

# Want Guidance? Get Wisdom

Jon Ball, May 2005

Have you ever felt like a rat in a maze, wondering how to find the right path—God’s will? Do you ever worry that you’ll miss meeting the right person to marry, or making the right career move?

How do we discern God’s will for our lives? How do we hear his voice? What is God calling us to do? Maybe we all struggle with these questions. If we only knew what God wanted us to do, we feel, then we could make the right choices. But to our dismay reality never seems that clear cut. So how do we make decisions without that clear, compelling certainty?

Listen to the good advice of the wise man: “The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom, and whatever else you get, get insight” (Proverbs 4:7, NRSV).

This verse initially struck me as meaningless: “The beginning of wisdom is this: get wisdom” sounds like “tangerines are tangerines.” Actually, it is deeply helpful. Wisdom is the difference between a life well lived and one that ends up on the rocks. Wise people choose well, foolish people choose poorly. Our circumstances vary, but over a lifetime our wise or foolish choices add up to a whole lot. The wise prosper and fools end up with disaster!

## False Views of God and His Will

Many Christians feel paralyzed and frightened because they hold false views of God’s will. Our understanding of God and his will makes a crucial difference. Before we look at discerning God’s will and calling for us, let me expose four common myths—actually dangerous ways of thinking about God.

**A Rat in the Maze.** Let’s go back to that feeling of being rat in a maze. You have to find the one right path through the maze. You’re faced with a series of choices in life, and if you find God’s will you get the goodies. Better not mess up, though, because you don’t want the electric shock! Many of us hold that view of God’s will. But I do not believe that it’s a biblical view. When was the last time one of your friends was zapped by lightning for going the wrong way?

Dallas Willard, in *Hearing God*, says God’s will is more like the will of human parents for their children. As a

## Proverbs 4:7-13

The beginning of wisdom is this: Get wisdom,  
and whatever else you get, get insight.

Prize her highly, and she will exalt you;  
she will honor you if you embrace her.

She will place on your head a fair garland;  
she will bestow on you a beautiful crown.”

Hear, my child, and accept my words,  
that the years of your life may be many.

I have taught you the way of wisdom;  
I have led you in the paths of uprightness.

When you walk, your step will not be hampered;  
and if you run, you will not stumble.

Keep hold of instruction; do not let go;  
guard her, for she is your life.

dad, I can relate to this idea. My kids have many choices when they play in their rooms. They can build block castles, play house with dolls, or color pictures, and be well within my will for them as their father. They may even go into the living room or back yard. I have not laid out one path for them to figure out. I won’t punish them for playing with the wrong toy at the wrong time! On the other hand, they may not play boats in the toilet or carry around kitchen knives. Those activities are outside my will.

The Bible does not exhort us to figure out the right path or else be zapped. It exhorts us to get wisdom—in other words, to learn how to live within the boundaries of God’s will.

**Finding “The One.”** “I’m looking for that perfect someone, the person God has for me to marry.” Have you ever heard that? This romantic myth pervades our movies and songs . . . and fundamentally, it’s a view of God’s will. Someone out there has been destined for you by heaven, and you better hope you find that one! Otherwise you’re doomed to a bad marriage.

This same worldview applies to other decisions, as well. You had better choose the right major, the right job, the right church, the one destined for you.

It's like the assumption in the old jazz classic. Can you spot it?

*It had to be you, it had to be you,  
I wandered around and finally found  
The somebody who  
Could make me be true,  
And could make me be blue . . .*

As if my faithfulness depends upon who I marry! The biblical view is quite the opposite, as illustrated, for example, by the stories of Hosea and Ruth. Hosea marries a prostitute, and though she repeatedly abandons him for other men, he remains faithful to her—a model of God's faithfulness to his people. Faithfulness is a character quality, a fruit of the Spirit, not the product of a compatible match.

The beautiful episode in Ruth 2 and 3 illustrates a wise way to choose a spouse. Ruth sees the character of Boaz in his actions towards her: courtesy, generosity, hospitality, kindness. The story emphasizes his godliness, not that it's a match pre-ordained by heaven.

Don't focus on *finding* the right person but on *being* the right person. Don't waste your energy looking for that perfect someone. Invest it in becoming a marriageable person. That takes time and effort, but you'll greatly improve your chances of a strong marriage. In the process you'll also learn how to tell a marriageable person—you'll get wisdom for choosing a marriageable spouse.

In the same way, work on being a teachable student, an employable worker, and an active member of your Christian community. In other words, work on getting wisdom. Don't sweat so much about "finding the right one" when it comes to major, job or church.

**But Am I Called?** I've heard students say, "Is God calling me to this discipleship conference?" or "How do I know if it's God's will for me to go to Bible Study this week?" Some people spend lots of time looking for a sign for each decision or "putting a fleece before the Lord." Certainly this has a biblical basis. Gideon, in Judges 6:36-40, puts out a fleece to verify that God wants him to do something that seems exceedingly

foolish, and God gives the sign he requests.

I am not suggesting we should not seek to God's direction through signs or hearing his voice; in fact, I strongly urge everyone I can to learn how to hear God and obey his voice. A personal relationship with God depends upon it. That's not the myth.

The problem is that the enemy would like to trap us in a misunderstanding. We are God's children, but sometimes we act as if we are to remain babies. No! The New Testament authors urge us that "we are to grow up," (Eph. 4:15) and to "become mature," (1 Cor. 14:20, Heb. 5:12-6:1). God wants us to relate to him as adult children.

At an early age my children need explicit, step by step instructions: "It's bedtime. Put on your pajamas—*after* you take off your clothes, and your shoes too. And change your undies. Then turn off the lights and get under the covers." It's appropriate for a new believer to ask whether God wants them to attend a conference or Bible Study, but I hope they will soon learn that Scripture and community are in the center of God's will: they don't need a special call. Wisdom says to practice regular meeting with God's people to study his word.

But imagine if my goal as a dad was that my children, at age eighteen, would wake up each morning and pick up a schedule from me with every fifteen minutes of their day's activities listed out. How would you describe our relationship? Perhaps controlling, stunting, oppressive, and certainly dysfunctional. Neither is God's goal to tell us every next step before we take it. Gideon needed confirmation for a bold new step of faith—and God gave it to him; but we do not need a fleece to know whether to go to church or not.

Is calling a biblical concept? Moses and David were not called by God to be shepherds, Jesus received no call to be a carpenter, Peter to be a fisherman, nor Paul to be a tentmaker. The Bible primarily uses "calling" to refer to God calling us to himself, as Jesus did when he said, "Follow me." Mark continues, "And immediately he called them; and they . . . followed him" (Mk 1:16-20).

Occasionally a calling is an assignment: Abraham was called not to a job, but to a place; or more specifically,

to the task of leaving his home and going to a place God would show him (Gen. 12:1). Paul was chosen to preach to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15-16). A few of us may receive a specific “calling,” like Paul, but that often has little bearing on choosing a job, a spouse, or a church. However, we’re all called to be disciples of Jesus, which means learning from him and obeying him wherever we find ourselves in life.

**Something Must Be Wrong.** Sometimes we wonder, “Why is everything going wrong?! I thought I was in God’s will!” Another myth says that if I’m in God’s will, life will be hunky-dory. If I’m suffering, I must have sinned or made a bad choice somewhere.

This myth deconstructs easily: look at Jesus. Didn’t he follow God’s will perfectly? At the end of his life he told the Father, “I glorified you on earth by finishing the work that you gave me to do” (John 17:4). And where did God’s will lead him? To the cross. Jesus’ life is the rule for us, not the exception. Peter, Stephen, and Paul all suffered profoundly, not because they were outside God’s will, but precisely because they were in it—to the degree that they could sing in prison and rejoice while being stoned!

### **False Views of Life**

Have you watched CSI? I love detective stories. I also love algebra problems. (I am not making this up. Call me sick, but I was a math major.) Dorothy L. Sayers changed my worldview for good with her brilliant article “Problem Picture.” She says we often approach life as if it is a detective story or algebra problem, but life is not like a problem which can be solved like that.

As the creator of the popular Lord Peter Wimsey mystery series, Sayers explains that a detective story always has a solution, one and only one solution, which is perfect and complete, and which is solvable in the same terms as the problem is set. That is how screenwriters construct the story. At the end of the hour, the crime has been solved and all the loose ends are tied up.

Those who approach life like a detective story or an algebra problem are badly mistaken. The wisdom of the Bible gives us a very different view. Genesis 1 tells us that we are created in the image of God—the Creator God, the eternal Artist. Therefore, life is an art. Art is the process of creating something new. Life’s problems are an entirely different kind from

those of mystery novels and math books.

Say that I gave you this problem: paint a picture illustrating foolishness and wisdom. That problem does not have only one solution. Any solution can’t be called “complete,” and it wouldn’t wrap up every loose end neatly.

### **What is Real?**

A critical element of art is learning your materials. Wisdom is knowing reality. Reality means what we have to deal with—the materials of life. An artist must learn the materials and tools of the craft well in order to create beautiful, unique works of art. I do a little wood carving, and I learned quickly how critical it is that I pay attention to the grain of the wood! One careless cut can ruin hours of work.

Evidently marble is similar. A magnificent, massive block of white unflawed marble was quarried near Florence, by the sculptor Agostino di Duccio in 1463. Delighted, he set to work with hammer and chisels. Tragically, because of the veins in the marble, he gouged a gaping hole in the side of the block. Ruined, the 18-foot stone stood abandoned as a monument to his folly. No sculptor would touch it for nearly forty years, until a twenty-six year old artist began to examine it. Three painstaking years later, Michelangelo finished carving David, now one of the world’s most awe-inspiring works of art. You can see from David’s odd stance where the gouge had been.

Someone has said, “You can’t go against the grain of the universe without getting splinters.” Learn the rules of crafting a life that works well! Get wisdom. In the end it doesn’t really matter whether you’re the CEO of Citibank or a Subway sandwich artist. It matters that you are a servant. It doesn’t matter whether you earn \$7,000 or \$700,000. It matters that you’re a steward, that you live sacrificially, that you store up treasure in heaven. It doesn’t matter whether you work for Arthur Andersen or InterVarsity as much as it matters that you work with integrity, that you work for justice.

A friend recently told me about a friend of his, hired as an accountant for a major firm. As he progressed up the corporate ladder, he was taught “how we do things here”—little ways to make the bottom line look better. He refused to compromise his integrity. At first his company applied increasing pressure, and then

persecution, hoping to force him to quit. Finally, they fired him. Two years later during the recent spate of high-profile accounting scandals, the firm rehired him to clean up its mess. He asked the man who had fired him, “Why are you hiring *me*?” He answered, “You’re the only person I know I can trust.” Wisdom means learning the universe will not change to accommodate my desires. In the end, character counts.

### What’s God Saying To Me?

Faced with major life decisions, we would *really* like to know God’s will for us. We hear a cacophony of voices influencing our decisions including parents, professors, and peers. Ancient Christians teach us that three main categories of voices compete with God’s voice: the world, the flesh, and the devil. We must learn to recognize God’s voice to get wisdom.

How do you hear God’s voice? Many books have been written on this subject, so I will only touch lightly on it. I heartily recommend Willard’s *Hearing God*, which has helped me tremendously.

God speaks in many ways. But if we do not expect him to speak we probably won’t hear him, like a radio that is not tuned in to a station. It may broadcast day and night but never be heard.

So how does God speak to us? Elijah looked for God in the hurricane, earthquake, and fire, but God spoke in a still, small voice (1 Kings 19:11-13). A friend of mine visited several college campuses to discern where she would work on InterVarsity staff, but she kept getting an impression of the name of a far away Muslim country. She spent two years there planting a new student movement, and met God powerfully during that time.

Jonah also heard the still, small voice—and went to a far away country to *escape* God (Jonah 1:1-3). Sometimes I wonder why I can’t hear God’s voice, then realize that I have not obeyed what I *have* heard God say.

God speaks to us in other ways: *the Bible* offers the clear, sure wisdom of God, and though it’s not usually be tailored to our specific situation, we gain confidence by knowing the clear boundaries of God’s will it lays out.

*Advisors, mentors, and our community* have incredible

wisdom, but we seldom seek it. “Without counsel plans go wrong, but with many advisors they succeed” (Prov. 15:22). Don’t overlook your *parents* as advisors! You may not like their wonderful plan for your life, but they will probably surprise you with perspectives, questions, or experiences which turn out to be gems for you.

Our *passions, gifts and personality* often offer more personal clues as to God’s leading. God will tend to lead us, over time, towards what he uniquely crafted us for, though it often feels like we’re on the scenic route. The *pattern of God’s work* in our lives can bring clarity about the next step; spend some time reflecting on your life to see what patterns emerge. *Life circumstances*, such as what job offers we get (or not), certainly provide direction as well.

In 1994 Dr. Elizabeth Glanville, assistant professor of leadership at Fuller Theological Seminary, started a list of different ways that people hear God, both in Scripture and in contemporary life. As of 2005 she has listed over 40 ways God speaks. Why should we be surprised? God is a person, and more creative than any human being. Of course he is not limited in how he speaks!

### Growing Maturity

The past two years have been quite difficult for me spiritually. I would describe them as a desert season. Since 2003 I have rarely heard God speaking. At first I wondered if it were because of disobedience in my life? But he has not revealed any major sin to me. Have I not been listening? No, I’ve been quite eager to hear. Then it dawned on me that I probably don’t need God to tell me, “Your baby is crying. Go change his diaper and feed him.” I don’t need special guidance to do most of my job—I already know what to do. I can live within his will even without explicit guidance for most things.

The radio analogy breaks down here, because a station broadcasts continually. God is a person, and just like I don’t speak non-stop to my friends, he doesn’t speak non-stop to me. He can choose to be silent. And he may not tell me why.

Older, wiser friends have given me a helpful perspective: If God aims at my maturity, he may choose to let me make more choices as I grow wiser and more mature, just as I let my children choose

when to go to the bathroom and what to wear, once they can make those decisions well. Sometimes I'll even let them make less than perfect choices so that they experience the consequences and grow wiser. Believe it or not, God wants you to become wise enough that he can give you whatever you want. The Psalmist thought so, at least: "Take delight in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart" (Ps. 37:4). I like the favorite prayer of an elder in my church: "Lord, change the desires of my heart to your desires, so that you can give me the desires of my heart!"

Finally, after reading Scripture, seeking wise counsel, reflecting on my life, my passions, my gifts, and my circumstances, after praying and diligently listening, often I'm left with several options. God says, "Now *you* choose." He wants me to decide.

I often wish for obvious decisions, with neat and tidy pros and cons: 95% in this direction, 5% in the other. Real decisions often feel more like 60-40 choices, or even 52-48. Frustratingly, we usually face situations more like this: One job you're looking at excites you, uses your training and would challenge you, but it's far from anyone you know. A second job, in the same town as a Christian community you know and trust, does not pay nearly enough to cover your student loans. A third pays well, but has nothing to do with your passions, gifts, or abilities. Pick one! (My dad's advice, which I've found good, is to decide a few days before the deadline and pray, "Lord, give me peace if this is a good decision.")

These decisions can be excruciating. But do we really wish it were different? Any child can make the easy decisions. A world of obvious choices would be a desert world of no adventures, a life requiring no faith, barely worth being called life. Our Master knows what we need for the journey and has designed everything for our great good.

### **In the Hands of the Supreme Artist**

And his best promise is this: "Lo, I am with you always" (Matt. 28:20). Let me illustrate why I love this promise best with a parable, an urban legend about the great pianist Ignacy Paderewsky.

The parents of a young boy had enrolled him in piano lessons, and hoping to inspire him, took him to hear Paderewski in concert. During intermission the boy

wandered away. He found his way to the only familiar object, the piano keyboard, without anyone noticing. He sat down, and heads turned toward the stage as he began to plunk out "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" with one finger. Imagine his parents' flood of shame and fear! Before anyone could move, Paderewsky stepped back on stage. The crowd held their breath, wondering what the great musician would do—scold the boy? Remove him gently?

Paderewsky came up behind the child and whispered, "Keep playing." Reaching his left hand out he began a bass line underneath the simple notes. With the other hand he began a countermelody high above, and soon the crowd was blinking back tears as the world-famous artist and young boy created amazingly beautiful music together.

Our God is the master artist. He loves to make beautiful and glorious masterpieces out of our childish notes on the piano. So do not hesitate to pick out the notes you know, if only with one finger. The One who created Michelangelo can make even our mistakes into awe-inspiring works of genius. Do not be afraid. Life's an adventure! Enjoy it. And I am sure that the master craftsman, "who began a good work in you, will bring it to completion on the day of Christ" (Phil. 1:6).