

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Discerning God's pleasing and perfect will

Jeremiah 29:11 declares a particular and personal promise of God to the prophet and, by extension, a hope for each of us. "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." But how can we know God's will? Romans 12:2 offers the answer: Those who offer themselves as living sacrifices, those who are genuinely transformed by the renewing of their minds by the Word of God, "will be able to test and approve what God's will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will."

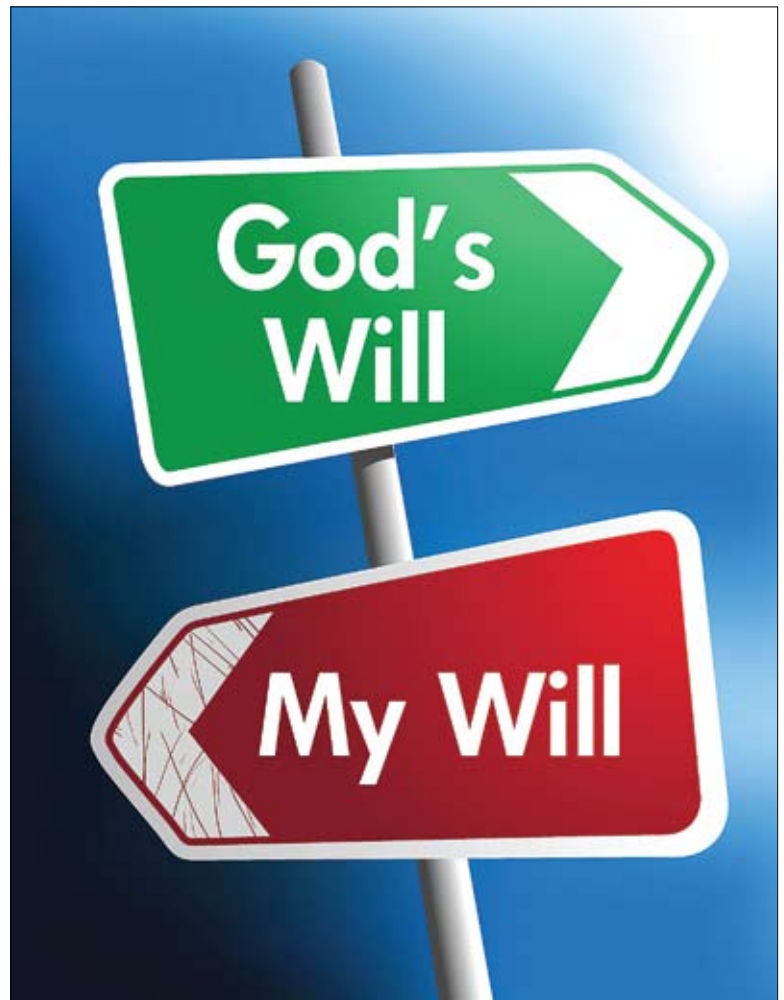
Discerning God's plans and living faithfully into the future God has planned is a personal process for each and every disciple. There are some overarching principles about the will of God and then there are the unique callings to which we have been called. This equipping study is designed to help you embrace the reality of God's will and submit yourself joyfully to the plans He has for you.

Knowing God's will is one thing, doing it is quite another. Abraham knew it was God's will that he offer Isaac in sacrifice. Packing and making that trip, binding Isaac and raising the knife were quite another act of faith altogether. As we enter this "study" it should be acknowledged that the end goal is complete surrender to the will of God in every moment and every area of life. It is also worth noting that no exploration of God's will is exhaustive and no knowledge of God's will is sufficient.

God has an overarching will for redemptive history and God has a particular will for each of us as we live as His children in the world. We are called to be living demonstrations of grace and truth – temples of the Holy Spirit in which God would be pleased to dwell. So, does God care whether or not we eat that high-carb, high-fat, high-sugar snack? Does God have a particular will for me in that moment? Yes. Will I submit to His will? Maybe yes, maybe no. Therein lies the struggle. The right hand may not see what the left hand is putting in the offering plate, but God does. The choices we make to submit to God's knowable and known will in the small matters are the real indicators of where our treasure and our heart ultimately reside.

The entire discussion of discerning and doing God's will is had within the context of submission, sacrifice and the spirit of Jesus who prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Not My will but Thine be done." Recognizing at the outset that we have a will (and can be strong willed) is important for the journey ahead. Continually throughout this process we will need to consciously and prayerfully submit our will to the will of the Father. As Romans 12:1-2 says, only after the sacrifice of ourselves and the subordination of our thoughts and ways to His ways will we "be able to test and approve what God's will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will."

One additional consideration before we embark: If you have no intention of doing God's will, why seek to discover it? The great



adventure is that we do not know in advance where He might lead!

This is an area of discipleship where the Church sings her theology of surrender in many hymns. It would be helpful to meditate and sing hymns of surrender throughout this equipping study.

- "Jesus calls us" – Cecil Alexander, 1852
- "Take my life and let it be consecrated Lord to Thee" – Francis Havergal, 1874
- "I surrender all" – Judson VanDeVenter, 1896
- "Have Thine own way, Lord" – Adelaide Pollard, 1907
- "I have decided to follow Jesus" – unknown
- "Wherever He leads, I'll go" – B.B. McKinney, 1937
- "O Jesus I have promised" – John Bode, 1866
- "I'll go where you want me to go" – Mary Brown, 1892

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Week I: God's will is knowable, and He has graciously revealed His will in His Word.

God is not hiding, we are. The game of hide n' seek we're playing with God started in the Garden of Eden and it persists for many even today. Jesus came to seek and save the lost, but many run away from His grace and refuse to be found.

Tragically, even among those who are redeemed, many still seek to reserve or hide parts of their lives from the Lordship of Christ.

Again, when they seek to know God's perfect will they are stymied, not by God's evasiveness but by their own. If you want to know the will of God, seek it.

Jesus promises that those who seek will find and to those who knock, the door will be opened. So, if you're not finding, if God's will continually seems opaque and vague, consider that the problem is with you, not Him.

Jesus assured blessings to those who "seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness." That's not a proclamation of the prosperity gospel that promises perpetual health and wealth in this life. Those who have read God's Word and take God at His Word know better.

It is ours to learn the secret of being content in all circumstances, like Paul. It is ours to revel in living as demonstrations of grace and truth, bearing faithful witness to Jesus Christ in and out of season.

If you are doing God's will in the world that He so loves but a world that loves Him not, there will be times when you are at enmity with everyone. To do God's will when no one in our family understands and no one in our culture agrees, we must have the assurance that comes by faith.

Questions for reflection:

1. Do you really want to know the will of God and are you willing to do it no matter what?
2. What is the most radical thing that you know God asked or instructed someone to do in the entire Bible?
3. Read Hebrews 11. The faithful are those who do the will of the Father. What legacy of faith will be written of us?
4. Sing and consider deeply the 1905 hymn by Elisha Hoffman, "Is your all on the altar?"

*Have you longed for sweet peace and for faith to increase,
and have earnestly, fervently prayed;
But you cannot have rest or be perfectly blest
until all on the altar is laid.*

*Refrain: Is your all on the altar of sacrifice laid?
Your heart does the Spirit control?
You can only be blest, and have peace and sweet rest,
as you yield Him your body and soul.*

*Would you walk with the Lord in the light of His Word
and have peace and contentment always?
You must do His sweet will to be free from all ill,
on the altar your all you must lay.*

*O we never can know what the Lord will bestow
of the blessings for which we have prayed,
Till our body and soul He doth fully control
and our all on the altar is laid.*

*Who can tell all the love He will send from above
and how happy our hearts will be made,
Of the fellowship sweet we shall share at His feet
when our all on the altar is laid.*

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Week II: On one level, discerning the will of God is very simple.

God's will is that we should become God's children through salvation in Jesus Christ and that we should be holy, living lives that are acceptable to God, in conformity with Christ.

Romans 10:9 says that if you "confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." Period, and yet, not the end but just the beginning of the story! Thus begins the moment-by-moment living of the life of faith. A life marked by continual submission of the human will to the divine, continual transformation from one degree of glory to another, more and more into the likeness of Christ. Simply put: Sanctification.

It is God's will that we should be holy. Why? Because God is holy, and He cannot abide the presence of that which is contrary to His holiness. So, in order to live with God, in order to fellowship with Him, we must be holy as He is holy. Being realists, we recognize in advance that this is impossible – apart from God. But with Christ, all things are possible!

However, herein lies the rub: In order that Christ might live in us, we must die to ourselves. Galatians 2:20 expresses it well: "I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me." Do you understand and embrace the truth that you're already dead? If not, you must come to terms with that reality before you can take one more step forward in the great adventure of the Christian life.

If you think that there are yet things for *you* to do, things for *you* to acquire, then you are not ready to do the will of God, for you are still focused on pursuing *your* kingdom purposes. Only those who have died to self and now live in Christ can be fully animated by His Spirit to advance His Kingdom purposes and fulfill His will.

God's will is that none would be lost and that those who are redeemed would also be sanctified. Where you are on that spectrum is for you to discern and then tend to.

Questions for reflection:

1. As a person who is baptized and professes to be a Christian, do I understand that my salvation from sin and death was not primarily for *me* but for the glory of God?
2. Do I understand that God saved me on purpose and for a purpose, and am I fully devoted to discovering and doing His will whatever the cost?
3. If I'm already dead (and raised with Christ as His ambassador, a conduit of His grace) what have I to fear?

Carmen Fowler LaBerge is the author of the equipping study that appears in each issue of *The Layman*.

Your feedback is greatly appreciated as future equipping studies are planned.

Share your comments with Carmen via e-mail at cflower@layman.org.

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Week III: God's will is that we should give thanks in all circumstances, trusting Him.

"God is great and God is good, let us thank Him for our food. By His hands we all are fed, give us Lord, this day, our daily bread." God is great and God is good. He is perfectly sovereign. His grace is all sufficient. His love is steadfast and His mercies are new every morning. Why then do we doubt?

Why did Eve believe the lie that God had lied?

Why did Peter avert his attention from Christ to the all-consuming waves beneath his feet?

Why did Thomas doubt that God had done what Jesus promised He would do?

Why did Ananias and Sapphira doubt God's omniscience and omnipotence?

Why do we go to church but then live our lives and make decisions as if God is not present, real and willing to guide us into the paths of righteousness for His name's sake?

Jesus once said that we do not have because we do not ask, but why don't we ask? Why don't we ask God to do whatever He wills with all that we are and all that we have in every moment of every day? The sobering truth is that we trust *ourselves* more than we trust God. We trust *our* ability to reason and assess facts, negotiate, mediate, politic, advocate, manipulate, persuade and control. The Psalmist has one word for us: Fools.

Habakkuk is a minor prophet who lived at the same time as Jeremiah. His conversations with God are tucked in between those of Nahum and Zephaniah. My guess is that most of us have spent little time with Habakkuk. Suffice it to say that Habakkuk lived during a very dry season of history in terms of physical evidence of God's presence and providence. In fact, Habakkuk affirms that Judah is living in the midst of God's righteous wrath executed by the Chaldeans. When Habakkuk looked around he saw desolation, depression, destruction, wickedness prospering and goodness maligned. Sound familiar?

Habakkuk took his honest questions to God and trusted Him to answer and to act; Not according to Habakkuk's design but in full submission to God's desire and timing. Read Habakkuk 3:17-19. That is a prayer of faith! That is the prayer of a person whose life is fully submitted to the sovereignty and providence of God.

Habakkuk does what Paul, a prisoner in chains from a Roman cell, commends we do in Philippians 4:4-7, "Rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again: Rejoice!" God is good and God is great! God will supply everything necessary for the faithful living of these days. God's will is that we would walk into fiery furnaces and lions' dens with the kind of faith and trust in Him that Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego and Daniel had. Ponder these things in your heart, like Mary, if you must – but then, by faith turn to the Father and give yourself to Him praying, "Let it be with me according to your Word."

There is great joy in living a life utterly abandoned to Christ. Trust and obey, for there's no other way ...

Questions and Reflections:

1. Where in your life (relationships, finances, health, etc.) do you find cause for anxiety, worry or doubt? What do you know about God that answers that anxiety?
2. What do you fear? What do you know about God that alleviates that fear?
3. Pray submissively to the Father, "Let it be with me according to your Word." Cast all your cares upon Him for He is faithful and He loves you.

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Week IV: God calls everyone but not in the same way nor to the same ministry.

God usually leads you according to your gifts and personality. Study Ephesians 4:11-6:1, I Corinthians 12:4-31 and Romans 12:3-8. Utilize a spiritual gifts inventory or meet with your pastor to talk about your spiritual giftedness and the possibilities for ministry in your community and around the world.

All of life is preparation for God's unfolding will. Your family, upbringing, schooling, heartbreaks, triumphs, disappointments, successes, failures, friendships – whether physical, financial, emotional – the path you have walked to this point has been a preparation for the path which now lies ahead. Wherever you have been, whatever you have seen, whatever you have done, God can use it for His glory. Indeed, all that is past is prelude, “that you might comfort others with the comfort with which you have been comforted” (II Corinthians 1:4).

Don't believe me? Consider this: In order to solve a future problem that only God could see (the famine in Israel), God allowed Joseph's brothers to sell him into slavery and convince their father he'd been killed. All so that Joseph could rise to the necessary position of influence in the government of Egypt's Pharaoh. Need more evidence? Read Romans 8:28 and I Corinthians 1:18-31.

God does not call or lead everyone in the same way nor may He ever call or lead someone else in that same way again. Note the unique call and path of:

- Moses: From a reed basket in the rushes to a burning bush to a parted sea to the edge of the Promised Land.
- Zechariah and Elizabeth: From a life devoid of progeny to the parents of the one whom Jesus would call greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.
- Paul: From Pharisee to persecutor of the Church to a life-transforming encounter with the living Christ to the greatest missionary the world has ever known.
- Philip: Whom God equipped to run with horses in order that an Ethiopian eunuch could come to know Christ and the power of His resurrection.

To what has God called you? Think you're too old? Consider Abraham and Sarah, Zechariah and Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna. Think you're too young? Consider Samuel, David, Mary and John Mark. Think you're too poor or too ignorant or too slow or too ... think again. God calls everyone to full-time ministry as agents of His grace and ambassadors of His Son sent to advance His Kingdom purposes in the world He so loves, but God does not call everyone to ministry as a full-time vocation.

Martin Luther called it the priesthood of all believers. You and I are called and chosen, and by God's grace, we are to be fully equipped for every good work God has prepared in advance for us to do. No more excuses.

All the spiritual resources have been poured out and God has made known His will. So we know, so let us now do.

Questions for reflection:

1. What are my spiritual gifts? (If you don't know now is the time for discovery!)
2. What are my passions or heart leanings in terms of ministry? (What breaks the heart of God and breaks my heart as well?) Who is doing that and how can I learn more?
3. If you could join in the effort to change one reality in the world before you die, what would it be? Might that be God's will and your calling? Does it align with what you know of God's character and God's will as revealed in the Bible?

Of this we can be certain: God will never lead you contrary to His Word. Self-contradiction is impossible with God. Test the spirits and test your sense of leading against the revealed Word of God. Finally, test your sense of calling with the community of believers, the Church. And then, having discerned His will, go and do.