



Knowing and Doing the Will of God

Reasons for a study on knowing and doing the will of God.

First, I have been a believer for many years and teaching the Bible in various ways for the great majority of those years. Of all the questions that I have been asked across my Christin experience the **number one question**, **although it takes many forms** is, what is the will of God in a particular area of my life? This question often takes many forms:

- Does God desire for me to marry this person?
- Does God desire for me to take this particular job?
- Does God desire for me to attend this particular church?
- Does God desire for me to live in this particular area?
- Does God desire for me to buy this particular home?
- As well as many more.

Second, I imagine most believers, if asked whether they desire to do God's will, would answer emphatically, Yes! **But if asked** whether they are currently living out God's will, many might respond with uncertainty—"I think so," "I hope so," or simply "I'm not sure."

Yet Scripture is clear: God earnestly desires that we walk in His will through the power of His Spirit. In fact, knowing and doing God's will should be the chief aim of our lives!

Third, this issue is really a fundamental of the Christian faith. This is not an optional issue. God desires it for our lives and as believers we should desire it, so understanding how we do it is critically important.

With that in mind, I'd like to explore the topic of God's will under four distinct headings:

- First, God's Sovereign Will, Perfect Will, or Secret Will
- Second, God's Permissive Will
- Third, God's Revealed Will, Will of Precept, or Will of Command
- Finally, God's Unique Desires for Our Life

I. God's Sovereign Will

First, God's sovereign will, sometimes called His secret will. This refers to God's ultimate plan—what He has determined will happen, which unfolds exactly as He intends and can only be known to us insofar as He chooses to reveal it.

God's sovereign will is found all over the scriptures, consider the psalmist's words:

"Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases." (Psalm 115:3 ESV)

That is a sovereign God, who answers to no one and does not need to explain Himself.

And from the testimony of a humbled King Nebuchadnezzar:

"He (God) does according to His will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; none can stay His hand or say to Him, 'What have you done?'" (Daniel 4:35 ESV)

Consider what God through the prophet Isaiah declares about his own unmatched authority: "My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose." (Isaiah 46:10 ESV)

The sovereignty of God extends even to human hearts and plans:

"The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He will." (Proverbs 21:1 ESV)

"Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand." (Proverbs 19:21 ESV)

And another reminder:

"Whatever the Lord pleases, He does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps." (Psalm 135:6 ESV)

Other verses echoing this important truth include (Ps 103:19, Rom 8:28–30, Jer 51:29, Job 42:2, and Gen 50:20). All repeat and reinforce one truth: **God's sovereign will is unchangeable, purposeful, and perfectly orchestrated.**

Although this aspect of God's will is not our main focus today, it sets the stage. It reminds us of the immense power and wisdom of the One we serve—and gives us confidence that His plans will never fail.

II. God's Permissive Will

The second will of God we will look at is similar to the first, but slightly different, and I want you to see it. Theologians call this the **permissive will of God**. These are not the things that God ordains and intends to accomplish (His sovereign will) that we looked at a moment ago. These are things that God allows, even if the event itself is **displeasing to him** and **goes against his revealed will**, which we will talk about next.

This is the **most challenging** of all of God's will and is the area that is often used as supposed evidence that God does not exist. We have all heard something similar to this; **if God was truly all loving and all powerful, he would have never allowed this (particular thing) to happen.**

So, although not our focus, it is important that we have a degree of understanding about the permissive will of God.

To understand God's permissive will, we must first acknowledge that we live in a fallen world. Suffering, in all its forms, is a consequence of the fall. Sin has **devastated lives** and **fractured creation**, **leaving us surrounded by brokenness**. This **reality can feel overwhelming and even hopeless at times**.

Yet, under the umbrella of God's permissive will, we are reminded that God allows suffering—not arbitrarily, but to fulfill His purposes, reveal His glory, and refine His people. As one author insightfully put it:

"Trials sanctify us, conform us to Christ's image (James 1:2–4, ESV), and magnify God's strength, which is perfected in our weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9, ESV). God's reasons for allowing suffering can be mysterious, but ultimately, it's part of His eternal plan for His glory and our good."

Just as with His sovereign will, we can **only know God's permissive will to the extent that He reveals** it. Still, Scripture offers us many examples of God's permissive will.

1. Israel's Demand for a King (1 Samuel 8)

In 1 Samuel 8, Israel demands a king to be like the surrounding nations—an act that reveals their lack of trust in Yahweh. Samuel is distressed and prays to the Lord. God responds:

"Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them." (1 Samuel 8:7, ESV)

God instructs Samuel to warn the people of the consequences of their request (vv. 10–18), including the burdens of monarchy and their eventual cry for relief that would go unanswered. Despite the warning, the people persist in demanding a king like the surrounding nations. God then says to Samuel:

"Obey their voice and make them a king." (1 Samuel 8:22a, ESV)

Here, God permits their request—not because it aligns with His revealed will, but to let them experience the consequences of their choice. This is a clear example of God's permissive will in action.

2. The Prodigal Son: Another Picture of God's Permissive Will

Another well-known example of God's permissive will is found in the parable of the prodigal son. This story, recorded in Luke 15, offers a profound glimpse into both the permissive will and the love of God, wrapped in timeless truths.

In the parable, the younger son approaches his wealthy and regal father with a shocking request: "Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me." (Luke 15:12, ESV)

This request was deeply offensive—essentially saying, "I wish you were dead. Just give me what's mine now." It was likely not the father's will to divide his estate prematurely, and we can imagine he knew it wasn't wise to entrust such wealth to an immature son. Yet, the text tells us:

"And he divided his property between them." (Luke 15:12b, ESV)

The father does what we would not expect. **He grants the request**—not because it was his desire, but because it was the desire of his son. This is a clear example of **God's permissive will**: allowing a choice that is not ideal, in order to let the consequences unfold and ultimately lead to **growth and redemption**.

We know how the story continues. The son squanders his inheritance, hits rock bottom, and eventually returns home in repentance. While this parable also beautifully illustrates God's love and forgiveness, our focus here is on how it reflects His permissive will. Still, it's hard not to pause and be grateful for the depth of God's love.

3. Joseph: God's Permissive and Sovereign Will Intertwined

Another powerful example of God's permissive will is the story of Joseph, one of Jacob's youngest sons. In Genesis 37:18–21, Joseph's brothers conspire to kill him. However, instead of murder, they decide to sell him into slavery—believing this would put an end to his prophetic dreams and keep their hands clean of his blood.

God permitted their sinful actions, but He did not allow them to take Joseph's life. Why? Because He had a greater plan. Joseph was destined to become a key figure in preserving the nation of Israel.

Years later, after Joseph had risen to power in Egypt and saved his family, his brothers feared retribution. They fabricated a message from their late father, asking Joseph to forgive them. Joseph's response is one of the most powerful affirmations of God's providence in the entire Bible:

"As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today." (Genesis 50:20, ESV)

Here we see God's permissive will—allowing the betrayal—woven seamlessly with His sovereign will, which brought about redemption, provision, and the fulfillment of His promises.

4. Other Biblical Examples of God's Permissive Will

Scripture contains many other instances of God's permissive will. While we won't explore them in depth here, they include:

- Balaam (Numbers 22): God permits Balaam to go, but not without clear warnings.
- Hezekiah's request (2 Kings 20): God grants Hezekiah's plea for extended life, though it leads to unintended consequences.
- Lot's decision (Genesis 13): Lot chooses to settle near Sodom, a choice that brings significant trouble.
- Judas Iscariot (multiple references): God permits Judas to betray Jesus, yet this act fulfills prophecy and leads to the ultimate act of redemption.

While this can be a challenging aspect of God's will, we must trust Him—even when we encounter

pain, suffering, and unforeseen consequences.		

III. God's Revealed Will

We have talked about **God's sovereign will** and his **permissive will**, now we come to the third area where we will focus a great deal of our time, what theologians might describe as **God's revealed will**.

As the title implies, in this case **God is openly revealing** his will to individuals, thus it is not secret, but it can only be known so far as God reveals it.

As you reflect on this, it's important to understand that while a person can choose to disobey God's revealed will—falling under His permissive will and potentially facing various consequences—they cannot override God's sovereign will.

This aspect of God's will is made known to us through His Word—the Bible. In Scripture, God clearly communicates His precepts, both in terms of what **He desires us to do and what He commands us to avoid**. The prophet Micah summarizes this beautifully:

"He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8, ESV)

This is a beautiful synopsis of God's revealed will, at least a portion of it.

The Bible is the primary source of God's revealed will. Sometimes it expresses His will negatively—warning us against certain behaviors, much like a parent instructs a child not to touch a hot stove. Other times, it speaks positively, showing us what God expects and desires for our lives.

This is important for God's revealed will is not determined by chance, luck, accident, or some type of mystical experience. It is known through hearing the words of God from the Book of God's words.

With that foundation, let's explore a seven key areas of God's revealed will. This list is not exhaustive, but it offers a solid starting point for anyone seeking to know and do the will of God.

1. God's Will is for our Salvation

One of the clearest expressions of God's revealed will is His desire for **all people to be saved**. In his first letter to Timothy, Paul writes:

"First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (1 Timothy 2:1–4, ESV)

Here Paul tells his protégé Timothy that God's desire is for all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth.

Peter echoes this in his second epistle:

"The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." (2 Peter 3:9, ESV)

Though this verse is set within a discussion of the Day of the Lord and the judgment of God, the principle remains: God does not desire anyone to perish, but for all to repent.

The **prophet Ezekiel** also conveys this truth with urgency and compassion:

11 Say to them, As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel? (Eze 33:11, ESV).

Here is God's desire for each of us, that we would repent of our sins and place faith in Jesus Christ to save us from God's wrath, rightly due to each of us because of our sins!

Now, let me say something before we go to the next point. God's has nothing else for you if you reject him here. It matters not what you do if you reject him at this point. John said it this way:

"36 Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him." (Joh 3:36, ESV).

2. God's will is for our Sanctification:

First, this is actually number three in my list, but because of the pervasiveness of sexual sin in our culture and because sexual sin can derail our walk with Christ, I have moved it up to # two.

As Paul is bringing to a close his first letter to the church in Thessalonica, he writes this:

"4:1 Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and

more. 2 For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. 3 For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; 4 that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, 5 not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God..." (II Thessalonians 4:1-5a, ESV).

Here we see God's will is for us to be sanctified (set apart) is first stated in the positive, and then explained in the negative. Second, God's will for each of us is that we abstain from sexual immorality.

The Greek word here translated "sexual immorality" is the Greek word $\pi o \rho v \epsilon i \alpha$ (por-ni'-ah). It is where we get the English word pornography or pornographic, but it means much more than that. This word encapsulates all forms of sexual defilement including, illicit sexual intercourse, adultery, homosexuality, lesbianism, etc.

John MacArthur said this in his sermon on the will of God: "Sometimes a couple comes in, and they want marital counseling. Typically, the first question we ask is, "Are you having a sexual relationship? Because if you are, how would you ever know whether God wanted you to marry each other? How would you know the part of God's will He hasn't revealed when you're not even obeying the part He has? God's under no obligation to show you His will on a personal level when you won't obey the will that He's revealed on the pages of His Word."

Hear Paul's word to the church in Colossae about this matter:

"Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all. Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." (Col 3:5-14 ESV)

Others verses about God's will being our sanctification include (I Thes 4:4; I The 5:23; Rom 6:22; Rom 1:29; ICor 6:9-11; I Cor 6:15, etc).

Now I want to get dead level honest and serious with us? How in the world can we expect for God to reveal to us something that he has not previously revealed in his Word, when we are not obeying the things, he has revealed in his Word?

3. God's will is for us to be filled with His Spirit:

Now this should actually be **number two**, but due to the open carnality of the culture we live in and how in negatively impacts our own thinking, I chose to cover God's will in sanctification as number 2. Because to be blunt level honest, **you are not filled with the Spirit if you are caught in sexual sins.**

We are not "filled with the Spirit" if we are using pornography or in the midst of an illicit relationship.

But, God's will is that his children would be filled with the Holy Spirit.

This requires a little background to make sure we are on the same page.

- A) We are given the Holy Spirit when we are saved. "In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory." (Eph 1:13-14 ESV)
- B) But we are commanded to be continually filled with the Holy Spirit. We will look at this command in detail in a second.

 "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit," (Eph 5:18 ESV)
- C) If we do not have the Holy Spirit we are not saved "You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him." (Ro 8:9 ESV)
- D) Being filled with the Holy Spirit does not mean we will speak in tongues. Speaking in tongues is a spiritual gift that is given to some, but not all.

 "4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; 5 and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; 6 and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. 7 To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. 8 For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, 10 to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. 11 All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills." (I Cor 12:4-11, ESV).
- E) A person can be saved, but not filled with the Spirit or not walking in the Spirit (synonymw) during a particular period in their life.

That's the background, now let's unpack the point. In Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus he says: "18 And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, 19 addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, 20 giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, 21 submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ." (Eph 5:18-21, ESV).

In context Paul is explaining what it looks like to be filled with the Sprit. Here a command along with instructions on how to fulfill the command. The command, God's revealed will for our lives is that we might be **filled with the Holy Spirit**.

The Greek word translated filled is $\pi\lambda\eta\rho\delta\omega$ (play-ro'-o) and it means to be filled up to the brim, to be topped off. Used here it means to be under the control of, filled with in the sense of **completely being** controlled by.

A couple examples of how this word is used may be beneficial:

"6 But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart." (John 16:6, ESV).

"24 Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full." (John 16:24, ESV).

God's desire for our lives is that we operate under the power and the influence of the Holy Spirit:

"16 But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do." (Gal 5:16-17, ESV).

One more observation, the verb translated walk is in the present tense and imperative mood. It is a command. As believers we have the choice to be filled with the spirit, to walk in the Spirit, or to do otherwise. God's will for our life is that we live a life of walking in the Spirit!

4. God's will is for us to let go of our will for our life and embrace His.

In what we call the Lord's Prayer, Jesus said that we are to pray like this:

"Pray then like this: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. 10 Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." (Mat 6:9-10, ESV).

This is not simply a prayer for God's will to be done in a nebulous, general sort of way. This is a prayer for God's will to be done in a specific area on earth, in particular, in our life. We should be praying that God's will would be done in our lives even when our will may conflict with the will of the Father.

Remember what Jesus prayed in the garden:

40 And when he came to the place, he said to them, "Pray that you may not enter into temptation." 41 And he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed, 42 saying, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done." (Mat 26:40-42, ESV).

God's will for our lives is that we would embrace his will for or lives. For God to reign in our lives, we must endeavor to put down every vestige of our will for our lives and really seek His will.

I know this is scary business. I think that many of us worry that God has tucked away in his will for our lives something hard or difficult. Of course, that is not true, he has only our good and his glory in mind and I would encourage us to daily be praying that his will would be done in heaven and on earth (in particular) in our lives.

5. God's will is for us to know God's revealed will for our lives

Many people seem to think that God's will or desires for our life cannot be known. That they are a mystery, or maybe a game of chance, or an Easter egg hunt. You may find, but only because you got lucky!

Sometimes people make it sound like God's will is a mystery that only few will solve.

These things are simply not true. It may surprise us, but God's will can be known for our lives. In fact, God desires for us to know His revealed will and even his desires for our life.

Notice what Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus:

"Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is." (Eph 5:15-17, ESV)

Let's unpack this backwards. Paul is telling the believers in Ephesus, that God's will for their lives is that they "understand" what the will of the Lord is.

The Greek word understand is συνίημι (soon-ee'-ay-mee), in the Greek, like the English, means to understand, to comprehend, to grasp, or to correctly perceive.

God's design and desire for our life is that we understand, we grasp what the will of the Lord is.

Now, notice how Paul juxtaposes understanding the will of the Lord. He says therefore *do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.* The Greek word means senseless, stupid, or foolish.

Likely Paul has in mind (at least principally), the commands of the Lord, the revealed will of the Lord. For it is foolish, not to know God's revealed will for our lives as articulated in the Scriptures.

This brings us to an important point. A one-hour Sunday School lesson and a 45 minutes sermon each week is not enough.

We need to be immersing ourselves in God's word each day, so that we are not ultimately foolish and we understand what the revealed will of the Lord is.

Other verses to consider include, Ps 119:27; Jer 4:22; Rom 12:1-2; Col 1:9; etc.)

6. God's will is that his children would be a joyful and a thankful people

"See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." (1Th 5:15-18 ESV)

Notice rejoice always. Be joyful, be glad, at all times. Because of who we are, because of what Christ has done, we are to be a people filled with joy.

But it is not just joy, it is thankfulness. Notice, give thanks in all circumstances. Regardless of the situation, thankful for what God has done in our lives.

Joy and thankfulness these are the will of God for our lives!

Other verses to consider (Rom 15:3, 12:12, Phil 4:4, Ps 16:11, I Thes 5:18, Ps 100:4, Col 4:2, Eph 5:20).

7. God's will is for you to rejoice in, to joy in Him, to desire Him above all else!

"Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act." (Ps 37:4-5 ESV)

As a new husband delights in his beautiful bride, and a new wife delights in her dashing husband. God's will for our lives is that we find joy, peace, comfort, and satisfaction in Him.

As Spurgeon reflected on this verse, he said this: "Here is a river to swim in, Christians, plunge into it. Here is a bottomless abyss of delights, the person, the grace, the works, the attributes of our covenant God; and here is a promise given to each one of those who carry on this excellent duty, "He shall give you the desires of your heart."

In another sermon Spurgeon said this: "When your heart's desires are of this kind, you shall have them, no matter what they may be. It is not every man who shall have the desires of his heart given to him, but only that man whose heart's delight is in his God."

The Psalmist said it this way:

"I have set the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption. You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore." (Ps 16:8-11 ESV)

In His presence there is fulness of joy!

Other verses to consider, (Ps 1, Pr 3:5-6, Neh 8:10; Rom 15:13; Phil 4:4; Jer 29:11, etc.)

Other areas we did not discuss that are God's will for our lives include, that would we be people of prayer (I Thes 5:17-18), that we would trust him (Pro 3:5-6), that we would not be unequally yoked with an unbeliever (II Cor 6:14), that we would set our minds and our thoughts on things above (Col 3:1-3), that we would make it a priority to assemble with other believers (Heb 10:25), that we would not quench the Holy Spirit (I Thes 5:19), that we would not grieve the Holy Spirit (Eph 4:30), that we would be submissive to proper authorities in our lives (I Pet 2:13).

IV. God's Unique Desires for Our Life

This is really where most people want to go, but you cannot get here without a discussion of the revealed will of the Lord.

Now I would say this. If we are following the seven revealed wills of the Lord, to the best of our abilities:

- 1. We are saved.
- 2. We are abstaining from all forms of sexual immorality
- 3. We are walking in the Spirit
- 4. We are praying and seeking His will for our lives
- 5. We are in the Scriptures seeking to understand His revealed will for our lives.
- 6. We are joyful and thankful
- 7. We are finding our fulfillment in Christ

If we are doing these things, then here is my advice. Forgive me for I do not mean to be trite, but here it is: Follow your heart. If we are following the seven revealed wills, we have placed faith in Jesus, we are staying away from all forms of sexual sin, we are being filled with the Holy Spirit, we are praying for God's will in our life, we are in the Scriptures to understand God's revealed will, we are full of joy and thanksgiving, then God has tuned our heart to match his, we would never seek something contrary to his revealed will, and thus we can be certain that God intends to give us the desires of your heart!

This week, this month, this year, let's pursue (at least) these seven areas of the revealed will of the			
Lord and watch how God tunes our heart to His.			