

## **Making Decisions by Faith, not Feelings**

by John W. Thompson

Christians today, more than at any other time in church history, have embraced a fallacy that extensively shapes and directs our lives. It is an error in the doctrine of guidance, or how to know the will of God. We all want to make right decisions, because those decisions will then turn around and make us, either for good or for ill. So, the central question before us is, How does God guide us? How do we know His will for us?

### WHAT GOD'S WILL MEANS

But first, what does God's will mean? In Christian conversation we use the phrase in three different ways. For example, in talking to a grieving friend who has lost a close relative in a tragic accident, we might say, The Bible says everything that happens is part of God's will, and though we may not understand why these things occur, we can be comforted in knowing that a wise and loving God is in control. Here we are referring to God's sovereign will.

In another situation, we might be speaking to a Christian friend considering marriage to an unbeliever whom we would warn, If you marry her, you will be disobeying God's will. Now we are speaking about God's moral will.

Finally, to an acquaintance considering several job offers, we might ask, Have you discovered God's will about which job He wants you to accept? Here we are talking about God's individual will. What do we mean in each of these three instances?

By God's sovereign will (called providence by the Reformers), we mean His secret plan which determines everything that happens in the universe (Eph. 1:11). In eternity past God formulated a perfect plan for all of history. The world was created by His will, kings rule by His will, and our salvation is the result of God working all things after the counsel of His sovereign will. He even determines each toss of the dice in a Monopoly game (Prov. 16:33). No one or no thing can resist or frustrate His sovereign will which will surely come to pass. And yet, though God determines all things, He does so without being the author of sin, without violating the will of man, and without destroying the reality of decision making. Each one of us is held responsible for every decision we make.

Our second usage, God's moral will, refers to His moral precepts, principles, and practices revealed in the Bible that teach how men ought to believe and live (Deut. 29:29). The Bible reveals 100 percent of God's moral will. It is for this reason the Apostle Paul states in Romans 2:18 that even the unbelieving Jews knew God's will (right from wrong) because they had the Scriptures. The fact remains, however, that there are many things which the moral will of God does not declare - specific situations where you must make choices. You have to decide where you will live, what church to join, which person to marry, what job to take, and a host of smaller decisions every day. How are these specific decisions to be made?

Many Christians today claim that these specific decisions are to be guided by God's individual will - God's ideal, detailed life-plan uniquely designed for each person (Prov. 16:9). It is popularly taught that God's individual will encompasses every decision we make and is progressively revealed by the indwelling Holy Spirit to the heart of the individual believer through various means such as circumstances, personal desires, and inner feelings. This individualized aspect of God's will is variously called God's perfect will, God's specific will, God's ideal will or the center of God's will. And to abide within God's moral will but miss God's perfect will results in what some authors have called God's second best. In marriage, this means choosing the right partner or else living with God's second best. You can change cars, houses, schools or churches if you discover you've missed God's will, but the choice of a spouse is irreversible for a committed Christian.

## TESTING GOD'S INDIVIDUAL WILL

With one's entire future at stake, a wise Christian parent or young person will surely want to test this doctrine of guidance, apply what is true and avoid what is not (1 Thess. 5:21). Like the noble-minded Bereans, we ought to examine the Scriptures daily to see whether these things are so (Acts 17:11). Is it really true (biblical) that God leads Christians through circumstances and feelings into His individual will for them, something more specific and detailed than the Word of God itself?

Four arguments have been offered in support of the concept that God has an individual will for each person: reason, experience, biblical example and biblical teaching. First, it is claimed that because God is a God of order (1 Cor. 14:40) and because God knows the future perfectly (Matt. 11:21f), then it is only reasonable that God would use these abilities to formulate and reveal an individual life plan for each of us. What great king has no design for his people? What wise shepherd has no path for his sheep? What loving father has no specific direction for his sons and daughters? It's only reasonable to say that God has an individual plan for each of His precious children.

But is that actually the case? Does an effective king seek to legislate every activity of his people? No, he establishes basic laws to promote righteousness and determines penalties for noncompliance. He doesn't desire a nation of slaves or robots, but a people who act responsibly within the limits of the law. Likewise, the wise shepherd sets boundaries for his sheep, but allows freedom of movement within those boundaries. He establishes limits for the safety of the sheep, but doesn't use his staff to point out every tuft of grass for each animal to eat. And does the loving father guide every detail of his child's life? The truly caring father teaches his child the basic principles of life, right from wrong, wise from foolish. He then seeks to train the child to make wise decisions on the basis of principles learned in his youth. Yes, God does guide His people like a King, a Shepherd, and a Father. But reason supports that God guides us through His moral will given in the Bible, teaching His children to wisely use their freedom in the application of His principles to the decisions of life.

Wait a minute, you think. What about the experiences of dedicated believers throughout church history, men like Martin Luther, John Wesley, David Livingstone, and Hudson Taylor. Those men attributed their spiritual successes to knowing God's individual will for their lives and doing

it. But is that the correct explanation? Are there any other factors that might account for their successes? It seems equally possible that those great men and women of God were successful because of their obedience to God's moral will in the Bible. In fact, spiritual success is actually promised by God to the one who obeys what God has revealed in His Word: ...be careful to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, so that you may have success wherever you go... be careful to do according to all that is written in it, for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success (Josh. 1:7-8). Blessing, God says, comes as the result of knowing and obeying the moral will of God revealed in the Bible (cf. John 13:17; 2 Tim. 3:16f).

If God's individual will can't be proved from reason or experience, surely we can argue it from the many biblical examples. After all, didn't the Apostle Paul claim that God guided him specifically in his Macedonian vision of Acts 16? And in other instances, the Lord led Ananias to Paul in Acts 9 and Peter to Cornelius in Acts 10. In fact, God's individual will is evident in the lives of Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, Elijah, Josiah, Ruth, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel and many others.

But examples in Scripture must be handled with great care. Many events are recorded in the Bible primarily because they were unique occurrences in the outworking of God's salvation history. So what must be determined in each case is whether the example was intended to illustrate normative Christian behavior. Should one expect a light and a voice from heaven to accompany a call to a particular vocation, as Paul experienced in Acts 9? Was this normative? God spoke to Balaam through a donkey in Numbers 22. Should each believer keep one in his back yard just in case? Yes, the Bible has many examples of men and women who received supernatural guidance from God through visions, angelic messengers, physical miracles, and even an audible voice from God. But, in fact, this was not even the norm for believers in Bible times. Even for the Apostle Paul, most of his decisions were based solely on God's precepts and principles. And the average believer in Bible times who did not hold a unique office such as apostle, prophet, judge or king NEVER received any supernatural revelation.

Well, if the biblical examples do not prove God's individual will for Christians, then what about the specific Scripture passages where believers are instructed to know and do God's will for their lives? Apart from the non-normative biblical examples just discussed, there are only about a dozen Scriptures that even hint at an individual will of God for Christians to follow. And with each of these Scripture passages, the problem is poor interpretation that does not take into account either the context or the word meanings. In every case, it can be shown that the biblical writer is referring not to an individual will but rather to the moral will of God. For example, Isaiah 30:20-21 (...your ears will hear a word behind you) is often quoted to describe the inward work of the Holy Spirit giving specific guidance of God's individual will. Yet if the additions and capitalizations (which are not in the original Hebrew) are left out, it becomes clear from the context that the voice behind them was not an inner voice of the Holy Spirit but rather the voice of a prophet coming out of hiding (vv. 8-11) to teach repentant Israel (v. 19) the way of God's law.

After testing the arguments for God's individual will - reason, experience, biblical example and biblical teaching - this third use of God's will is found to have no valid support from Scripture,

even though it is commonly (and confusingly) taught in modern churches. Though seldom believed before this present century, it has become so accepted today that most Christians don't know how to think outside the box. This is particularly crucial for such a life-transforming decision as choosing a spouse. So let's do some final testing of the trappings associated with God's individual will.

The individual will of God has been compared to a personalized road map that shows the one, specific, detailed route you should take through life, including all the decisions you will ever make. It is taught that God does not show us our whole journey all at once but gives us road signs along the way as we need them, four of which are circumstances, results, inner impressions, and personal desires. Yet in actuality Scripture reveals that these are four ways God does NOT guide us. Let's evaluate them one by one.

### CIRCUMSTANCES DO NOT GUIDE US

First, as believers in the sovereignty of God, we know that no circumstance develops by chance because God is the Sovereign Ruler over all things, including the circumstances that surround the decisions we make. It is reasoned, therefore, that just as we read our Bible because God wrote it, so also we should read our circumstances because God providentially controls them to reveal His individual will to us. Open and closed doors are said to be two of the most obvious circumstances through which God reveals His individual will. Paul was directed to stay in Ephesus by an open door (1 Cor. 16:8-9). And he regularly prayed that God would open other doors for him (Col. 4:3).

Putting out a fleece is yet another circumstantial sign. This is the practice of asking God to speak directly through a providential sign agreed upon beforehand. It comes from the story of Gideon in Judges 6:36-40 where Gideon asked God to answer yes or no concerning his battle against the Midianites through the use of a fleece of wool or sheepskin. This same method of discerning God's individual will was used by Abraham's servant who asked God to use a circumstantial sign to reveal the right bride for Isaac. Even before he finished praying, Rebekah appeared and immediately fulfilled the sign by providing water not only for the servant but for his caravan of camels as well (Gen. 24).

But are these examples normative for believers today - or even for believers in Bible days? Does God, in fact, reveal His specific, individual will in advance to us for everyday decisions through circumstances, such as open or closed doors and fleeces? And how can we be sure we are interpreting the circumstances correctly, since Scripture gives no guidelines for this? Contrary to popular belief, the Bible actually does not support the road sign of circumstances. The Bible teaches that God's sovereign will is purposely hidden from man, and that His moral will is already revealed in its entirety in the Bible: The secret things [His sovereign will] belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed [His moral will] belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law (Deut. 29:29). Circumstances, then, are not designed to give hints about God's future sovereign will or about His moral will either.

In fact, Solomon made it clear in Ecclesiastes 1 that trying to interpret our circumstances makes life seem futile: Vanity of vanities, all is vanity, he declared. It often appears that God favors the

wicked and resists the righteous, says Asaph in Psalm 73. Apart from the Bible's teaching that God is at work in history, the raw data of circumstances is often mysterious and conflicting. It shouldn't be surprising, therefore, to read in John 9:2-3 that those who attempted to interpret circumstances failed in their efforts. Similarly, the Lord had to correct a wrong interpretation of the circumstances in Luke 13:1-3 when He explained that a group of Galileans killed by Pilate were not greater sinners than others (cf. also vv. 4-5). Such events were determined by the sovereign will of God; they were not circumstantial signs to be interpreted for daily guidance.

God has His wise and sovereign reasons for each event in history, but He does not regularly give man a running commentary of His reasons, just as Solomon observed in Ecclesiastes 11:5-6, Just as you do not know the path of the wind... so you do not know the activity of God who makes all things. Sow your seed in the morning, and do not be idle in the evening, for you do not know whether morning or evening sowing will succeed, or whether both of them alike will be good. We just do not know the activity of God because we cannot and should not interpret the divinely controlled circumstances around us. It's like the farm boy who ran to tell his father that he had to leave the farm because he'd just been called to the ministry. The clouds had floated by in the shape of a P and a C, which he interpreted to mean preach Christ. His dad, however, deciphered the sign differently, and told him to get back to work since God was telling him to plant corn, pick cotton, punch cows, and pluck chickens.

Probably the classic interpreters of circumstances were Job's comforters - Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. After sitting silently with the afflicted Job for seven days, they thought they were wise enough to interpret his circumstances for the next nine chapters. You know what? They were wrong nine chapters out of nine! Only God really knew what was going on. And when did God finally reveal to Job the divine interpretation of his troubles? He never did! God just wanted Job to trust Him for the present as well as the future. And that is how God wants us to live too - by faith, not by interpreting circumstances.

## NEITHER DOORS NOR FLEECES

But doesn't Scripture speak of open and closed doors? If these are not circumstantial road signs from the Lord, then what are they? How does one distinguish between an open door and one that's only ajar? And who opened the door anyway - God, or Satan, or neither of them? How do you differentiate between a closed door and a test of faith?

The phrase open door in Scripture is a figure of speech for access to something or an opportunity to do something. For instance, in Acts 14:27, Paul and Barnabas reported how God had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles, meaning that the Gentiles had been given an opportunity to hear the gospel and believe. But the question is, does an open door constitute individual direction from God that must be obeyed, or is an open door simply an opportunity that may be taken or bypassed depending upon the judgment of the believer?

Paul seems to answer that question by his remark in 1 Corinthians 16:8-9. Verse 9 reveals two very important reasons for Paul to stay in Ephesus awhile longer. On the positive side, a wide door for effective service had opened for him; on the negative side, there were many adversaries trying to close that door. In short, Paul decided to remain in Ephesus to utilize the opportunity

and to neutralize the opposition. He didn't look upon this door as a road sign commanding him to stay in Ephesus but rather as an opportunity to spread God's message and combat God's enemies.

Again in Colossians 4:3, Paul wasn't praying for a circumstantial sign, but rather for an opportunity to preach the gospel, a door for the word. Lest there be any question that an open door in Scripture is not a road sign to be obeyed but rather an opportunity to be evaluated, look at 2 Corinthians 2:12-13. Here is an open door from which the Apostle Paul walked away! When Titus did not meet him in Troas as planned, Paul became so concerned that he left Troas, open door and all, and went looking for him in Macedonia. Now if an open door constitutes a road sign from God to be obeyed, then Paul's action would be unexplainable. But if an open door is an opportunity to be considered and weighed (and possibly bypassed) in light of other factors, then Paul's action was clearly understandable.

What does Scripture say about closed doors? Not a word! Yes, the concept of a closed door is found in Scripture, but it simply means the absence of an open door of opportunity. For example, in Acts 16:7 when the Spirit did not permit Paul and Silas and Timothy to go into Bithynia, God sovereignly accomplished this by not giving them an open door of opportunity. And whenever Paul was sovereignly prevented from pursuing a godly plan, he didn't interpret it as a no answer from God but simply waited and tried again later (cf. Rom. 1:10-13).

What about this issue of putting out a fleece as a circumstantial sign of God's individual will? Is Gideon's practice a model for believers today? Let's notice several differences between Gideon's fleece in Judges 6 and today's practice of putting out a fleece. In the first place, Gideon's fleece was not simply a circumstantial sign, it was a miraculous display of supernatural power. Gideon had already been visited by the angel of the Lord, his offering had been consumed by fire from the rock, and God Himself had spoken aloud to Gideon. Now he was asking God for another genuine miracle of the fleece being wet with dew while the surrounding ground remained dry, something far different than, say, someone inquiring about your house before you advertise it for sale!

Second, Gideon wasn't using the fleece to gain guidance, but to gain confirmation of guidance that had already been given, guidance that had come through supernatural means. So Gideon was not seeking the right decision but enough faith to believe that God would deliver Israel through him.

Third, rather than being an example of a proper approach to receiving guidance, Gideon's demand for further signs was really an expression of doubt and fear which God graciously tolerated, certainly not a model for us to follow.

In summary, then, Gideon was not seeking a circumstantial sign but a miraculous one; he didn't use a fleece to obtain guidance, but to confirm guidance already given; and his motivation wasn't a desire to do God's will but a reluctance to do God's will.

The other primary example of putting out a fleece is Abraham's servant, Eliezer, getting a bride for Isaac in Genesis 24. Does this passage teach that Christians are to seek detailed guidance beyond the moral will of God in the Bible? Is this the way we are to discover the specific person

we're supposed to marry? No, the experience of Abraham's servant is an example of God's special, supernatural guidance which was not even the norm for believers in Bible times. Here was a unique incident in the salvation history of the Old Testament where God had promised Abraham in Genesis 15 that he would have innumerable descendants. But that promise first required the birth of a son, and that son had to have a wife. For this reason, the servant based his request on God's covenant-keeping character as one who is faithful to his promise - the literal meaning of lovingkindness in Genesis 24:14. Therefore, this example does not depict the normal father using the normal method to pick a normal wife for his normal son. Rather, this was the fulfillment of a special covenant with Abraham, using angelic assistance and a supernatural fleece to bring about success.

Having seen, then, that God does not communicate His will through circumstances, what about the second road sign of results or blessings? Actually, this is often viewed as a way of confirming God's will more than determining God's will, since God's will is said to bring good results or blessings to the believer. A good result is like the sign at your destination that reads, Welcome, you made it. You were pretty sure you had followed the directions accurately, but that final sign assures you that you stayed on course.

But is this what the Bible teaches? It seems that if positive results and blessing are proof of God's will, then Jeremiah was never in God's will! In fact, many of God's servants throughout the Bible and church history have been faithful in their ministries yet have encountered nothing but difficulties and obstacles in life. Are they to be labeled as failures? Was their lack of results due to being out of God's will? The Bible teaches that results must always be viewed within the framework of God's sovereignty. And God's sovereign plan for His universe presently includes both good and evil. It permits Gabriel and Lucifer, Jesus and Judas to exist side by side. A day is coming when God will judge all evil and reward all good. But until then, we cannot interpret results or blessings as a sign or confirmation of God's will.

## IMPRESSIONS DO NOT GUIDE US

The third road sign which is said to direct us to God's individual will is the inner prompting of the Holy Spirit. Since the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit dwells within each one who puts his trust in Jesus Christ. And one of the Spirit's many wonderful ministries is the leading and guiding of believers: But when He, the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth (John 16:13). For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God (Rom. 8:14). This inward guidance is sometimes called the inner voice because it comes from within our heart, not outside our body. It is described as the still small voice in contrast to physically audible sounds. Inner impression, inward burden, inner witness, and checks in the spirit are other expressions used to distinguish the nature of this guidance. Possibly the most common designation for this road sign is the peace of God which is said to come when we are in the center of God's will (Col. 3:15).

But herein is the dilemma of subjectivism. Christians who base their decisions on feeling led or sensing God's will can have widely different, even contradictory convictions. One father told me he had three different young men claim it was God's will for them to marry his daughter. Hmmm! How do you argue against the inner impression of a Christian who claims that God told

him this or God told him that? You can't, because there is no objective standard (the Bible) by which his claims can be evaluated. This view of God's will can make Christians susceptible to all sorts of doctrinal error and deception. After all, how can one tell whether these impressions are from God or some other source? We know that inner impressions can come from any number of causes: God, Satan, an angel, a demon, human emotions, hormonal imbalance, sleep loss, medication, sickness or even a Big Mac. Sinful impressions are obviously not from God. But what about non-moral impressions, like whether to buy one car or another? Scripture gives absolutely no guidelines for distinguishing the source of your inner impressions. Tremendous frustration has been experienced by sincere Christians who have earnestly but fruitlessly sought to interpret the meaning of their inner impressions. Yes, impressions are real in that we do experience them. But they do not reveal God's will. Two examples, I think, will illustrate this.

First, if you read very many Bible commentaries, you will soon begin to notice that no scholar writing his interpretation of the verses will appeal to inner impressions as his guide to the Scripture. If an inner prompting is a good guide to God's will, then why do all the hard work of serious Bible study, learning the original languages and the principles of biblical interpretation? Why not just say, God, tell me the correct interpretation through your inner voice? Would you trust a Bible scholar who came to his conclusions that way?

A second example of the problem with subjective impressions would be the typical decision made by a church's leadership or by a whole congregation. When two, or ten, or two hundred people must all have the same inward leading on an issue, the process becomes very complicated. Should a church require a unanimous leading before proceeding with a decision? What if the decision can't be postponed, but everybody has a different leading? What if equally godly men line up on opposite sides of the issue? How can you resolve an issue when some Christians think the Holy Spirit is telling them to vote yes, and other Christians think the Holy Spirit is telling them to vote no?

But doesn't the Bible teach that one of the ministries of the Holy Spirit is to lead believers? The answer, of course, is yes. The issue, however, is not whether the Holy Spirit leads us but how He leads us. Romans 8:14 is often quoted as proof that the Holy Spirit leads believers through inner impressions into the individual will of God. But look at the context of this verse. First, the context is not dealing with daily decision making in non-moral areas. Second, this verse gives no indication whatever that the means of leading is by inward impressions. And third, there is no hint at all that the goal of the leading is the individual will of God.

What the Apostle Paul is discussing in this passage is righteous living, not which car to buy or which woman to marry. The issue set before us (beginning in 8:1) is the contrast between living according to the Spirit versus living according to the flesh, or put simply in verse 7, obedience versus disobedience to the law of God contained in the Bible. It is Paul's answer to the problem of slavery to sin raised in chapter seven. In this context, then, being led by the Spirit of God is simply another way of describing living according the Spirit in which the Christian is putting to death the deeds of the body by obeying the moral will of God in the Bible.

But what about the next few verses of Romans 8, especially verse 16: The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit...? Doesn't this verse teach about an inner witness? Again, the context

does not describe daily decision making. In verse 15 our spirit (i.e., our inner person), because it has been regenerated through spiritual adoption, cries out Abba, Father. But why? Verse 16 explains that the Holy Spirit bears witness to us, that is, He illumines our understanding of Scripture that the promises of God are now ours (cf. 1 Cor. 2:14).

Another prominent passage on the leading of the Holy Spirit declares, the Spirit of Truth... will guide you into all the truth (John 16:13). This promise is directed not to all believers but specifically to the Apostles to whom He was speaking. And the truth that Jesus would give them (truth that you cannot bear now and truth about what is to come) was not inner impulses for daily decision making but direct revelation from the Holy Spirit for writing the New Testament, truths related to Christ's death, resurrection and second coming.

### WHAT ABOUT PEACE?

Perhaps the most common allusion to inner impressions is having the peace of Christ when we are in the center of God's will (Col. 3:15). Yet in this passage, Paul is writing not about God's provision for our decision making but about maintaining love and unity in the body of Christ. The word peace can mean one of two things in Scripture - either the absence of anxiety within a person or the absence of hostility between persons. The whole appeal of Colossians 3:5-17 is for believers to manifest Christ-like attitudes and virtues that will result in experiential unity among believers. So which definition of peace fits this context? Surely Paul is talking about the absence of hostility between believers, not a warm, fuzzy feeling. He's calling us to peace with one another, not inner peace within our soul. The whole subject of inner guidance is entirely foreign to the context.

But what about the lack of peace - the lack of tranquility - you might have in the process of decision making? How do you explain it? What is the source of this anxiety? Well, it could be your conscience. If you are pursuing a course of action in violation of God's word, then your conscience will produce a feeling of guilt. But if your decision is not a matter of disobeying God's revealed will, then like we said before, your feeling may have numerous possible causes: fatigue, illness, stress, timidity, uncertainty, weather, diet and so on. How did you feel the morning you were to be married? Didn't you feel a little unsettled inside? Yet if all marriages were called off because of nervous grooms, we'd have no weddings! That lack of peace is perfectly normal whenever we face a major new step in life. In summary, then, impressions are just feelings, which can have numerous causes. But they are clearly not road signs for God's will.

What, then, is the proper place of emotions in the Christian life? Instead of being our method for determining truth, they are our God-given means for responding to truth. The emotional cart is to be pulled by the intellectual horse, and not the reverse. Our feelings are designed by God to express our response to objective truth. For example, if a friend is injured, my God-given emotions respond with sorrow; but if a friend gets saved, my emotions respond with joy. In our relationship with God, our minds learn from the Bible what God says is true. Our wills choose to accept God's truth and obey it. And our emotions then respond accordingly with love, praise, thanksgiving, fear, hope, trust, rejoicing and so forth, lifting our Christian experience to the highest possible level of enjoyment. The Psalms are an ideal place to explore the proper, biblical expression of our emotions!

One caution: Since our emotions are designed to respond to what we believe to be true, we must walk by faith and not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7). We must believe what God says is true, regardless of our circumstances. If we believe our circumstances rather than God, then our life will be an emotional roller coaster as our circumstances change. That's why James exhorts us to consider it joy, my brethren when you encounter various trials (Jas. 1:2f). Why? Because of the truth of God that trials will make you a mature Christian. That is cause for joy! But if your focus is on the trial, then you will be emotionally depressed.

Finally, let's examine the fourth road sign said to direct us to God's individual will, namely, our personal desires. At the time of salvation, God gives us a new heart and begins renewing our desires. The more we grow in grace, the more our desires line up with God's desires. Though initially our experiential righteousness is like filthy rags, God is washing those rags a little more every day as we grow in Christ. But the problem with using personal desires as a road sign is that, this side of heaven, Christians will still have some sinful desires, foolish desires, prideful desires and many other desires that are difficult to identify because the heart is deceitful and desperately wicked (Jer. 17:9). Even the Apostle Paul expressed his own inner conflict with desires (Rom. 7:15-25) and taught that Christians in this life will always experience internal warfare as the flesh lusts against the Spirit (Gal. 5:16-26). Ultimately, all desires must be judged by God's moral will, the Bible, because only the Bible explains which desires are which.

## HOW GOD GUIDES US

Though it can be emotionally unsettling to probe our fundamental assumptions, we have tested the doctrine that God has an individual will for every person which he or she must discover in order to be within the will of God (1 Thess. 5:21), examining the Scriptures... to see whether these things are so (Acts 17:11). And having seen how each of the four arguments and each of the four road signs are unfounded, we must conclude that this viewpoint is actually an unbiblical teaching that will lead us into confusion, not clarity, about God's will. It is not that God does not craft every detail of our life - indeed, He does - but He simply has chosen not to reveal those details to us. They are part of His sovereign will (Deut. 29:29), purposely kept secret because He wants us to learn to Trust and Obey as the hymn writer so aptly put it. Trusting is our response to His sovereign will; obeying is our response to His moral will (the Bible). But how do the two work together in our choosing of a spouse?

God's sovereign will has four primary characteristics, each of which has a crucial application in the choosing of a spouse. First, as mentioned above, God's sovereign will is secret or hidden until it happens. Would you like to know whom you will marry? Just wait until the day after the wedding! Why, you might wonder, doesn't God tell us His sovereign will in advance? It is because He wants to build in us a character of trusting Him for our future, walking by faith, not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7). Moreover, He is protecting us from information we are not equipped to handle. Jesus teaches that we are wired to handle only one day's anxiety at a time - and no more (Matt. 6:34).

Second, God's sovereign will is exhaustive. As the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords (1 Tim. 6:15), God is the ultimate determiner of everything that happens,

including our choice of a mate. In a word, God works ALL things after the counsel of His will (Eph. 1:11). Even the sinful acts of men are included in God's sovereign will as Peter divulged that Jesus was delivered up by the predetermined plan of God (Acts 2:23; cf. Luke 22:22). And yet, as we said before, God accomplishes this without being the author of sin, without violating the will of man, and without destroying the reality and responsibility of decision making. He simply uses man's nature to bring about His predetermined end.

The third characteristic of God's sovereign will is that it is certain. Daniel 4:35 declares that God's sovereign will cannot be frustrated by men, by angels or by anyone else. Thus, it is not blind chance, impersonal fate, human manipulation or Satanic trickery but rather God Himself who brings a man and a woman together in marriage. And nothing - including someone marrying the wrong person - can thwart God's sovereign will. Did Mr. or Miss Right pass you by and marry someone else? God's sovereign will makes no mistakes - He knows better who is ideal for us. Perhaps there was some hidden flaw in that person which God was protecting you from. Or maybe God was protecting him from you as God continues to conform your character to Christ. Could be you two just weren't a good fit for each other.

Fourth and finally, God's sovereign will is perfect, bringing the highest glory to God and the greatest good to man. God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God (Rom. 8:28). God does not say all things are good, because they're not. He says all things work together for good to make us conformed to Christ. Even a difficult marriage can work together for good to conform us to Christ's qualities of endurance, forbearance, and forgiveness as we learn to love a less-than-perfect mate. So in the perfect sovereign will of God, there is no such thing as getting stuck with God's second best spouse. And whether we become bitter or better in marriage simply depends on how much we are trusting in the sovereign will of God.

But trusting God's sovereign will is only half the equation for our choosing a spouse. Remember Trust and Obey? The second half is obeying God's moral will. And the substance of God's moral will is the Bible, pure and simple (Rom. 2:18). It is our perfect and complete guide for all faith and practice (2 Pet. 1:3-4; 2 Tim. 3:17), encompassing not only WHAT we do, but also WHY we do it and HOW we do it. Speaking of this truth, Jesus told His disciples in John 13:17, If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. So our two responses to God's moral will are (1) to know it and (2) to do it. The Holy Spirit does not guide us apart from God's Word, rather He guides us through God's Word as we diligently study it. Then He blesses us with success as we faithfully obey it (Josh. 1:8; Ps. 1:1-3).