

God's Will for Your Life

An Every-Verse Examination of God's Will

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(All verses taken from the NASB, unless otherwise noted)

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“How do I know God's will for my life?”

For teenage and college-aged Christians, no question arises more frequently. As young people look toward their futures, they want direction. And young Christians have the right idea by looking to God for that direction.

This question gets asked more often than it should, however, because few people can provide a sufficient answer to it. Therefore, young Christians keep asking it. The most common answers anyone gives are, “Pray to God and listen quietly for His answer. If you're not hearing God's voice, you're not listening hard enough,” or, “God isn't listening to you because you have sin in your life. You have to eliminate all of your sin in order to hear His voice.” These answers have many Christians going out of their minds, because they try their best to follow this advice, yet they remain confused about God's will for their lives.

Adding to the frequency of this question's utterance is the fact that its asking is often commanded. Many pastors and youth leaders tell their followers, “You *must* find out God's will for your life!” They follow with the warning, “If you don't, you'll miss out on the wonderful journey God has for you.”

Nobody wants to miss out on something wonderful, so the curiosity about God's will becomes an urgent crisis—a need to know His will before it's too late. An inability

to figure out God's plan could lead to a disastrous life followed by an encounter with an angry Maker on Judgment Day. Wow! Talk about pressure!

How do many young Christians respond to this pressure? By grasping at straws. They pray for God to reveal His will for their lives, and, within a short time, they have an answer. Unfortunately, the answer rarely becomes reality. In fact, many believers find themselves pursuing a different path in a matter of only a few months.

Back in my college days, I knew a couple Christian men who had a tremendous heart for God and desperately sought His will. What did they find? A call to become missionaries to China. One of them told me all about this calling with great enthusiasm. Six months later, I spoke to that same man again.

I asked him, "When are you going to China?"

He said, "What?"

I said, "Weren't you and your friend called to become missionaries to China?"

He replied, "Oh, that. That's ancient history. God wasn't really calling us. In fact, my friend and I don't even talk to each other anymore. It's funny you remembered that. I had forgotten all about it."

My friend wasn't the only person I knew who was misguided about God's will for his life. Another person, who I often refer to as "me," made a similar mistake. When I first arrived at Belmont University as a Music Business major in the fall of 1990, a former president of Belmont's Baptist Student Union insisted that we young Christians figure out God's will for our lives ASAP.

Of course, I focused on this task immediately. After a couple days of prayer and deep thought, I concluded that God wanted me to be a successful performer in the music business who then spread the gospel through my fame. This was quite a coincidence, since I already desired to be a rock star. God's will and my will matched!

So have you heard my songs on the radio yet?

No?

Do you know why?

Because I never came anywhere close to becoming a rock star!

I fell for the common lie that circulates among young Christians that if you pray over God's will, and you have a desire to do something, that it must be God's desire for you to do that very thing, because God gives you your desires for a reason. However, we are about to find that the Bible never says this.

The moral of these stories is that we're often misled about God's will for our lives, because we go about seeking it the wrong way and sometimes have the wrong motives when doing so. The only way we can find it is to seek it the proper manner.

How do we do that? A good start would be to examine everything the Bible says about God's will.

Genesis: 12:1, "The Lord said to Abram, 'Go forth from your country, and from your relatives, and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you.'" [All verses from the NASB unless otherwise noted].

Context: The 11 chapters preceding these provide a quick overview of many generations; but here, the Bible slows down and gives us a detailed look at God's relationship with Abraham, because it is through Abraham that God initiates the process of building Himself a nation.

Analysis: This story of Abraham makes no mention of the term, *God's will*. But it paints the kind of picture that comes to many Christians' minds when we think of what it means to know God's will.

Many of us long for an experience just like this one, where God speaks to us in an audible voice and gives us a task for the present, as well as a direction for our personal future. When we try to obey biblical commands that tell us to know and obey God's will, this is what we aim for. We want Him to tell us in plain words what He wants us to do, and why He wants us to do it.

Unfortunately, occurrences like these are incredibly rare. Therefore, many of us become frustrated in seeking God's will. Out of our impatience, we often try to force it. We do so by praying to God to tell us His will, and then we assume that the desires we have thereafter must be from Him. The sad reality is that these desires are often nothing more than our own desires; they're not God's desires at all.

Why do we want God to work through us in this manner? Sometimes we desire a command like Abraham's out of our pride, because we want to feel as though we are more important than others. We know that God instructs few people in this manner, and that we will feel special if God addresses us like He addressed some of the Bible's greatest heroes.

Sometimes we desire instructions like this one, because they are easy to follow and have guaranteed positive results. We hate to be confused over what to do next, and we hate the vague uncertainty of the future. We want God to tell us what decision to make and to assure us a future as great as we had ever hoped for.

Genesis 25:22-23, "The children struggled together within her; and she said, 'If it is so, then why am I this way?' So she went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said to her, 'Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples shall be separated from your body; the one people shall be stronger than the other, and the older shall serve the younger.'"

Context: Isaac's wife Rebekah prepares to give birth to Jacob & Esau.

Analysis: Again, most of us dream of having God reveal a plan this spectacular to us with spoken words. Imagine God telling you that He plans to make a nation out of both your children. During their childhood years, you wouldn't even have to worry about them running onto the road or sticking a fork in an outlet, because God's plan would see them through to child-bearing years safely. It would take all of the worry out of being a parent.

Of course, imagine the pride that many of us would have, too, because God chose us out of all people for this special assignment. Unfortunately, pride is sin according to numerous Bible verses.

On the other hand, imagine the love we would feel from God because He chose us for this task. Feeling God's love isn't sin. But we shouldn't have to have a miraculous personal plan revealed to us in order to feel it. The fact that God chose us at the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4) to be His children and have eternal life should be enough for us to feel His love. Also, we should not feel His love any less because His plan for us may not be as grand or romantic in our opinion as the plans revealed to the heroes of the Bible.

Unlike Abraham, Rebekah voiced a concern to God, and He eased her mind by telling her what was going on. How many times do we wish that God would ease our concerns by telling us what He plans to do? Many of us pray for God's direction, not because we want to do what He wants, but because we want to eliminate any concerns we might have about an uncertain future.

Exodus: 18:15-16, "And Moses said to his father-in-law, 'Because the people come to me to inquire of God ("seek God's will" in the NIV). When they have a dispute, it comes to me, and I judge between a man and His neighbor, and make known the statutes of God and His laws.'"

Context: Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, expresses concern over Moses' heavy work schedule. The Ten Commandments and the rest of the Mosaic Law have not yet been given at this point (that happens in chapter 20), so the people have to inquire of God through Moses as to how to behave. Moses reveals the will of God by making "known the statutes of God and His Laws."

Analysis: This is the Bible's first example of someone *seeking* God's will. Abraham did not seek God; God approached him. And Rebekah simply asked what was going on; she did not ask for direction.

There's one big difference between the Israelites' pursuit of God's will and our pursuit of it: Here, the Israelites had not yet received God's law. That's why Moses was so overwhelmed with requests. We, on the other hand, have God's law revealed to us in the Bible.

Unfortunately, many of us fail to examine these biblical laws when seeking God's will. Instead, we pray for God's guidance and then rely on gut feeling for the answer. Or we ask our pastor for guidance—a solution better than relying on gut feeling, but still less reliable than knowing the Bible.

Sometimes, it's as if the Bible is the last place we want to look to find God's will. This is especially true for charismatic Christians who indulge in the emotional spirituality of the faith, but avoid examining the Bible with the mind. In fact, some of these churches tell their members that it's a sin to study the Bible with their minds, and that they may only study it through the Holy Spirit. Of course, guess who has the Holy Spirit? The

church leadership. This theology is nothing more than a tactic to keep congregations from questioning the church's non-biblical and anti-biblical rules, beliefs, and practices.

Joshua 9:14, “So the men of Israel [‘leaders’ in the NRSV] took some of their provisions, and did not ask the counsel of the Lord.”

Context: The Gibeonites, having seen the military might of the young nation of Israel, tricked Israel's leaders into making a treaty of peace with them, so they wouldn't be destroyed.

Analysis: The nation of Israel was a theocracy in which its leaders were to inquire of God before making a decision. They were to either inquire of God directly, through a prophet, or by doing the ancient equivalent of flipping a coin (i.e.: casting lots). When the Israelites failed to seek the Lord's guidance, bad things happened, as is the case in this story.

I will not include in this study every instance in which Israel's leaders inquire of the Lord on the nation's behalf, because we cannot assume that God's requirements for individuals are the same as His requirements for His nation. Therefore, going forward, I will only cover verses that reveal God's will for our personal lives.

1 Chronicles 10:13-14, “So Saul died for his trespass that he committed against the Lord, because of the word of the Lord which he did not keep; and also because he asked counsel of a medium, making inquiry of it, and did not inquire of the Lord. Therefore He killed him, and turned the kingdom to David the son of Jesse.”

Context: Saul, the first king of Israel, died. He had turned away from God during His reign.

Analysis: Again, this verse focuses on Israel's king seeking guidance for the nation. Nonetheless, this verse applies to us, too, because it shows the dangers of seeking council from the dead through mediums and spiritists.

Why does God forbid such a thing? Is He so hungry for attention that He doesn't want us talking to other spiritual beings? That's not the reason at all. No spirit or deceased person can advise us as well as God can, and none of them know the totality of God's plans. Even more worrisome is that many channeled spirits are evil (I won't say

that all of them are, because Saul had a medium channel Samuel in 1 Samuel, chapter 28, and Samuel was righteous in God's sight), so they might guide us into committing evil and hurting others.

Jeremiah 10:21, "For the shepherds have become stupid, and have not sought ['do not inquire of' in the NRSV] the Lord; therefore they have not prospered, and all their flock is scattered."

Context: Jeremiah prophecies against the house of Israel.

Analysis: This may be the first verse to criticize individuals for not seeking the Lord's guidance. However, it's more likely that this prophecy uses the word, "shepherds," to denote Jewish leadership. Notice that the word, "flock," is singular, implying that the shepherds share a common flock, rather than each having a flock of his own. It's the nation's leaders who share a common flock; whereas, shepherds tend to individually own flocks.

According to this verse, failure to seek the Lord's guidance brings about a negative result: lack of prosperity. God wants us to enjoy life. When we seek and follow His guidance, we find happiness; when don't, we're left searching.

Zephaniah 1:6, "...those who have turned back from following the Lord, and those who have not sought the Lord or inquired of Him."

Context: God says that He will destroy Judah and Jerusalem (which fell to Babylon in 586 B.C.) and lists the types of people He will punish.

Analysis: This verse appears to be about those who turned away from the Lord altogether. Nonetheless, this verse assumes that those who follow the Lord seek Him and inquire of Him.

Many of us Christians today claim to follow God but rarely seek out His will. Instead, we use Him to support our personal agendas. Sometimes, we find ways to twist solitary Bible verses so that they appear to support our political or religious beliefs. Other times, we think of God as someone who smiles on everything that we do; therefore, we

never change our ways to match His will. When we fail to seek His will, we fail to follow Him altogether.

Matthew 12:50, “For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother.”

Mark 3:35, “Whoever does the will of God, he is My brother and sister and mother.”

Context: Here, someone had told Jesus, as He spoke to a crowd of people, that His family was waiting for Him. These quotes are Jesus’ response.

Analysis: Do you want to be close to Jesus? So close that He feels like family? If so, these quotes direct you toward achieving your objective.

Of course, at this point, we have yet to find out what this “will” is. This verse may be giving us a hint, however, as it ties family and God’s will together. Will obeying God’s will turn us all into a close-knit family?

Matthew 26:39, “And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, ‘My father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not as I will, but as thou wilt.’”

Context: Jesus prays to the Father in the Garden of Gethsemane. He dreads going to the cross where He will bear the punishment for our sins.

Analysis: This is the only example in the entire Bible of someone ending a prayer with the words, “not as I will, but what Thou wilt” or, “not my will but Yours be done.”

These words have inspired many Christians to end prayers in the same manner. This gesture is noble, but is it really how God wants us to pray?

No other prayers in the Bible end in this manner, not David’s prayers, not Moses’ prayers, not any of the Psalms. The reason for the difference between their prayers and Jesus’ prayer is that Jesus, being the Son of God, already knew God’s plan. He knew God sent Him into our world to be the perfect sacrifice for our sins. He knew He had to die on the cross. His prayer was both an expression of dread and a last minute check to be sure there wasn’t a less painful way for Him to save us from God’s wrath on Judgment Day.

When we pray, on the other hand, we don't know God's plan as Jesus did, and we don't know how God might respond. When we end a prayer by saying, "not my will but Yours be done," that's the same as saying, "Never mind what I just prayed; go ahead and do what You were going to do anyway." We show a total lack of faith that God will fulfill our prayer requests, and thus we fall short of Jesus' encouragement to "have faith and do not doubt (**Matthew 21:21** – also see Luke 17:6)."

It's good to acknowledge that God's plan is of greater importance than our desires, but we underestimate God's ability to work our prayers into His plans. We give up too easily when we pray. If Moses would have said, "Not my will, but Your will be done," when pleading for God not to destroy the Israelites in Numbers 14, the rest of Judeo-Christian history may have never happened. So while Jesus may have negated His prayer because He already knew God's plan, that doesn't mean that God requires us to do the same.

Notice that I said Jesus already knew God's "plan." In this quote, that's the definition of God's *will*. However, in verses to come, we will find other definitions for God's *will*.

John 6:40, "For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him, may have eternal life; and I Myself will raise him up on the last day."

Context: Jesus explains how He is the bread of life.

Analysis: This is the first place in which the Bible spells out a definition of *God's will*. This will is not a plan for an individual's life, but a desire for all who believe in Jesus to have eternal life. It's a plan of God's that's sure to happen.

The certainty of this plan becoming reality is not unique in the Bible. The Bible contains numerous prophecies, etc, that have come true and others that will be fulfilled in the future. All of God's plans recorded in the Bible succeed. None of them have ever failed. Neither does the Bible give us a single example of a person thwarting God's plans, whether it be intentionally or by mistake. Even when Satan schemed to kill the Son of God, God worked that scheme into His plan for the redemption of His people.

It's important that we understand the certainty of God's plans coming to pass. Many Christians worry that God's plans will fail if they don't figure them out and make them happen. That worry is unnecessary. God's plans will happen.

John 7:17, "If any man is willing to do His will, He shall know of the teacher, whether it is of God, or whether I speak from Myself."

Context: While at a feast, the Jews expressed wonder at how Jesus could teach without having the proper religious education. Verse 17 is part of Jesus' answer.

Analysis: One who "is willing to do His will" is someone who commits himself (or herself) to God and places God's desires above his (or her) own. For any of us to do this, we must first learn what God desires. The big question is, "How do we learn what God's desires are?"

Jesus says here that anyone who seeks to do God's will is certain to recognize that His teachings are from God and not from men. Perhaps, those who seek it are God's chosen people and God simply gives them a gut feeling that Jesus' words are truth. Or it may be that God's will itself—for those able to discover it—reveals whether or not Jesus' teachings are true.

Acts 16:7, "When they had come to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them...."

Context: Paul and his companions pass through Asia Minor (modern Turkey) en route to Macedonia on Paul's second missionary journey.

Analysis: Here's a biblical example of how God's plans happen no matter what we do. Even though Paul headed toward a place where God did not intend for him to go, God steered him in another direction.

Was Paul concerned that He almost missed out on God's plan for him? Was Paul even repentant of the fact that He had not figured out God's plan ahead of time? The answer to both questions is "no." Paul was content to let God guide him, and he was never worried that God's plans for him would fail. Therefore, we should rest assured that God will steer us in the right direction, regardless of whether we figure out His plans or not.

Acts 21:4, “And after looking up the disciples, we stayed there seven days; and they kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem.”

Acts 21:14, “And since he would not be persuaded, we fell silent, remarking, ‘The will of God be done.’”

Context: As Paul prepares to go to Jerusalem, other Christians, including Jesus’ disciples, begged him not to go, because they expected him to be arrested or killed. Even the prophet Agabus foretold Paul’s imprisonment. Nonetheless, Paul insisted upon traveling to Jerusalem, because He possessed a greater desire to do God’s work than to ensure his own safety.

Analysis: These verses are interesting in that verse 4 says that “through the Spirit” they told Paul not to go to Jerusalem, and then verse 14 says that they decided to let the Lord’s will be done. At first glance, these verses seem to say that the Holy Spirit opposed God’s will. What’s more likely is that these Christians knew through the Holy Spirit that something bad would happen to Paul if he went to Jerusalem. (They were right. Paul would go on to be imprisoned there.) While they feared for Paul’s well being, God, on the other hand, planned to spread the Gospel through the events of Paul’s journey.

Acts 22:14, “And he said, ‘The God of our fathers has appointed you to know His will, and to see the Righteous One and to hear and utterance from His mouth [“own voice” in the NRSV].”

Context: Paul recalls his conversion experience in which Ananias informed him of God’s intentions.

Analysis: Is this *will* a general will that applies to all people, or is it a plan for Paul’s life? It could be either, but since Paul says in Galatians 1 that he received the gospel through revelation, it’s more likely that he speaks of that revelation, which God revealed to him with “His own voice”. Fortunately for us, Paul recorded this gospel and other revelations in letters to churches (the Epistles), and these letters are now in our Bibles, so we need not look anywhere else to experience Paul’s revelation.

Romans 1:9-10, “For God, whom I serve in my spirit in the preaching of the gospel of His Son, is my witness as to how unceasingly I make mention of you, always in my prayers making request, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you.”

Context: Paul greets the Roman Christians in the first chapter of his letter to them. His desire to visit them probably stems from a combination of wanting to strengthen their relationships with God and wanting to visit brothers in Christ whom he cares about.

Analysis: Here, the “will of God” represents the means by which Paul was to visit His Roman brethren in Christ. In prayer, Paul effectively asked God to include his request in His plan. Paul understood, as Moses did, that God can integrate our prayer requests with His plan for our lives and for the world.

Romans 2:17-18, 21, “But if bear the name ‘Jew,’ and rely upon the Law, and boast in God, and know His will, and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law...you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself?”

Context: Paul opposes judgmentalism.

Analysis: The *will* of which Paul writes in this passage represents that which is revealed in the Old Testament Law. The Jews were nuts about the Scriptures and were proud to know them well. Unfortunately, despite such great knowledge, they had a tendency to miss the point of the Scriptures.

Nonetheless, we, too, are required to know God’s will as revealed in the Bible. God’s biblical will applies to all of us. It’s a general will. If you want to know God’s will, you must go to the Bible to find it. That’s not to say God doesn’t have specific tasks for you to carry out that don’t apply to others, but 99% of what you need to know is found in the Bible.

Romans 12:2, “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Context: Paul urges the Christians to live a life pleasing to God.

Analysis: This verse gives us another definition of “the will of God:” all that is good, acceptable, and perfect. Where do we go to learn what is good, acceptable, and perfect? The Bible. The Old Testament Law, the prophets, the writings (like Proverbs), the words of Jesus, and the letters of the Apostles, all contain revelation of what is good, acceptable, and perfect.

We can’t learn all of these things by simply praying and then obeying the gut feeling that follows. There are too many issues for us to take this approach. We’d have to pray for God’s direction on each and every issue, but we wouldn’t even know what questions to ask without the Bible’s guidance as to which issues are important. The *only* way to learn what is good, acceptable, and perfect, is by reading, studying, and knowing the Bible.

Ephesians 1:1, “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God...”

Context: Ephesians, chapter 1, is known for being the chapter that gives the most support for the theology of pre-destination: the idea that God chose us (those who are Christians) to be Christians before the human race ever began. Even though it feels to us that we are choosing God, it’s actually God who places the desire to worship Him in our hearts.

Analysis: Not only does Paul credit God for choosing him to be a Christian, but Paul credits God for choosing him to be an Apostle of Christ. How did Paul learn of God’s will for him? Well, Paul didn’t exactly seek out God’s will through his own efforts. Instead, God converted him by means of a miraculous vision on the road to Damascus (see Acts, chapter 9) and then led him to a man named Ananias for instruction.

Of course, most of us will never see a vision from heaven that knocks us to the ground, so our best bet for learning God’s will is studying the Bible.

Ephesians 1:11, “In Him [Christ] also we have obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will [‘accomplishes all things according to His counsel and will’ in the NRSV], to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ should be to the praise of His glory.”

Context: Ephesians 1 is well-known for Paul's explanation of predestination in which all Christians were chosen to be Christians by God before the world was created.

Analysis: Notice that God "accomplishes all things according to His counsel and will." That means He never fails to accomplish anything He wills; all things He wants to accomplish come to be; and everything He accomplishes matches His will. In summary: God's plans happen no matter what. There's no mistake we can make that will interfere with them. God has already taken all of our actions and prayers into account when determining His plan for history.

So what about the warning that if we don't figure out God's will for our lives that we will miss out on the wonderful journey that awaits us? It's a lie! We will never miss out on God's plans for us, because His plans can never be thwarted. It's arrogant to think that we are powerful enough to ruin God's plans. Are we more powerful than God? He is in total control, and He never loses that control for even the slightest instant.

1 Thessalonians 3:3, "For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality..."

Context: Paul reminds the Thessalonians to continue following the instructions he had given them in person.

Analysis: Again, we see here a general will of God that applies to all Christians. To be sanctified is to become more like Christ. We do this by obeying the rules of the Bible, which apply to all people.

1 Timothy 2:3, "This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth."

Context: Paul gives Timothy instructions on how to govern a church, and urges Christians to pray for kings and others in authority.

Analysis: For those who oppose pre-destination theology, they find support for their beliefs in this verse. Because if God desires that everyone be saved, and yet most of them are not, then how can He be in control their choices to become Christians?

I was once told, however, that *all* doesn't always mean *all*; but that it means *all kinds* about 75% of the time it's used. Over the years, I have found this to be true. Paul speaks of praying for government leadership in the preceding verses. He is speaking of multiple nations and leaders. He says that God wants people from all of these nations to be saved, not just Jews, not just Romans. He desires salvation for *all kinds* of people, not for every man or person in the world.

James 4:15, "Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we shall live and also do this or that.'"

Context: In verses 13-17, James warns the Christians not to assume what will happen in the future, because God controls it.

Analysis: Now we're back to God's *will* representing His specific plans for our lives. Again, James warns that we cannot control even our short-term plans. Everything we plan is subject to God's approval. That doesn't mean God won't let us sin if we plan to, although sometimes He doesn't. God gives us free will, but sometimes gets in the way of us falling too deeply into sin, especially if we pray for His protection from our sinful ways.

1 Peter 2:15, "For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men."

Context: Peter tells Christians to obey the secular governing authorities.

Analysis: "Doing right" is following all of the Bible's commands. Following them has numerous positive effects, one of which is that nobody has a legitimate reason to accuse us of being unlawful. This was important for early Christians, because they didn't want to invite unnecessary persecution. Persecution would come at times, but Christians were never called to do anything that would provoke or increase it.

1 Peter 3:17, "For it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong."

1 Peter 4:19, "Therefore, let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right."

Context: Peter encourages Christians to be willing to suffer for living the Christian life, much like Christ suffered by remaining steadfast in righteousness.

Analysis: The phrase, “if God should will it [our suffering] so,” tells us that suffering should be of God’s will, but never of our own will.

While you might think it preposterous that anyone would impose suffering upon themselves, many Christians do. They believe that God is happy when we suffer, and they say we must deny ourselves and take up our own cross as Jesus did. They are correct about taking up our own crosses as Jesus did, because Jesus instructed us to do so in Matthew 16:24, Mark 8:34, and Luke 9:23.

Remember, however, that Jesus did not seek out a cross and ask people to nail Him to it so He could suffer for God; He was crucified simply for doing what was right—carrying out His ministry. 1 Peter 3:17 tells us that we, too, must do what’s right, but like Jesus, we should only suffer for it if we have to. We must be willing to suffer for the sake of the gospel, but we should not force suffering upon ourselves needlessly. That’s what the other religions of the world are all about. Christianity is so much better than that!

(For more on the anti-Christian nature of self-imposed suffering, read the *Christian Freedom* study on the *Essentials* page.)

1 Peter 4:2, “...live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men [‘human desires’ in the NRSV], but for the will of God.”

Context: Peter inspires believers to be willing to suffer for Christ and no longer live sinfully like they had in the past.

Analysis: In the Bible, what’s the opposite of “human desires?” God’s desires! In other words, God’s will. We find biblical examples of human desires in **Galatians 5:19-21**. They are “...immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing...” And what does **Galatians 5:22-23** say are God’s desires? They are “...love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control...”

Here, again, we have God’s will for our lives revealed to us by the Bible.

Having examined all Bible verses addressing God's will, we've found the source of confusion over it: the fact that *God's will* has two primary definitions. The first definition is *God's plan*. The second definition is *God's law*. The first is a specific, personal will. The second is a general will, which is the same for all Christians.

The Bible verses that command us to know God's will instruct us to know His general will for all of us. They do not tell us to figure out His plan for our personal future. And nowhere in the Bible are we commanded to figure out God's plan for our entire lives.

While some might argue that life is short, there's a sense in which life is long, too. A lot can happen in a lifetime. For some of us, it's as though we live several different lives in one lifetime. Those of us who have been around for awhile can look back on our lives and see how God has led us in directions we never could have expected or even understood during our early adult years. God doesn't require that we memorize the map to the long and winding road we are to travel. God knows the way, and He will see us through to the finish, because His plans never fail.

While the Bible never requires us as individuals to inquire of God about personal direction like the leaders of Israel had to, there's no reason why we shouldn't. Why not check with God first before making any important decision? (Decisions over insignificant things like what to eat for breakfast and what to wear should not be brought before God, because **Ecclesiastes 5:2** says, "Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God.") If God chooses to reveal direction to us, whether it comes by an angel, vision, burning bush, or a set of circumstances that make our decision easier, then we experience God's involvement in our lives. If God remains silent, don't worry; just make sure that your decision aligns with God's general will that's revealed throughout the Bible.

When seeking God's will, we must place His general will for all Christians ahead of His specific plan for our lives. Imagine taking a class in school that's crucial to your career. Throughout the semester, you fail to do your assignments, perform poorly on tests, and fail to participate in class. Toward the end of the semester, the professor informs the class that he has a special opportunity for a student to work on a project with a professional who is established and well-connected in your field of study. You

enthusiastically volunteer in hopes of being catapulted into a successful career. Should the professor choose you—the one who failed to do what was required of everybody? The professor will most certainly not choose you. He will choose someone who has excelled at fulfilling the basic requirements.

This is not to say that God isn't free to choose an underachiever for a special task. God may do whatever He wants. Nonetheless, our focus is to be on the primary assignment that all Christians must complete: knowing God's will and adhering to it as commanded in the Bible. God's will as revealed in the Scriptures is necessary "for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work [**2 Timothy 3:16-17**]." Without these essentials, we are unequipped to carry out God's will for our personal lives. So if you're worried about missing out on a wonderful journey planned by God, then get to work on knowing and doing God's will as revealed in the Bible.

Don't just study the New Testament, either. Keep in mind that Paul spoke of the Old Testament Scriptures when he wrote verses 16 and 17 to first century Christians (the New Testament had not yet come together at this time). We may not overlook the Old Testament. Contrary to popular Christian belief, the New Testament is a supplement to the Old Testament, not a replacement for it. We can't ignore it because Paul failed to re-write it in the Epistles and because Jesus failed to recite it in the Gospels. Both of them chose not to reiterate it, because early Christians understood the importance of the Old Testament law and knew it well.

Why doesn't God expect us to figure out His plan for our entire lives? There are a couple of reasons. The first is that we would let our misconceptions about what God's plans might look like interfere with seeing God's plans clearly. For example, we live in a romantic age. I'm not talking about dating and marriage; I'm talking about literary romanticism. Most of us have big dreams of getting out there and living a spectacular fairy tale life, like we would see in a movie packed with inspiring heroism and narrow escapes.

While we are certain to have some powerful experiences in carrying out God's plans, the plans He has for us are often not grand from our point of view. A Christian

might imagine that God will want him to become a famous Christian rock star, when God's true plan for him may be to befriend a person who's unpopular and down on his luck. God may then want him to be a good representative of Christ in the workplace, so that a co-worker will be open to becoming a Christian when the timing is right, years down the road. Later in life, we may look back on these experiences and know God's power through them, even though they were never experiences we would have foreseen as wonderful.

Not only do we over-romanticize God's plans, we tend to limit them to what we deem to be important. For example, in America, we are very career focused, because we have a historically high number of career choices available to us. Throughout history, however, peoples' options were limited. Most people had little choice but to do what their parents did. God still worked great plans for those peoples' lives, even though their careers had little to do with their duties to God. Today, in trying to figure out God's plans for our lives, we tend to focus too much on careers and not enough on the little opportunities around us that just might make all the difference in light of eternity.

The final reason that we're not required to foreknow God's plans for our entire lives is that we simply can't see the all of the long and winding road that lies before us from where we stand. Take this website for example. Could I have known back in 1990, at Belmont University, when trying to determine God's plan for my life, that God wanted me to someday minister to people through a website? Websites didn't exist in 1990! Neither were my talents and passions in writing. They were in music. I loved music, wanted to commit my life to it, and had developed some talent (although not much) around it. Meanwhile, I dreaded writing, wasn't very good at it, and considered English to be my least favorite subject. Also, I was a semester away from experiencing word processing for the first time. Would I have looked forward to writing so extensively using nothing but a typewriter, where if I wanted to change something, I would have had to type the page all over again? Christian writing was the furthest thing from my mind. Yet God ultimately led me down an unforeseeable, yet amazing, path to doing just that.

While we are called to use our talents to serve God, we must take care not to limit ourselves to our talents. I once met a woman who told me that God's call for her was the

Christian music business (I heard that one a lot in Nashville), and that she refused to do anything else but that. She complained to me how her former pastor had encouraged her to teach Sunday school, and she replied to him that doing so was not her calling, only the music business was. She may have been right in that Sunday school was not the appropriate ministry for her. Nonetheless, I sensed a reluctance to remain open to where God would lead her.

Not to be self-focused, but as I look at my journey (it's the one I know best, since I have been present for the whole thing), I realize that I never would have expected my sales career to figure into ministry plans, because I initially lacked natural talent in sales; I was terrible at it. But that's exactly why God placed me there. My people skills were pathetic. Only out of a need to survive did I improve them over many years of working in sales.

In the corporate sales world, I faced a lot of temptation to deceive potential customers. It was the norm for sales reps and their employers to do so. This experience proved invaluable when I wrote my study on *Greed & Oppression of the Poor* on the *Essentials* page. A pastor who majors in religion, goes straight to seminary, and then goes straight into the ministry, could never relay the same message, because he has never experienced the harsh realities of the corporate sales world like I did.

When trying to determine God's plan for my life in 1990, it was inconceivable to me that God would use things I did poorly, like writing and sales, to train me for it. I could only imagine back then that He would use my passion for music in His plan, because the music business was where I envisioned my future at the time.

Seeing the long and winding road in God's plan from the present all the way to the end of our lives is nearly impossible. That's why God never requires us to see it. He only requires that we learn His will as revealed in the Bible, and that we seek His guidance on the decisions we must make in the immediate future. We need not worry about the more distant future, however, because God's plans never fail.