



Light from the Word

Following God: Discerning God's Will

Key verse: *"And be ye not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God"* (Romans 12:2)

Though God has given us both the ability and the power of free choice, He fully desires that we seek and follow His will in every thing we do. *"Trust in the LORD with all thine heart: and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths"* (Proverbs 3:5-6). In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul describes God's will as good, acceptable and perfect (Romans 12:2). In other words, His will is good for us, it will agree with us and will completely satisfy all our needs. The believer is instructed to prove (or test) whether our understanding and knowledge of God's will is correct in His sight.

We comprehend God's will more easily when we can read it directly from His Word. Important doctrines such as, *"...except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish"* (Luke 13:3) and *"Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself"* (Matthew 22:39) are relatively easy to discern. Wherever we read God's Word with the intent that it will guide us in a specific matter, we should sincerely and earnestly pray that we *"rightly divide the word of truth"* (2 Timothy 2:15). We are wise to seek the "whole counsel" of God and avoid concentrating solely on those Scriptures we personally prefer. Seeking wise, biblically-based counsel from church leadership or other faithful brethren is a safeguard: *"Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counselors there is safety."* (Proverbs 11:14).

Sometimes brethren will seek to discern God's will by opening the Bible at random with the belief that the resulting scriptures will reveal an answer

to a particular question or issue. While it may not be wrong for us to use the Bible in this fashion, we would not want to do so in a casual manner or as our primary means of seeking God's will. Sincerely seeking God's blessing through prayer before opening the Bible has proven to be good practice. God's Word is holy, true, righteous, perfect and eternal, and *"rightly dividing the word of truth"* (2 Timothy 2:15) will always be consistent with the whole counsel of God and the leading of His Holy Spirit. His purpose for His Word is to make us wise unto salvation, convert our soul, make wise the simple, rejoice the heart, and enlighten our eyes. (Psalm 119:160; 19:7-8; 2 Timothy 3:15). We certainly would not want to diminish the importance of the Scriptures by attributing the sacred words to something mundane or worldly or by pulling certain words or verses out of context. We would want decisions influenced by opening the Bible at random to be in agreement with the Holy Spirit's prompting and the biblically-based counsel of other believers. Nevertheless, many of us have had instances when random opening of God's Word spoke directly to our hearts in an unmistakable manner, perhaps fulfilling a special need during a crisis in our lives.

We are not always able to individually capture or apply the Bible's depth to specifically address all of our questions or concerns. In these incidents, be they common everyday issues, or life-changing events, we will need to apply additional methods of discernment.

We can apply the precepts of "Asking, seeking, and knocking" when praying to God for guidance (Matthew 7:7-11). When asking God for direction, we should include Christ's humble words from His prayer in Gethsemane, *"...nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done"* (Luke 22:42). In so doing, we not only express our submission to God but

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we acknowledge that He really does know what is best for us. Seeking and knocking imply some persistent effort on our part. However, we should not be so persistent that we frustrate God's true purpose for us. The Apostle Paul prayed three times that God would remove his thorn in the flesh before he received his answer, after which he apparently quit asking and accepted the will of God.

The Holy Spirit will guide us into all truth and will reveal God's plans for us. *"Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things to come"* (John 16:13). God has promised His Holy Spirit to those who ask Him. *"If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?"* (Luke 11:13). The Spirit will prove effective where the flesh cannot. *"It is the Spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life"* (John 6:63).

Knowing and understanding God's desire and purpose for us as individuals requires faith. We must

have faith in God and His Holy Spirit, faith in the truth of his Word, and trust in those of whom we seek counsel and advice. When trying to discern God's will we will not necessarily receive an outward sign, *"For we walk by faith, not by sight:"* (2 Corinthians 5:7). Faith is a necessary component for all aspects of our spiritual walk, and discerning His will in our life is no different. *"But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him"* (Hebrews 11:6). The exercising of true faith will bring us an answer through the *"substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen"* (Hebrews 11:1).

In Acts 15 we see an example of early believers exercising discernment of God's will. In this instance, a question arose as to whether circumcision according to the law should be required of Christians. The apostles and elders gathered to discuss the matter. After questioning and reasoning together, they submitted to one another, "giving audience" and considering one another's opinions. They examined the relevant scriptures surrounding the matter. Finally, inspired by the Holy Spirit, James offered his counsel that the whole group adopted and in due course carried out. Note

the pattern of an initial struggle, during which they reached no decision. Through submission to the Word and the Holy Spirit and with the safety of counsel with one another a godly solution followed.

Learning from the teachings and examples in the Word will enable us not only to discern God's will in our lives, but more importantly, we will be equipped to actually carry out His will.