

PAUL'S THEOLOGY

Lesson 31

Guidance and Discerning God's Will

When you were growing up did you ever have any of the childish or occultist games or toys for discerning the future or decision-making? I can remember the stores selling "Magic 8-balls" and "Ouija Boards." Some kids in my elementary school swore they were able to get results by séances. Then there were the friends who had the Chinese Fortune Sticks. They would shake the canister and the first stick that fell out was their answer to whatever problem or question troubled them. I recently read an advertisement for these sticks:

There are times when we simply do not know what to do for the best when we can see both sides of the argument or when we feel we need advice. For the Chinese, a traditional way to find such help is to turn to the gods and goddesses for guidance using revered divination sticks. Now you too can benefit from their wisdom with CHINESE FORTUNE STICKS.¹

Of course, many did not need such childish toys. They thought they could determine the future by reading horoscopes in the paper. The wealthy (or those with no regard for wasting money) could even hire special astrologists who could give more personal readings, on the theory that the planets and stars could give directions. (Granted, the North Star can give directions, but of a different kind!) Those of us alive in the 60's remember hearing that:

When the moon is in the Seventh House
And Jupiter aligns with Mars
Then peace will guide the planets
And love will steer the stars

This is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius
The Age of Aquarius
Aquarius!
Aquarius!

Harmony and understanding
Sympathy and trust abounding

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No more falsehoods or derisions
Golden living dreams of visions
Mystic crystal revelation
And the mind's true liberation
Aquarius!
Aquarius!

I was recently watching the National Geographic channel and I saw this on this show that one culture thinks you can discern God's will by dissecting the liver of dead animals. There are many many forms of divination, defined as "seeking knowledge by supernatural means."

How do we as Christians discern the will of God? How do we go about seeking God's guidance in our lives? What does Paul have to say on this subject, either directly or by example? That is our lesson today.

CAN WE GET SUPERNATURAL ANSWERS TO OUR QUESTIONS?

There was a famous Greek historian named Herodotus (c 484 – c. 425 BC) who wrote a history of the Greek / Persian wars. These wars stretched over centuries. Herodotus, termed by many "the Father of History," dates the feud back even earlier than the seizing of Helen by the Trojans.

Writing about the consolidation of the Persian Empire, Herodotus recorded the various tribes of Medes that were involved. One of these tribes was the Magus tribe. Herodotus took the Persian name and simply put it into Greek letters - writing of the *Magos* tribe.² Later in his history, Herodotus showed that this tribe took a role in reading the signs from the gods for the king. Writing about an eclipse that had stumped the Persian king Xerxes, he explained the Magos were consulted. The Magos told Xerxes that, "the god was showing to the Greeks the desolation of their cities."³

The Magos developed a reputation for harnessing supernatural powers to understand signs and meanings. Their name became synonymous in the Greek world with legitimate supernatural work as well as trickery and chicanery passed off as supernatural work. The Magos are still famous today! They gave their name in two ways that are important still today. First, we note that the Magos were in the Bible as the "Magi" who followed the star to find the Christ child.

² "The Median tribes are these – the Busae, the Paretaceni, the Struchates, the Arazanti, the Budii, the Magi: so many are their tribes." Herodotus, *The Persian Wars* I.101 (Loeb Classical Library translation by A.D. Godley).

³ *Ibid.*, Book VII.37.

A second way the Magos are still important today is with their name. The Greeks used it, the Romans adopted it, and we have it today in English, although we have modified the ending. Today it has become our word “Magic.”

The English word “magic” carries both overtones from the early Greek usage of Magos. It can reference trickery and illusion, such as one might see from a magician. It can also refer to sorcery, witchcraft or some occultist’s access to supernatural powers. This supernatural access is a concept that Paul was familiar with, both because it was in the Old Testament, and because he saw it in his life experiences.

We begin this lesson examining magic because many wish that God’s will could be determined in a magical sense. We would love to be able to get that magic answer, so that anytime we wonder, “What should I do?” we get a direct answer. It is a desire to be able to follow some formula, some method, that gets us a clear and concise answer from the Divine telling us what to do, or answering whatever question we have.

God has never set himself up as the unseen mystic resource, like a fortuneteller, tarot card reader, or palm reader. Paul certainly never taught or treated God as such. Paul’s Old Testament training was clear enough on such ideas.

The Old Testament spoke out against magic in a number of places. As Moses gave the will of God to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 18:10-14 he instructed:

There shall not be found among you...anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead, for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD. And because of these abominations the LORD your God is driving them out before you. You shall be blameless before the Lord your God, for these nations, which you are about to dispossess, listen to fortune-tellers and to diviners. But as for you, the LORD your God has not allowed you to do this.

An option for Paul on discerning God’s will was never some magical incantation. As a good Pharisee, Paul would never have gone to magic for some one to tell him God’s will or the direction he should go.

Paul certainly would never have sought God’s will by engaging a medium, as King Saul did in 1 Samuel 28. Saul had asked God for guidance in a coming battle against Philistines, but God had maintained silence and given no insight to Saul. Incognito, Saul then sought out a medium and had her conjure up a spirit for guidance.

On an early mission effort, Paul was on the island of Cyprus speaking to a Roman authority, Proconsul Sergius Paulus, when the proconsul's adviser "Elymas the magician" opposed Paul. Paul dealt with Elymas swiftly and directly:

You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? And now, behold, the hand of the Lord is upon you, and you will be blind and unable to see the sun for a time (Acts 13:10-11).

Paul had another brush with magic in Ephesus written up in Acts 19:13-20. There were Jewish exorcists who sought to cast out demons "by the name of Jesus whom Paul proclaims." The demon overpowered the men, answering, "Jesus, I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?"

This caused a number of believers who were still practicing and using the magical arts to confess and divulge their practices. "And a number of those who had practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all" (Acts 19:19).

Paul never had a place for this way of living. In Galatians 5:20, Paul includes sorcery as a work of the flesh, to be avoided by the believer. There is a good indication that Paul's comment in 2 Timothy 3:13 that "imposters will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived" is a reference to magicians. The term Paul uses that is translated "imposter" (*goetes* - γοητες) was a derogatory term used for workers of magic.⁴

Paul also wrote the Colossian letter teaching, "See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ" (Col. 2:8). The phrase "elemental spirits of the world" was also used in other writings pre-Paul as a reference to astrology or magical incantations for supernatural intervention.⁵

Archaeology has salvaged from history a number of Greek papyri from the early centuries that reflect many of these Ephesians' magic spells and incantations. The magic was used not simply to find God's answers to life's questions, but also for protection, for altering the future, for aphrodisiacs, to gain favor or influence over someone else, to heal, or even to curse or harm others.

⁴ See, e.g., Philostratus, *Apollonius of Tyana* (Loeb Classical Library, vol. 16, 17).

⁵ See the Testament of Solomon 8:1-4; 18:1, 2. See also, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation* (U. Chi. Press 1992) Vol. 1 at 39.1-21.

Scholars have poured over these magical papyri and texts to understand the ancient's use of magic. One of the interesting aspects of magic in Paul's time concerned the reasons for using magic. Magic was man-centered in the sense that man was the reason for magic.

There are no extant examples of people using magic to accomplish the will of a deity. Rather, magic was used precisely to influence the will of a deity or spirit.⁶

It is no wonder Paul had no use for magic. Paul was never interested in Paul for Paul's sake. Paul lived for God and God's purposes. Paul's life was one for God's will. When Paul wrote from his imprisonment to the Philippians, he told them his desire was to depart from this life and be with Christ. That was much better than living in this fallen world. Yet Paul knew he had more work to do for God. Paul told the Philippians that recognizing their need, he would stay doing God's will, rather than what was best for Paul personally. (Phil. 1:21-26).

So how does Paul teach one to access God's will? Certainly not through some magical incantation! These are not some ways to force God to answer our questions, either by reading stars, palms, crystal balls, or the entrails of animals. Similarly, we do not have a magical formula where we can force God to write on walls, answer audibly to our ears, or even give us a nudging in our hearts. There is no magic that forces God to communicate to us "in our guts" or with our instincts.

Which brings us back to the question, if not magic (or some less occult sounding version of it), then how do we discern God's will? For just as we cannot force answers from God, we can just as certainly know that God does answer prayer. God does want his will done on earth, as it is in heaven! Part of not putting God in a box by thinking we can force him to answer includes not putting him in the box of never answering at all. God does not exist in most boxes we construct. God certainly can use a star to guide the magi to Christ (Lk 2:2), he can write on a wall to speak to King Balshazzar (Dan. 5), he can use Balaam's donkey to speak (Num 22), he can answer Saul through Samuel's spirit when the medium beckons (1 Sam. 28), and he can speak through dreams and visions (Gen. 40, 41, etc.). But just because God can do these things, does not mean it is how he teaches us to seek him out.

PAUL'S TEACHING AND EXAMPLE

Having decided that Paul did not teach guidance using a magical formula or incantation, we now consider how Paul taught on the subject, both directly and by example. Because we do not have a formula, we look at a number of features that

⁶ Hawthorne, Gerald, et al., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (IVP 1993) at 581.

we can glean from Paul's letters and life. These features are all considerations for our reflection, but even more for our use!

1. Prayer.

First and foremost among the ways Paul sought God's guidance and direction was through prayer. We will have a later lesson on Paul and prayer, but for a limited review here, consider that Paul prays for God's will:

- Romans 1:9-10 "without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you."
- Colossians 4:12 "Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God."

Often when Paul is praying, he does not say he is praying for God's will, but it is apparent from what he is praying that he is doing so:

- Ephesians 1:16-19 "I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might."

Paul certainly exhibited prayer in the way that Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven (Mt. 6:10).

Paul not only prayed to God for himself and others, but he also urged others to pray for him:

- Philippians 1:18-19 "I will rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance"
- Colossians 4:3 "Pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ, on account of which I am in prison"
- Philemon 1:22 "I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you."

- 2 Corinthians 1:11 “You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many.”

We do not so readily see Paul praying for God to write some message on the wall, nor do we see him asking others to pray for that. Instead we see Paul’s prayers pointedly for something (that he might come visit, might have a successful ministry, etc.) that Paul already believed was in line with God’s will. Paul never tried to put God in a formula box, where God would give him the answer to his certain question with the clarity of his Damascus road conversation. Instead Paul was confident God would answer those prayers and Paul would walk in God’s will. This was part and parcel of these other features we should consider.

2. Thinking.

This may shock some, but Paul relied on his own thinking to help determine what God wanted and willed for him. This is often the very thing we do not want to do! We want to remove our thinking from the process, instead having it dictated to us from on high. It is as if we want to be a computer. I sit here and type into my computer these words. Each time I type a word, it appears on the screen, and ultimately (if not edited out!) before your eyes. In this way, many of us wish that God made his will so plain. We could then blindly obey and follow whatever he tells us – no problem!

Except God has never worked that way. From the beginning God made Adam and Eve, indeed he seems to have made the world, with some degree of independence (or randomness in the case of the world). Adam and Eve made true choices. They had reasoning ability, and they used their minds to tend to creation, encounter Satan, and choose to obey or disobey the Creator.

After the fall, mankind was not stripped of their minds, nor were they stripped of their ability to reason and make choices. The fall resulted in darkened minds, fallen minds, minds that no longer functioned as they were intended. But the minds were, and are still there!

Paul taught that God was not taking decision making or thinking away from the believer’s mind. Instead Paul taught that God was in the process of renewing the believer’s mind. Even this renewal was not something God did in a vacuum or without involvement by the believer. Paul explained to the Romans:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may

discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom. 12:1-2).

For Paul, discerning God's will was linked closely to renewal of the mind. Discernment is, at least in part, a thinking process.

Paul uses the word, "testing" to discern the will of God. We should consider briefly Paul's use of the Greek word "testing" (*dokimazo* δοκιμάζω). From his other letters, we can readily see that Paul employed this word in the sense of people determining the value or worth of someone or something. When Paul used the word in reference to people testing, he meant they would observe and think through a matter.⁷

A practical example of this is found in 1 Timothy 3. Paul is instructing Timothy on how to select deacons for the church. Paul does not say, "Pray about it and go with your gut." Nor does he say, "Close your eyes, flip through Scripture and the verse your finger lands on will be God's will in this matter." Paul says:

Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless.

This is a process that included the mind! Did the deacon candidate meet the criteria? Then test (*dokimazo*) him! Think through and see if observation and time show the deacon worthy.

Alister McGrath speaks of "discipling the mind" and it is a wonderfully Pauline term. We often speak of discipling young Christians to help them grow deeper in their faith and walk. McGrath has taken that term (and indeed much of his time and effort in life) trying to teach and challenge people to disciple their minds. To take the "renewal" process Paul writes of seriously! To strive towards minds that more readily discern God's will, as they grow deeper in faith and understanding. This is hand in hand with Paul's teaching on determining God's will.

The mind is not disciplined without more of the very same features we are considering as we work through Paul's teachings on guidance. Consider how closely the following two features play with the thinking feature we have been discussing.

3. Study and Meditate on Scripture.

⁷ Consider the following passage: 2 Cor. 8:22 "And with them we are sending our brother whom we have often tested and found earnest in many matters, but who is now more earnest than ever because of his great confidence in you."

The King James Version translated 2 Timothy 2:15 as follows:

Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.

“Study” or, as many later translators said, “do your best” or “be diligent.” This should be the believer’s approach to Scripture. We should take the time and energy to study. It is what this class is about, but it should be more. These lessons are presented orally in class, as well as in this written form so that people have something concrete to study.

Take personal time to pull out your Bibles. Prayerfully reflect and consider the teachings of Scripture. When you do so, do not simply read the gospels, or the Psalms, or the epistles of Paul. As you would hope to have a well balanced diet of fruits, vegetables, proteins, carbohydrates, etc., develop a broad based scriptural diet. Read and study from different parts.

This is especially important as you seek God’s will in your life. For while we do not encourage a non-thinking use of Scripture, we do know that the Scriptures bring us closer to God, help us understand his ways, and give us insight into our lives, our God and the world around us.

We must pause here and reiterate what we mean by a non-thinking use of Scripture. It is something akin to blindly selecting a passage and deciding God gave it to you, much as if you were to write Scripture verses on Chinese fortune sticks, put the sticks into their container, and shake the container until the first one falls out by divine providence answering your question.

Paul calls the Scriptures “the oracles of God” (Rom. 3:2). Paul never advocated going to Mt. Olympus to seek God’s will from some human oracle. Paul sent people to Scripture to study, to learn, and to grow in holiness. We have frequently reminded ourselves of Paul’s instruction to Timothy that Scripture is:

profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

It is in scripture that we can find God’s will, but not in Scripture alone. Consider this next feature in light of the Timothy passage just quoted.

4. Counsel.

Not only in Scripture do we find aid in determining God’s will, but also in the good counsel of other godly people. Consider again the Timothy passage. Paul

did not simply send Timothy to the Scriptures. Paul sent counsel: “Read these, they will help! They are useful in a number of ways!”

In fact, all of Paul’s letters, while we might consider them “teaching” or “instruction” they could also be fairly called “counsel.” Consider in this vein the Jerusalem conference Paul attended. Luke wrote of the conference in Acts chapter 15. Here the church was trying to decide what to do with Gentile Christians. Should the Gentiles have to become Jews as part of their conversion to Christianity? This was a watershed issue for the church.

The church gathered the apostles and elders together for a counsel time, a discussion time, a time of “much debate.” This included a discussion of what God had been doing in their midst and on the mission field. It included a study and well reasoned consideration of Scripture, and then it ultimately resulted in a letter of instruction to the Gentile converts. In this letter, the Jerusalem church wrote:

It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements:

The church, Paul included, saw in their prayer, in their thinking, in their study, and in their counsel (“much debate”) God’s Spirit at work, leading them into God’s will!

5. Keep Your Eyes and Ears Open.

In Luke’s narrative, the very next chapter after the Jerusalem conference contains an interesting event. Paul was in Troas:

And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them (Acts 16:9-10).

Several items draw our attention to this story. First, God used a vision to speak to Paul! This emphasizes our earlier suggestion that we not put God in a box. That means we do not put him in a box of *having to work in some way*, but it also means not putting him in a box of *not working in some way*!

A second interesting aspect to Luke’s write up is the phrase, “concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.” Luke uses a word (*sumbibazo* συμβιβάζω) that suggests a conclusion that was deduced after weighing or bringing together a number of thoughts or ideas. In other words, Paul still used counsel, his brain, and likely bathed their decision in prayer, before moving on it as God’s message.

CONCLUSION

I am sorry that I cannot impart a magic formula to you for determining God's will. I am unable to tell you exactly what to do to make certain you are taking the right job, living in the right home, or even wearing the right pair of shoes. I can assure you, however, that if you are a Christian, God is at work in you. He is working in you to bring his will into your life and into the world. He is at work renewing your mind just as he is healing your hurts. God does not leave you adrift. He has set Scripture before you and placed his Spirit within you. You have wonderful ways of growing before him, learning his ways and finding his paths – but it never has been, nor will it ever be, magic!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“Be transformed by the renewal of your mind”* (Rom. 12:2).

It may not always be what we want, but it is the way it is. God made us to be decision makers. He gave us minds and he expects us to use them! Part of being fallen, however, includes minds that are darkened. Jeremiah proclaimed that, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick” (Jer. 19:9). For this reason, we need to disciple our minds, and work to align our thoughts with God. Toward this end, we study his word, we seek counsel and we prayerfully consider and test matters before us.

2. *“It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us”* (Acts 15:28).

As we consider God giving directions for our lives, I would urge us not to look at the MapQuest model. MapQuest is wonderful for driving directions. It will tell you exactly how many miles to go and exactly when to turn. A better model for much of the direction God gives is that of a compass. It points the way to go in the sense of giving us a true north. From that we can derive east, west, and south. We can find legitimate and good paths for where we should go. It does not provide the almost mindless instruction of MapQuest, but its directions are true. I do not believe that God has only one pair of socks in mind for most of us to wear on any particular day. Instead, there are many areas where God truly gives us a choice, with the assurance he will bless us. Our choices are to align with his will, certainly, but his will often leaves us with multiple choices. This is the idea of Proverbs 3: 5-6, “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.” As we acknowledge and seek God, as we look to him for wisdom and his will, he will bless our choices and make our ways straight.

3. *“By testing you may discern what is the will of God”* (Rom. 12:2).

Paul’s call to renew our minds, his call to seek direction in Scripture, his call to prayerfully consider God and his will are all calls that set before us spiritual dependence upon God for direction. Paul’s urging for thinking, for testing, for counsel, engage our minds in the process. Practically speaking, then, we have good insight for how we weigh pro’s and con’s of decisions, how we process a decision tree to see where our choices lead us, and how we weigh out those factors to determine what seems to comply most readily with the instructions God has for us!

DISCERNING GOD’S WILL:

A CASE STUDY

This lesson was prepared with a lifetime of experience and one-week preparation (although admittedly it is a subject and issue I Have discussed and taught many times in my lifetime!) It is very important to me as I write these lessons that I deliver a product in line with God’s will. In other words, each week I write, I am asking myself, either consciously or unconsciously, is this what God would have me say?

In an effort to find God’s will in my choices as I do these lessons, let me tell you what I have done.

First, I have sought God through prayer. Not simply through my own prayers, but I have also had the prayer support of a number of people, both in the class that receives these lessons on Sunday, and from others.

Second, this lesson, as the others produced in this series, is the product of a great deal of thought. I have written a number of ideas, prayerfully considering them as I noted them in a spiral. I have researched them, read from numerous books, those cited in this lesson and others, and I have mulled them over, trying to make sense of a few details, and trying to figure out the best way to present them.

Third, I have prayerfully, and with much thought, sought out the relevant Scriptures to this subject. I did not do a “close my eyes and randomly pick passages” type search. I used concordances (English and Greek), Internet search engines, and memory to find and identify relevant passages. I also used Greek and English dictionaries, along with a number of commentaries, to make sure I had a full range of understanding behind the passages.

Fourth, I sent this lesson (as I do all the lessons) to 30 different people from all across the experience spectrum – from pastor to seminary scholar to laymen (and women), as well as spanning the religious spectrum (from Catholic monk to Lutheran, Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist, and church of Christ. I got their feedback, their counsel!

The counsel was great! Let me give you their thoughts:

Anonymous Reader 1: I especially appreciate your teaching on the "thinking" aspect of discerning God's will. Following Jesus doesn't mean that we "check our brains at the door." But, we are not talking about the unregenerate mind or even the undisciplined mind, which is not capable of spiritual thought and insight. We need the mind of Christ. 1 Cor. 2 is some powerful teaching from Paul on spiritual wisdom and discernment: 1 Cor. 2:14-16 14 "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. 15 The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: 16 "For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ." When we have the mind of Christ, we will know the will of God!

I've learned (and try to remember) that knowing God's will for my life is a by-product of my relationship with Him. He doesn't tell me what to do so that I can run away and do it. I am only able to discern what God is up to as I walk with Him and watch for His activity in my life. Jesus set the pattern: John 5:17, 19-20 " 17Jesus said to them, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working." 19Jesus gave them this answer: "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. 20For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, to your amazement he will show him even greater things than these." Walking with Jesus is the key to knowing God's will.

Anonymous Reader 2: Good lesson – especially the part warning against seeking guidance through “magic” and otherwise not from God. Also appreciate your emphasis on God being free to guide us any way he wishes!

In case it might interest you, here are links to chains of gracEmails on the two topics of divine guidance:

www.edwardfudge.com/./gracemails/guidance_means_of.html

and gift of prophecy:

www.edwardfudge.com/./gracemails/guidance_means_of.html.

Anonymous Reader 3: So, wouldn't Paul have a working knowledge of the Urim and Thummin- was it still around with the high priest in the NT? just wondering- and isn't it interesting that God didn't let too much info about that be recorded in scripture....

So my favorite book on the Will of God is by Bruce Waltke- it is called Finding the Will of God ~ a pagan notion? (have you read it?) His premise is that one doesn't "divine" the will of God- one lives the will of God as one comes to know Him through his word. He uses verses such as 1 Thess. 4:3-4; Eph. 5:15-18; Col. 4:12; 1 Thess 5:16-18; 1Peter 2:13-15. Even Romans 12:1-2 explains God's will in character shaping form. He also makes the point that Psalm 119 highlights the word of God as our counselor, director, and guide. My personal opinion is that people want the will of God apart from a thorough understanding of the Word of God and, thus, without the work that it requires to know the word of God. And because of that desire and, yet, laziness- they spend lots of time on other methods to discern the will of God- such as the ones listed in your lesson.

Does the NT ever command people to "find God's will" or does it only tell people the wrong ways to go about seeking direction? Romans 12 seems to indicate that with a careful study of scripture it is a forgone conclusion that you will know the will of God. {Then} you will be able to test and approve God's will, His good, pleasing and perfect will....

So in your conclusion... Do you really want to apologize for NOT being able to give them a magic formula? (I know what you are doing but I think the apology discounts what you ARE giving them...sort of like "well all I can do is pray.") You give them sound counsel- pray, meditate on scripture, seek wise counsel, etc... In the conclusion, you assert that if I am a Christian- "God is at work renewing your mind just as he is healing your hurts." Doesn't that presume that I am studying His word? Is he really renewing my mind if I make no more time for Him than on Sunday morning? It is so true that "He has set Scripture before you and placed his spirit in you." And to me the conclusion is that with the scripture and the spirit you have everything you need to be conformed to the image of Christ...which IS the will of God...(And if you looked at shoes, the right home and the right job from the perspective of God's will is that we be conformed to Christ's image- I think that a person would have their answers even to those questions....)

And, by testing you may know- (# 3 Points for Home) There is a Biblical test, a character test and an eternity test to think about- How does it mesh with scripture's teachings, how does it conform me to the image of Christ, and finally what kind of eternal impact is there??? (These are my personal criteria for choices that come my way).

Anonymous Reader 4: He WANTS us to live as he has planned best for us! There are two principles that give me great confidence in this: (i) God is all-powerful and can do anything he wants; (ii) God has a deep unending love for me. If those are really true (and they are!), then God will find a way to communicate his will to me. Nothing can keep him from doing it. The method he uses is his (e.g. the features you mentioned), but God is more interested in me doing his will than I am.

One verse as an example on guidance that I love is Paul's attempted trip into Bithynia (Acts 16:7). They tried, but the Spirit prevented them. That gives me great confidence that if I have a heart to honor God with my life, God will honor that and guide me even when in those times where I ignorantly try press on.

A person doesn't have to pray about God's will if it's in Scripture. You don't have to pray if you should commit adultery – God has already answered that. I remember sitting on a plane one time and a pastor seated next to me told me how God had led him to leave his wife and marry a younger woman he had fallen in love with. This pastor had let his emotions cloud his thinking to the point that he convinced himself it was God's will.

Two “features” to discern God's will that I think you left out are ‘authority’ and ‘responsibility’.

- (1) What do the authorities in my life command from me – govt, boss, parent (as a child), etc? Unless it is contrary to the word of God, I find that with rare exception it is God's will.
- (2) What responsibilities do I have that may affect what I do? What have I committed to? A mother or father does not need to pray if they should feed their infant. We do not need to seek God's will if we should go to work on time. We do not seek God's will about whether we should violate a commitment we have made (Ps 15:4) (although granted God also provides a way to seek relieve from commitments we should not have made).
- Hierarchially speaking, I typically view it as the Bible first, then the authorities in my life, my responsibilities/commitments, counsel, wisdom (including inward leadings I might feel sometimes).

The key to me to become sensitive to God's will is looking back. In other words, I reflect back on the various ways it seemed God was speaking to me and leading me in a decision process, and then compare that with how it all turned out. It a sense, it's sort of like a counted cross-stitch embroidery. Generally you can't tell what it looks like from the bottom, but when you turn it over then it becomes clear. I often find that when I get through it all, I can look back and identify God's hand in guiding me. That makes it easier to see it again in the future, as well as to have confidence that God really is there leading me.

One thing that hit me many years ago, is that God seemed to guide me differently as an older Christian than he did as a new Christian. I think it's like our own kids. When they're 1-2 years old you only put them down in the back yard. When they're 3, you may go in the front but you keep them by your side. When they're 4 you let them play in the front yard and tell them to stay out of the street. A little older and it's "be careful" crossing the street, etc etc. You get the drift. The point is, I no longer tell Stephanie to look both ways before crossing the street. So, too, with God. As we come to know Scripture better, have learned the counsel of others, become aware of our responsibilities, etc, God doesn't need to guide us as he did when we were babies. It doesn't mean God isn't still active in our lives, but it is in a different way (e.g. the 'Think' feature you mentioned).

Anonymous Reader 5: Although we would never consider prayer in the same category as magic, it seems to me that there are many Christians whom seem to treat it that way. They are convinced that if they pray for something hard enough (or get enough people praying hard enough) that somehow that forces God's hand into answering their prayer **in the way they want it answered**. Similarly, I know of many well-intentioned believers who are absolutely convinced that it's not God's will that _____ (fill in the blank - typically something that involves suffering) - and they tell God that when they pray.

In the area of God's will, there are two principles that guide my life:

1. There is absolutely nothing that happens to me that God doesn't allow to happen.
2. God is all about conforming me to the image of Christ.

When I'm trying to discern God's will regarding a decision, I try as best as I can, to empty my mind of my personal leanings, tendencies, etc. This is not to say that I don't use my mind and intellect to think through the situation.

Anonymous Reader 6: Looking for "open doors" is very important. Sometimes I have a tendency to avoid open doors I don't like, and force my way through doors that are not open. Some interesting notes from scripture on the divination end:

-Remember when Joseph has the "cup he uses to divine (maybe tea leaves but probably blood)" placed in Benjamin's saddle bag?

-Witch of Endor situation

Did you ever hear Rodney Cloud's story of choosing a church to work with when he attended Hebrew Union? He had several opportunities so he put all of the church names in a hat, prayed, and drew a name out. It was the one he least favored, so he did it again and the same name came out (Gideon's fleece). He said that it worked out great, and that the other churches, which had appealed to him, would not have been as good for him. I think the prayerful decision and looking for signs is important.

Twice when I have been on a church search, I have had two churches, very near to each other, show up interested. In both cases, I chose one of the two churches. In looking back, I think God wanted me in those areas (although the California move was a baptism of fire).

Anonymous Reader 8: I think it also relates to the current certainty some express in being sure they 'know God's will'. The most common use is as their reason for divorce. "I know that God wants me to be happy."

Anonymous Reader 9: I take the following points for good discernment:

What is God saying to you in the depths of the Spirit? This is a pure intuition. But we are often out of touch with the Spirit, or confuse it with limited emotions or mental constructs, so have to test the spirits. The following points help with this.

- 1 - Is it in line with sacred scripture, apostolic tradition, and church magisterium?
- 2 - Is it in line with the community or ministry leadership, vision, and guidelines that we are a part of?
- 3 - What does your spiritual director or pastor say?
- 4 - What do trusted spiritual friends say?
- 5 - Does it bear good fruit? (The greatest discernment tool taught by Christ)

If you can get all five to line up, you are usually in great shape. If not, take the top of the list first, and always check #5.

Anonymous Reader 10: These two emphases, the total sufficiency of Scripture and God's personal relationship with His people, provide a dynamic framework for knowing the will of God.

...

Our application of the will of God must change as our knowledge of his will grows deeper. We remain accountable within the bounds of our best current understanding. "Remember," James warns, "it is a sin to know what you ought to do and then not do it."⁸ As God reveals Himself, through His written word and through our individual circumstances, we must submit to His guidance in all of life.

Anonymous Reader 11: Lots of "testing" going on in NT with Paul... 1 Thessalonians 2:4 God had put him to the test so that he may stand approved before them having been entrusted with the gospel. Or 1 Thessalonians 5:21-22 "Test all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil" (That in itself helps us answer a lot of our questions about discerning God's will, don't you think?) Also 1 Cor 11:28, 16:3; 2Cor 8:22; 1 Tim 3:10; 2 Cor 13:5; Gal. 6:4; Eph 5:10; Eph 5:1. Rom 1:28; 2:18; 3:23 and many others, I'm sure! The very ways we are tested I think help us mature into mature Christians that can discern God's will as you are so ably pointing out!

Anonymous Reader 12: It needs a personal story - inspiring - on properly seeking God's will.

But seems to me - with your resources - - - someone will have an inspiring story - important!

Most times I'm wishy washy - but this is an important add in. Bruce Wilke - *Discerning God's Will* -- Maybe something in there inspiring you can add.

Get someone's personal story!

CONCLUSION

From this supplement, one can readily see the value in godly counsel in trying to discern God's will. Now, normally I edit these suggestions, and choose which to integrate and which to politely leave for another lesson (or another day). But in

⁸ James 4:17, New Living Translation.

this lesson, as a case study, I set them out so that you, as part of engaging your brain, can prayerfully sort through these and decide what helps and what does not!