

“God’s Will”

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Many Evangelicals see 3 Meanings of “God’s Will” in Scripture

1. Sovereign Will – God’s secret plan that determines all that happens in the universe.

Daniel 4. 35. All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: "What have you done?"

Proverbs 21.1. The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.

Ephesians 1. 11. In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will

Romans 11. 36. For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.

Revelation 4. 11. "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."

2. Moral Will – God’s commands revealed in Scripture, how to believe and live.

1 Thessalonians 4.1-5

1. Finally, brothers, we instructed you how to live in order to please God, as in fact you are living. Now we ask you and urge you in the Lord Jesus to do this more and more.

2. For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus.

3. It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality;

4. that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable,

5. not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God;

1 Thessalonians 5.16-18

16. Be joyful always;

17. pray continually;

18. give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

Ephesians 6.5,6

5. Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ.

6. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart.

Romans 2.18 if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law;

3. Individual Will – God’s ideal, detailed total life-plan, uniquely designed for each believer

Ephesians 5. 17. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is.

Romans 12. 2. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Colossians 1. 9. For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

Colossians 4. 12. Epaphras, who is one of you and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.

Comparing these 3 Wills

Sovereign	Individual	Moral
Detailed, specific	Detailed, specific	General, principles
Unknown to us	We must find & do	We must find & do
Will happen	May not happen	May not happen
Revealed afterwards	Revealed in hearts	Revealed in Bible
All that happens	Unique for each believer	Principles for all

Representative Examples of Individual Will from the book of Acts

8. 26. Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road--the desert road--that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza."

10. 5. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter.

10.17-20

17. While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate.

18. They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.

19. While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you.

20. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."

12.7-8

7. Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. "Quick, get up!" he said, and the chains fell off Peter's wrists.

8. Then the angel said to him, "Put on your clothes and sandals." And Peter did so. "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me," the angel told him.

13. 2. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

Acts 16.6-10

6. Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia.

7. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.

8. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas.

9. During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."

10. After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

18.9-10

9. One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent.

10. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city."

22.17-21

17. "When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance

18. and saw the Lord speaking. 'Quick!' he said to me. 'Leave Jerusalem immediately, because they will not accept your testimony about me.'

19. "'Lord,' I replied, 'these men know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you.'

20. And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.'

21. "Then the Lord said to me, 'Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.'"

23. 11. The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, "Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome."

Characteristics of these examples from Acts -

1. They were exceptional events, did not always happen, even to the Apostles. They are cited because they were exceptional.

2. Given to key leaders, mostly Apostles, who were foundational in establishing the church of Jesus.

Ephesians 2. 20. built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets

3. Given at critical – “make or break” – points in the establishment of the church, which means that such examples MAY be seen today on the frontiers of world outreach.

4. Communicated by supernatural revelation, there was no NT available to them.

Concerns about looking for this Individual Will -

1. Once someone has “heard God’s voice” they are beyond the reach of counsel or advice.

2. Delays can occur while person seeks this special guidance.

3. Denies role of personal desire.

4. Circumstances can ultimately dictate the decision.

5. Routine of life and ministry is interrupted while people seek something which may be unknowable.

6. Can lead to despair in “God’s silence.”

7. Failure is sometimes blamed on God, who “told them to...”

8. Can lead to a subjective, feeling-oriented, faith – instead of a firm confidence in God’s word.

Walking with God: Following General Principles of Revealed, Moral Will

1. Where Bible speaks directly – revealed commands and applicable principles – obey.
2. Where Bible gives no specific teaching, believer is free and responsible to decide.
3. Goal of life is to make decisions which are wise; for God's glory, consistent with Scripture, agreeing with wise biblical counsel.
4. In all our life, we must submit to God's sovereign will as it touches our lives.

God's Moral Will in Scripture

1. Reflects the character of God in behavioral terms.
2. Touches all areas of our life: goals, attitudes, actions, words, emotions.
3. Fully revealed in Scripture, belief in sufficiency of God's revealed Word.
4. Scripture is given "so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." 2 Timothy 3.17

Other Guiding Influences on the Believer (Scripture is the testing standard)

Prayer

James 1. 5. If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.

(Remember that the context of this verse is specifically how to endure trials, not just a blanket promise that you will get any question answered from God.)

Wise, Biblical Counsel

Proverbs 15. 22. Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.

(Again, remember that Proverbs are general principles of life with God, not guarantees that our decisions will always be consistent with God's sovereign will.)

Circumstances

Revelation 3.7 What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open.

Personal Desires

Psalms 37.4. Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Paul's Example of Following and Serving

1. Purposes: Led by spiritual goals based on God's revelation

Acts 26.15-20

15. "Then I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' " "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' the Lord replied.

16. 'Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you.

17. I will rescue you from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to them

18. to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me.'

19. "So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven.

20. First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds.

Romans 1. 13. I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I planned many times to come to you (but have been prevented from doing so until now) in order that I might have a harvest among you, just as I have had among the other Gentiles.

Romans 15. 24. I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to visit you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while.

2. Priorities: Arranged his goals wisely by their importance

2 Corinthians 10.15-16

Our hope is that, as your faith continues to grow, our area of activity among you will greatly expand,

16. so that we can preach the gospel in the regions beyond you. For we do not want to boast about work already done in another man's territory.

Romans 15. 20. It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation.

3. Plans: Made strategic plans to accomplish his goals

2 Corinthians 2.12-13

12. Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me,

13. I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said good-bye to them and went on to Macedonia.

1 Corinthians 4. 19. But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing

1 Corinthians 16.5-7

5. After I go through Macedonia, I will come to you--for I will be going through Macedonia.

6. Perhaps I will stay with you awhile, or even spend the winter, so that you can help me on my journey, wherever I go.

7. I do not want to see you now and make only a passing visit; I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits.

Acts 18. 21. But as he left, he promised, "I will come back if it is God's will." Then he set sail from Ephesus.

Acts 19. 21. After all this had happened, Paul decided to go to Jerusalem, passing through Macedonia and Achaia. "After I have been there," he said, "I must visit Rome also."

Acts 20. 16. Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus to avoid spending time in the province of Asia, for he was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, if possible, by the day of Pentecost.

4. Prayer: Submitted his plans to God's Sovereign will

Romans 1.9-10

9. God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you

10. in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you.

5. Perseverance: Did not quit or get overly discouraged, adjusted his plans patiently

1 Corinthians 16.8-9

8. But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost,

9. because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me.

Acts 17.10,14-17

10. As soon as it was night, the brothers sent Paul and Silas away to Berea. On arriving there, they went to the Jewish synagogue.

14. The brothers immediately sent Paul to the coast, but Silas and Timothy stayed at Berea.

15. The men who escorted Paul brought him to Athens and then left with instructions for Silas and Timothy to join him as soon as possible.

16. While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.

17. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.

Acts 21.7-14

7. We continued our voyage from Tyre and landed at Ptolemais, where we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for a day.

8. Leaving the next day, we reached Caesarea and stayed at the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the Seven.

9. He had four unmarried daughters who prophesied.

10. After we had been there a number of days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea.

11. 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.'"

12. When we heard this, we and the people there pleaded with Paul not to go up to Jerusalem.

13. 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."

14. When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, "The Lord's will be done."

6. Presentation: Explained his actions as his decisions made in response to God's moral will

1 Thessalonians 3.1,2

1. So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens.

2. We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith,

Philippians 2.25,26

25. But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs.

26. For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill.

1 Corinthians 16.3,4

3. Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem.

4. If it seems advisable for me to go also, they will accompany me.

Acts 15. 28. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us

These notes are a distillation and adaptation of "Decision Making and the Will of God" by Garry Friesen (Multnomah Press).