

New Peace from Ancient Wisdom

Discerning God's Will

Proverbs 3:5, 6

On autumn nights, while we sleep peacefully in our beds, millions of songbirds are quietly traveling under cover of darkness, heading south for warmer climates. Take, for example, the Baltimore oriole. Every fall, they pack up their bags, close up their homes, leave the key under the mat, and like "snow-bird" senior citizens, head south.

It's the weather patterns that tell the birds that it's time to move on. As the cold fronts move in, waves of orioles and other songbirds head to their wintering grounds in Mexico and Latin America. And these cold fronts often bring clear skies and north winds, ideal conditions for migration. The birds travel with little risk of storms, the wind at their backs and a clear view of the stars to help them find their way.

They fly over thousands of highways and houses, shopping centers and schools, passing state after state. If a particular oriole opts for a direct flight, it can fly over the Gulf of Mexico in a single night, crossing six hundred miles of open water. The entire trip from Baltimore (for example) to Mexico, Panama or Costa Rica takes about two weeks. But the oriole knows exactly where it's going. God planted within its little brain a perfect guidance system that tells it exactly where to go, and when and how.

The Bible says that you and I are more valuable to the Lord than all the birds in the sky. If the God of the universe is pleased to guide the birds in their migrations, it's a safe bet that He also wants to guide you and me.¹

The question is, Just *how* does God guide us? How do we discern God's will in the decisions of life? What does this look like?

I know that many of you are facing gut-wrenching decisions that weigh on your minds 24/7. That's evident from our weekly prayer sheet. What do I do in this situation? How do I handle those circumstances? And then there are the typical questions that always come up in a discussion about God's will, such as:

- Should I marry or not?
- Whom should I marry?
- Should I take this job or another job?
- Should I go to this school or that school?
- Should we plan to have another child or not?

As we continue in this series, *Seeking New Peace from Ancient Wisdom*, I'd like you to turn to two passages this morning. The first is our primary text, Proverbs 3:5, 6. At the same time, I want you to place a finger in the New Testament book of James, chapter 4, verses 13-17. (James 4:13-17) In a few minutes I'll tell you why.

Proverbs 3:5-6 says this:

Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;
in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.

These verses are probably cited more frequently than any other passage in the Bible when it comes to a discussion of the will of God for our lives. They are also the most frequently misunderstood.

Successful Paths

Let me start at the end of the verse. Solomon is saying that if you and I do certain things, then *God will make our paths straight*. One reason these verses are so often cited in relation to discerning God's will in our lives is because of the old King James translation of that last phrase. It reads this way, "And he will *direct* your *paths*." Now that sounds an awful lot like God telling us just what to do in the decisions of life – things like: "Go to this school," "Marry this person," "Buy this house."

However, that word "direct" is better translated (as in the NIV), "make straight," or "make smooth," or "make successful." And what does God "make smooth" or "make successful?" The answer is: our *paths*. In Proverbs, the focus of this word "path" is not so much on *specific details*, but on the *general course or direction of our lives*. Proverbs 11:5 sums it up when it says: "The righteousness of the blameless *makes a straight way* (or "path") for them..."

The principle of this verse is this: When we do certain things (which we'll look at in just a moment), *we will discover a life that is successful by God's standards*. Our life and decisions may not look all that successful to those looking on, but they will be from God's viewpoint.

Now if this is what you really want – a life that is successful *by God's standards* – then these verses have something to say to you. On the other hand, if your primary concern is success as defined by *your* standards – whether it be achievement, affluence, or the absence of difficulty – then you're already on the wrong path.

What We Are Not To Do: *Lean on Your Own Understanding*

If you sincerely want to discover God's will, i.e. a life that is successful by God's standards, then these verses tell us both what we're to do and what we're not to do.

What we're *not* to do is to "lean on our own understanding." He is *not* saying – when we are faced with crucial decisions – to put our brains on hold, relying rather on some inner, mystical nudge in our hearts as to the direction that we should move in. In Proverbs, to rely on one's own understanding is to *make decisions apart from God's input*.

Earlier, I told you to put your finger in the book of James. Why? Because the book of James is really a commentary on the book of Proverbs. Both books highlight the priority of seeking God's wisdom in all we do. So let's look at James 4:13, where we find an example of making decisions apart from God's input.

“Now listen, you who say, ‘Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.’”

Planning is not a bad thing. God gave detailed plans to Moses, instructing him how to build the tabernacle (Exodus 26:30).ⁱⁱ Paul says in Romans 15 that he planned to go to Spain. Jesus once said: “No man goes out and builds a house without first considering how much it’s going to cost” (Luke 14:28). And the book of Proverbs says over and over again that if I *don’t* plan I’m a fool. I like to plan and I use Microsoft Outlook. But every time I see that trademark, it reminds me that what I really need is *God’s outlook*. And that’s precisely what these wealthy merchants were lacking in their decision making.

One way in which these guys rely on their own understanding is by *presuming about the future*. “Today or tomorrow,” they say. And again, “We will stay there a year!” These optimistic planners assume they have a 100 year lease on their bodies with options to renew! But none of us have that. The proverbial life insurance salesman has a point when he says, “If you don’t want to buy a policy now, think about it tonight and call me tomorrow morning – if you wake up.”

Another way in which we lean on our own understanding in decision making is by *planning apart from God*. Did you notice how many times in verse 2 the word *God* is mentioned? Zip! Zero times. It’s all about I, me and my: “*we* are going to a certain town...*we* will stay there...*we* will make a profit.” Essentially, these entrepreneurs leave God out of their planning. Of course, unbelievers do this all the time. That’s sad. But what is particularly sad is that many *believers* leave God out of their planning. Some claim to be believers, but are living as practical atheists.

But why do we presume about the future and make plans apart from God’s counsel? Bottom line, we’re *preoccupied with self*. These guys presume about the *duration* of their lives, “Today or tomorrow we will.” They presume about the *location* of their work, “We will go to such and such a town.” They presume about their *vocation*, “We will do business.” And what really makes the whole scenario unfortunate is their *motivation*: “*We will* make a profit.” In all of this, they are relying on their own understanding. They begin with self rather than with God.

What We Are To Do: *Trust and Acknowledge*

Well, that’s what we’re *not* to do. What *are* we to do? Back in Proverbs 3:5 Solomon says that, first of all, we are to “trust in the Lord with all our heart.” That word “trust” originally carried the idea of “lying helplessly face downward on something or someone.” When you do that, all of your weight, all of your confidence is placed on what is holding you up. The New Testament brings out the same idea in 1 Peter 5:7, “Casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you.” More literally, we are to “roll our cares” (our decisions, our plans) upon Him with the full confidence that He is able to care for us.

In Psalm 22:9 David gives us a picture of what this trust should look like. He puts it this way: “You made me *trust* in you even at my mother’s breast.”

As many of you know, Mary Alice and I are the proud grandparents of our nine-week-old Rachel Lynne. Since Dan and Becky have been living in our house, I’ve had the fun of seeing the restful confidence of little Rachel Lynne when she’s nursing. Just like any baby, when hungry and left

to herself, she can scream you out of the house! Last night we were watching a family movie together and little Rachel Lynne started crying because she wanted to nurse. Mary Alice took her, but that didn't work. I took her, and that didn't work either. It was sort of funny! As the volume of her crying progressively increased, we progressively increased the volume of the TV...until finally none of us could take it any longer! But once she was in her mother's arms and at her mother's breast, peace returned to the household! That is the position of trust. When we rely on our own strategies, our own understanding, the stress of our lives mounts to the point where we can stand it no longer. But when we "trust in the Lord" we confidently lay the full weight of our lives upon Him, and in return we find peace.

But there's a second thing we are to do. We are to "acknowledge Him" in all our ways. What does that mean? Well, again, I believe the commentary that we find in the book of James is very helpful.

Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."
James 4:15

To acknowledge God in all our ways is to *recognize the sovereignty of God*. Proverbs 16:1 says, "We may make our plans, but God has the last word." Paul modeled this attitude in his decision making. In Acts 18:21 he says to the Ephesians, "I will come back *if it is God's will*." And to the Corinthian believers he writes: "I will come to you very soon, *if the Lord is willing*" 1 Corinthians 4:19.

I have an older sister who always used to sign her letters with the Latin abbreviation "D.V." What does that mean? It means *Deo Valente* – "Lord willing." That's what we all need to have written over our entire lives: D.V. *Deo Valente*. That's a freeing thought! It's freeing, not only as we make decisions about the future, but look back on the past. Some of us are crucified between two thieves: the regret of yesterday and the fear of tomorrow.ⁱⁱⁱ But James tells us that this shouldn't happen. So the first step in acknowledging God in all our ways is recognizing the sovereignty of God.

But there is more. To acknowledge God in all our ways means to *obey what God has already revealed*. Notice what James says in verse 17: "Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins."

James is telling you and me this: Quite worrying about what God hasn't revealed (the specific plans of tomorrow and next year), and do what God *has* already revealed in His Word. Some people are too caught up in wondering what God's will is in terms of location and vocation. Where does He want me to go? What does he want me to do? But God has already revealed to us so much of his will. God is far more concerned with our obedience to what he has already shown us in the present than in our worry over what he has not yet revealed to us about the future.

In many areas of our lives, God has already specifically revealed His will. For example, there are at least two verses in the Bible that specifically state "This is the will of God." Paul writes to the Thessalonians, "It is God's will that you should ...avoid sexual immorality" (4:3). And later in that same book he says, "In everything gives thanks, for this is the will of God" (5:18). That's

why I'm never impressed when someone comes to me and says, "I feel God is leading me to do this or that," but the "this" or "that" is in direct contradiction to what God has already said in His Word.

So how are we to acknowledge God in all our ways? Recognize the sovereignty of God. Obey what God has already revealed. But also, *ask God for wisdom* in those decisions where He has not revealed His will for us.

Again, James puts it this way, "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God..." (James 1:5). But in asking God, we need to remember that in many of the decisions of life, God grants you and me a great degree of freedom! God's will is more like a compass than a detailed road map. Let me explain.

When I was back in Paris in January, I visited my favorite museum, the Louvre. There you can see the Code of Hammurabi engraved on a huge stylus or stone. This particular law code predates the Ten Commandments of Exodus by about 200 years. What is interesting about this code, however, is that it attempts to legalistically legislate all the details of one's life. In contrast, the Bible provides what we call *normative* law. God's law gives us great freedom within certain boundaries.

God told Adam and Eve that, apart from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they could eat from any tree they wanted. And Paul, in writing to widows in 1 Corinthians 7:39 says, "You are free to marry *whomever you want*, as long as that person is a Christian." You see, God's will is more like a compass than a road-map.

However, as we face the important decisions of life, we should ask God for his wisdom. What is wisdom? I like how a good friend of mine, Dick Pearson, defines it. He says wisdom is learning to "live above 'see' level." It's the power to see and the desire to choose those things that will best contribute to God's glory and the progress of His story. In this sense, wisdom is opportunistic from a spiritual standpoint. I ask, "What would best contribute to the progress of the gospel in my life and in the lives of others?"

Often, God will grant us wisdom, not only through His Word, but through others. And that's why in making important decisions you and I should seek godly counsel. The book of Proverbs emphasizes this again and again:

For lack of guidance a nation falls, but many advisers make victory sure.
Proverbs 11:14

He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm.
Proverbs 13:20

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

TESTIMONY: Jeff Bentley

One thing that has struck me as I think about discerning God's will is that immediately I want to start with myself. My first thought is what is God's will FOR ME. This shows our human tendency to start with ourselves and not with God. The first question I should be asking is what does God want or require OF ME. One is a perspective of getting and the other of giving.

Personally this year God has again been leading me through a combination of His Word, prayer and circumstances. Two themes have emerged as I have been reading through the Bible this year. The power of perseverance and commitment. Last year in August I was laid off from a job I had for 11 years. It has been a big adjustment for me. I left that job praying that God would guide me into a calling, a vocation. It has not been an easy time. In a way it's probably good that it has not been. Many years ago I painted professionally for a short time. Now that I had free time I took it up again. God has used this time to bring my painting to a new level. I also want to say that my prayers are in process, ongoing. It has not always been readily apparent what God is doing in my life. I think he wants me to trust Him for that leading, cry out to Him, wait on Him.

I am impressed with the perseverance and commitment of Moses and David. They kept going, trusting God for each day and moment. I am learning how real that can be as I begin to trust God for each day, moment and conversation. I spend 8 hours a day talking to people on the phone. My job has a 70% attrition rate. No one gets laid off. Most people quit in a short time. God has used my job as a lesson in perseverance.

I have sensed Him asking me several times, "Are you going to take the time to get to know Me and enjoy Me for who I am or do you just want something from Me?" "Are you going to worship Me?"

The Bible for perspective and prayer for pain and heart cry to God and for others. This is the engine that keeps me going day after day. The Bible reminds me of the glory ahead and the journey of others who have gone before and have made it. People we read about in the Bible, people like us who had no tangible reason for doing so and yet trusted God anyway.

Do I submit to the rule of Scripture in my life and study these words which are God's? Is the main course of my life heading in this direction towards God? If I can speak honestly YES than I am in God's will.

ⁱ Adapted from Clint Bonner, *A Hymn is Born* as cited by Robert J. Morgan, *Stories, Quotes and Illustrations*, 372.

ⁱⁱ There are even numerous verses in the Bible that talk about God's plans: 1 Chronicles 28:19; Job 42:2; Isaiah 5:19; Amos 3:7; etc.

ⁱⁱⁱ Adapted from Fulton Oursler, *Christian Reader*, Vol. 32, no. 3 as cited by www.preachingtoday.com.