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KEY SEVEN: KNOWING GOD’S WILL

How do I know when God is speaking to me?

The center of His will is our only safety— let us pray that we may always know it! —Corrie Ten Boom (1892-1983)¹

Early in (George Müller’s) Christian life, he formed the habit, in things great and small, of ascertaining the will of the Lord before taking action, asking guidance in every matter, through the Word and the Spirit.²

MITCH AND GOD’S WILL

Everyone around Mitch seemed to be telling him what God’s will for his life was, but he just didn’t have peace about it. Mitch seemed a bit desperate as he explained his situation (while teaching me the finer points of barbeque wing etiquette at his favorite campus restaurant). The ministry he was involved with had singled him out as a potential leader, and he was on the fast track to become a

¹ Corrie Ten Boom, *The Hiding Place* (Minneapolis, MN: Worldwide Publications, 1971), 87.

² A.T. Pierson, *George Müller of Bristol, and His Witness to a Prayer Hearing God* (New York: The Baker and Taylor Company, 1899), 113.

point man for this well-known organization. In this position, he would have hundreds of wide-eyed young students looking up to him, following his example, listening to his advice. He began, *They want me to lead Bible studies, to disciple guys, to go to this special leadership thing in another state ... and I'm just not comfortable with it all.*

I proceeded to ask Mitch a series of questions over the next half-hour or so, and together we reached a conclusion. I asked him, *Do you know what the problem is? You just really don't know much at all.* A big smile spread across Mitch's face—he seemed relieved. I continued, *My advice would be to take a deep breath, relax, and take the next year or two to grow—learn the Bible, develop a consistent prayer life, learn how to do ministry, and learn how to hear God's voice for yourself.*

The advice made a lot of sense to Mitch, so he bowed out of ministry leadership (amidst protest from those who were just sure that Mitch was missing God's will). He decided to spend a little more time growing and gaining competency in the most important skill in the universe—hearing God's voice for himself. Mitch and I met regularly after that, and he would often tell me, *I am so glad I decided to back out of that—I have such peace now.*

Mitch's dilemma is similar to what I see all over the place—young people being told to do something (*take a ministry position, change jobs, marry or don't marry this or that person*) because some Christian leader tells them, *This is God's will for your life.* This chapter will focus on the fact that one of the main features of real New Testament Christianity is that God wants us all to learn how to listen to His voice for ourselves. This does take some practice, but every Christian can learn to do it.

As maturing believers, we aren't supposed to let others dictate God's will for our lives. That is what false religions and cults do to control people. One of the beauties of being a New Testament Christian, truly born again, is that everyone receives the Holy Spirit as a teacher and guide. God wants you to learn how to listen to Him for yourself. God often uses other saints to confirm what He is saying, but if you are open and humble, He wants to tell you Himself when He has something important to say. Like everything else in the Christian life, however, learning to hear God clearly is a skill set. So let's start with the easy stuff.

THE EASY STUFF—*DO YOU EVEN KNOW ME?*

Is there anyone you know pretty well—a best friend, spouse, family member? You know their favorite restaurant, and you probably know what they will order. You know what they like to do on a day off (go to a coffee shop, read a good book, go mountain biking). You know what kind of desserts they like, what their favorite movie is. You know what they would do right now if you gave them 100 bucks to do whatever they wanted. Have you ever thought about this—that getting to know God is really a similar sort of thing?

God isn't some mysterious impersonal force, like gravity or time. He is a Person with likes and dislikes. There are things that bring Him joy and things that bring Him grief. Once you really start to get to know Him better, you find there are occasions where you don't even need to pray a whole lot before you make a decision. There was a time, for example, when I was praying about whether to take a step of faith that would involve bringing help to a bunch of orphans overseas. About two minutes into the prayer, I almost

laughed out loud because it seemed like God was saying, *Really?! This is not brain surgery. You know what I like.* (Those weren't His exact words, but it was something like that.) I thought of Scriptures like,

He pled the cause of the afflicted and needy ... Is that not what it means to know Me? (Jeremiah 22:16)

This is pure and undefiled religion: to visit orphans and widows in their distress. (James 1:27)

Once you have walked with God for a while and memorized a lot of Scripture, you often have a pretty good idea about what He wants—His will—without a whole lot of effort. It is advisable to double-check if you can because there may be factors or contingencies you are unaware of, but a lot of times it's pretty "cut and dried," as they say. Now if you haven't spent much time with Him and don't know His Word, you won't even be able to get the easy stuff right. (You are *easy* prey for deception.)

Below are a few examples of easy issues—questions that a typical young person in their twenties might ask God, followed by what I believe God's normal response would be in parentheses. Because His answer will always be consistent with His Word, it is a safe bet that He would respond in the following ways:

Question 1: *Should I forgive that person who hurt me so deeply?* (God: *Absolutely! That's what My kids do. And if you don't, you will damage yourself.*)

Question 2: *Should I be more generous with my resources?* (God: *If you are My child, of course.*)

Question 3: *There is a fatherless kid on the youth sports team that I coach. Should I reach out to him? (God: Get right on that, NOW!)*

Question 4: *Should I go into debt for a super cool car that I don't really need? (God: Don't be ridiculous!)*

Question 5: *Should I date that person at church who is really attractive but has no spiritual fire? (God: Blank stare)*

On what basis would I make the assumption that God would respond in the above ways? Again, HIS WORD, of course. Let's consider the questions above in light of God's Word. Anyone who has prayerfully studied the Bible knows that ...

Question 1: God always (always, always) wants us to forgive. Among other issues, to not forgive opens us up to demonic influence. (*Ephesians 4:26-27; Matthew 18:21-35*)

Question 2: God commands us to be generous ... to the poor, to our friends, even to our enemies (*Hebrews 13:16; Romans 12:20; Matthew 5:45*). This is part of being a new creation in Christ.

Question 3: Fatherless children have always been one of God's top priorities. (*Psalms 68:5; Isaiah 1:17; James 1:27*)

Question 4: Materialism and debt are often the symptoms of a sick, dissatisfied heart. (*1 Timothy 6:6-11; 1 John 2:15-17*)

Question 5: Any young Christian asking that last question has no business even thinking about pursuing a romantic relationship. (*1 Corinthians 7:39; 2 Corinthians 6:14*)

Get to know God better, and a lot of things are really "no-brainers." Again, it's often a good idea to double-check

about such things if you can; occasionally, there is some factor you don't know about that changes the equation a little. But the mature believer who knows the Bible can often just go ahead and move. They don't need to spend the next three weeks fasting, or wait for an angel to appear.

It is true that there are some situations in life that are not so cut and dried, even for a mature saint. Those decisions will require a little more effort. What do you do then? What if it's a decision between two good jobs, or two good churches, or what college to attend? Maybe it's an issue of going on a mission trip versus living with your unsaved mom for the summer? What do you do then? What about this one—determining if the Christian person you are dating is “the one”? How do we know God's will in these sorts of more complicated situations?

THE MORE DIFFICULT STUFF: THREE LIGHTHOUSES

There is a talk I seem to have at least once a week, and it centers on this question—*How do I know what God's will is for me?* Should I go on the mission trip, take the job, marry the girl, break up with the guy, buy the car ...? To answer the question, I use a little analogy that I picked up from some preacher somewhere. It involves three lighthouses, and the story goes something like this ...

There was once a very dangerous seaport, and the bay leading to it was lined with massive rocky outcroppings. Over the years, many ships had come to ruin on these treacherous rocks. Docking safely, however, was not a problem for anyone who knew about the three lighthouses.

Three lighthouses had been strategically set on the furthest outcroppings, and if a ship were positioned right,

their beacons would form a straight line, 1 ... 2 ... 3. If a ship captain would just keep the three lights in a straight line and keep them starboard (to the right), his ship would come in safely every time. When the wise captain got his ship just so, even if it was a black, starless night, he could safely ease it into port.

Anyone seeking to determine God's will needs to do a similar thing—line up three God-given lights in row, 1 ... 2 ... 3. If they do, they too will come successfully into “port” when making major decisions in their life. So what are these “lights” that we need to align?

First, we should have some sort of inner prompting, a nudge, that we suspect is from the Holy Spirit. Second, we have the Bible and should use it to determine whether this nudge lines up with God's truth. Third, we have godly counsel—we seek the confirmation of wise and mature people in the faith. Line up these three lights, and you will not be dashed upon the rocks, but will consistently find God's will.

LIGHTHOUSE 1: THE NUDGE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

It should be obvious here that we are only talking to those Christians who are truly surrendered to God. If you have unconfessed sin in your life or are holding out on God in some area, make sure you get this right before you try to hear His voice. If you don't, you are setting yourself up for deception. But if you have done this, know that God has given you His Holy Spirit as a guide, and He really wants to speak to you.

This is one of the most amazing things about being a real New Testament Christian—the God of the universe will

regularly be speaking directly to you. On occasion, He will use dreams and visions, but His typical method is something I like to call *a nudge in the Spirit*. This might happen when you are focusing on spiritual things—praying in the morning or studying your Bible—but it could also happen when you are eating your bagel and working on your physics homework.

This nudge thing comes directly from the Holy Spirit to our spirit. When this happens, we usually don't hear literal, actual words. God probably won't say in perfectly enunciated English, *Abby, I want you to give \$100 to your roommate for her summer missions project* or, *Gavin, go to Joe's Coffee Shop and talk with the barista*. The nudge is usually deeper than words, but it is God mysteriously communicating to us. The spiritually sensitive person gets pretty good at quickly translating this nudge into, *I think God wants me to do*

In the book of *Acts*, we see the Holy Spirit leading people in all sorts of very specific ways. To Philip, He says, *Go up to that chariot over there and talk to that guy (Acts 8:29)*. To Peter, *Hey, three guys are looking for you. Get up and go downstairs (Acts 10:19-20)*. To the early church, *Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the mission I have called them to (Acts 13:2)*. Perhaps He said these things in perfectly enunciated Koine Greek, but I suspect He did the Spirit-to-spirit nudge on these occasions, too. Anyone who has walked with the Lord very long will know what I am talking about here.

Now, none of us is very good at hearing God as a baby Christian. And there are other things out there that can give us an inner nudge ... like the flesh or the devil. We are especially vulnerable to deceptive nudges when we are

young and inexperienced, so how do we know if a nudge comes from the Holy Spirit? It could be Satan, or maybe it's just your overactive mind playing tricks on you because you only got two hours of sleep last night. The next thing you need to do is line up the nudge you think God's Spirit just gave you with His Word.

LIGHTHOUSE 2: THE WORD

Chapter 2 was devoted to emphasizing just how important it is to know God's Word. The Bible clearly tells us that we are basically crazy (fools) until we take the time to develop the mind of Christ. The person who takes the time and effort to do this can discern pretty much anything that comes across their path.

But he who is spiritual discerns all things, yet he himself is discerned by no one. For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD THAT HE CAN INSTRUCT HIM? But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Corinthians 2:15-16)

This person who has the mind of Christ can rightly discern the voice of God. When that inner nudge (or a dream or vision) comes, they know whether it is from the Holy Spirit or a counterfeit. How? Not from some mystical sense, but because it resonates with the clear teachings and principles found in the Word of God.

This is exactly what we see going on in the life of Jesus when He goes into the wilderness for 40 days before He launches into ministry. The devil meets Him and tries to tempt Him. I am convinced that the temptations Jesus experienced there were very much like the temptations you and I face—they were suggestions (or nudges) that could have been mistaken for the voice of God. (I do not believe

the devil showed up with a pitchfork wearing red tights. Rejecting that would not have been much of a test.)

So how did Jesus discern that the nudges He was receiving were not from His Father? THE WORD, THE WORD, THE WORD, THE WORD, THE WORD. Every time the devil gave Jesus a nudge, Jesus grabbed hold of it and held it up next to the Scriptures. That is how He determined its source. The devil said, *If You are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread (Matthew 4:3)*. That doesn't sound like a bad thing for someone who hasn't eaten in 40 days. But Jesus saw the devil behind it because this was a temptation to doubt what God had said very clearly. God had already affirmed Jesus's Sonship. No further test was necessary. Jesus basically says, *I'm not going to fall for that. I am not going to test the Father but will stand on what He has clearly said*. He then quotes the Word (*Deuteronomy 8:3*).

There is no way to emphasize just how important the Bible is for every aspect of our Christian life. Jesus summarized it well in the temptation narrative—our very life depends on it.

But He answered and said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.'" (Matthew 4:4)

The next time you think that God is speaking to you, prayerfully seek out Scripture that would confirm that it is indeed Him. If you neglect to do this when you feel that inner nudge, you will probably live to regret it.

LIGHTHOUSE THREE: GOD'S PEOPLE

Where there is no guidance, people fail, but in an abundance of counselors, there is victory. (Proverbs 11:14)

Do you know older Christians who have a special touch of God on their lives? They seem very sensitive to His Spirit, and God regularly uses them to impact people in a positive way? Maybe you have a wonderful pastor, a mentor, or perhaps your parents or grandparents are wise, godly people. As a third and final way to determine God's will for your life, go and check with them about the decision you are considering.

If you have already lined up the other two lighthouses—you sensed God's inner nudge, and you think you have confirmed it with Scripture—find the godliest people you know and see if they agree with you. If they have the same Holy Spirit inside of them, they should bear witness to what God is saying. This is clearly what we find all through the Bible. In the book of *Acts*, for instance, at one point when God's people needed to make a major decision, they concluded, *It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us (Acts 15:28)*. They humbly sought God's will together, and because they all sensed the same thing, they concluded that God was in it. You and I would be wise to follow the same pattern.

I believe this is the point Jesus is making when He says that if two or three agree on anything, He will do it for them:

Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. For where two or three have

gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.
(Matthew 18:19-20)

Some people think that this is some sort of magic formula—just get two or three Christians together, and God will do whatever you want—a Mercedes, or a trip to Hawaii. No! This is actually saying that if two or three truly humble saints get together and seek God’s will on something, there is a very high probability that together they will be able to figure out God’s mind. So first you get the nudge, then you check the Scriptures, then you confirm it with God’s people. 1...2...3. Then bring that ship into dock.

I have found the above method—the three lighthouses—virtually foolproof in my 35 years of walking with God. As you grow older, you get better at figuring out God’s will, so I don’t have to check with others for absolutely every decision in life. But on the major things, I still check with my wife, then make a few phone calls—to a pastor friend in Colorado, then a godly older missionary in Chicago. Then I go to coffee with a couple of wise, godly people who live close by and ask, *What do you think about this?* If they all sense that the decision I am about to make is God’s will, I move forward with confidence.

AND FINALLY: RELAX, GOD LOVES YOU— PROVERBS 3:5-6

There is one last thing that needs to be said about discerning God’s will. After you have done your due diligence—humbled yourself, prayed, studied, consulted the godliest people you know—you will come to a conclusion (at least it will be the best conclusion you are able to make). At this point, it’s time to act—*talk to that friend, give that*

car away, take the job, go on the mission trip (or not), go to grad school (or not), get engaged ... or break it off. You checked all three lighthouses, so move.

Often, however, it's at precisely this point that the devil weasels in and starts to fill you with fear and doubt. *Maybe it's not God's will. Maybe you are making a huge mistake. Maybe the consequences will be disastrous.* This sort of second-guessing is enough to make some people freeze in their tracks. Don't do that! Their thought seems to be: *Not moving at all is better than possibly making a wrong move.* Personally, I believe that freezing in fear is virtually always a wrong move. This is Satan's last-ditch effort to keep you from blessing.

There is no need to fear. Even if you are wrong, you need to know that God appreciates your heart, your humility, and the effort you put into your decision making. If He needs to, He is more than willing and able to redirect you. To this day, I still pray something like this, *God, I am making my best "faith move" here. I believe I have discerned Your will, but if I am wrong, please redirect me.* He actually did redirect my life at a few crucial junctures when I was younger and didn't have my discernment as finely tuned.

Ultimately, we can rest in the promise found in *Proverbs 3:5-6*, which actually reads a little bit differently in the original Hebrew than most of us think it does. It tells us that if we "know" God, He will make sure to lead our lives, even when we don't quite have perfect clarity. It says,

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways, know Him, And He will make your paths straight.

I am convinced that if I am sincerely trying to walk obediently with God, even if I lack a little clarity at times, even if I make a little misstep, He has promised to get me where He wants me to be. I have learned to relax. He has given us a method for finding His will, but even deeper than that He has promised to fulfill His will in the lives of those walking in intimacy with Him, those who are really striving to *know Him*. Do your best to make a wise, godly decision, and then rest in the love of God.

THE ONE NECESSARY THING

In a real sense, this is the great objective of Christian discipleship. It is the way we fulfill our destiny as God's image-bearers. Jesus calls this *the one necessary thing—sitting at His feet, listening to His Word*. Figure out how to do this well, and you will be God's agent of change on earth.

The actual phrase *sitting at His feet, listening to His word* comes from the Gospel of Luke, in an account where two sisters were trying to please Jesus in very different ways (*Luke 10:38-42*). Martha, the older one, was running around like a chicken with its head cut off, doing anything and everything she could think of to make Jesus's stay at her house welcoming. Her younger sister, Mary, just sat quietly at Jesus's feet, hanging on every word that came from His lips as if her life depended on it.

Martha got frustrated at Mary for sitting around seemingly doing nothing and politely asked Jesus to tell Mary to basically *get off her can and help out* (my very rough paraphrase). But from Jesus's perspective, Mary was doing something. In fact, she was doing the most important thing any human being can do—she was *sitting at His feet*

listening to His word (Luke 10:39). Jesus then gave Martha a gentle rebuke to straighten her out.

Martha, Martha, you are anxious and bothered about many things, but only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the better thing, which will not be taken away from her. (Luke 10:41-42)

What was Mary doing? Instead of assuming that she knew what was best for God and everyone else, Mary wanted to really know the mind of Christ (the will of God). This is the one necessary thing in life, and it is worth infinitely more than all our busy activities.

This has always been what God has desired of His little image-bearers. This is why He gives us the Bible. This is also the thing the devil is trying so hard to oppose in our lives. Our success in life depends upon our ability to hear and follow the will of God. All through the Bible, God says this over and over again in different ways. He is not so excited about our religious do's and don'ts, our rituals, our chants, and candles, or our ornate temples. What He is really looking for is someone who will hear what He has to say and then do it.

Heaven is my throne, and earth is My footstool, where then is a house you could build for Me? ... For My hand made all these things. ... But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and lowly of heart, who trembles at My word. (Isaiah 66:1-2)

Very early in this book, we introduced a guy by the name of Jason. He came face to face with the biblical truth that Jesus is looking for people who truly surrender to Him as Lord. He isn't just interested in providing us with fire insurance; He wants us to surrender and obey. This is where

all of us have to begin. It is only when people like Jason (and all the rest of us) really surrender to God and then strive to hear His voice that our supernatural life begins.

BACK TO THE BEGINNING

We could say that our book has really come full circle—*it's all about hearing the voice of God*. We are saved so that we can hear God's voice and do His will (Chapter 1). His voice is made clearer and clearer as we get to know the Bible deeply (Chapter 2). We can then defeat sin—all those things opposed to God's will (Chapter 3). If we are hearing Him, we can pray rightly and move God's powerful hand (Chapter 4). We can also receive the power of the Holy Spirit so that we can supernaturally partner with God (Chapter 5). In addition, if we hear Him we will regularly defeat Satan (Chapter 6). You see, the whole operation really centers on hearing His voice, a.k.a. knowing His will.

Sometimes it doesn't take a lot of time and effort to determine God's will, but at other times the issue isn't so clear. God has given us His Spirit, His Word, and His people to help us work it out. The young disciple who gets into the habit of lining up their three lighthouses will find increasing joy, peace, and fruitfulness. They will be fulfilling their created purpose. They will be doing *the one necessary thing*, and the supernatural touch of God will be on their life.