

The Christian Life: God's Will

4. By What Means Can I Know God's Will?

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From the **TeachingtheWord** Bible Knowledgebase

Part four of a series. Read [part three](#).

We now examine the two God-given means of knowing His will, and three key principles for applying them.

As we continue our study of the believer's knowledge of the will of God in Colossians chapter one, it is important to remind ourselves of Paul's over-arching purpose for writing this book. It is Paul's inspired intention throughout the entire epistle to exalt the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

He begins the book by stating that he is an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God. Thus he speaks with Christ's authority, and not on his own authority. In verses three through eight he reminds the Colossian believers that because they had believed on Christ as their Savior from sin and damnation, because they had not merely heard the words, but had believed the Gospel as the truth, everything had changed for them. The Gospel was bearing fruit among them.

The Gentiles among the Colossian believers were no longer pagans. They were no longer under the bondage of the empty worship of false deities. The Jews who were among them - and there had been a Jewish population in Colosse for centuries - were no longer merely Jews according to the flesh, Jews under the bondage of the ceremonial law. Both Jew and Gentile in Colosse had been made one and made free to serve a new Master, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And then we come to the verses that are our present focus, nine through twelve:

For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;

strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy; giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light.

Once again let me remind you of our expanded translation of the Greek of verse nine: "On account of the hope that is laid up for you - the inheritance that is ours because we are in Christ - on account of that, Timothy and I, from the day we heard about the fact that you have trusted in Christ, we do not permit ourselves to cease praying for you, desiring that you may be liberally supplied with the precise, correct, and thorough knowledge of God's will - His intent and purpose - in all spiritual wisdom in the broad sense, and in all spiritual understanding in the more specific sense, joining together in your minds the things that you have learned, are learning, and will learn about God."

Declarative Truths

We have seen, first of all, that *believing the Gospel of Christ makes knowledge of God's will possible*. We have seen that the Holy Spirit expands upon this theme in First Corinthians chapter two. We have seen that knowledge of God's will is impossible for the unsaved man. Spiritually speaking, the unsaved man does not have a clue about the will of God. It is only as God the Holy Spirit takes up residence in the heart of a person who has believed on the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation from sin that the spiritual lights come on, so to speak, and the individual can truly understand the will of God. Believing the Gospel of Christ is what makes knowledge of God's will possible.

Secondly we have seen that *precise and correct knowledge of God's will is possible* - not a nebulous knowledge, but precise and correct knowledge. We saw that this is the meaning of the word that is translated "knowledge" in our English Bibles in verse nine. The common Greek word for knowledge was *gnosis*. It is the root word from which we get English words like diagnosis (analytical knowledge) and prognosis (foreknowledge). Normally, in Greek, if you wanted to talk about knowledge, you simply used the word *gnosis*. But Paul did not use that word in verse nine.

He said, my prayer is not that you will simply have knowledge, *gnosis*. My desire is that you will have *epignosis* - full knowledge, complete knowledge, accurate knowledge.

Paul uses the same word in a number of other places. In Romans 3:20 he says that by the law is the knowledge, the *epignosis*, of sin - the law gives us the full understanding of the sinfulness of sin. In Romans 10:2 he says that the unsaved Jews have a zeal for God, but it is not a zeal according to knowledge, *epignosis*, a full and accurate knowledge of God. The unsaved Jews do not have that, Paul says. And Peter, in Second Peter 2:20, says that Christians escape the pollutions of the world through the knowledge - the *epignosis*, the complete and accurate knowledge - of the Lord Jesus Christ. Precise and correct knowledge of God's will is possible. That is declaration number two.

So we come now to declaration number three from the original language of verse nine: *Precise and correct knowledge of God's will - knowledge that is not merely gnosis but epignosis - comes because of two things: prayer, and the Word of God.* The two are inseparable in the Christian life. Prayer - proper prayer - and the reading and study of the Word of God.

Knowing God's Will Through the Means of Prayer

What, according to Scripture, is *proper* prayer? Paul was praying for the Colossians that they would have this kind of accurate, complete, and abundant knowledge of the will of God. By saying this to the Colossians, Paul was establishing a model for their own praying. Paul says, I am praying for this for you. And by implication, Paul is saying, this is something that you yourselves should be praying for, and seeking after.

This is also the focus of the model prayer that the Lord Jesus Christ gave to us in Matthew chapter six, beginning at verse nine. Most people refer to it as "the Lord's prayer" but that is not really a proper name for it. If any prayer deserves the title of "the Lord's prayer" it is Jesus' high priestly prayer in John chapter 17. The prayer of Matthew six is the model prayer given by Christ to believers. This is not a prayer we are to pray as such. It is Jesus' demonstration of *how* we are to pray. Jesus said, "Pray after this pattern." It is a how-to lesson on proper prayer.

We could spend considerable time just on that prayer. But let us focus our attention on one thing in particular that is especially important in our current study: If we were to employ just a single word to describe that prayer, the word would be *submission*: "Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name." May Thy name be exalted, Father. "Thy kingdom come" - Father, may Your kingdom be the thing that has the priority in my life and in all things. "Thy will be done in earth, as it is in Heaven" - not my will, Father, but Thy will, be done. Jesus himself prayed to the Father in just such words.

What is the purpose of those words in Jesus' model prayer? Their purpose is to properly orient us before we ask anything of God in prayer. Their purpose, if you will, is to get our spiritual compass pointing to true north, pointing in the direction of desiring and seeking after accurate and complete and abundant knowledge of the will of God. That is the attitude you need to have before you ask anything of Him. That is the attitude you need to have before you open your Bible to read and study and absorb the truth of His Word: Father, I want You to be exalted. I want Christ to be truly preeminent in my life. I want Your will to be done, I want Your kingdom to have the priority, because I know that there is absolutely nothing better in Heaven or on Earth for me than for Your perfect plan to be accomplished in this world, and for Your will to be accomplished in me and through me as your beloved child.

Knowledge of God's will - *epignosis* knowledge - comes through submissive prayer.

Knowing God's Will Through the Study of His Word

Coupled closely with this, we find that abundant, accurate, and complete knowledge of God's will comes through the reading and study of His Word. What does Paul say further on in Colossians, in chapter three verse sixteen? "Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom." Again, the original Greek is intensely meaningful. Literally, Paul is saying, let the Word of Christ be at home within you, in such a way that it exerts all of its influence upon you. "Thy Word," the psalmist says, "is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path." "Wherewith shall a young man cleanse his way?" the psalmist asks in Psalm 119 verse 9. And he gives the answer: "By taking heed according to Thy Word." "The entrance of Thy Word

giveth light" - Psalm 119:130 - "It giveth understanding unto the simple." "Order my steps in Thy Word" - verse 133 - "and let not any iniquity have dominion over me."

Dear Christian friend, doubtless you have problems and concerns as you read these words. You wrestle with questions as you desire to know and understand the will of God. Some are much more weighty and difficult than others. But we all have matters where we are seeking to understand and pursue the will of God, if we are truly following Christ today.

In the midst of those questionings and wrestlings, never lose sight of one of your greatest possessions as a believer on the Lord Jesus Christ: You have the truth. Christianity is an exclusive faith. Christianity says that it alone proclaims the truth of God, and that the truth of God is to be found only in the Word of God. God's Word declares this from beginning to end.

Furthermore, the fact that Christianity is an exclusive religion, and the Bible is the exclusive Word of God, means that you do not need to add anything to it. You do not need to add a little bit of psychology, or a little bit of human philosophy, or a little bit of some other religion, because the Bible itself and the Bible alone is complete, entire, self-contained, and sufficient.

The Bible Is An Exceedingly Practical Book

That is why it is so important for us to understand the Word of God. That is why it is so vital for us to be constantly searching the Scriptures. And not only to search them and them, but to apply the Scriptures to our lives. The Bible is an exceedingly practical Book. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God," Paul says in Second Timothy chapter three, verse sixteen, "and is profitable." It is valuable. It is useful. It is to be treasured above anything we can measure.

Furthermore, Paul says, it is profitable for four things. It is profitable for *doctrine*, for teaching you the path in which you are to go. Secondly it is profitable for *reproof*, for showing you when you have gotten off the right path. Thirdly it is profitable for *correction*. Once God's Word shows you the right path, and shows you when you have gotten off the right path, it additionally corrects you. God the Holy Spirit through His Word shows you how to get back

onto the right path. And finally, God's Word is profitable for *instruction in righteousness*, for keeping you on the right path, which is always the path of God's righteousness.

Three Principles of God's Guidance

At this point some readers may be asking this question: I understand that God guides Christians through His Word. But does God not also guide Christians' lives through circumstances? Yes, God certainly does do that. We call that form of guidance God's providence. God is sovereign. He is in control of all things. But we as human beings also have a will, and the fact that we have a will is not in conflict with the fact that God is sovereign over all things. He is sovereign, but He has not reduced His creatures to being nothing more than robots.

But we need to remember something very important about God's guidance through circumstances. I want to state it to you in the form of three principles regarding God's guidance. You need to always keep these principles in mind when you are dealing with the question of how to know the will of God, and how to view God's providential acts.

Principle Number One: *God guides through Scripture*. We have already seen that from the many passages we have been examining.

Principle Number Two: *God also guides through circumstances*. We live in a real world where God's providence is continually in operation. We have countless examples of God's providence in the Scriptures. God sent Joseph as a slave into Egypt ahead of his brothers so that the nation of Israel might be saved from dying out through famine. Joseph's brothers meant it for evil, but in the end it became clear that God meant it for good. As we study the panorama of the Old Testament, it becomes clear that God orchestrated a vast and complex set of circumstances to bring about the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ in just the right place, at just the right time in human history, and in just the right way, so that all the prophecies concerning His miraculous birth would be fulfilled. In exactly the same way, God is orchestrating events and circumstances in your own life today.

God guides through His Word, and God guides through circumstances. But there is a third very vital principle that we must never forget: *God's guidance through circumstances never contradicts Scripture*. I have heard people say, "Well, Scripture is one thing. But I live in the real world. I have to be practical." What they are actually saying is, "I know what the Bible says, but because of the particular situation in which I find myself I need to ignore Scripture, or I need to bend it a little bit, or adapt it a little bit. I have to live with my circumstances."

Dear friend, if you see your circumstances as dictating that you need to do something that is contrary to Scripture, then you are looking at your circumstances in the wrong way. You are letting your circumstances become your authority, rather than God's Word. Scripture governs circumstances, not the other way around. Hebrews 4:12 tells us that it is Scripture that is the discerner, or the critic, of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Scripture must govern our comprehension of the circumstances that God sets before us. Circumstances are never an excuse to ignore Scripture. Circumstances are never an excuse to compromise the Scriptural way of conducting our lives.

So in summary: Precise and correct knowledge of God's will comes because of two things - proper, submissive prayer, and the reading and study of the Word of God. That is a major element of the message of Colossians 1:9. In the studies to follow, we shall see that knowledge of God's will involves both *spiritual wisdom* and *spiritual understanding*. Grasping these two concepts will prove vital as we move on in our study of how to truly know God's will.

Next: What is Spiritual Wisdom?

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