

PRINCIPLES FOR DECISION MAKING: Living According to God's Will

Introduction

Decision Making and the Will of God is a BIG book. Nevertheless, in the twenty-five years since it was released by Multnomah Press, over 250,000 copies have been purchased. Reader response has been enthusiastic, and many have taken pains to express their appreciation. But when your own mother tells you that the book you wrote is too long, it's probably time for a shorter version.

We admit that *Decision Making and the Will of God* cannot be read in an evening. So we have put together this shorter version that can. As painful as it is, we have had to leave some things out. Like three parts of the four-part book. So, you will read nothing of "The Traditional View of Guidance" (Part 1) nor our critique of it (Part 2)--alas. We also had to omit the final section (Part 4) which applies biblical principles of decision making to major decisions such as: marriage, ministry, missions, vocation, giving, and issues where Christians differ.

What is left? The heart of the book--a biblical approach to understanding the will of God as it pertains to decision-making. This version is a condensation of those chapters (Part 3) which set forth "The Way of Wisdom." It is a "no frills" presentation of four principles which apply to all of life's choices, whether great or small. It contains the reply we give when we have thirty minutes to answer the question: "What does your book say, anyway?"

Actually, we've given quite a few of those half-hour introductions. So we know from experience that a summary presentation such as this can be a helpful way to introduce people to the concepts developed in detail in the book. What has surprised us has been the response of folks who have already read *Decision Making* prior to hearing the condensed version. That overview, they say, helps them to avoid missing the forest for the trees. And that's good. Because in the case of knowing God's will, it is a very important forest indeed.

To some readers, then, we present this booklet as an introduction to biblical principles of decision-making. To others, it will serve as a survey of terrain previously traversed. In either case, it is a labor of love, certain to warm a mother's heart.

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Principles for Decision Making

There is a very old, now classic, joke that goes like this:

Patient: Doctor, I can't seem to make up my mind about what I should do.

Psychiatrist: Have you always had trouble making decisions?

Patient: Well, yes and no.

At best, the joke is a grinner. But it touches a responsive chord in most of us because, on any given day, the guy on the couch could be yours truly. And yet we must decide. And how we decide is significant, for all of our choices shape our lives to some extent. Haddon Robinson expresses our sentiments well when he says: "We want to make right decisions, for we realize that the decisions we make turn around and make us. As we choose one end of the road we choose the other."

Everyone wants to make decisions that turn out well. But conscientious Christians have an additional, ultimate objective: "...we have as our ambition... to be pleasing to [the Lord]" (2 Corinthians 5:9).

The prerequisite for God-pleasing decisions is set forth by the Apostle Paul in Colossians 1:9-10: "...that you may be filled with the *knowledge of His will*. In all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects..." The principal task in decision making for the Christian is to learn what God wants him to do, and then do it.

So far so good. The obvious question is, how is the Christian to learn what God wants him to do as he is confronted with life's decisions?

"God Has Spoken"

Throughout history, the ways that God has communicated His will to men have varied. Before there was any Scripture, God revealed His will through direct revelation. Usually the message was received by a single individual who would pass along to others whatever content God would instruct. The means of revelation included visions, angels, theophanies (manifestations of God in human form), or simply the audible voice of God (see Genesis 28:12-16; 32:1-2. 24-30; 35:1).

As God's special revelation was committed to paper (Exodus 17:14; 24:4; 34:27-28), His people had two sources to know His will. They had the Book (Joshua 1:8) and the additional instruction that God gave by further direct revelation (Joshua 1:1-9).

Over a period of some 1500 years, God's will was written down (2 Peter 1: 19-21). Finally, after God had revealed Himself fully in the human person of His Son, Jesus Christ (John 1: 14, 18), the Book we call the Bible was completed (Revelation 22:18-20). Since God's special revelation culminated in His Son, believers in this age possess in Scripture the full disclosure of God's will until the Second Coming of that same Son.

Accordingly, God has provided for us all that we need in order to make decisions that are pleasing to Him! (2 Peter 1:3). The purpose of this presentation is to summarize the teaching of God's Word on how we can make decisions according to God's will.

The Principle of Obedience

When the Bible speaks of God's will, it does so in one of two senses. The first of these we will call the "moral" will of God. It may be defined *as the commands and principles which God has revealed in the Bible to teach how people ought to believe and live.*

For example, Paul wrote that even unbelieving Jews " know [God's] will, and approve the things that are essential, being Instructed out of the Law..." (Romans 2:18). He was saying that since they study the Scripture, they understand God's moral will. Therefore, they know right from wrong, truth from error. Their fault is not ignorance, but disobedience.

Accordingly, the Principle of Obedience may be stated: *Where God commands, we must obey.* The ramifications of this principle are more fully recognized when four crucial characteristics of God's moral will are brought into focus.

1. The moral will of God is *fully revealed in the Bible.* One hundred per cent of what God wants us to know about believing and living to please Him He has already told us. The Bible is our final and complete authority for faith and practice (2 Timothy 3:16-17; Hebrews 1: 1-2).
2. The moral will of God is *the expression of the character of God* (Romans 7:12). Because God's moral will reflects His character, it helps to produce that same character in the life of the one who obeys it (Luke 6.35-36) and leads to fullness of life (Psalm 19:7-11).
3. The moral will of God *touches every aspect and moment of life.* That is true because God's will encompasses more than overt behavior. For God is not concerned simply with *what* we do; He cares equally about *why* we do what we do, as well as *how* we do it. To put it differently, God's moral will prescribes the believer's *goals and attitudes*, as well as his *actions*. Furthermore, it shapes his *perspective* of reality which serves as the context in which his decisions are made.

This point is so important that it merits further consideration. *Goals*, by their nature, are more general than behavioral commands. The Christian's goals should reflect God's stated purposes for his life. Here are a few of the major ones:

- to glorify God in all things (1 Corinthians 10:31);
- to minister to others (Romans 14:19);
- to fulfill God-given responsibilities (1 Peter 4: 10-11);
- to evangelize lost people (Matthew 28:19-20; 2 Peter 3:9);
- to do good works (Titus 3:8);
- to produce spiritual fruit (Colossians 1: 10).

Our decisions should not only conform to God-given goals, they should reflect right attitudes. A partial listing of God's will for this area of our lives would include: love (Mark 12:28-31), reliance (Proverbs 3:5-6), humility (Philippians 2:5-8), gratitude (Colossians 3:17), integrity (Colossians 3:22), diligence (Colossians 3:23), eagerness (1 Peter 5:2), generosity (1 Timothy 6:17-19), courage (John 16:33), submission (Ephesians 5:21), contentment (Hebrews 13:5), and joy (James 1:2).

Of course God *is* concerned about our behavior, for the end does not justify just any means. With proper goals in view, and right attitudes at heart, our actions must be lawful (i.e., they must not be outside of the revealed will of God. Ephesians 5:1-14). and they must be wise (i.e., the believer may not make a decision he knows to be foolish, Ephesians 5:15-17, Luke 14:28-32).

Since no decision is made in a vacuum, the degree to which we pursue godly goals with righteous attitudes and wise actions will be largely determined by our perspective on life. In particular, the Christian whose world-view is shaped by Scripture will have a much different sense of self-identity. Knowing that we are loved by God with a love which we did nothing to earn (and which, therefore, we can do nothing to forfeit, Romans 8:31-39), we will face life with a deep sense of security. Being aware that God has specifically equipped us to participate meaningfully in the outworking of the eternal purposes of God (Ephesians 2:10; 1 Peter 4:10-11), we have a clear grasp of our personal worth. A strong sense of security and significance in Christ frees the Christians from self-promoting motivations in decision making, releasing us to focus more on the needs of others (Philippians 2:1-5).

Other passages would remind believers that they are on assignment for God in enemy territory (Ephesians 6:12), that physical life on this earth is preparatory for 'real life' in heaven, that what we invest for God now will be repaid with interest later (Matthew 6:19-21; Romans 8:18; 2 Corinthians 4:17). And we will recognize that the unseen forces and resources of heaven are involved on our behalf as we seek to carry out God's will on earth (Hebrews 1:14; 11:1, 2 Kings 6:16-17).

It is God's moral will that we resist having our viewpoint molded by the world (Romans 12:2). Instead, we are to "walk by faith" (2 Corinthians 5:7) seeing our lives, and therefore our decisions, through the "glasses" of God's Word.

To sum up: It is because God's moral will prescribes our goals, attitudes, actions, and perspective that it touches every aspect and moment of life.

4. Since the moral will of God contains His complete revelation for faith and life, expresses God's own character, and touches every aspect and moment of life, it is fully able to equip believers for every good work. "All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable 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).

Our response to such abundant guidance from God should be obvious. First, we need to learn what God has said (Joshua 1:8).

Second, we need to do what God has said (John 13:17). As one observes the decision-making practices of people, one is forced to the sobering conclusion that the greatest impediments to making good decisions are ignorance of God's Word and stubborn resistance to God's will (Proverbs 16:25; Acts 7:51).

The Principle of Freedom

It is obvious to the student of the Bible that God's moral will does not specifically address every decision we make. That would be impossible. For not only are there too many decisions to prescribe, there are choices that are required in our modern setting that were unknown in the biblical world-which car to buy, what television program to watch, etc. It is those kinds of decisions that are governed by the next two principles of decision making.

The Principle of Freedom may be expressed as follows: *Where there is no command, God gives us freedom (and responsibility) to choose.*

This principle asserts three things: 1) There are some decisions which have multiple options, any number of which may be acceptable to God; 2) the final decision made must not be in violation of God's moral will (in purpose, attitude, or execution); and 3) God will not dictate to the believer what he must do-the individual is free to make the decision.

(It should be noted in passing that God certainly could reveal His will for a particular decision not directly addressed in Scripture. He has done that in the past, as Scripture records, and His ability to do so now remains unchanged. So if His purposes warranted, God could directly communicate specific guidance today. If He were to do so, it could be expected that the revelation would be crystal clear-and that the means would be on the order of an angelic visit, super-natural vision, or audible voice. However, what we are about to see is that biblical decision making does not anticipate such divine intervention. True, it does not rule it out. It just assumes that the Word we already have is adequate for all our decisions. And if it is not enough in some situations, it is up to God to provide what we need.)

The principle of freedom of choice within revealed limits was clearly part of the Creator's design from the very beginning. The parable which follows, paraphrased from Genesis 2, highlights the reality of freedom in God's first specific commandment to man.

"THE FIRST SUPPER"

(with apologies to Moses ben Amram¹)

Adam was hungry. He had had a long, challenging day naming animals. His afternoon nap had been refreshing, and his post-siesta introduction to Eve was exhilarating, to say the least. But as the sun began to set on their first day, Adam discovered that he had worked up an appetite.

"I think we should eat," he said to Eve. "Let's call the evening meal 'supper.'"

"Oh, you're so decisive, Adam," Eve said. "I like that in a man. I guess all the excitement of being created has made me hungry, too."

As they discussed how they should proceed, they decided that Adam would gather fruit from the garden, and Eve would prepare it for their meal. Adam set about his task and soon returned with a basket full of ripe fruit. He gave it to Eve and went to soak his feet in the soothing current of the Pishon River until supper was ready. He had been reviewing the animals' names for about five minutes when he heard his wife's troubled voice.

"Adam, could you help me for a moment?"

"What seems to be the problem, dear?"

"I'm not sure which of these lovely fruits I should prepare for supper. I've prayed for guidance from the Lord, but I'm not really sure what He wants me to do. I certainly don't want to miss His will on my very first decision. Would you go to the Lord and ask Him what I should do about supper?"

Adam's hunger was intensifying, but he understood Eve's dilemma. So he left her to go speak with the Lord. Shortly, he returned. He appeared perplexed.

"Well?" Eve said.

"He didn't really answer your question."

"What do you mean? Didn't He say anything?"

"Not much. He just repeated what He said earlier today during the garden tour: 'From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.' I assure you, Eve, I steered clear of the forbidden tree."

"I appreciate that, but that doesn't solve my problem," Eve said. "What fruit should I prepare for tonight?"

From the rumbling in his stomach, Adam discovered that lions and tigers were not the only things that growl. So he said, "I've never seen such crisp, juicy apples. I feel a sense of peace about them. Why don't you prepare them for supper?"

"All right, Adam. I guess you've had more experience at making decisions than I have. I appreciate your leadership. I'll call you when supper's ready."

Adam was only halfway back to the river when he heard Eve's call. He jogged back to the clearing where she was working, but his anticipation evaporated when he saw her face. "More problems?" he asked.

"Adam, I just can't decide how I should fix these apples. I could slice them, dice them, mash them, bake them in a pie, a cobbler, fritters, or dumplings. I really want to be your helper, but I also want to be certain of the Lord's will on this decision. Would you be a dear and go just one more time to the Lord with my problem?"

Adam was not keen on bothering the Lord again, but after Eve said some very nice things about him, he agreed to go. When he returned, he said, "I got the same answer as before: 'From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.'"

Adam and Eve were both silent for a moment. Then with light in his eye, Adam said, "You know, Eve, the Lord made that statement as though it fully answered my question. I'm sure He could have told us what to eat and how to eat it; but I think He's given us freedom to make those decisions. It was the same way with the animals today. He told me to name the animals, but He didn't whisper any names in my ear. Assigning those names was my responsibility."

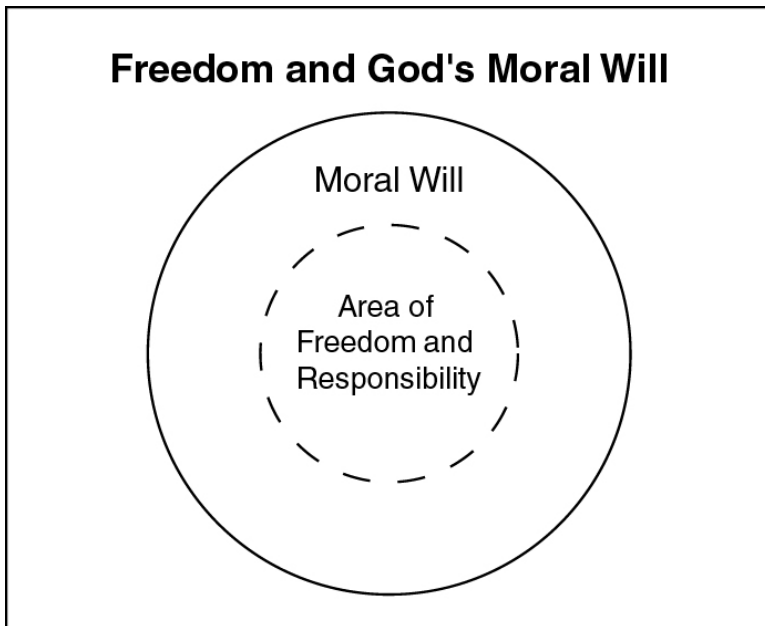
Eve was incredulous. "Do you mean that we could have any of these fruits for supper?" Eve said. "Are you telling me that I can't miss God's will in this decision?"

"The only way you could do that is to pick some fruit from the forbidden tree. But none of these fruits are from that tree. Why, I suppose we are free to eat a little from each one of them." Adam snapped his fingers and exclaimed, "Say, that's a great idea! Let's have fruit salad for supper!"

And so they did.

¹Assuming the Mosaic authorship of Genesis, he would have been the writer of the original narrative.

When we speak of freedom within the moral will of God, our terminology suggests a diagram. God's moral will can be represented by a circle. Whatever is commanded by God lies within the circle; whatever is forbidden by God is outside that perimeter. Within the larger circle of God's moral will is a smaller circle signifying an area of freedom where God has given no command.



The chart: Freedom and God's Moral Will
 Moral Will
 Area of Freedom

Now, in the first command quoted above, the tree of knowledge of good and evil would be outside of the circle of God's will and thus, forbidden. The rest of the trees of Eden would not only be inside the larger circle, they would be within the area of freedom.

This same principle is taught in the New Testament as well. For the sake of brevity, we will simply cite three passages that teach freedom of choice: dinner invitations from unbelievers, giving to the church, and marriage partners.

'If one of the unbelievers invites you, and you wish to go, eat anything that is set before you, without asking questions for conscience' sake' (1 Corinthians 10:27).

'Let each one [give] just as he has purposed in his heart; not grudgingly or under compulsion; for God loves a cheerful giver' (2 Corinthians 9:7).

'A wife is bound as long as her husband lives, but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes. only in the Lord' (1 Corinthians 7:39).

In each of these cases, there is a clear line marking off the circle of God's moral will. The reality of an area of freedom is equally clear in each case. In the last passage, for instance, the moral will of God forbids marriage of a Christian to a non-Christian. But the choice of whether to marry and which particular believer to marry falls within the area of freedom. It is up to the individuals involved to make the decision and follow through on the commitment with the Spirit's strength.

The Principle of Wisdom

The other side of the coin is that freedom entails responsibility. If God is not going to dictate every choice we make, then believers are not only free to choose, we are required to choose. That raises a critical question: On what basis is the Christian to make his decisions in freedom areas?

That basis, in a word, is wisdom. And the Principle of Wisdom is: *Where there is no command, God gives us wisdom to choose.*

In noncommanded decisions, the goal of the believer is to make wise decisions on the basis of spiritual advantage. In this principle, some definitions are important.

'Spiritual' indicates that the ends in view, as well as the means to those ends, are governed by the moral will of God.

"Advantage" means what works best to get the job done-within God's moral will, of course.

And 'wisdom' is accurately defined as 'the power to see, and the inclination to choose, the best and highest goal, together with the surest means of attaining it. " Wisdom is the ability to recognize what is spiritually profitable in a given situation.

The standard of wisdom is proven by four lines of support.

First, The Old Testament teaches wise decision making by its Wisdom Books and examples of wise men-"Wisdom has the advantage of giving success" (Ecclesiastes 10:10).

Moses was humble, and thus teachable. This was important because he had a blind spot Jethro was God's delivery vehicle. Jethro watched Moses judge the people all day and concluded that what Moses was doing was not good. He would wear out himself and all the people. It was too much for Moses alone. Jethro gave wisdom to use teaching and a chain of command to distribute the labor (Exodus 18:13-23). Righteous Moses became wise Moses.

David was on the run when his son Absalom took over Jerusalem. He organized his army of those who stayed true. With courage he announced that he would go out to fight. With wisdom the people said, "No, you won't". They reasoned that David as the true king, was their reason for fighting. He was worth ten thousand soldiers and his life should not be risked (2 Samuel 18:3). David agreed, "Whatever seems best to you I will do" (2 Samuel 18:4). Brave David became wise David.

Ecclesiastes 10:10 argues that wisdom gives success and its legal brief is hard to defeat. "If the ax is dull, and a man does not sharpen its edge, he must exert more strength. Wisdom has the advantage of success."

The second line of defense for wisdom comes from Jesus. Jesus commanded His servants to be wise - "Be shrewd as serpents" (Matthew 10:16).

The parables of Jesus often depend upon wisdom for their punch to hit the nail. The Parable of "Two Foundations" (Matthew 7:24-27) depends upon the wisdom of laying a foundation on the rock rather than sand for a secure house. The same wisdom must be used when building for eternity. Christ is the only foundation worthy of one's destiny.

When sending out His disciples he commanded them to obey the moral will of God and while obeying it, to be as wise as possible. The treacherous life of Christ's servant made His follow "a sheep in the midst of wolves." In light of the bad neighborhood of the world, He commanded them to "Be as shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16).

The third line of defense of the standard of wisdom is the example of the apostles. The apostles modeled wisdom in their decision making - "We thought it best" (1 Thessalonians 3:1).

It is fruitful, when reflecting on this question, to observe the decision-making practices of the apostles as well as their explanations for the reasons behind their actions. For instance, some weeks after Paul and his companions were forced to leave the newly founded church at Thessalonica, they agreed on a plan. It is explained in 1 Thessalonians 3:1-2, whereby the fledgling church could receive further help: 'Therefore when we could endure it no longer, we thought it best to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy ? to strengthen and encourage you as to your faith.'

How was their decision made? 'We thought it best.'

As one reads of other apostolic decisions in the New Testament, one encounters similar terminology: 'I thought it necessary' (Philippians 2:25-26); 'if it is fitting' (1 Corinthians 16:3-4); 'it is not desirable' (Acts 6:2-4); 'I have decided' (Titus 3:12).

When it came to instruction in decision making, the apostles' exhortations were consistent with their practice. Some choices were commanded on grounds of being 'good,' while others were 'better' (1 Corinthians 7:1, 9, 26, 38).

All of the decisions referred to have two things in common: 1) since they were not determined by God's moral will they each qualified as a matter of freedom, and 2) the terms utilized in the explanations ('good,' 'better,' 'best,' 'fitting,' etc.) imply some standard.

The fourth argument for wisdom as the basis of decision making is the apostolic command. The importance of wisdom in decision making is emphasized by Paul in Ephesians 5:15-16: 'Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men, but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil.'

And where does one find the kind of wisdom necessary for decision-making? Ultimately, of course, '...the LORD gives wisdom, From His mouth come knowledge and understanding' (Proverbs 2:6). For 'wise' is what God is in His essence (Job 9:4, 12:13). In Him alone can wisdom be found in its fullness (Romans 11:33; 16:27).

But godly wisdom is not imparted to just anyone. It is granted only to those who value it enough to pursue it.

'If you seek [wisdom] as silver,
And search for her as for hidden treasures;
Then you will discern the fear of the LORD,
And discover the knowledge of God' (Proverbs 2:4-5; see 8:17).

If one is going to find 'hidden treasure,' it is important to know where to look. For God's wisdom is mediated through a number of sources. The most obvious of these sources is the Bible itself. For in its pages, God has spoken. His gift of wisdom has, in large measure, been given (Psalm 119:97-100). Even though not all of decisions are determined by God's moral will they are all *regulated* by it.

Still, God in His grace has provided other valuable and legitimate sources of wisdom. The principal ones include *outside research* (Luke 14:28-32), *wise counselors* (Proverbs 15:22) and the lessons of life itself (Hebrews 5:12-14)

Even though the search for wisdom is objective, it is not impersonal. For God is involved, throughout the process in granting wisdom those who ask in faith (James 1:5-6) and who seek the attitudes of reverence, humility, teachableness, diligence, and uprightness (Proverbs 2:4-7, 9:9-10; 15:31-33).

The Principle of Humble Trust

Most of the biblical teaching concerning decision making relates the believer's choices to the moral will of God. God's moral will not only dictates what men must and must not do, but it also defines the sphere within which Christians have freedom and responsibility of choice. And it explains how that freedom and responsibility are to be exercised according to wisdom.

There is, however, another aspect of God's will that is found in the Bible and affects our decisions. We will call this category God's 'sovereign' will. Ephesians 1:11, for example, uses the term in this sense when it says that God "...works all things after the counsel of His will." God's sovereign will may be defined as God's secret plan that determines everything that happens in the universe.

To see how God's sovereign will affects our decisions, there are at least four things we need to understand about it.

1. God's sovereign will is certain. It will be fulfilled. It will not be frustrated by men, angels, or anything else (Daniel 4:35). To Paul's challenging question: 'Who resists His will?' (Romans 9:19), we are humbly compelled to agree, 'No one!' (Romans 9:6-29).
2. God's sovereign will is detailed. It is the ultimate determiner of all things (Ephesians 1:11), including which of our plans finds fulfillment (James 4:13-15).
3. God's sovereign will is hidden except when revealed by prophecy. Man can only learn what it is after it happens (Deuteronomy 29:29). The only exceptions to this are statements of prophecy in which events are foretold (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18), and explanations of the destinies of the saved (John 3:16) and the lost (John 3:36).
4. God's sovereign will is perfect. It is perfect in the sense that it will ultimately lead to God's greatest glory. There never was another plan (Ephesians 1:4). Though sin is contrary to God's moral will, its presence is permitted in God's plan partly because His conquest of it reveals His grace and power. God will be glorified for His holiness, for His defeat of Satan, for His righteous judgment, and for His grace to redeemed sinners (Revelation 5, see also John 12:32-33; Romans 5:20, 8:28-30; 11:15, 30-33).

Without a doubt, the teaching concerning God's sovereign will confronts us with one of the greatest mysteries in the Bible. For Scripture is equally emphatic that while God ultimately determines all things, He does so without being the author of sin (James 1:13), without violating the will of man (Luke 22:22), and without destroying the reality of decision making (Acts 2:23; 4:27-28).

Theologians have not unraveled this mystery (Romans 9:14-21), and God has not yet completely explained the outworking of divine sovereignty and human responsibility (see Habakkuk 1-3). But both are asserted to be true, often in the same verse (Luke 22:22).

The equal truth of these twin realities is in no place more clearly seen than in the provision of our salvation. For the most wicked act ever committed--the willful murder of God's Son, Israel's Messiah--actually accomplished the central requirement in God's glorious plan of redemption! Accordingly, Peter declared to the men of Israel, "this Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death" (Acts 2:23; see 4:27-28).

While it is always appropriate to seek full understanding of God's revelation, there are limits to the ability of finite minds to comprehend the infinite God. Those who, through the study of God's Word, gain humble appreciation for the wonder of God's sovereign will, find themselves echoing in their hearts the doxology of the apostle Paul: "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!" (Romans 11:33).

It remains for us to see how God's sovereign will relates to our decision-making. Perhaps the clearest biblical commentary is provided by James 4:13-16:

Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow, we shall go to such and such a city, and spend a year there and engage in business and make a profit. Yet you do not know what your life will be like tomorrow. You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away. Instead, you ought to say, 'if the Lord wills, we will live and also do this or that.' But as it is, you boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil.

This paragraph is essentially a rebuke of arrogant, self-sufficient planning which does not acknowledge God or His sovereignty. The proud merchants are guilty of making two presumptions: 1) that they will live beyond tomorrow; and 2) that they control their own destinies. "All such boasting is evil."

Significantly, James does not condemn the practice of planning. His corrective does not call for a repeal of their plans, but for a proper recognition of God's overruling purposes "If the Lord wills . . ." (4:15). The whole paragraph is apparently an illustration of the principle stated in verse 6: "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble."

In short, the proper response to the sovereign will of God is what we are calling the Principle of Humble Trust: *When we have chosen what is moral and wise, we must trust the sovereign God to work all the details together for good.* In all decisions, the believer should humbly accept, in advance, the outworking of God's sovereign will as it touches each decision. (See Acts 18:21; 19:21; 20:16; 1 Corinthians 4:19; 16:5-7.)

Since the sovereign will of God cannot be known in advance (it is secret), it has no direct bearing on the activity of decision-making. On the other hand, since the sovereign will of God ultimately determines whether and/or when our plans are accomplished, its reality should govern our *attitude* in decision making. Humble planning is the proper response to the sovereign will of God. Then, we trust in Him to work all things together for good.

A Case History: Paul's Plans to Visit Rome

What James advocated, Paul practiced. In Romans 1:8-13 and 15:20-29. Paul explained the travel plans by which he hoped to visit Rome. Careful study of these verses reveals the steps in Paul's decision-making process.

1. PURPOSES: Paul adopted spiritual goals that were based on God's moral will (1:11-13; 15:20).
2. PRIORITIES: Since he did not know how much time he had, he arranged his goals into wise priorities, determining what should be done first, second, third, etc. (15:23-28).
3. PLANS: Next, he devised plans that gave him a strategy for accomplishing his purposes (1:13; 15:23-28).
4. PRAYER: Through prayer, he submitted himself and his plans to the sovereign will of God (1:8-10).
5. PERSEVERANCE: When providentially hindered from accomplishing his plans, he assumed that the delay was God's sovereign will. This conviction freed him from discouragement. Since his plans were sound, the only thing he adjusted was the timetable (1:10, 13; 15:22-24).
6. PRESENTATION: Paul explained his decisions on the basis of God's moral will and his own personal application of wisdom (1:8-13; 15:20-29).

The postscript to this discussion is that Paul did eventually make it to Jerusalem, Rome, and possibly even Spain--in that order. He did have to modify his plans somewhat along the way, for the two-year stopover in the Caesarean jail

and the shipwreck at Malta had not been included in Paul's original projections. Nor did Paul just visit the Romans 'in passing.' His confinement under house arrest delayed his plans for westward advancement for at least two years.

On the plus side, Paul's transportation from Palestine to Rome was provided courtesy of Caesar, who also furnished a military escort for his protection. And the period of imprisonment was used by Paul to pen a major portion of what was to become the New Testament.

Because he responded properly to God's guidance in its various forms, Paul became a model of one who engaged in long-range planning on the one hand, and snatched up present opportunities on the other. Interruptions became occasions for personal growth and ministry. It is just such a balance that believers today should seek to maintain.

And in Conclusion

At the beginning of this presentation, we established that the goal of the Christian is to make decisions that are pleasing to God. What we have seen is that His Word establishes four principles for decision making according to God's will.

1. The Principle of OBEDIENCE: Where God commands, we must obey.
2. The Principle of FREEDOM: Where there is no command, God gives us freedom (and responsibility) to choose
3. The Principle of WISDOM: Where there is no command, God gives us wisdom to choose.
4. The Principle of HUMBLE TRUST: When we have chosen what is moral and wise, we must trust the sovereign God to work all the details together for good.

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Principles for Decision Making

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Unless otherwise identified all Scripture references are from the New American Standard Bible, The Lockman Foundation 1960,1962,1963,1971,1972,1973,1975,1977,1995.