

GOD'S BEST FOR YOU: DISCERNING HIS WILL

By Andrew Wilson
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Psalm 25:4-5
John 10:1-5

Life presents to us a series of decisions. Most of the decisions we make are fairly trivial. But every now and then we have to make a big, tough decision. The choice we make, we realize, will shape our future, for good or for ill, for years to come, and maybe for the rest of our lives. Yet the best course of action isn't clear to us. We need wisdom from above.

So often in the Bible when people are faced with hard decisions, God speaks to them directly, or he communicates his will using supernatural signs and wonders. Moses spoke with God on Mount Sinai as you and I might talk to each other over coffee at Starbucks. Mary, the Lord's mother, was visited by an angel. Peter was told in a vision to go to Cornelius's house and witness to him.

Don't you wish sometimes that God would treat you that way? Don't you wish you could just pick up the phone and get his counsel? Or walk up a mountain and meet with an angel? Don't you wish God would tell you straight out if the career you're pursuing is the right one for you? Or how you might be a better parent to your children? Wouldn't it be terrific if God would just post a message on your Facebook page that says: "Hey – no worries – you're doing a great job. If you'll just do X, Y and Z, you'll become a great success in my eyes"?

But we all know God almost never works that way. He rarely employs miracles to tell us what we should do, or to point us in the direction we should go. Even though the Bible records many revelatory miracles, they were astonishing, once-in-a-lifetime events even for the people who experienced them.

But that doesn't mean God never speaks. To the contrary, God promises to guide us when we're in a relationship with him. God says in Psalm 32:

"I will instruct you and teach you
in the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my loving eye on you."
- Psalm 32:8

In the same way, Jesus promises to counsel his followers. He says in John, chapter 10:

"He [that is, Jesus] calls his own sheep by name and leads them out... [H]e goes ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice."
- John 10:3-4

God has a good plan for our life. His desire for us is that we would lead lives that are satisfying and productive. He says to us in Jeremiah:

"For I know the plans I have for you...plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."
- Jeremiah 29:11

God wants to use us to fulfill his dreams for all of creation. Most of the big mistakes we make in life happen when we fail to seek the Lord's counsel, and we try to work things out according to our own visions and dreams. God warned the people of Israel not to act without consulting with him. He says to them in Isaiah:

“Woe to the obstinate children... who carry out plans that are not mine, forming an alliance, but not by my Spirit, heaping sin upon sin.”
- Isaiah 30:1

We're all living with messes of our own making. We're all dealing with the on-going consequences of making plans without seeking God's heart. I know people who have made a disaster of their lives and have given up hope of ever reconciling with God or living a fulfilling life.

But the Lord never gives up on any of us – not even the person who has reached rock bottom. By his Spirit, he's communicating with us all the time, and in many different ways. He's trying to teach us how we can leave our messes behind. He's trying to open up for us a beautiful new life that's full of his peace and joy. What he requires of us, mainly, is that we seek his heart and commit our steps to him.

We learn from the Bible and from experience that God communicates in five basic ways. Nicky Gumbel uses labels that begin with the letters 'C' and 'S' to identify those five forms of divine communication. I like his labels because they're easy to remember, so I'm going to use them up on the screen.

We can think of them as God's communication media. They're the spiritual counterparts to newspapers, magazines, radio, TV and the internet. Like a network broadcaster, God can use one medium or a combination of media to reveal his heart to us.

The first medium is *Commanding Scripture*.

When we read the Bible we should of course remember that it was written to a particular people, in a particular social and historical context. But we should also remember that God is constantly using Scripture to reveal his general will for all people in all times and places. In fact, the Bible has something important to say about virtually every area of life where hard decisions are required of us.

Take, for example, marriage and family life. The Bible doesn't tell us whom we should marry. But it does counsel Christians to marry Christians. It doesn't tell us how to resolve our fights in the bedroom. But it does prohibit us from leaving our spouses just because we're attracted to another person.

Financial issues are also addressed in the Bible. We aren't told how much debt is acceptable when we're buying a house or what kind of car we should drive. But we *are* told not to live beyond our means. And we *are* directed to give a tithe, or 10 percent of our earnings for God's work.

As these examples make clear, the Bible reveals principles that help us to know God's will in a huge range of circumstances. More than that, the Bible shows us, through story and example, what it means to be a good person. It shines God's light on the character traits, or virtues, that enable us to live well, and to fulfill God's plan for our life.

When we read and meditate on the Bible regularly, something extraordinary happens. The Bible becomes for us an indispensable source of wisdom and strength. Books that once seemed impenetrable become accessible and intensely relevant to our daily life. People who lived two or three millennia ago become living, breathing personalities. Most amazing of all, God speaks directly to the circumstances we face through our daily Scripture readings. In doing so, he fulfills his promise, that if we'll seek him, and feed upon his Word, he will direct our steps.

There have been many times in my life, especially when I've been faced with a difficult decision, when I've had the sense that God was speaking directly to me through a particular passage.

When I was in college I worked each summer as a house painter with my brother and a friend. A man who was a pastor once hired us to paint a rental property owned by his church. The pastor refused to pay us most of the money that he clearly owed us, and my brother and friend decided to take the man to small claims court.

I felt funny about taking a pastor to court, and I felt even worse when I came across a verse from 1 Corinthians that warns Christians against suing other Christians. I sensed that God was telling me to stay out of court.

I followed Jesus' commandment and confronted the person who had wronged us. But I got so ticked off with the guy that I left his house practically shouting. Then, full of indignation, I decided to join in the law suit.

We ended up settling in court for about half of what we were offered by the pastor the night before the hearing. We foolishly refused the man's last minute offer of full restitution because it didn't include our \$20 court filing fee.

Commanding Scripture is one crucial way that God reveals his will to us. The Bible may be old, but it's always fresh and relevant. God still uses it to guide us through the complexities of our daily life.

God reveals his will, secondly, through his *Compelling Spirit*.

God longs to have a deep, personal relationship with all of us. He doesn't want us to relate to him as a lawgiver or judge who speaks through a book. He wants us to know him as a loving Father who is close at hand. More than that, he wants to take up residence in our hearts so that we'll never feel apart from him and we'll always have the benefit of his guidance and protection.

God establishes that deep, personal connection with us when we receive Christ as our Lord and Savior. He sends to us his Spirit. As Paul explains to the Church in Galatia, God sends "the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father'" (Galatians 4:6).

The most common way that the Spirit speaks to us is through prayer. God delights in conversing with us in the quietness of our hearts. On very rare occasions, God may speak in an audible voice, but much more often God communicates through our thoughts and intuitions. As we grow in our faith we learn to differentiate between ideas that are self-generated and messages that come from God. All such messages need to be tested. A message from God will be consistent with the Bible. It will help to build up others. It will give us a sense of peace and oneness with the Lord.

Sadly, many people never hear God speak, in any sense, when they pray. They never experience God's presence and power because they aren't really seeking fellowship with him. Prayer, to them, is a one-way conversation. It's a matter of sending messages to a remote, impersonal higher power in the vain hope that he'll hear them.

If you're not hearing from God when you pray, maybe it's because you're not listening. Maybe you need to speak less and wait for God to fill the silence.

The Spirit also communicates with us by causing us to want the right things – the things that are in line with God's plans for us. And this work of God isn't just one of gentle persuasion. As we surrender our lives to Jesus Christ, the Spirit actually changes our hearts, so that our will aligns with our Father's will, and we take delight in doing what is pleasing to him.

Paul explains the process in Philippians, chapter 2. Paul says:

"It is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose."
- Philippians 2:13

We should pay close attention to our passions and our dreams. If we're genuinely seeking to serve God, and there's a fire burning inside us to do something that seems to be in line with his broad plans and purposes, it's likely that God has started that fire. If we extinguish that fire, whether out of laziness or a fear of failure, we may be giving up the greatest opportunity we'll ever have to bring glory to God. But if we fan the flames of our passion, and commit our work to the Lord, there's no telling what we might accomplish.

God sometimes assigns us to tasks that are hard, and even distasteful and dangerous. But we shouldn't worry that he might call us to work that doesn't fit our passions and skills, or that doesn't help to build to his kingdom. Because God's a good manager. And he knows us intimately. He always calls us to important work that we can do or that we can learn and that we can get excited about.

The third medium for Divine communication is *Common Sense*.

God doesn't speak to us through the Bible and through prayer so that we won't have to use our brains. The universe God created is rational and orderly, and our approach to most of the problems we face in life ought to reflect that reality.

John Wesley, the father of the Methodist Church, always impressed upon his followers the importance of thinking clearly. He said that, while the scriptures and prayer are vitally important, God usually guided him by presenting reasons to his mind for taking a particular course of action.

Most of us have experienced times when we've wondered if we need a change. Our daughters both experienced days and weeks when they wondered if they had chosen the right colleges. Then they worried that they'd chosen the wrong majors. Holly eventually changed her major.

Many of you, I know, have contemplated making big career changes. Some of you are haunted day and night by the question of whether to stay the course or make a radical career move.

All of those doubts are normal. But common sense tells us we should stick with the commitments we've made until God calls us to do something else. We're ready to make big changes only when we've given careful consideration to where we want to be and what we want to be doing ten or

fifteen years from now. That process ought to include lots of prayer. But it also ought to include realistic conversations about common sense questions:

- Where is my present education or job taking me?
- Am I headed in a direction that makes sense for me, considering the gifts and passions that God has given me?
- If I don't make a change, am I going to be satisfied with where I wind up over the long run?
- If not, what do I need to do to get myself heading in a new direction?

The fourth medium God uses to communicate with us is the *Counsel of the Saints*.

Some people lean too heavily on other people for advice. They shift responsibility for their decision-making to a spouse, a friend, a mentor or a therapist. It's important to learn how to think for yourself, and to trust your best instincts.

But many of us have the opposite problem. We're reluctant to consult with others when we're faced with a big decision because we don't want to appear weak or dependent. We'd rather make a colossal mistake than give people the impression that we're unsure of ourselves.

We almost always make better decisions when consult with people we respect. As the writer of Proverbs reminds us, "plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisors they succeed" (15:22). God often uses those who love and serve him to reveal his truth to us.

Most of you know Terri Hewitt, who currently serves as a missionary to China. Terri recently made a difficult decision regarding a new direction for her ministry. She spent much of her time with us last July consulting with various members of our congregation about what she should do. In the end, she prayed over and owned the decision that she made. But she testified from this very spot that the advice she received from many of you made all the difference. And she now realizes, with the advantage of hindsight that God used the whole process to steer her ministry in a wonderful new direction.

It takes humility and courage to include others in your decision-making. It takes even more humility and courage to listen to mature people that you may not agree with, and consider the possibility that God may be speaking through them.

The fifth and final medium is *Circumstantial Signs*. God often communicates with us by shaping the flow and outcome of events in our lives.

There have been two occasions in my life when God absolutely slammed the door in my face. In both situations I had been pursuing visions that I thought were God's visions. One of them involved the creation of a city-wide youth outreach that I thought would be my life's calling. By closing off those two possibilities and doing so in a way that made it impossible to move forward, God communicated to me that I needed to focus my energies elsewhere.

In both situations, I was so absorbed with the details that I would have ignored a commanding Word of scripture or wise advice from a friend. I needed to hear from God in a way that left no room for doubt. And as painful as it was to walk away from the work I had done, I'm grateful that God used circumstances to steer me towards my true calling.

We should pay attention when doors close and when they open. We should pay attention to coincidences, and watch for opportunities to share God's love and his good Word with the people within our circles of influence. Because when we're living within his will, the Lord often places us in just the right place, at just the right time, to draw people to his heart.

God speaks to us in many ways. But we have to remember that God seldom speaks or acts in a way that lines up with our personal schedules. He's got his own list of priorities, and his plan is often a mystery to us. So we have to be patient. On those dark days when God seems to have forgotten about us, we have to remember that he's still working out his good plan for our lives.

Our challenge, and our joy, is to commit what we have to him and cooperate with his Spirit.

Lord, so often we think we're following your plan when we're actually making it up as go. But we know that our desire to do your will pleases you.

Help us, Holy Spirit, to hear you speaking, and to see you at work in our lives. Change our wills so we will want only what you want. Give us the joy and peace that come from living within your perfect will, according to your perfect plan.

We pray in the name of Jesus, who is one with the Father and with the Spirit. Amen.