

What is God's Will?

In my experience, one of the questions that many Christians ask themselves is: What is God's will for my life? And usually this question relies on the assumption that God has a particular will for each individual (or, if not for everyone, then surely for me!). A major task of Christian life, we think, is to figure out what God wants you to do, from the biggest questions to the smallest. What should I study? Where should I live? Do I take that job? Volunteer in this ministry? Talk to that person? Wear these socks?

It's also been my experience that much of the figuring-out-God's-will-for-my-life talk is strangely cutoff from the language of the Bible. And when referring to Scripture while discerning God's will, we frequently do so in a surface, selective way, removing a few verses from their context. It can be very difficult for us to allow the Bible to speak and then to understand what it is saying to us. It's much easier and often more immediately satisfying to convince ourselves that chosen portions say what we want them to say.

The possibly surprising truth is that the Bible rarely speaks about "God's will" or the "will of God", at least in so many words. Although obviously many parts of the Bible give commands, instruction, and teaching, seldom - if ever - is this toward the explicit goal of helping us to determine God's will for the individual, for me, for you. What we discover in the passages that speak of the "God's will" is that this always has in view the big picture of God's will for Jew and Gentile and all creation.

In the following weeks we're going to look at several passages which mention the exact phrase "God's will" or "will of God" as well those passages which are typically understood to address the subject. For each passage I attempt to give some background/context and bit of interpretation in order to help frame the discussion to follow. The questions are presented in clusters, and it's likely that in answering one you'll begin to answer others beside it (and it's also likely, I realize, that you'll go off in quite unexpected directions).

It's also likely that, as you progress in the study, the questions will begin to seem repetitive, or you will be having the same conversation you've already had. If that is the case, you may want to skip some questions (or pose some of your own), but I would also encourage you that we sometimes need to ask the same questions of different passages and to allow each passage speak for itself. We should not be surprised when different passages address the same subjects from different perspectives, with different emphases, and - possibly - with different conclusions. The Bible is a big, diverse book with many voices. Listen to all of them.

1. Proverbs 3:1-10

- 1 My child, do not forget my teaching,
but let your heart keep my commandments;
2 for length of days and years of life
and abundant welfare they will give you.*
- 3 Do not let loyalty and faithfulness forsake you;
bind them around your neck,
write them on the tablet of your heart.*
- 4 So you will find favor and good repute
in the sight of God and of people.*
- 5 Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight.*
- 6 In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.*
- 7 Do not be wise in your own eyes;
fear the Lord, and turn away from evil.*
- 8 It will be a healing for your flesh
and a refreshment for your body.*
- 9 Honor the Lord with your substance
and with the first fruits of all your produce;
10 then your barns will be filled with plenty,
and your vats will be bursting with wine.*

The book Proverbs does not seem especially “Christian”. Whereas the Psalms seem to be highly spiritual and heavenly minded, the book of Proverbs seems immanently practical and down to earth. It’s often overlooked exactly because it’s a very “ordinary” book; it reads more like common sense than divine revelation. A professor of mine put it like this:

This is a book for unexceptional people trying to live wisely and faithfully in the generally undramatic circumstances of daily life, on the days when water does not put forth from the rock and angels do not come to lunch. The Israelite sages are concerned with the same things we worry about, the things people regularly consult their pastors and friends about: how to avoid bitter domestic quarrels, what to tell your kids about sex and about God, what to do when somebody asks you to lend them money, how to handle your own money and your work life, how to cultivate lasting friendships. In short, the sages whose sayings make up the Proverbs are interested in the art of living well - with others, with ourselves, with God.¹

And though some the Proverbs might seem like obvious advice, as we read we discover that the “art of living well” it describes is frequently not the same thing as what we would call “conventional wisdom.” The Proverbs assume that there is a wise and foolish way to live, a right and a wrong way to act. What’s wise and foolish, right and wrong, isn’t for us to decide but

¹ Ellen F. Davis, *Getting Involved with God* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2001), 92

rather is written into creation. The world is designed in such a way that some things are good and some things are bad.

Israel's sages - their wise and learned leaders - compiled the sayings of the Proverbs in order to help people live faithfully. When we read in the first verse, "My child, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments;" - these "my's" refer to the sage who wrote the Proverbs.² They promise that, if these proverbs are understood and adhered to, they will give prosperity.

Verses 3-4 counsel loyalty and faithfulness, though it is a bit unclear if the goal is to be loyal and faithful to the teaching itself, or to one's neighbor, or to God - or all three. I tend to think that this is referring to the teaching itself, a teaching to which we should be loyal and faithful, that we should always keep close to our hearts and minds - even to the point of literally carrying the teaching with us.³ If a person remains loyal and faithful to the true teaching, then they will find favor in the sight of God and all people.

And then come the two most well-known verses in Proverbs. Because Proverbs is a collection of short sayings, the famous words - "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths." - can stand on its own, but, as always, some context certainly helps.

Like all proverbs, the proverb of 3:5-6 is practical, wise advice. We are counseled not to rely on our own insight or understanding but to instead simply trust in the Lord. The assumption, unstated, seems to be that loyalty and faithfulness to the teaching found in the Proverbs is tantamount to trust in the Lord. The trust in this proverb isn't a mere abstraction; it's not an inner disposition. The Proverbs describe a particular way of being in the world - a way that may frequently be at odds with how we'd otherwise choose to be/act - and following this way is an act of trust, trust in the Lord who created the world and reveals all wisdom.

To trust in the Lord requires setting aside what you think you know and putting into practice the teaching of the Proverbs (and, it's safe to say, the whole Bible). This type of trust is an act of submission, of relinquishing one's own authority. To acknowledge the Lord is, in this context, not simply to admit that there is God, but to believe and - more importantly - to live as is the Lord really is *the Lord*. And this requires recognition that each of us is *not* the Lord or our lives or of anything else. This is what it means to worship.

The promise of the passage is that, if we do this, the Lord will make our paths straight. But what does that mean? The three crucial words here - make, paths, straight - are all subject to a

² We probably tend to read these as God's direct address to us (and in a sense, they are) but it's important to keep straight who is addressing whom in the text. This is perhaps not so different than when Paul repeatedly uses the first person in his letters, saying things like "My Gospel..."

³ This perhaps echoes what God commanded the Israelites regarding the law: "Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words, which I command you this day, shall be upon your heart; and teach them thoroughly to your children, and speak of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk on the road, and when you lie down, and when you get up. And tie them for a sign upon your hand, and let them be "totafot" between your eyes. And write them on the door-posts of your house and on your gates." Deuteronomy 6:4-9

variety of interpretations (this will probably become evident when you start answering the questions in a group).

- 1. Is what verses 1-2 promise actually true? If we understand and obey good teaching do we necessarily have a long life and “abundant welfare”? Has that been your experience?**
- 2. Similarly, what does Jesus’ life and ministry teach us about the earthly effects of faithfulness? Did Proverbs 3:1-2 come true for him? How do we account for the difference between his words and what we read in Proverbs?**
- 3. What makes for a good life? Does it require wisdom? Where is wisdom found?**
- 4. What does it mean to trust in the Lord? What does trusting the Lord have to do with wisdom? Can a person be wise but not trust the Lord? Can a person trust the Lord but behave foolishly?**
- 5. What does it mean to acknowledge the Lord? And what does acknowledging the Lord mean that we must acknowledge about ourselves?**
- 6. How does the Lord make our paths straight? Or does perhaps this proverb suggest that trusting and acknowledging the Lord is already to put ourselves on a straight path?**
- 7. Does this proverb make life sound too simplistic, too formulaic? Does it ever seem like we’ve trusted in God but we’re still walking a crooked path? What does a “straight” path look like? How do we know if we’re on one? And if the path doesn’t seem straight, should we necessarily doubt if we’ve actually trusted God?**
- 8. What does this passage say about God? And God’s will for us?**

2. Jeremiah 29:4-14

11 For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.

One of the many gifts I received at my ordination was a wall hanging inscribed with the words of Jeremiah 29:11. The idea, I assume, was that this was good news for me - a young minister just beginning - that God had a plan for me. This well-known verse (undoubtedly the most famous in Jeremiah) is often cited wherever encouragement or reassurance is needed. When we are anxious or fearful it is comforting to hear that God wants good things for us, that our future is filled with hope, that amidst the chaos and confusion God is directing us - each of us - to some goal. The trouble is that too often this verse ends up functioning much like an inspirational quote cut and pasted out of its context. There are 1364(!) verses in Jeremiah; how does this one verse relate to the rest?

From beginning to end the subject of Jeremiah is the fall of Judah to Babylon in the sixth century BC. For God’s chosen people this was a political and spiritual catastrophe. In 597, Judah revolted against their Babylonian overlords, which eventually led to the destruction of Jerusalem - including the temple - in 587. In order to suppress continued uprisings, in 582 the

Babylonians began sending many of the Judeans into exile. There they struggled to make sense of the tragedy that had befallen them. Long ago God had delivered them into the Promised Land, but now they were imprisoned on foreign soil. God had established David's throne forevermore, but now the kingdom was overthrown and David's royal city lay in ruins. God has commanded Solomon to build a temple where his presence would dwell, but now it was destroyed and God's whereabouts left in doubt.

How could this happen? And what does it all mean? Did God abandon them to destruction? Or was their God not as powerful as the gods of other peoples? And where is God? Can God be worshipped without the temple, in faraway Babylon? What are they supposed to do now? What's going to happen? It is within this context of doubt and despair that God speaks the words of Jeremiah 29:11 to his people.

4 Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: 5 Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. 6 Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. 7 But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. 8 For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, 9 for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says the Lord.

10 For thus says the Lord: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. 11 For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. 12 Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. 13 When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, 14 I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

In this passage God declares the reason for the exile: God has sent his people to Babylon. This answers big questions but raises others. It's good to hear that God is in control of - not subject to - the events of history. But then if God is in control, why would he send his people into exile? Is the covenant broken? Is God giving up on his people? Or does God still have a plan?

God tells the people that they should make themselves at home in Babylon. They should get on with the business of living life: build homes, plant gardens, get married, have children, etc. God tells them to pray for the place where they find themselves; instead of seeing themselves as separate and apart, they should seek a common welfare. Whereas some (false) prophets proclaim that the exile will be short (exactly the kind of message the people would like to hear) God declares that these deceivers were not sent by Him.

Instead, after 70 years⁴ God will - as promised⁵ - "visit you" and bring the people back to their former home. And then God issues the famous words of 29:11. Even though the people have been sent into exile (and will remain there for a long time) God hasn't abandoned them but has a plan for them - a plan for their welfare, not their harm - so they have reason to have hope in the future.

It's essential to see that this promise is made, not to an individual, not even to a bunch of individuals, but rather it is made to a people. You/your here refers collectively to the nation of Israel, the ones to whom God had made his promises and the ones he'd send into exile. Many of those who heard this promise would no longer be alive when it finally came true, but it is nevertheless a promise to them because they are part of the people. It's bittersweet news; a better day is coming, but few will be around to see it. Much like Moses and the Hebrews who died in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land, those to whom God spoke through Jeremiah would have to be content knowing that the future God planned was not for them but their descendants.

Of course, as the years passed in exile, again and again the people would return to God's promise. Undoubtedly this increasingly became a word of hope as the time of its fulfillment drew nearer. And then God makes an even better promise: when the people return from exile, God will be intimately present to them. God will hear their prayers; God will be found by those who seek; God will restore his people from every nation.

- 9. *When we imagine God's plans for his people, does it include things like sending them into exile? Why would God do this/allow it to happen? Is it sometimes useful or even necessary that we suffer?***
- 10. *What is God's will for the exiles while they live in Babylon?***
- 11. *Does it sometimes feel like your life is lived in "exile"? What does God's word to the exiles teach us about life in a foreign land? And what does it teach us about life on earth as we long for the Promised Land?***
- 12. *Was this good news for the first hearers - for those who would perish before the promise came true? What does it mean for God's promises to come true only after we've died?***
- 13. *What does it mean for God to make promises to "a people"? How is keeping promises to a collective (like Israel, or the church) different from keeping promises to an individual?***
- 14. *What does this passage teach us about God? And what does it teach us about God's plans for his people? For the individual?***

⁴ This number is likely symbolic: 7 - or 70 - represents completeness, the fullness of time. The exile actually ended in 538-9, so it wasn't precisely 70 years.

⁵ See Jeremiah 25:11-12

3. Micah 6:6-8

6 *“With what shall I come before the Lord,
and bow myself before God on high?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?
7 Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousands of rivers of oil?
Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”*
8 *He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?*

The prophets are God’s chosen instruments who speak God’s truth to the people, and often the message God gives them to speak isn’t a happy one. When God’s people have failed to love God and love their neighbors, it’s the thankless job of the prophets to call them to account. Micah, like other prophets, speaks a harsh word to God’s people because they have failed to worship God as they’ve been commanded. The passage above appears toward the end of the book of Micah, at which point the letter has moved from rebuke to more encouraging words of hope. Micah has told the people what they’ve done wrong, but what is it that they need to do?

It’s interesting to note that this passage is comprised entirely of rhetorical questions. When we stand before God, what can we possibly bring Him? This list of possible things - burnt offerings, calves, rams, and oil - does not appear out of nowhere. In fact, God did indeed command his people to bring these very things (and others like them) before God. This is how God told them to worship; it wasn’t their idea. Then the passage even takes the rhetorical questions to the extreme: “Shall I bring my firstborn for my transgression?” Would that prove my devotion!? Would that be a big enough sacrifice to please God!?

Repeatedly throughout the prophets and here again in Micah, God’s people are told that, while they’ve worshipped God as ritually prescribed, they haven’t *really* worshipped God.⁶ They’ve said and done what they’re supposed to say and do, but their hearts have remained far from God.⁷ So if God isn’t pleased by the fulfillment of the commandments, what would please God? What is required?

⁶ See especially Isaiah 1:12-17. It’s worth recognizing that already the prophets are well aware that merely obeying the law does not put a person in God’s favor. It’s too simplistic (and inaccurate) to say that Judaism was/is about righteousness by law observance while the NT/Christianity is about righteousness through faith. Micah and others condemn rote religion.

⁷ Perhaps the most well-known formulation of this idea is found in Isaiah 29:13: “The Lord said: Because these people draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote;”

The answer to these questions takes the form of a question, as if God's people shouldn't have even needed to ask because they've already been told. The question - which is also the answer - is delightfully simple: "do justice, and to love kindness, and walk humbly with your God." This briefly summarizes what God has always wanted from his people, and what God wants still.

- 15. Do you ever feel the need to offer something to win God's approval? Like you need to bring some present to stand in God's presence?**
- 16. How could God be dissatisfied with the people doing what He commanded? Should God have given them a better commandment? Or can what God really wants even be commanded? Can obeying commandments please God?**
- 17. Do you ever feel like you're just "saying and doing what you're supposed to do" while your heart is actually far from God? Do you ever feel like you're doing all the "right" things but somehow it still feels like the "wrong" thing?**
- 18. Why does Micah name these three things: "do justice, and to love kindness, and walk humbly with your God"? Why these three? Is this easy to understand and do?**
- 19. How did Jesus fulfill God's requirement to "do justice, and to love kindness, and walk humbly with your God"?**

4. John 10:1-10

"Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. 2 The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5 They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers." 6 Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

7 So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8 All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. 9 I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

It is very common to hear Christians to say something like, "I'm just waiting to hear God's voice," or "as soon as God speaks, we'll make a decision." Because we believe that, through Jesus, we have a personal relationship with God we also believe that God can and will speak to us. And the passage above gives us good reason to believe these things, because Jesus himself promises that he is indeed the shepherd who calls out his sheep by name and leads them.

Jesus (not to mention others in the Bible) often employs metaphor. In this passage, in fact, he uses two: he declares that he is both the shepherd and that he is the gate. These are metaphors because he is not *literally* a shepherd or a gate, and - thankfully - we are not *literally* sheep. Our relationship with Jesus is *like* the relationship of sheep to their shepherd, but, of course, there are other ways in which he is not like a shepherd and we are not like sheep. Effective metaphors, like this one, succeed by drawing a comparison between unlike things and

highlighting the way they are alike. We *are* like sheep. But, of course, we are also not like sheep, so understanding metaphor requires discerning the point at which the comparison is being made without pushing it too far. (Jesus is not suggesting, for instance, that we are covered in wool, walk on four legs, etc.) Usually we know this intuitively and the best metaphors are those that continuously lend themselves to additional layers of interpretation.

In the same way, Jesus' use of the word "voice" is metaphorical as well. In fact, usually when people say something like, "God spoke to me", they don't *literally* mean that they heard God's audible voice but rather that they understood God's message to have been conveyed to them in some form or another. Of course, this is not to deny that God can literally speak to us with a voice (and if God did audibly speak to us he might well use a metaphor!) but instead to highlight that when we say "God speaks to us" we are typically speaking metaphorically. And this does not diminish the reality of God's "voice" in our lives; Jesus uses metaphor exactly because it's often more powerful than the literal.

So why did Jesus use this particular metaphor in the first place? In the Gospel of John especially Jesus encounters severe antagonism, and he also uses especially harsh language towards those who oppose him. Perhaps no passage is more startling than John 8:42-44: "Jesus said to them, 'If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now I am here. I did not come on my own, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot accept my word. You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father's desires.'" Here Jesus makes a sharp distinction between those who listen/understand/follow and those who do not, and our passage above, which follows soon after, reiterates the same point. In John 10, Jesus draws a stark contrast between those who hear his voice and those who do not, those who follow him as shepherd and those who are lost.

The emphasis in the passage is upon the division between those who have heard Jesus' voice and those who have not. And his "speech" - the message he proclaims - consists not only of his words, but of his powerful deeds, of his essential oneness with the Father, of the Word made flesh. The crucial question this passage raises is whether or not one has chosen to hear the voice of the good shepherd or whether one had chosen to ignore his voice (or is incapable of hearing) and to deny the shepherd. Many people heard Jesus without really *hearing* him. His voice can enter our ears without changing our heart. His point is that, those who truly are his sheep will recognize his voice and respond. They will follow him, not just because they've eaten the miraculous bread, but because he has the words of life.

The abundant life that Jesus promises is the result of having heard his voice, followed him as shepherd, and entered his fold.

20. Do you expect God to speak to you? What does God's "speech" "sound" like? Have you had an experience when you were sure you "heard" God's "voice"? Or a time when you really did literally hear God's voice?

21. In what ways are we like sheep? How is Jesus like a shepherd?

22. When Jesus says, "He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out," is he suggesting that he only calls some? Or that only some respond? Why do only some follow the shepherd? Why is it hard for some to hear?

23. How do we know if the "voice" we hear is God's voice? And how do we know that we're not following "the voice of a stranger?"

24. Is it possible that God has already spoken to us and we haven't heard? Are we possibly waiting to hear God's voice when he's already spoken what we need to hear?

25. Might Jesus have told us to follow him, but we stayed where we are and can't hear his voice?

5. Matthew 6:25-34

25 "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? 26 Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? 27 And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? 28 And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, 29 yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. 30 But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? 31 Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' 32 For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. 33 But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

34 "So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

In this passage Jesus tells his disciples and all who would hear not to worry about their lives. And it seems to me that, in our day, those people most concerned with discovering God's will are often the same people most worried about life. It's easy to become preoccupied with discerning God's will and to become fearful that we've strayed off course. We can often feel dissatisfied with our circumstances (even when they're not so bad!) and grow anxious that things aren't going to get better, that we're not going to achieve things we hoped, experience the things we imagined, be fulfilled the way we expected. And we might think that, if we just discovered God's will, then we'd be content. And because we're not so content, we easily begin to suspect that we're not where we're supposed to be, that we missed some important sign along the way.

Jesus counsels quite a different approach to life. He says that God already knows what you need. And just look at the birds and the lilies: God feeds and clothes them according to their needs, and God cares about us much more. But we usually want much more than what we need, and we become worried that we will not attain it - or then we do attain it then worry when it doesn't satisfy. Our desires have a way of overriding and ignoring what is most needful. We want to be blessed in specific ways then become frustrated and confused when God doesn't comply with our wishes. We strive after what we don't really need when God has already provided what we really do need.

Jesus redirects our seeking away from ourselves and onto God. When we become preoccupied with God's will, what we might actually be preoccupied with is getting what we want out of life, and we treat God as the means to help us get it. Jesus tells us not to worry about ourselves but instead to strive for God's kingdom and God's righteousness, and that then all these other things we worry about will be taken care of. He's telling us that the path to the best possible life is discovered, perhaps paradoxically, by not worrying about our life and instead pursuing God. The less we worry about ourselves, the more satisfied we'll be. We're closest to God's will for our lives exactly when we trust that God meets our needs, when the only thing we want is God. Here Jesus moves the emphasis away from what we should do and onto what kind of people we should be.

26. Do you worry about discovering God's will?

27. Do you more often find yourself worried about your needs? Or your wants? Do you ever confuse the two? What does Jesus promise us God will provide?

28. Do we ever treat God like a genie in a bottle, as if he'll grant our wishes if we just ask the right way? Do we expect God to give us what we want?

29. Do you desire for yourself what God desires for you? Or do your desires need to change?

30. Might we still need to seek God's will regarding exactly how we should pursue "the kingdom of God and his righteousness,"? Is Jesus' instruction sufficient? Or do you want something more specific?

31. What does this passage teach about seeking God's will?

6. Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God

1 Corinthians 1:1-3

1 Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, 2 To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

2 Corinthians 1:1-2

1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God that is in Corinth, including all the saints throughout Achaia: 2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Ephesians 1:1-2

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints who are in Ephesus, and are faithful in Christ Jesus: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Colossians 1:1-2

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father.

2 Timothy 1:1-2

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God according to the promise of the life that is in Christ Jesus, To Timothy, my beloved child: Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

Acts 22:12-16

12 "A certain Ananias, who was a devout man according to the law and well spoken of by all the Jews living there, 13 came to me; and standing beside me, he said, 'Brother Saul, regain your sight!' In that very hour I regained my sight and saw him. 14 Then he said, 'The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will, to see the Righteous One and to hear his own voice; 15 for you will be his witness to all the world of what you have seen and heard. 16 And now why do you delay? Get up, be baptized, and have your sins washed away, calling on his name.'

The phrase "will of God" or "God's will" appears infrequently in the Bible, but one of the contexts in which it appears repeatedly is in the greetings of Paul's letters (and even those of Paul's letters which don't use these words still typically express a similar idea). Paul rarely speaks of God's will elsewhere (we'll look at those instances where he does) but he routinely does so when referring to his own vocation. If there's one thing Paul is certain can be called God's will - a thing which could only be possible as the result of an unmistakable act of God - is that Paul is an apostle of Jesus Christ.

Three times in the books of Acts (chapters 9:3-9, 22:6-16, and 26:12-18) as well as in Galatians 1:11-17 (and, to a lesser extent, 1 Corinthians 15:3-8), Paul tells his conversion story. Jesus Christ, the risen Lord, appeared to him on the way to Damascus for the explicit purpose of calling Paul to be Christ's ambassador. Paul's conversion wasn't just to a new religion, but to an entirely new life. He became a Christian in a very particular way for a very specific goal.

Paul repeatedly returned to his conversion story in order to establish his credentials as an apostle. Initially some Christians were (quite understandably) skeptical about a former persecutor of Christ turned proclaimer of Christ and Paul often felt compelled to give an account of how this shocking transformation took place. But even more than that, Paul's letters show repeated evidence that the churches to which he writes were also influenced by other teachers who proclaimed a different Gospel. This is seen most clearly in his letter to the Galatians, in which Paul wrote:

"6 I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— 7 not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! 9 As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!"

Of course, if there were many versions of the Gospel being offered, Paul needed to give the Galatians some reason to believe that the Gospel he proclaimed was the only true Gospel. So Paul wrote to them: "11 For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; 12 for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ."

Paul never shows reluctance to assert his special status as the chosen instrument of Christ; quite the opposite, in fact: he wants to make clear that his Gospel is *the* Gospel because it proceeds directly from the source. Paul doesn't allow his churches to forget, that wherever these other so-called apostles got their "Gospel", his Gospel was revealed directly to him by Christ himself.

It's impossible to overstate just how critical this conviction was to Paul. He was blessed with the certainty that God had called him, that the work he did was not just really important but, in fact, the "will of God." This helps explain the boldness and perseverance he demonstrated throughout his ministry. Paul's vocation frequently resulted in suffering, but rather than calling into question his calling, he understood his suffering as confirmation that he was doing God's will. After all, he was Christ's ambassador, and Christ himself had suffered.

- 32. *In the same way that Paul's conversion was special (few of us have heard a voice, been blinded, and knocked off our horse), is Paul's vocation also special? In what ways is your conversion and vocation like that of Paul and in what ways are they different?***
- 33. *Similarly, Does God often call people as directly and clearly as he did Paul? Or does God just do this occasionally? Does God only give some people a clear vocation?***
- 34. *Do you wish your sense of vocation was as clear as Paul's? Or could that be a burden?***
- 35. *Even with his clear sense of calling, do you think that there were times when Paul wasn't sure exactly what his calling required? Even if knew he was an apostle, were there times he didn't know what he, as an apostle, ought to do?***
- 36. *Of all the many things Paul might have described as "God's will", why does Paul most frequently use this description for his own calling as an apostle?***
- 37. *What does God's will for Paul teach us about God's will for our lives? And what questions does it leave unanswered?***

7. Open Doors (Matthew 19:21-23)

"When God closes one door, He opens another." This isn't Scripture, but many Christians happily state it as if it were. The metaphor of opening and closing doors is a popular means of describing the operation of God's will in our lives. The assumption is that whatever "door" is opened or closed is that way due to God's providence. So, for instance, if we are without a job and then are offered a job, we might conclude that this is a door that God has opened, or, if we are offered two jobs, but then one offer is withdrawn, then perhaps that is a door that God has closed. Following the path that God has for our lives then consists of passing through whichever doors God has opened, and waiting patiently for a new one to open when another has been closed. We might feel as if God's will for our lives remains mysterious until it is revealed.

This language of open doors has biblical warrant (as the passages below indicate), but I fear that the application of this idea is often difficult to justify. For one thing, it easily suggests that God's will for our lives might be something like the "path of least resistance", that whatever door is easiest to walk through must be the one that God intends for us to take.⁸ Just because a "door" is open (or appears to be) does not necessarily mean that it is open because God wants it to be. There are all kinds of doors wide open to us that we should not walk through. And just because a door is closed does not mean that God wants it closed; there are always doors which ought to be open but which remain closed due to our sin and the sin of others.

The way the we perceive these "doors" depends largely on our ability to see clearly the truth about the world and our own lives. For instance, we might see two open doors and then pray to God asking which one to walk through, and God might well say, "neither". Likewise, it might seem to us that every door is closed to us, but meanwhile many doors are open and we are either blind to see them or we refuse to consider it as a real option.

Consider the rich young ruler who came to Jesus seeking God's will for his life: "Jesus said to him, 'If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions." The man received a clear answer, but he didn't like it. He was told which door to walk through, but we don't know if he did. The door to sell all of our possessions stands open to many of us, but that's not a door that we want to walk through!

Like the rich young ruler, too often our desire for God to open and close doors seems disconnected from discipleship. We want God to open up the path before us - a path that hopefully aligns with our own desires - when God has already shown us where to walk: "Take up your cross and follow me."

The story of the rich young ruler continues concludes with Jesus' word to his disciples: "Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven." And here's one reason why this may be: there are more doors through which the rich - exactly because they are rich - are unwilling to walk through.

- 38. Does the language of open and closed doors appeal to you and your experience? Have there been times that you are sure God opened or closed a door for you? And have there been times when you walked through a door that you thought God had opened only to later doubt? - or even to be convinced you had ben mistaken?**
- 39. How do we discern if a door is open because God's opened it - or if it's open for some other reason? Likewise, might there be times when a door is closed but it needs to be forced open?**
- 40. Has God opened doors to you to which you've turned a blind eye? - Which you see but refuse to walk through? Has God closed doors that you keep trying to walk through?**

⁸ We would do well to recall Jesus' words: "Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it." (Matthew 7:13)

41. *Are we sometimes guilty of using the idea of open doors to convince ourselves that we were doing God's will when we were really just doing what we wanted or what was easiest? And might we sometimes tell ourselves that all the doors are closed in order to justify our lack of action?*
42. *What lesson do we learn from the rich young ruler? Did Jesus open a door for him? Or merely direct his attention to a door that has always been open? Does being rich make it more difficult to follow Jesus, to walk through the door he calls us to enter?*
43. *How does the idea of open and closed doors apply to Jesus' own life? If we follow Jesus, what kind of doors should we expect to be open and closed?*

8. More Open Doors

Acts 14:21-27

21 After they had proclaimed the good news to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, then on to Iconium and Antioch. 22 There they strengthened the souls of the disciples and encouraged them to continue in the faith, saying, "It is through many persecutions that we must enter the kingdom of God." 23 And after they had appointed elders for them in each church, with prayer and fasting they entrusted them to the Lord in whom they had come to believe.

24 Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. 25 When they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. 26 From there they sailed back to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had completed. 27 When they arrived, they called the church together and related all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles. 28 And they stayed there with the disciples for some time.

In this passage Luke narrates how the apostles, upon arriving in Antioch, told the church about their missionary work, "all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles." The primary purpose of this statement is to give thanks to God for the work that God had done through them. It is a retrospective judgment: God blessed this, God made it happen. It's quite possible that, at the moment the metaphorical door to fruitful ministry was opened, the apostles did not even realize it. We don't know to what extent the door was "closed" before, but in any case God gave them success. After their labors bore fruit they could see clearly that God has been with them. It's always easier to see God's will looking backward than looking forward.

1 Corinthians 16:5-9

5 I will visit you after passing through Macedonia—for I intend to pass through Macedonia— 6 and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may send me on my way, wherever I go. 7 I do not want to see you now just in passing, for I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. 8 But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, 9 for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.

In the passage from First Corinthians, Paul tells them that, while he does want to come visit them - "if God permits" - he only wants to come only if it will be an extended stay. Paul here makes clear that, as far as he can tell, it is God's will for him not to visit the Corinthians until God "permits" it. This should not be taken to mean that God is forcibly preventing Paul's trip, but rather that, for now, God has other more pressing work for Paul to do. Paul could choose to go to Corinth (or anywhere else) but he wants to remain in Ephesus because, "a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries."

Whereas the Acts passage is a retrospective assessment, here Paul describes a present moment currently unfolding. The door has been opened and remains so. As we saw earlier, if there's anything that Paul is sure about it's that God wants him to share the Gospel with Gentiles. But Paul also knows that, while it's his responsibility to carry out the vocation he's been given, it is still God that gives the success. So when he finds that people are responding to the Gospel, he can only conclude that he's right where God wants him to be. Visiting the Corinthians might be a good thing, but remaining in Ephesus is clearly a better thing - so much better that it's really no choice at all.

At the same time that Paul is sure that God has opened a door, he also fears the adversaries who are trying to close it. If Paul departs at this moment, all the good work that has been done is jeopardy. Paul's fears are legitimate: in the reality of daily life it is entirely possible for people to destroy what God has built. This is exactly why we need redemption - why Paul is an apostle - in the first place! Even when God opens a door, it doesn't mean it will be easy to walk through; our faithfulness is often met with resistance.

Colossians 4:2-3

2 Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with thanksgiving. 3 At the same time pray for us as well that God will open to us a door for the word, that we may declare the mystery of Christ, for which I am in prison, 4 so that I may reveal it clearly, as I should.

This passage expresses the hope for a "door for the word" to be opened in the (near) future. The remarkable thing about this passage is that Paul makes this prayer request while in prison. He doesn't pray for his release but rather that his ministry will bear fruit. The "door for the word" can be opened even as he remains locked in prison. Paul's circumstances don't determine God's ability to use him. In fact, because Paul is in prison for the sake of Christ - for faithfulness to his apostolic calling - he has good reason to think he's right where God wants him to be, in a place where God can use him.

44. What do all three of these passages have in common? For what purpose is the door opened? What is the evidence of an "open door"?

45. How are these three passages different? What difference does it make that one is past, one is present, and one is future? Is it easier to see an "open door" looking back than looking forward? Do we sometimes only see evidence of open door in retrospect?

46. What do these passages teach us about the idea of "open doors"? Is it significant that the New Testament uses this image specifically for the mission to the Gentiles?

47. Paul told the Corinthians that he both had an open door and that he had adversaries; do we sometimes assume that if God opens a door we won't face opposition? Do we expect it to be easy? Can opposition sometimes be confirmation that we're being

faithful? How do we discern whether or not resistance is a sign that we're on the right path or the wrong path?

48. How could Paul pray for an open door while he was in prison? What does this teach us about the kind of doors God might open to us? What do we expect an open door looks like? What do we expect life to look like when we're at the center of God's will?

9. Romans 12:1-2 (Philippians 2:5-8)

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Here, as in many translations, Paul describes God's will as something to "discern". Many other versions (like the NIV) use language like, "test and approve what God's will is" - which is an update (and clarification) of older translations (like the RSV) which said, "prove what is the will of God,". What all of these translations together make explicit is that, in this passage, Paul speaks of God's will as something that believers actively - not passively - discern, test, prove, etc. The emphasis here is not on something that God reveals but on something which is discovered.

Of course, what we are meant to discover are the full implications of what God has already revealed to us in Christ. For Paul, God has given us the BIG revelation and now we need to walk in the full light of it. This is not to say that God doesn't still reveal things - hardly - but rather that God has already shown us plenty! The fundamentals of God's will for our lives have been made abundantly clear, if only we have eyes to see.

The important thing to note in this passage is that the ability to discern God's will follows from having offered our whole selves to God as living sacrifice, as our spiritual worship. The image of the sacrifice of the body points directly to Jesus himself, who precisely modeled what Paul describes. In effect, Paul is explicating a more simple idea: be like Jesus.

Instead of being conformed to this world, we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. When Paul describes the "renewing of our minds", he assuredly has something in mind [sorry] like what he famously told the Philippians:

*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.*

Paul frequently draws upon the example of Jesus, but it's usually in much more abstract kind of way. He doesn't say things like, "Jesus fed people so you should feed people." Instead, Paul uses the broad narrative of Christ's life as the form for our lives. Just as Christ took on the form of a slave, we slaves are to take on the form of Christ.

The logic of Paul's statement in Romans 12:1-2 is that, the more Christlike we are, the more we'll be able to discern God's will for our lives. The more we have presented our bodies as a living sacrifice (in other words, the more we have died to ourselves to be raised with Christ) the more we see what our lives ought to be. The more we have the mind of Christ, the more we know what to do. And this, creates a kind of virtuous circle: the more we are like Christ, the more we can discern God's will, and then the more we become like Christ. And ultimately that is God's will for us.

- 49. When you think/pray/hope about God's will for your life, do you more imagine something that God will reveal? Or something that you need to discover?**
- 50. What is discernment? How does someone become discerning?**
- 51. What does it mean to offer our bodies as living sacrifices? What are some practical ways we can make (or signs that we have made) this offering of ourselves?**
- 52. How do we renew our minds? What is the evidence that our minds have been (or are being) renewed?**
- 53. How does being Christlike help us to discern - and do - God's will? And how does discerning and doing God's will help make us more Christlike?**
- 54. Do we first need to offer ourselves to God before discerning God's will? Is this in fact the first step of God's will for our lives? How can we expect to know God's will for us if we don't first submit to God?**

10. First Thessalonians 4:1-8

*Finally, brothers and sisters, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus that, as you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God (as, in fact, you are doing), you should do so more and more. 2 For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. 3 For this is the **will of God**, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; 4 that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, 5 not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; 6 that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. 7 For God did not call us to impurity but in holiness. 8 Therefore whoever rejects this rejects not human authority but God, who also gives his Holy Spirit to you.*

In the first passage (4:1-8) Paul declares that God's will for the Thessalonians is their sanctification. To be sanctified is to be made holy, to be set apart for the Lord - and this is a process. No one is entirely sanctified in an instant, or even in this lifetime. When the earliest Christians first became believers, many of them only knew the pagan customs that they'd always practiced, the customs of the people which surrounded them. However, Paul tells them,

because Jesus is their Lord they need to put these old things behind and live in light of the Gospel. Apparently Paul has spoken to them about this before: “You know what instructions we gave you though the Lord Jesus”. In this letter he instructs them (almost certainly not for the first time) to abstain from “fornication” (the word which covers all types of sexual immorality) and instead learn to control their bodies - unlike the Gentiles⁹ who are controlled by their lustful passions.

Why does Paul single out avoiding fornication? In part, almost certainly, because he’d heard reports that some of the believers in Thessaloniki were still caught in the “old ways” with regard to their sexual practices. It’s always difficult to start living a radically new life, and - let’s be honest - sexual immorality was, is, and always will be tempting. The other thing to bear in mind is that pagan worship often involved ritual prostitution. Paul is preoccupied with fornication, not only because it’s sinful in and of itself, but also especially because it’s likely to entangle people with false gods. He urges the believers to leave behind impurity and be holy, set apart for the one true God. God’s will is for us to be sanctified, or, as Jesus put it: “Be perfect therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

55. What is sanctification? Why does God want us to be sanctified? When we think about God’s will for our lives, do we think about sanctification? How do we become sanctified?

56. Why does Paul specifically address “fornication” as something that the Thessalonians needed to avoid in order to be sanctified? Was this a problem especially for them? Or is it a “universal” problem?

57. Why is it important to be set apart, not just in belief, but in body as well?

58. In what ways are modern Christians sanctified, holy, and set apart? In what ways are our habits indistinguishable from those who surround us? What are practical ways we can become more sanctified?

59. Is it possible to become too preoccupied with being sanctified - to flee “impurity” to such an extent that we cease to be any earthly good? How do we both stay in engaged in the world and be holy?

11. First Thessalonians 5:12-21

*12 But we appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to respect those who labor among you, and have charge of you in the Lord and admonish you; 13 esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. 14 And we urge you, beloved, to admonish the idlers, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with all of them. 15 See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. 16 Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the **will of God** in Christ Jesus for you. 19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not despise the words of prophets, 21 but test everything; hold fast to what is good; 22 abstain from every form of evil.*

⁹ Interestingly Paul contrasts the Thessalonians Christians with “the Gentiles”, even though the majority of them would’ve been Gentiles. However, Paul no longer thinks of them that way; they are neither Jew or Gentile but a new creation, the church.

When we think about the will of God for our lives, we probably often imagine something extraordinary. We might like to escape the tedious reality of our lives and be used by God to do great things.

But in the passage above, which concludes his letter, Paul paints a more mundane picture of God's will for our lives. He first urges the Thessalonians to respect those who labor among them doing the Lord's work. At the same time, "idlers" - those who do not work - should be admonished. Paul here implicitly places a high value on labor, on people doing what they're able to do, day after day, and living peaceably with one another. Everyone is to do simple, unexciting things like encouraging the fainthearted, helping the weak, and being patient with all.¹⁰

Nowhere in Paul's letters does he indicate that becoming a Christian will make our lives easier or more exciting. Instead he assumes that - in one sense - life will continue to look like it always has. Christians will continue to work hard doing the same jobs and fulfilling the same obligations they did before they became disciples. But - in another sense - everything is transformed by the Gospel. While suffering conflict is an inescapable part of life, instead of repaying "evil for evil", Paul urges the believers to do good to others, both inside and outside the church. Because of the hope that they have, they can choose to "rejoice always"; they can - even while at work - "pray without ceasing", and despite often less than ideal circumstances, they can (and should) "always give thanks." And Paul tells them, "for *this* is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus."

60. If you discovered God's perfect will for your life, how do you imagine your life would be different? And how it would remain the same?

61. Would our lives be "better" if we didn't have to work? Is work part of God's will for our lives? How does work make us Christlike?

62. In what sense are Christians called to an ordinary life? And in what sense are we called to be extraordinary? Do we desire our lives to be "extraordinary" in ways that have nothing to do with God's will?

63. This really isn't an either/or question, but answer it anyway: Is God's will for us more about being on the right path? Or more about being Christlike whatever path we're on?

64. Similarly, how much of God's will for us is about our circumstances? And how much is it about how we respond to whatever circumstances we find ourselves in?

65. Does this passage encourage you that God's will for your life is attainable?

I elected not to include 1 Peter 2:13-17 as part of the study, but it expresses a similar thought that Christian life should be characterized by faithfulness in ordinary life:

"For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, 14 or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. 15 **For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish.** 16 As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. 17 Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor."

¹⁰In Ephesians 4:28, Paul counsels this: "Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy."

12. Colossians 1:9-14

*9 For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of **God's will** in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, 10 so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. 11 May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully 12 giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light. 13 He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*

Paul's letter to the Colossians begins with a prayer (or really, with the report of a prayer) of thanksgiving for their faith in Christ. Paul then extends this prayer to the passage above - a prayer that they "may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding...."

When we (21st century people) read this passage, we instinctively presume that Paul is praying that each individual Christian would know God's particular will for each of their lives, and by extension, we read this passage as a statement of God's desire to reveal a specific will and plan for each of our lives as well. But in this instance - as is often the case in the Bible - Paul addresses the people collectively, and the will of God here pertains to God's singular will for all people (and, indeed, all creation). Starting in verse 15, Paul describes Christ and his work from a cosmic perspective (it's worth reading verse 15-20), making clear that this is the meta-narrative, the BIG story of what God has done, is doing, and will do - a story that centers on Christ. God's will, from start to finish, is defined in terms of who Christ is.

So, when Paul prays that the Colossians "may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding," he is praying that they would *know* what God has done in Christ - not just as information received - but as *the truth*, a truth which changes everything, which reveals the truth about all things. It is to be, in the words of Paul, rescued from the power of darkness and delivered into the Son's kingdom. Paul, in effect, prays that the Colossians will find their earthly story in God's cosmic story, their lives in the eternal life of Christ; that they will live in the light of truth, not blind in the darkness.

And once filled with this knowledge, the Colossians then are enabled to "lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God." The essential aspect of living a particular, individual life that pleases God is knowing God's universal, overarching will. We first need to truly know God before we can comprehend God's will for our lives. God's will for us has everything to do with who God is.

It's no coincidence that Paul continues his prayer by asking God to grant the Colossians patient endurance. Because Christ is indeed the cornerstone of history, the one through whom all things were created and through whom all things will be redeemed - and because Christ in his

earthly life suffered, even to the point of death on a cross - we should not be surprised that following God's will for our lives will involve suffering.

66. *When you think about God's will, do you think more about God's particular will for you? Or about God's will for all things?*
67. *Can we know God's will for our lives if we don't know God all-encompassing will? And can we truly know God at all apart from knowing God's will?*
68. *Do you ever focus so narrowly on your life that you lose sight of the picture? How does knowing the BIG story centered on Christ help us to make sense of our "little" stories?*
69. *Why is it God's will for us the we, "be prepared to endure everything with patience"? How does endurance fit in God's story? Would we rather it be God's will that we don't have to endure anything?*
70. *What does this passage suggest about discovering God's will for our lives? And what does it suggest as evidence that we are indeed doing God's will? How does the knowledge of God lead (necessarily?) to greater knowledge of God?*

13. Hebrews

Hebrews 10:32-39

*32 But recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, 33 sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. 34 For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting. 35 Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings a great reward. 36 For you need endurance, so that when you have done **the will of God**, you may receive what was promised. 37 For yet*

"in a very little while,

the one who is coming will come and will not delay;

38 but my righteous one will live by faith.

My soul takes no pleasure in anyone who shrinks back."

39 But we are not among those who shrink back and so are lost, but among those who have faith and so are saved.

Hebrews 13:20-21

*20 Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, 21 make you complete in everything good **so that you may do his will**, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.*

One of the many things that makes interpreting the Bible challenging is that we find ourselves in a very different situation than did the first-century Christians to whom it was first addressed. Although it is true that, in our age, the predominant culture in the West is increasingly secular and, at times, antagonistic to faith, nevertheless believers here rarely suffer much worthy of the name “persecution”.¹¹ We still enjoy freedom to worship and the social cost of being a Christian remains low.

To become a Christian in the first century, however, meant placing oneself outside the mainstream culture and suffering the consequences. The first passage above relates the experience of those to whom Hebrews was written. They are urged to, “recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened” - after they had heard and believed the Gospel - “you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution...” The suffering they endured - the public abuse, the looting of their property - was the direct result of becoming disciples of Jesus, of joining this new community with strange beliefs and practices.

Those to whom the letter to the Hebrews was addressed have been Christians a while, and it seems that their confidence has been shaken. It’s often the case that our enthusiasm is greatest when something is fresh and new, then it fades over time. Eventually “new” becomes “normal”; it’s difficult - maybe impossible - to sustain that original feeling. And this is why converts to Christianity typically display more joy and zeal than longtime believers. For the early Christians suffering persecution might initially have been occasion for rejoicing,¹² but over the years it surely became much less enjoyable. Public abuse and persecution year after year would wear down even the most ardent believer.

The letter to the Hebrews urges the believers to remain faithful, trusting that their perseverance will bring “great reward.” And this is “the will of God” about which this passage speaks: to endure so that they will receive what God has promised. The “will of God” in this context suggests not something specific for the individual believer but rather the more general, sustained, collective faithfulness to Jesus in the face of persecution. God’s will for them is to stay the course and not forget their first love. They are exhorted not to be among those who “shrink back” but among those who remain faithful.

The second passage is a benediction at the end of the letter to the Hebrews: “Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, make you complete in everything good so that you may do his will, working among us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.”

In this blessing, doing God’s will is the result of being “complete in everything good” - and the prayer is for God to bring about this completion. The assumption is that, if someone is indeed

¹¹ This description is limited to “the West” (Western Europe and its cultural descendants), but clearly there are places where persecution is real.

¹² Think of Acts 5:40-42, in which the apostles, after having been flogged, “rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name.” And, of course, Jesus’ statement: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:10).

brought to completion by God, then that person will necessarily do God's will. Whatever is "pleasing in his sight" is the will of God. In short, God's will for us to be Christlike.

- 71. How is our situation like that of the first century Christians? And how is it different?**
- 72. Is persecution always a part of being Christian? Are we better off because we live in a place and time when persecution is minimal? Might we be forced to be more faithful if we were more persecuted? Or would it just wear us down?**
- 73. How would you react if, because you are a Christian, you were publicly abused and had your house looted by an angry mob? Would you rejoice!? Would that likely be a sign that you're doing something right - or doing something wrong? The difficult question: Would you be willing to suffer like that for Jesus?**
- 74. What does the first passage reveal about the will of God for us? How does it help us discern if we are doing the will of God?**
- 75. What does the second passage suggest about how we discover God's will? What role does God play? Can we know God's will and, more importantly (and difficulty), do God's will unless we are already Christlike people?**
- 76. Are we satisfied with what these two passages tell us about God's will? Or would we like to know more?**

Final Thoughts

This study has sought to answer the question, "What is God's will for my life?" and I hope that, collectively, these passages have shown that God's will for you - and for all people - is to be Christlike. This might not seem like much of an insight, but this simple realization has the potential to be transformational.

I wonder if many of us many have been waiting for God to respond to a question which has already been answered in Jesus. We might anticipate God telling us something even as we neglect listening to and putting into practice what God has already said. We want advanced revelation but we haven't yet mastered the basics. There are all kinds of things God has told us to do that we don't do consistently or at all - and yet we want God to tell us something more.

I suspect that often what we want is for God to lead us on a path that doesn't involve following Jesus, and thus often our pursuit of God's will is disconnected from discipleship. The language of discipleship is, I believe, the most determinative for Christian life. In the Gospels, we are told to follow Jesus, and in Paul's letters, we are told to be conformed to Christ. Both Jesus and Paul and the rest of Scripture have quite a lot to say on what discipleship entails, what it means to be like Jesus. If we are honest, we all must acknowledge that frequently what we desire for our lives looks different than what it would look like to follow Jesus. We'd prefer not to take up our crosses.

What the passages above demonstrate is that when we prioritize discipleship, when we become more Christlike, then we begin to see more clearly God's will for our lives. Frankly, the Bible just doesn't show much interest in answering the question, "What is God's will for *my* life?" Instead,

it always points to Jesus and defines our lives in light of him. The Bible tell the Good News of what God has done, is doing, and will do through Jesus, and then we find our place in that story.

Of course, this is not to deny that God has revealed, is revealing, and will reveal His specific will to individual people. In the Bible, however, this is much more the exception than the norm. And it's also the case that when we attempt to follow Jesus, to obey his commands, etc., we might still desire guidance on what being his disciple requires in our particular time in place. It's rarely straightforward, and we don't have all the answers we'd like to have.

That said, part of what it means to trust God is to trust that God has already told us what we need to know (which might be considerably less than what we want to know). And we can be confident that, when it comes to the question of God's will for our lives, God has already told us more than enough.