important area of practical Christian living, or it could blow your mind and upset your whole spiritual applecart. Someone has said that sacred cows make the best hamburger, but it's easy to choke on it. I may be slaying someone's sacred cow today, but I don't ask that you digest it all at once. I just want you to try it and see if it isn't actually more healthy than what you've been chewing on in the past.

By the way, I preached on this general topic here several decades ago after reading a book by two men who were in seminary with me—Garry Friesen and Robin Maxson wrote *Decision Making and the Will of God*, easily one of the ten most important books I have ever read. A couple of weeks ago Joe Stout pulled the outline of that sermon from 1982 out of his Bible and told me that he has carried it with him all these years because it was so liberating. I'm going to preach from a different passage this morning than I used then, but the truth will be essentially the same.

One of the most popular statements in Christian circles over the past 50 years has been, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life." That's a happy, reassuring thought for sure, but an awful lot of Christians are wondering,

*If God has a wonderful plan for my life, why isn't He telling me what it is? I've followed all the steps that I've been given as to how to find God's will, as to whom I should marry, or where I should go to college, or whether to invest in a particular company, or how much I should give to the building fund, but honestly, sometimes I have blown it by a mile and most of the time I lack the real certainty that I have made the decision that God wanted me to make. I think I have, sometimes, but I don't have the assurance that most other Christians seem to have. Friends of mine are always claiming, "I prayed about this decision and God showed me clearly what the answer was." What am I missing?*

I have a sneaking suspicion that you may not be missing anything. Rather you may be suffering from unnecessary frustration and guilt because a lot of other Christians are *claiming* they have something you don't have, when the fact is they don't have it either. They claim they have it because they *think* they have it or because they think Christians are *supposed* to have it. See, I told you this sermon might rattle your cage.

I want us to read a narrative account from Acts 20 and 21 this morning. I won't be doing a detailed exposition of the passage, but I believe it serves as an excellent text to launch a sermon on finding God's will for your life. As I read I want you to think hard about the conflict between various believers that is evident in this passage over the Apostle Paul's decision to take a trip to

Jerusalem. Look for ways in which the various parties try to determine God's will in the matter. Let's start in verse 22 of chapter 20, where Paul is speaking:

*“And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.*

Skip down now to chapter 21, where Luke is narrating:

*After we had torn ourselves away from them (the Ephesian elders), we put out to sea and sailed straight to Cos. The next day we went to Rhodes and from there to Patara. We found a ship crossing over to Phoenicia, went on board and set sail. After sighting Cyprus and passing to the south of it, we sailed on to Syria. We landed at Tyre (in Lebanon), where our ship was to unload its cargo. Finding the disciples there, we stayed with them seven days. Through the Spirit they urged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. But when our time was up, we left and continued on our way. All the disciples and their wives and children accompanied us out of the city, and there on the beach we knelt to pray. After saying good-bye to each other, we went aboard the ship, and they returned home.*

*We continued our voyage from Tyre and landed at Ptolemais, where we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for a day. Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea (in Israel) and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven. He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.*

*After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. Coming over to us, he took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet with it and said, “The Holy Spirit says, ‘In this way the Jews of Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.’”*

*When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem. Then Paul answered, “Why are you weeping and breaking my heart? I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.” When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, “The Lord's will be done.”*

The common thread through this passage is the interaction by various groups on the Apostle Paul's decision to go to Jerusalem. Paul is determined to go, claiming He is “compelled” by the Holy Spirit, but fellow-believers in Tyre, also speaking “by the Spirit,” are urging him not to go. How can the Holy Spirit tell Paul one thing while telling fellow-Christians something else?

The next major stop on the trip was Caesarea, further south on the coast and only a day's journey from Jerusalem. There Paul stayed with Philip the evangelist, who was one of the deacons appointed in Acts 6 to relieve the apostles of administrative duties. During his stay there a prophet named Agabus claimed to be speaking for the Holy Spirit when he uses an object lesson to warn Paul that he will be imprisoned and turned over to the Gentiles if he goes to Jerusalem.

He, too, is opposed to Paul's decision.

Then in verse 12 we learn that Paul's companion Luke was also begging him not to go up to Jerusalem. His use of the word "we" probably includes Philip, Philip's four daughters, who were prophetesses, and the rest of Paul's traveling companions. And not only that, but verse 12 also indicates that the local residents, presumably the Christian lay people of Caesarea, also begged him not to go.

So here we have at least six groups or individual all speaking with one accord (and some of them apparently speaking by the Spirit of God), saying to him, "Don't go." And what is Paul's response? "I'm going anyway." Here's the key verse, verse 14, with Luke speaking for everyone else: "When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, "The Lord's will be done!"

Now what I see here is the Apostle on one side and a whole group of Christian people on the other side, with both sides sincerely desiring to know God's will on the issue of whether he should go to Jerusalem. He is convinced he should; they are convinced he shouldn't. My own opinion is that Paul was probably wrong and they were right, but I'm not so concerned this morning with the rightness or wrongness of the decision as I am with the *way* in which it was made. How did Paul decide that it was God's will for him to go to Jerusalem and how did the others decide that it wasn't God's will for him to go? And what did the others mean when, after Paul decided to go (against their understanding of God's will in the matter), they said, "The will of the Lord be done!"?

I think the first thing we need to do is to wrestle with this phrase that is bandied about so much, namely "the will of God," and try to establish exactly what it means.

### **Defining the will of God**

The fact of the matter is that people can mean at least three distinctly different things when they speak of "the will of God." They may be referring to His sovereign will.

**His sovereign will.** God's sovereign will can be defined as "His undisclosed plan for the universe which determines everything that happens." There are many Scriptures which speak of the sovereign will of God, including Ephesians 1:11, which says that God "works all things after the counsel of His will." Proverbs 16:33 adds that "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord." The emphasis in these passages upon "all things" and "every decision" indicates that God's sovereign will includes everything that happens.

Now, I think we can demonstrate biblically that God *has* a sovereign will, but it is clear that we cannot know what that sovereign will *is* until it has happened. It is undisclosed, except for those prophetic events God has revealed in advance. So God's sovereign will cannot be used by us in making decisions.

There are some Christians, of course, who do not believe that God has a sovereign will. They believe that God may know in advance what is going to happen but He doesn't sovereignly will it to happen. In other words, He has foreknowledge but He does not predetermine what happens. I think this is largely a matter of semantics, because if God foreknows something, it cannot *not* happen, can it? (Because if it doesn't happen, then He didn't really know it!) So ultimately there is no practical difference between foreknowledge and predestination.

And I probably should mention that there is a relatively recent view that has become popular in certain evangelical circles known as the Openness of God, which holds that God doesn't even have complete foreknowledge, for He cannot know in advance the decisions of free moral creatures because otherwise they would not be free. I believe they are wrong, but it is quite a complicated theological discussion that we cannot get into today.

However, even though I affirm the sovereign will of God, I don't want to be a fatalist or determinist, for I cannot accept that we are mere puppets on a string. One way to avoid fatalism is to recognize that God's sovereign will includes both an active will (or direct will) and a permissive will. In other words, some things God actively and directly brings to pass, while other things, like sin, He merely *permits* to happen. This is a very useful and biblical distinction.

But either way you cut it, God's plan for the universe covers everything, and nothing happens that is outside His sovereign will. Quickly, however, we move to the fact that the Scriptures speak also of a moral will of God.

**His moral will.** God's moral will consists of "His revealed instructions in the Bible as to how people ought to believe and behave." In other words, God's moral will equals His desires. His sovereign will includes everything that happens, but His moral will includes only what He wants to happen. Obviously there is going to be a difference, because God's desires clearly don't always happen.

Again let's look at several Scripture passages. In 1 Thes. 5:18 we are exhorted, "in everything give thanks, for this is God's will for you." It is God's moral will or desire that we give thanks, but obviously it is not His sovereign will, because sometimes we don't. Then in 1 Thes. 4:3 it says, "this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality." Again the Apostle is speaking of God's moral will, not His sovereign will, because some believers don't abstain from sexual immorality.

Then let's consider a negative example, as found in 2 Peter 3:9: "God is not willing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance." Some universalists (i.e. those who hold the view that everyone will eventually go to heaven) make the mistake of concluding that this verse is speaking of God's sovereign will, so they conclude that no one will perish. But it should be clear to us from the Bible as a whole that some will perish. Their perishing is part of God's sovereign will, while their not perishing is His moral will for them. Did you follow that?

The moral will of God that we have been talking about is sometimes referred to as His general will or revealed will because it is his will for everyone and it has been revealed to us. Some of it

has been revealed to our consciences, according to Romans 2:15, but the only place all of it is found is in the Bible. I believe that 100% of God's moral will is found in the Bible.

We have looked so far at the sovereign will of God and the moral will of God, both of which are clearly taught in the Scripture. But in addition there are quite a number of writers and Bible teachers who speak of still a third will of God, which they call His individual will.

**His individual will.** By this they are referring to “the ideal, detailed life-plan which God has uniquely designed for every believer, and which it is our duty to discern and follow.” This wonderful plan for our life impacts every decision we make and is the basis of God's daily guidance. Sometimes this individual will is referred to as God's “specific” will (for obvious reasons), and sometimes as His “perfect will.” The latter terminology is confusing, for God's sovereign will and His moral will are also perfect, but generally what is meant is that this will of God is “perfect for the individual” and if we miss it we have to settle for God's 2<sup>nd</sup> best, 3<sup>rd</sup> best, 4<sup>th</sup> best, or worse.

The process of finding God's individual will might be likened to aiming for the bull's eye on an archery target. If you don't hit it, then you've missed His best for you. But God is gracious and will not wipe you out just because you missed the bull's eye. He'll give you some points for getting close, but of course you will never again have a perfect score. For example, if you marry someone other than the mate He chose for you, then your chances of hitting the bull's eye are over, but God will help you make the best of the bad choice you made, if you let Him. Even His 2<sup>nd</sup> best is good, though perhaps not great. (I talked to one guy who claimed he missed the bull's eye by a long shot and decided the best solution was to take aim at a whole new target. [That is definitely not God's moral will!]).

Now perhaps you've already sensed that I feel there's something wrong with this concept of the individual will of God, but before I challenge it I must say a word about how we have traditionally been taught to discern God's individual will. At the risk of oversimplification I will just say that generally we have been taught that God has provided road signs to discover His will. We have the Scripture, common sense, prayer, circumstances, godly counsel, etc. If and when these signs all line up, then we can be pretty sure that we're in the center of God's individual will regarding that particular decision.

If they don't all line up, however, or if one still has some doubt, an alternative way of finding God's individual will might be setting forth a fleece. This comes from an OT story in which Gideon determined God's will in a situation by putting a sheep's fleece out at night and the next morning it was wet while the ground was dry. He tried it again and found the fleece dry while the ground was wet. God used that strange, apparently unique method of speaking to Gideon, but many have borrowed it for their own situations, asking God to speak directly through a providential sign agreed upon beforehand. Like, “Lord, if you want me to go to such-and-such a college, help me to get an acceptance letter by Tuesday.” Unfortunately, it is easy to be fleeced by a fleece, and I wouldn't recommend that as a normal way of determining God's will, especially since it's mentioned only once in Scripture.

But then there are some people who have an even quicker way of determining God's individual will—they get a direct word from the Lord. They are the ones from whom one frequently hears words like, “The Lord told me to do such-and-such,” or “The Spirit led me to do thus-and-so.”

The real issue, however, is this: does the Scripture teach that God even has an individual will for our lives, a bull’s eye which we must hit if we don’t want to settle for His second best? Let me read just three passages which are frequently used by advocates of the “individual will” concept.

Proverbs 3:5,6: *"Trust in the Lord with all thine heart and lean not on thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him and He shall direct thy paths."* (KJV)

Psalms 32:8: *"I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go. I will guide thee with mine eye."* (KJV)

Isaiah 30:20, 21: *"Although the Lord has given you bread of privation and water of oppression, He, your Teacher, will no longer hide Himself, but your eyes will behold your Teacher. And your ears will hear a word behind you, 'This is the way, walk in it,' whenever you turn to the right or to the left."* (NASB)

That just about nails it, doesn’t it? How could anyone argue with the individual will of God after reading such verses? Well, having briefly described these three wills of God, I would like now to challenge the “individual will” concept, for it is here that problems most often arise for many believers.

### **Challenging the concept of God's individual will**

Before going further I need to make it clear that I do not doubt that God gives direct guidance to some individuals on some occasions, but I must say that I believe such claims are often carelessly made in an effort to clothe decisions in a spiritual aura. Instead of saying, “I decided to do such-and-such,” we opt to say, “The Lord led me to do such-and-such,” especially if the decision has obvious spiritual implications. Rarely do you hear a pastor say, for example, “I decided to turn down the call to that Church.” He will almost always say, “The Lord closed the door to that option.” That sounds so much more spiritual! But the question we need to be asking is this:

**Does the Scripture really support the concept of God’s individual will?** The fact of the matter is that most of the biblical examples and biblical passages that are used to prove an individual will fall far short of proving the point. True, some of the prophets and apostles received very specific and direct leading from the Lord; Paul Himself, for example, was at times directed to certain places of ministry and forbidden to go to others. But if one examines the NT examples of individual guidance carefully he will discover that nearly all of them have a direct bearing on the spread of the Gospel. One looks in vain for examples of specific guidance from God on the more ordinary decisions of life, like “whom should I marry?” Or, “what career

should I tackle?" Or "which chariot should I purchase?" Or "how many shekels shall I put in the offering?"

But, you say, what about the passages you read a few moments ago that clearly teach that God is in the business of revealing to each of us His wonderful plan for our lives? Well, what about Proverbs 3:5, 6? Virtually every modern translation of the Bible has corrected this KJV translation so that it accurately reflects the original Hebrew. It really says, "In all Thy ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight." The word "path" describes the general course or fortunes of life, so the meaning is, "He shall make the course of your life successful." It does not suggest that God will do so by specific guidance into an individual path marked out by God.

What about Psalm 32:8? Again the KJV reads, "I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go. I will guide thee with mine eye." It is assumed by many people that the Lord is speaking here, but Psalm 32 is a Psalm of David, and David is clearly speaking up through verse 7 and again in verses 10 & 11. Why assume that God begins speaking in verse 8? But even if God is speaking it still doesn't necessarily teach a specific will, for the Hebrew word translated "guide" really means to "counsel" and "the way you should go" is probably a reference to the moral law of God rather than an individualized plan. He is simply urging the believer to follow the moral will of God.

Isaiah 30:20,21 is another passage we read a few moments ago from the NASB: "Although the Lord has given you bread of privation and water of oppression, He, your Teacher, will no longer hide Himself, but your eyes will behold your Teacher. And your ears will hear a word behind you, 'This is the way, walk in it,' whenever you turn to the right or to the left." As a matter of fact, the NASB has here made an inexplicable translational blunder, but both the KJV and the NIV are correct. The word "teacher" should not be capitalized as though it refers to God, because in the Hebrew it is not even singular, but plural. NIV reads, "Your teachers will be hidden no more; with your own eyes you will see them." These teachers are the prophets, who had been in hiding for their safety (vs.8-11). The eyes and ears are the literal eyes and ears of the prophets. Furthermore, the reference to "the way" indicates God's moral law from which Israel had strayed and to which the prophets would recall them whenever they turned to the right or to the left in straying for the straight and narrow.

Having examined some of the key passages used (or misused) by the advocates of a special individual will of God, I want to ask another question:

**Does experience support it?** It is my contention that it does not, for I don't believe anyone can *consistently* practice this approach to finding God's will for their lives. Everyone abandons the bull's eye approach to decision-making at some point. Did you seek and find God's perfect will about what clothes you would wear this morning, which cereal you ate, what route you took to church, or what row you sat in this morning? (Well, that's not a very good example, because most of you apparently have found God's perfect will on that matter).

But the point is, the only time most of us talk about finding God's perfect will is in regard to the relatively major decisions of life. For other decisions we use the Bible, our brains, our experience, our desires, our instinct, etc. My question is, "Why aren't those same factors sufficient to decide the *major* decisions also?" After all, small decisions sometimes turn out to be large ones and what appear to be large decisions sometimes turn out to be quite insignificant.

The fact of the matter is, in my estimation, the reason many of us "seek God's perfect will" in the major decisions of life is that we are uncomfortable assuming responsibility for those decisions, which means accepting the blame if they go wrong. So we want God to make them for us. God, on the other hand, wants to promote maturity in us and wants us to learn to make wise decisions. It seems to me that when faced with several options (so long as they are all within the moral will of God) we should not worry about possibly missing the bull's eye, but rather we should rejoice that we have more than one option. Years ago I was talking to a man in this church who was unemployed. He said, "Pastor, I have three job offers. I want you to pray that the Lord will close the doors to the two jobs He doesn't want me to have." I said, "Why?" His answer was, "What do you mean, 'Why?' I don't want to miss His will."

I said, "How could you miss His will? Is one of those jobs for a crime syndicate or a liquor store?" "No," he answered, "they're all legitimate jobs which would help me take care of my family." "Then why," I asked, "do you want any of the doors closed? Do you realize how many people don't have *any* choices?" You want to know why? Because he didn't want to have to make the decision and accept the consequences if it turned out to be wrong. His insecurity and immaturity were showing.

My point is not that he should leave God out of the decision-making process. I think he would be wise to thank God for the options, examine Scripture for any evidence that God's moral law might be violated by any of the options, pray that God would help him not to overlook any relevant facts, ask God to help him evaluate his motives, etc. But to pray that God would make the decision for him by sovereignly closing doors may be illegitimate.<sup>1</sup>

I came across a rather humorous account of Adam and Eve caught in the age-old quest for the will of God that I would like to read.

### *The First Supper*

*Adam was hungry. He had had a long, challenging day naming animals. His afternoon nap had been refreshing, and his post-siesta introduction to Eve was exhilarating, to say the least. But as the sun began to set on their first day, Adam discovered that he had worked up an appetite.*

*"I think we should eat," he said to Eve. "Let's call the evening meal 'supper.'"*

*"Oh, you're so decisive, Adam," replied Eve admiringly, "I like that in a man. And 'supper' has a nice ring to it. I guess all the excitement of being created has made me hungry, too."*

*As they discussed how they should proceed, they decided that Adam would gather fruit from the garden, and Eve would prepare it for their meal. Adam set about his task and soon returned with a basket full of ripe fruit. He gave it to Eve, and went to soak his feet in the soothing current of the Pishon River until supper was ready. He had been reviewing the animals' names for about five minutes when he heard his wife's troubled voice.*

*"Adam, could you help me for a moment?"*

*"What seems to be the problem, dear?" he replied.*

*"I'm not sure which of these lovely fruits I should prepare for supper. I've prayed for guidance from the Lord, but I'm not really sure what He wants me to do. I certainly don't want to miss His will on my very first decision. Would you go to the Lord and ask Him what I should do about supper?"*

*Adam's hunger was intensifying, but he understood Eve's dilemma. So he left her to go speak with the Lord. Shortly, he returned. He appeared perplexed.*

*"Well?" probed Eve.*

*"He didn't really answer your question," he answered.*

*"What do you mean? Didn't He say anything?"*

*"Oh yes," replied Adam. "But He just repeated what He said earlier today during the garden tour: 'From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.' I assure you, Eve, I steered clear of the forbidden tree."*

*"But that doesn't solve my problem," said Eve. "What should I prepare for tonight?"*

*From the rumbling in his stomach, Adam was discovering that lions and tigers are not the only things that growl.*

*So he said, "I've never seen such crisp, juicy apples. I feel a sense of peace about them. Why don't you prepare them for supper? Maybe while you're getting them ready, you'll experience the same peace I have."*

*"All right, Adam," she agreed. "I guess you've had more experience at making decisions than I have. I appreciate your leadership. I'll call you when supper is ready."*

*"OK," replied Adam, relieved. "I'll get back to my easy-bank."*

*Adam was only halfway to the river when he heard Eve's call. He was so hungry that he jogged back to the clearing where she was working. But his anticipation evaporated when he saw her*

face.

*“More problems?” he asked.*

*“Adam, I just can’t decide what I should do with these apples. I could slice them, dice them, mash them, bake them in a pie, a cobbler, fritters, or dumplings. Or we could just polish them and eat them raw. I really want to be your helper, but I also want to be certain of the Lord’s will on this decision. Would you be a dear and go just one more time to the Lord with my problem?”*

*Since he didn’t have any better solution himself, Adam did as Eve requested. When he returned, he said, “I got the same answer as before: ‘From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.’”*

*Adam and Eve were both silent for a moment. Then Adam said, “You know, Eve, the Lord made that statement as though it ought to fully answer my question. I’m sure He could have told me what to eat and how to eat it; but I think He wants us to make those decisions. It was the same with the animals today. He just left their names up to me.”*

*Eve was incredulous. “Do you mean that it doesn’t matter which of these fruits we have for supper? Are you telling me that I can’t miss God’s will in this decision?”*

*Adam explained: “The only way you could do that is to pick some fruit from the forbidden tree.”<sup>ii</sup>*

Now most of my time is gone this morning and I have yet to give you any positive guidance about how to properly understand God's will for your life. I've explained some of the problems with the traditional view but I haven't really given an alternative. And I want to do that quickly.

### **Suggesting an alternative way to make right choices**

**1. First, God's “moral will” as revealed in the Scriptures has to be considered foundational and absolutely authoritative.** If God has left the decision-making process up to us, then there is no substitute for knowing the moral boundaries within which our decisions must be made. I am personally convinced that if some Christians spent less time trying to discover God's *individual* will for their lives and more time ascertaining God's *moral* will as revealed in the Scriptures, their lives would be more productive, happy, and pleasing to God.

**2. Within God's moral will there is a large “freedom area” where we are free and responsible to make choices.** To put it another way, we have “freedom of choice within revealed limits.” Any issue not addressed in the Bible either by commandment or by principle is an area of freedom which God is not normally going to decide for us. Furthermore, any decision within the freedom area is acceptable to Him. One option may be wise and another foolish, but neither is sinful.

**3. God's Word indicates by example and by doctrine that the normal way to make decisions is to use the wisdom He has made available to all of us.** Consider these passages:

- (1). Romans 4:15: "Where there is no law, there is no transgression." The only way a person can sin against God is to break one of God's moral laws or principles—all of which are in the Bible!
- (2). Romans 14:5: regarding the decision as to which day one should set aside for worship, "Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind." It doesn't say, "pray that you will find God's will in this matter."
- (3). 1 Cor. 10:23: "'Everything is permissible'—but not everything is beneficial." In other words, where God hasn't laid down restrictions you're free to do what you want, but some choices are dumb. Is it a sin to smoke a cigar? I don't think so, but who wants to stink?
- (4). 1 Cor. 16:3,4, regarding a journey to Jerusalem, "If it seems advisable for me to go also, they will accompany me," not, "Let's seek God's perfect will."
- (5). 2 Cor. 9:7: speaking of the issue of stewardship: "Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give." The actual amount we should give is a personal decision, freely made.

In each of these verses and dozens like them the issues at hand are the ordinary decisions of life—and the individual does not seek God's perfect individual will or even pray about it specifically (except in the sense that believers are to bathe their whole lives in prayer). No, the decision is made after considering all the options and using the wisdom God has made available to all of us.

**4. Making wise decisions involves gleaning all available data from such sources as Scripture, reason, experience, counsel, circumstances, strong conviction, and prayer.** There may be times when the data seem to yield two equal options, in which case I think St. Augustine's advice is appropriate. He said, "Love God and do what you please." John MacArthur has said the same thing in a slightly different way: "If you're saved, Spirit-filled and sanctified, then do whatever you want to do." Now those are some big "if's," but I think I agree. If your life is right with God, then what God wants will be what you want.

**5. Within the "freedom area" decisions are best not viewed as God's "first choice," "second best," etc., but simply as "wise" or "unwise."**

**Conclusion:** Let me return to the case of the Apostle Paul and his decision to go to Jerusalem as found in Acts 21. Was it a wise decision for Paul? I'm not sure, but I think not because reason, counsel, and circumstances all voted against it. I suspect made his decision on emotional grounds, based on his intense love for his countrymen; Luke and the rest probably made their decision on wisdom grounds. He felt compelled by the Spirit to go, but he might have been

wiser to listen to counsel. But was it sinful for Paul to go? No, for his going violated no moral principle of God's revealed will. That's why they could all say, "Let the Lord's (sovereign) will be done." And God graciously used the Jerusalem visit for good, as it was there that he was arrested and eventually shipped off to Rome to preach the Gospel in the heart of the Roman empire.<sup>iii</sup>

As we close, allow me to clarify what I am challenging. I am not questioning whether God knows in advance all that I will ever do, nor whether He has sovereignly willed (either directly or permissively), that it be so. I am questioning whether God has uniquely designed for me an ideal, detailed life-plan which I must discover if I do not want to settle for His second best. Furthermore, I believe that God can give special guidance anytime He wants to and He does do that on occasion for some people. And if and when He does, they'd better follow it, because that would be God's perfect will for that person at that time. But I do not think that is God's normal way of dealing with all believers, nor do I believe we should feel spiritually inferior if God doesn't seem to deal that way with us.

Finally, let me say that the closer we are to God in terms of an intimate walk with Him, the more likely our personal decisions will be pleasing to Him.

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i. Am I saying that God does not choose a spouse for us? Yes, in effect that's what I'm saying. What He does is expect us to choose a spouse within the limits of His moral law. If you are male He limits your choice to females. That cuts the options down to 50%. He further limits your choice to believers, and that further cut the options by perhaps another 80% or more. He tells you not to marry someone who is already married or unbiblically divorced. He indicates by principle that you should not marry someone with whom you are not in agreement. By the time you consider all the parameters God has set up, there may be only a handful of options, perhaps as many as a hundred. But within that number, whatever it is, God gives you the freedom to choose your own spouse. You must use your head and your heart and the wisdom He has given you, and then you must assume responsibility for your decision and make the best of it.

ii. Garry Friesen and Robin Maxson, *Decision Making and the Will of God*, 165-167.

iii. What did Luke mean when he said in verse 14: "And since he would not be persuaded, we fell silent, remarking, 'The will of the Lord be done!'" Which will of God was he talking about? Not the individual will of God for Paul's life (the bull's eye so to speak), because Luke actually thought his decision was unwise. Not the moral will of God, for that was not even an issue here. I believe he was referring to the sovereign will of God. In essence he was saying, "Though we cannot agree on what is a wise decision here, we have one thing to fall back upon, namely that God has a wise plan for this universe and in that plan He is able to bring good even out of unwise decisions. The will of the Lord be done!"