

THE COMPASS

Phoenix, Arizona

Wednesday, March 22, 2006

FUTURE TENSE? Figuring Out God's Will

Part 2:

Bad at Darts

Teaching Pastor Doug Brendel

Do you really want to know God's will for your life?
 Are you facing some decision, and you want to know what God's will is in that situation?
 Or did you make a decision some time ago, and you find yourself wondering if what you did was God's will?

What is God's will for my life?
 I don't think there's any question that has tortured more people in human history.
 What is God's plan for my life?
 How can I know for sure?
 How can I even get a clue?

I've heard there's kind of a target that I'm supposed to hit.
 The bull's-eye in the middle is God's "perfect" will — this is what God really wants.
 Then the circle around the bull's-eye is God's "acceptable" will — this is stuff he doesn't really prefer, but he's willing to put up with. He "allows" it.
 And then off the target entirely, you're "out of God's will."
 This is sin.
 Every decision I make is like throwing a dart at this target.
 Everything in my life fits somewhere on this target — except, in my own specific case, there would be a lot of darts stuck in the wall, and the door frame, and the furniture.

OK, let's go with this dartboard theory for a minute.
 How do I decide what's in the bull's-eye? What is God's perfect will?
 Well, I can look in the Bible — there's some specific information in there.
 The Bible is pretty explicit about fornication, and gossip, and murder — these would not be in the bull's-eye.
 I could consult with the authority figures — my pastor, my parents, my teachers.
 Some have suggested that I should also look at circumstances to determine God's perfect will.
 They talk about God "opening" doors and "closing" doors.
 Some also ask, What does your heart say?
 They say I need to listen for the "still, small voice."

Then maybe you've also heard about people randomly opening the Bible and expecting God to show them an answer right from whatever page of Scripture they happen to land on.

As I was preparing this talk, I literally tried this.

I took my Bible and looked out the window while I opened it, and plunked my finger down on the open page.

And you know what? It worked. I got very clear instructions from God.

My finger landed in the book of **Haggai, chapter 1, verse 8:**

“Go up into the mountains and bring down timber and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored,” says the Lord.”

I didn't really have time for this, so I decided to cheat and try it again, and hope God wouldn't notice.

This time, my finger fell on **James 1:7: “That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord.”**

Now I was a little scared. I'm hoping I'm not going to get punished for not doing the original instructions.

So I tried it one more time.

This time I landed on **Judges 4:21**, which says, **“...She drove the peg through his temple into the ground, and he died.”**

You know, it would have been better just to go into the mountains and bring down timber and build a house in the first place!

And then I've heard some people talk about determining God's will by “laying out a fleece.”

This is a reference to a guy named Gideon — not the guy who goes around putting Bibles in hotel rooms; this is the original Gideon.

He was an actual person in history; you can read about him in the Old Testament book of Judges, starting in the sixth chapter.

God wanted him to do some stuff that Gideon considered to be pretty dangerous, and even though God assured him that he would be OK, Gideon was nervous.

So Gideon took a wool fleece, and laid it out on the ground overnight — actually on the threshing floor, where they processed their grains.

This would have been a flat, open space — usually it was on the top or the side of a high hill where you could count on strong winds blowing.

This is where they would bring the grain from the harvest, and crush it, and then toss it in the air, so the wind would take the chaff and the straw, and the heavier part of the grain — the valuable stuff — would fall back down.

So Gideon said to God, Look, I'll leave this fleece on the threshing floor overnight.

If I check back tomorrow morning and the morning dew has settled only on the fleece, but the ground all around it is dry, I'll know you're telling me the truth.

And actually, God did him one better.

The next morning the ground was all dry, but Gideon squeezed an entire bowlful of water out of the fleece.

But even then, Gideon didn't trust God to be telling the truth. So he asked God for one more sign: the same experiment, only backwards — make the fleece dry, and the ground wet.

Which God did.

And this story became so famous over time that we now very commonly use this term — “laying out a fleece,” or “giving God a fleece.”

What we forget, however, is that God never congratulated Gideon for this clever way of figuring out God’s will!

Jesus actually said twice (**Matthew 12:39** and **16:4**) that it’s “**an evil and adulterous generation [that] craves for a sign.**”

When Jesus was dealing with the guy we call “doubting Thomas,” he said the ones who are really “**blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed**” (**John 20:29**).

1 Corinthians 5:7 says we’re designed to “**walk by faith and not by sight.**”

So is putting out a fleece the way to determine God’s will for my life?

And then there’s one more method I can think of, that people have used down through human history for figuring out what’s in the bull’s-eye — and that would be casting lots.

Like rolling the dice, and letting the numbers that turn up be your guide.

There were actually a number of situations in ancient history where this approach was considered appropriate.

People of God cast lots in Old Testament times to decide property issues, and scheduling issues, and so forth.

They didn’t use dice, like gamblers do today — they used something called Urim and Thummim.

We don’t have any historical record of what these looked like, but we do understand from history that the Urim and Thummim were worn on the breastplate of the high priest.

After Judas betrayed Jesus, the remaining disciples decided they should replace him. They narrowed it down to two guys, and then — yep, they cast lots to choose between the two.

So should I be deciding God’s will for my life by rolling some dice?

You know, come to think of it, even rolling a pair of dice doesn’t take it totally out of my hands.

Using two dice, there are 36 possible combinations — but not all the totals have the same probability.

It’s easier to get a 7 than any other total, because there are six different ways to get 7. It’s harder to get a 2 or a 12 than any other total, because there’s only one way to get either of those outcomes.

So if you’re asking God to show you which woman to ask out on a date next weekend, I suggest you assign the number 7 to whichever one you secretly prefer.

Actually, something tells me this is not the way to determine God’s will for your love life. There are so many complications with all these approaches to finding the bull’s-eye on the target of God’s will!

How do we even know what stuff is included under the heading of “God’s will”?

Do I need to know God's will on the question of whom to marry, but not on the question of which pants to pull on tomorrow morning?

Does God's will factor in to where I live, what kind of work I do?

Is it only "big stuff"? Is it only "moral issues"?

I don't know — what food to eat at dinner may not seem like a moral issue, it may seem like small stuff; but then if I'm always over-eating, or eating junk food, then wouldn't I be "out of God's will" to have that third helping of mashed potatoes, or decide to drive through Burger King yet again?

* * *

There is a way to sort out all this confusion.

To begin with, we need to define our terms.

A lot of people talk about "God's will" and "God's plan" as if they're the same thing — but they're not.

Now, you can use different terms to describe these two entities, and that's fine — but what I'm saying here is that there are two distinct ideas which we need to understand separately.

What I'll call "God's will" is what God *wants*.

This is his desire. It's the longing of his heart.

But then there's "God's plan."

This is what he has decided will happen.

It's anything that God has determined will occur in the future.

These are very different things.

We can see this clearly if we look at the phenomenon of salvation — in other words, people accepting the sacrifice of Christ and becoming cleansed spiritually and entering into a relationship with God.

God is very clear in saying that he wants all mankind to be saved in this way; **2 Peter 3:9** tells us this.

This is his will. It's the longing of his heart.

But he is also very clear in saying that it won't happen.

Not everybody is going to do what God wants in this regard.

Some are going to say no to salvation — no to Christ's sacrifice — no to spiritual cleansing — no to a relationship with God.

God knows this; he sees it coming. **Matthew 7:13-14, 22-23** show us this.

And he has planned accordingly.

In other words, it's all part of his plan — it's not his will, but it's in his plan.

Look at living by God's design for our lives — living what we might call a "godly" life.

It's clear that God wants this for us; it's best for us.

This is his will. It's the longing of his heart. **1 Thessalonians 4:3** tells us so.

But not everybody goes there. In fact, nobody goes there entirely.

God knows I'm not going to live a godly life every moment of every day — **1 John 1:10** makes this clear — and yet he is still working all of my errors around somehow to produce the ultimate best; that's what he says in **Romans 8:28**.

His plan doesn't change; I don't wreck God's plan.

I can't. God says in **Isaiah 46:10**, "**My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.**"

Even when I contradict God's will — even when I break God's heart — his plan stands.

* * *

So when do I know God's plan? Afterwards.

I can tell you what God's plan for yesterday was, because we can see what God allowed and what he didn't.

I know that a bunch of stuff happened yesterday that broke God's heart — it was outside of his will — and yet it happened, and God wasn't a bit surprised that it happened.

He saw it coming, and he allowed for it.

He made it part of his plan.

What do we say when something goes wrong and we're grouching about it?

"Hindsight is 20/20."

In other words, looking back, we can see stuff clearly.

As human beings, we are hindsight specialists.

We are not foresight specialists.

Sure, once in a while, God gives us a glimpse into the future; this is what we call *prophecy*.

But even this is murky. It's like there's a veil over the future. Our perception of it is uncertain. The way **1 Corinthians 13:12** puts it is that "**we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror....**"

God knows that our meager human brains couldn't process the entire future; we couldn't handle it. We wouldn't know how to deal with that kind of information. We would just melt down.

In **Psalms 139**, the psalmist David acknowledges that when it comes to reading the future, he's out of his league.

So God says, Don't go there. Don't try to predict the future. That's fortune-telling. Avoid it.

To put it in our newly defined terms, we would say: Don't try to discern God's plan.

Instead, try to discern God's *will*. God's desire. The longing of God's heart.

The Scriptures urge us over and over again to *follow God's desire*. To seek God's pleasure — because this is how we're designed to thrive.

He loves us, he wants what's best for us — so following his desire makes good sense.

* * *

So now I'm facing my decision. I have to choose someone to marry, or move to a different city, or decide to take a certain job, or join a certain church, whatever.

My tendency is to want to know the future — is this going to be good, will it be productive, will it be fun? Or will it be bad, and problematic, and painful?

But I can't read the future. According to our newly defined terms, I can't know God's plan in advance. I can only know God's plan after the fact.

I am wasting my time getting a headache over this question, because God is not going to show me the future.

I need to be seeking something other than God's plan.

I need to be seeking God's desire. God's heart.

What is God's desire? This is a way different question.

Now when I look at the choice I'm facing — the choice of a marriage partner, or a job, or a relocation or whatever — I have some tools.

I can turn to the Scriptures and learn a lot about the longing of God's heart.

The Bible is my best source for this information!

Jesus said the whole will of God can be summed up in the "Two Things" — love God and love people — but then God went to the time and trouble of spelling out a whole bunch of scenarios, all through the Scriptures, to show me, in practical ways, how to do those Two Things.

But even going to the Bible won't automatically answer all of my questions — because I'm ultimately an imperfect human being with limited understanding.

For example: the Bible says very plainly, in **2 Corinthians 6:14**, "**Do not be yoked together with unbelievers....**"

This is God's desire. It's fairly clear.

Except does this apply to marriage? That's how I've heard it applied all my life.

Does it apply *just* to marriage? What about business partnerships?

Well, there are a lot of different kinds of business partnerships. Does this apply to my employment, or my investments, or both?

And if I apply it to marriage, what if both my fiancé and I love God, but there's a big gap in spiritual maturity?

This is what happened to me, actually — Kristina was a very mature Christian when we got married, and I was ... well, what you see is what you get.

But you see the difficulty.

I can't just lift a passage out of the Scriptures and lay it over my situation like a magic cloak, where the answer to my question is revealed in the folds of the fabric or something.

The Bible is not a Ouija board.

The Bible is just my foundation — it's where I learn about the heart of God, where I learn about God's desires.

The Bible is not going to tell me the name of some "special someone" God has all picked out for me.

It's not going to reveal the perfect job for me.

That's predicting the future, and predicting the future is out of my realm.

So how can I make this decision and not be paralyzed with dread?

What good does it do me to have this amazing, omniscient God if he won't even tell me whether this is the person I'm supposed to marry or not?

* * *

You know, sometimes I do hear people say God spoke to them — "God told me to" do this or that.

What's up with that?

How can I know if it's God speaking to me?

I can give you a very clear, straightforward answer to this question.
 If it's God speaking to you, you will know. There will be no question in your mind.
 If God decides you're facing a decision in which he wants to orchestrate a specific outcome, his intervention in your decision-making process will absolutely get your attention.

Look what happened to Paul the apostle. He's riding along on the road to Damascus and *blam!* God knocks him off his feet, blinds him, and talks to him in an audible voice.

There was no question in Paul's mind that this was God.

Look what happened to Moses: comes upon a bush that burns and burns but doesn't burn up, and he hears a voice. No question: that's God.

The one time God spoke to somebody and they weren't sure who it was, he kept talking until the person finally got it.

That was Samuel — and Samuel at the time was just a little boy, so I guess we can cut him some slack.

Bottom line: I never have to fear that God is speaking to me and I've missed it.

When God speaks, I will listen, whether I like it or not.

If I'm wondering whether God is telling me something, then he isn't.

If there's any doubt in my mind, then it's not God talking to me.

God is never frustrated trying to get people to know he's speaking.

He may be frustrated because people ignore him, or discount the importance of what he's saying.

He may be frustrated because people don't believe him, don't trust him — like Gideon putting out his fleece.

But God never has a problem getting through to us when he wants to.

If God wants to interrupt human history and intervene in your life to make something happen, he has demonstrated that he has all the power he needs for doing exactly that.

He got Gideon's attention. He got Paul straightened out spiritually. He got Moses on track rescuing the people of Israel. He kept the baby Jesus alive when King Herod was trying to kill him — the list goes on.

* * *

So then — how can I choose within God's perfect will?

Here's the answer: There is no such thing.

If I say I am in God's perfect will, I'm fooling myself.

If I say I'm doing God's perfect will, I'm deceiving myself.

I'm not perfect, and I'm not going to achieve perfection.

OK, then, how can I choose that one perfect marriage partner — that one perfect job — that one perfect choice that God has intended for me?

Well, bad news: there is no perfect husband. (Just ask any wife!)

There is no certain person who, if you find them, that's the perfect marriage partner for you.

There is no certain perfect job to take, no certain perfect church to join, no certain perfect location to locate in.

There is no certain perfect choice to make, where you're in God's perfect will, and if you choose otherwise, you're in his acceptable will, or out of his will.

God hasn't hidden the one perfect choice out there in the world somewhere, and now he's sitting back and waiting to see if I can figure out all the clues and wind up with the right answer.

Sure, if I make one decision, I may wind up having an easier time of it than if I make a different decision.

Marrying a Christian is going to simplify things, compared to if I marry an antagonistic atheist.

(I've known some pretty cute antagonistic atheists — but it would wind up being difficult, I'm sure.)

Yet even winding up with the simplest situation isn't necessarily God's preferred outcome.

God is not all about making my life easy.

God is about making my life worthwhile.

Sometimes God calls me to choose something that turns out to be difficult, but valuable.

So if there's no certain perfect choice, how do I decide?

If God isn't knocking me off my donkey and striking me blind or speaking through a burning bush or giving me a certain roll of the dice or turning my fleece wet or dry or whatever — if he's not telling me his desire, then how can I know what he desires?

Here's what God says, in **Psalm 37:4**: **“Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.”**

Look at what this really says.

If I “delight myself in the Lord,” I'm looking for what he desires. I acknowledge that what God desires will be the best for me.

I'm trusting him to be taking care of me. I believe him to be telling me the truth when he says he's going to give me his best.

If I really get this, I relax. I enjoy life. I experience a life of “delight.”

And then, the second part of the statement says, if I'm living this way — delighting myself in his provision for me — then he'll give me the desires of my heart.

This doesn't mean he'll give me whatever I want — I know this isn't true, because I demonstrate it every day. God doesn't give me everything I want.

What this passage is saying is that God is the one giving me my desires.

If I'm delighting in him, acknowledging that what he desires will be best for me, then the desires that I feel will be desires *he* gave me.

God is saying, “Doug, trust me as your source, and I'll be the one giving you the desires you're feeling.”

This means I can relax in my decision-situation, and make my choice, and trust God to take care of me and make something good out of it.

Of course there's stuff indicated in the pages of Scripture that won't qualify as God's will, won't fall under the category of "what God's heart longs for."

So I can't go there.

And there's stuff that, even though it's not explicitly indicated in the Bible, just churns my gut to think about doing it.

So I can't go there either.

But unless there's some prohibition in the Bible, or God clearly speaks to me about it, or I just can't get a sense of peace about it, then I'm free.

Free to do what I like — because God is guiding my likes and dislikes.

He is planting desires in my heart — as his response to my trusting him.

I need to understand that God does not want to be my slave master.

He wants to be my father.

He doesn't not want me to function as his slave.

He wants me to function as his son.

The goal of a parent is not to produce a child who can't make decisions for himself.

If my child is 25 years old and every evening my phone rings and that young adult is running down a list of the day's decisions for Dad to check off on, I haven't succeeded as a father.

Dad, the big chair in my living room is wearing through on the arms; I'm thinking about either re-upholstering, or maybe getting a slipcover, or maybe just getting a new chair.

But if I get a different chair, should I buy something new or go for used?

And how reliable do you think it will be to buy one on eBay?

I'm not really sure about my budget — what can I afford?

I've created a helpless — or paranoid — or at the very least dysfunctional young adult.

The idea of parenting that child was, over the course of 18 years or so, to help him come to understand the desires of my heart for him — to help him come to understand what was best for him — to give him the confidence to make decisions for himself, and respond to adversity in mature ways.

This is how God parents us too.

In fact, **Philippians 2:12,13** tells me that God will give me both the desire and the power to do his will.

But does God intend to designate a specific person for you to marry? Probably not. As you delight in him, he will give you a heart's desire for someone who can turn out to be pretty enriching to spend your life with.

Does God intend to manipulate you into selecting a certain car to drive, or a certain job to accept, or a certain pair of socks to wear tomorrow?

Probably not. If he has a strong desire for the argyle socks over the striped socks, he can very easily wake you up in the middle of the night and speak to you in an audible voice.

If it's crucial for you to choose the job in Houston over the job in Salt Lake, he can very easily make it crystal-clear to you.

But if he's not, then you are free. Free to choose. Free to enjoy the decision-making process.

Free to make a list of pro's and con's if that's how you decide stuff best.

Free to ask your friends and family and have long conversations about it if that's how you decide stuff best.
Free to flip a coin if that's what you want.
Free to enjoy life.

To walk with God means being a responsible person.
I can make decisions, and I can take responsibility for them.
I will not always choose in a way that makes life easy or pleasant or profitable.
But I can make my choices with a certain sense of peace because I know that God is working behind the scenes in everything.

How a situation plays out is not God's fault. I made my choice, there are consequences, that's life.

But being free to choose makes me human.
It's what makes me alive.

And besides that, I love knowing **“that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28).**

* * *

What's God's plan for my life? Don't know. Can't tell what it is, till after it's over, but it's gonna be good.

What's God's will for my life? That I would love him, and love people.
Everything else is just details.