

Finding God's Will

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[0 : 00] Hello everybody, good to see you, sort of, if you know what I mean. Please would you all turn to Ephesians chapter 1 with me and that well-known verse 10.

We were there on Tuesday night as well. Life coaches, blogs, self-help apps, podcasts, they all fuel our culture's desire to find out what is best for me.

Our culture invests a lot of time in looking at my choice of uni, career, marriage, flat, house, retirement plans and so on.

The message from the Bible is that God's way of looking at our life's choices is entirely different. If I'm alive, risen, seated with Jesus as we've seen in Ephesians, then to find God's will, the first question to ask is what is God's plan for the world and how do I fit into it?

So on the outline, you'll see that we're going to look at, first of all, the plan of God and second, the sovereignty of God. If we want to find out what God's will is, we need to be confident first that he has already revealed what he considers to be important.

[1 : 14] And secondly, that he is in control of everything. It may be that we think God guides by us putting out a metaphorical fleece to establish what his will is.

Lord, if you want me to become a doctor, send me a sign. Or that we think a sense of peace means that we are doing the will of God. Or that we think that by praying hard, God will show us his will as we pray.

All of those methods misrepresent what the Bible says. Gideon and his fleece are there to show us how God still uses one with so little faith, not as an example of how to find his will.

Jesus had no peace when he went to the cross, according to the gospel writers, yet he definitely made the right decision and was doing God's will. Prayer is not God talking to us.

It is us talking to him. And in many areas, we need to know our Bibles better to inform our decision making, because that is where God has told us his will.

[2 : 17] Not that God is unable to guide in any of those ways, but we're just not told in the Bible that that is how we should expect God to guide us. Really, what the Bible has to say is rather different.

Do write down the areas, small or big, where you want to find God's will. And I hope by the end of this evening, we will have greater clarity on them. So first then, guidance and the plan of God.

Most of us have been reading Ephesians. So let's just look at verse 10 to remind us of that plan. So Ephesians 1 verse 10, So that's saying that God's plan for our lives, his great cosmic long-term recorded plan for everything and everyone, is to unite all things in Christ.

This means all things. So we're not to have compartments of our lives where we don't seek to bring them in line with his will. We are to seek his will in all things, because God's revealed plan for you and me is to bring all things in Christ, every part of our lives.

Now, in case you're unconvinced, just look at our position in Ephesians 1, if we've personally repented and turned to Jesus. So look at verse 5, predestined or elected.

[3 : 44] So from before the creation of the world, elected to be holy and blameless. Verse 7, that we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins lavished on you.

Verse 9, that God has revealed or made known to us the mystery of his will. He's revealed the gospel to you according to his purpose. And all of that has happened already and was his plan for you.

His ultimate goal for you individually, but also for all his people, will happen, that you will be united in Christ. So as we make our choices in South East London, God is engaged in a far bigger plan across the whole world.

Are we willing to align ourselves with his plan? Or do we accept that he has a far bigger plan, but carry on making decisions about how we use our time and what we fill our children's lives with if we have them and what we spend our money on, without asking, how does this decision impact God's big plan?

When I was a student, I tried a bit of rowing in a boat with eight rowers facing backwards, steered and led by one cox, who alone faces forward and who alone can see the course ahead.

[5 : 02] The cox has a plan. She's told her crew the plan, yet with eight individuals in the boat, it is possible for their decisions and mistakes to take the boat off course, as I learnt to my cost.

They need to remember the plan in all of the decisions that they make in that boat. So do we need to remember that God has a plan in all of the decisions that we make?

Two implications. First one, I should seek his guidance in every area of life. Is that our desire? For every area of our life to come under his rule?

That is what it means to have Jesus as our Lord. If not, then let's not kid ourselves when we talk about finding his will, because it's not just the big decisions, like whether to stay at home to raise children, or how many days I do of paid work, or what job I apply for, or where I live, for which I need his guidance.

So I should seek his guidance in every area of life. Second implication. There shouldn't be any area where I'm not seeking God's guidance. The way I conduct myself in my relationships, with family, friends, church family, colleagues, neighbours, is very important to God.

[6 : 24] The way I do my work, the way I resolve disagreements, what I do about my respectable sins of impatience, judgmentalism, pride, laziness, how I use my tongue.

These are just as much matters of guidance as the job I do, or who I marry. The rest of Ephesians spells out how God's big plan will work out, as Christians learn to align our life choices with his will.

So we're going to see in what areas God gives us specific guidance, just from one Bible book. So in breakout groups of two or three, would you choose the sections that are most relevant to you on the handout?

And then I've given you just 10 minutes to look up as far as you can get with those sections. And then I shall ask a few people to feedback. Finding God's will is about training our instincts to think in line with God's thoughts, what his revealed will is, which means spending time in his word.

That is all part of his big plan coming together. When I have a decision to make, I wonder where do I go first? My mum? My boyfriend?

[7 : 43] A husband? My husband? Girlfriends? It should be the Lord in the Bible. A time of decision is a time to dig deeper into his word and to remember his plan of uniting all things under Christ.

And the question is, how will my decision affect that plan? Of course, we have freedom in the areas where the Bible is silent. There isn't just one job, usually, that I can take, or one school that a child should go to, or one account that I should invest money in.

Two good questions to ask from Philip Jensen's book, *Guidance and the Voice of God*, are first, is this a wise or an unwise decision?

So, if we've looked at the Bible and it is not clear whether or not we should do something, is it wise or unwise? May I invest my savings in this latest high-yielding account?

It may be very unwise. Second question, is it trivial? May I buy this particular brand of kitchen appliance with a similar cost to a rival brand? God has no view on it.

[8 : 54] Just do it. But many decisions have components of both, and the Bible does have something to say. So, let's take, for example, a job offer. If it's a job where I will be expected to lie, then it would be wrong to take it, but could God tell me not to lie?

If it's a job that won't leave me with enough time to raise my kids to know Jesus, and or to be a helper to my husband, don't take it. It would be an unwise decision.

If it's a job with a salary package of X, compared to another job with a similar package, then it's trivial. The difference is trivial. It doesn't matter. But too often, we end up majoring on the minor issues.

I'll take this job because it's a well-known company, and it's on the right train line. It sounds impressive to work for the well-known company, but if I'm being required to lie, to God that is a major issue, and I should not take it.

So, first, guidance and the plan of God to bring all things under Christ, including all aspects of our lives. Then secondly, guidance and the sovereignty of God.

[10 : 05] Let me read to you Ephesians 1, verse 11 and 12. Verse 11 and 12 assure the Ephesian Christians that Paul and the Jewish Christians were predestined according to God's purpose, and that God works out all things according to the counsel of his will.

In other words, God is in total control of everything from before the beginning of time, and he uses that control to ensure the success of his big plan. Verse 13 tells the Gentiles, which includes us, that they too were part of that plan.

You who were once far off have been brought near. So God works all things according to the counsel of his will. Romans 8, 28, a well-known verse, says all things work together for the good of those who love him.

But it goes with verse 29, which says, those God foreknew, he predestined to be conformed to the image of his son. God works all things for our good so that we might become more like Jesus.

I think it's taken me years to work that out. Can we see how his sovereignty works together with his big plan of bringing all things under Christ? He works things for our good, however painfully, to bring every part of us under Christ.

[11 : 46] 15 years ago, a few of us here were planning to plant a church in Dulwich in April. We were perhaps too confident of our network of human contacts, thinking that somehow we would be able to find a venue to meet on Sundays.

We'd prayed together regularly for 18 months. It seemed a wise thing to do, fitting in with God's big plan. But every venue said no. And we didn't have quite enough people to sustain a plant.

We had to defer the start date to September. But when we got to September, a coalition of opposition ensured that we were evicted, thrown out from our agreed venue after three weeks.

God is sovereign, and he will use his sovereignty to achieve his big plan. That venue would have been far too small in a matter of months because our numbers grew.

The venue we now use wasn't available in April, but by September of that year, it was about to become available and has been ever since bar the first and second lockdowns.

[12 : 53] It was very painful at the time. We all felt rejected, alienated, but God conformed us a little bit more into the image of Jesus as a church.

We knew that our venue was not our clever project management, but entirely the Lord's provision. God is sovereign, and he will guide our paths even when we are busily planning steps in an unwise or a wrong direction.

God speaks and acts clearly when he wants to, because his aim is to make you and me more like Jesus, so that we can come under the rule of Jesus, not just now, but forever.

It's why Paul prays for the Ephesians in chapter 117, for the spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that they and we see our lives and our decisions with the eyes of our heart rather than with our physical eyes.

So on the handout, there are verses for you to look up afterwards to remind us of the areas where God has specifically told us he is sovereign. And you might be surprised to see the detail included there.

[14 : 02] Every sparrow's death, where we live, our poverty or our wealth. So God is sovereign, and that leaves three pitfalls.

First, the super spiritual. Depending on your church background, you may hear people or yourself say something like, I can't commit to this project. Perhaps it's giving or outreach or Sunday club serving or scallywags or church plant or a new congregation because I'm waiting on the Lord.

That can be an excuse for not taking responsibility and just getting on with the work of ministry. Or, we're praying really hard about it, as if in the act of hard praying, God will reluctantly display his hand.

So beware the first pitfall, super spirituality. Secondly, not consulting at all. In our decisions to email someone rudely or abruptly or to speak harshly to someone, and here I say this as much to myself as to anyone else, we fail to find out first from the Bible how God wants me to address those we disagree with.

We tend to seek guidance in the areas that are our potential idols, a spouse, a job, a school, children, our home. But as we've seen, Ephesians tells us that God has a view on smaller issues to us, which are actually big issues to him.

[15 : 32] And then the third pitfall, paralysis. The fear that by doing something I may fall outside of God's will and so I do nothing at all. Since God is sovereign, we can't be outside of his will.

If we are obeying the Bible because everything comes under his sovereignty, as the title of Kevin DeYoung's book says, just do something, written to a generation often paralysed by indecision and by multiple choices to make.

Can we be encouraged this evening by the fact that God has a plan and that he is sovereign? Put those two together and we can trust that even when things don't work out as we had planned, God's plan always works out.

So ask first, what does the Bible say? If it's silent, then ask, is this wise or unwise? Or is it just trivial? Perhaps that's why Jesus says, pray, your will be done.

And then rejoice in the life he has given us and get on with living it for him. Now, we have threeiembre sections right here herealt. So I do this whole course.

[16 : 52] We'll slide five half half of it next week. So FREEDA COPE PRIMETE■■■ shooting and thisNãSpeed. This is the first half and half.