

Discerning God's Will

In his book, *Just Do Something*, Kevin DeYoung starts by posing a question. “If God loves me and has a wonderful plan for my life, then why doesn’t He tell me what it is? Have you ever felt that way?”

Kevin goes on to list questions many of us ask like the following:

There are so many decisions to make and none of the answers seem clear. What should I do with my summer? What should my major be? What kind of career do I want? Do I want a career or should I stay home? Should I get married? Whom should I marry? Do I want to have kids? If so, how many? Where should I go to college? Should I go to grad school? What job should I take? Should I take the offer that I got but it wasn't my dream job? Should I be a missionary? Should I be a pastor? Should I rent or buy a house? Where should I go to church? How should I serve my church or my fellowship?¹

Can you relate to these questions? The reason why we want to know the answers to these questions is because we authentically want to please God! And, if we are honest, we also want our lives to go as well as possible and we think if God will just tell us it will probably lead towards a good life.

We have these questions and often we are **paralyzed by all of the potential options** we have in our culture today. There are hundreds of possible career opportunities. There are thousands of possible mates. It seems like having a plethora of choices would be liberating, but in actuality it has proved to be agonizing and debilitating at times. Now we have terms like “**FOMO**”, fear of missing out. Because we know that to say yes to one thing is to say no to 100 other things. We know to commit to one relationship limits the possibilities of all the other options of people we could meet in our next season of life.

As a result of all of the potential options—and the anxiety that can bring—we come to God and **we want Him to just tell us what to do**. We don’t just want Him to tell us, we want Him to tell us in a way that is unmistakable. And if we are really honest, part of the reason we just want Him to tell us is because **we don’t want to carry the responsibility** of making decisions ourselves. We don’t want to think we could have messed up our lives. And if God will just tell us, well, then it is His responsibility and we are just being obedient.

What if there is a different way? What if God’s will isn’t so mysterious?

Here is the big revolutionary part of this article: **Most of the time, God’s way of guidance is not through subjective or crisis experiences. His usual way of guidance is through wisdom!** He guides us through transforming our heart and mind through the power of His Spirit and through the instruction of Scripture. Instead of just feeding us all the answers, He gives us His heart and His mind so that we can make good decisions in wisdom.

Kevin DeYoung writes “Wisdom is the difference between knowing a **world class professor** who can write your papers for you and studying under a world-class professor so that you can write papers that he would write.” Too many of us want God to be the world-class professor that does our work for us. God wants us to sit at His feet and read

¹*Just Do Something*, Kevin DeYoung, page 17

His Word, commune with Him through the Spirit, so that we can live a life in the image of His Son and walk in wisdom.

What I am saying is that **God doesn't expect us to grope around in the dark** for some hidden will or direction. Our lives are **not a tightrope act** where we have to nail every step of the way or we mess up our lives and plunge to our demise. We don't see that anywhere in Scripture. But instead, we should start looking to our glorious and loving God, and know that He is the one who holds our future therefore we can trust Him even when we don't know what that future may hold. What I believe God does expect is this: **He expects us to trust Him and be wise**. This means as people submitted to God, we can take a deep breath, walk in wisdom and trust God. This changes God's will from a perspective of fear to a perspective of faith.

So how do we deal with the places in the Scripture where we see **God showing up in miraculous events and speaking to His people in surprising ways**? That is a great question. For instance, we see **Paul** get a vision of a Macedonia man to go to Macedonia. We see **Peter** have a vision to go to Cornelius' house. We see **Philip** have an angelic visitation to leave a revival and go into the desert to reach one man—an Ethiopian Eunuch.

You may be thinking, "but don't you believe that God still does that?" Yes, I do. I definitely believe that the gifts of the Spirit are for today. I believe God still gives visions. But here is what you will notice as you read the book of Acts. **These people were not seeking visions, angels or other extra-ordinary means of guidance** when they had them. From what we see elsewhere in Scripture, Paul made decisions just like the rest of us—through wisdom and faith. In other words, **miraculous guidance was given during times when wisdom alone may not have led them where God wanted them to go**.

Peter needed a vision to go against the Jewish custom and enter into the house of a Gentile. Paul needed a vision to change his current strategy of going through Asia Minor. Philip needed a divine intervention to get him to leave a revival to go into the desert to reach one person. Wise thinking may not have been sufficient to lead any of these three in the direction God wanted them to go. So, He intervened to get them to where He wanted them.

So, here is what we can rest in: As we walk in wisdom submitted to God, if we need a supernatural event to fulfill something that God has for us, He will give us what we need when we need it. But this is not the norm and not what the people in the book of Acts were seeking when it happened.

When we face a decision there are three options:

1. That God doesn't really care which way we choose. Either option would be good.
2. He does care and He will lead you through the path of wisdom.
3. He does care and will intervene in a specific way if wise thinking isn't enough to get you there.

So, now let's look at how we can use wisdom to make decisions—**How does God guide us in wisdom? What is the path of wisdom?**

1. He guides us through Scriptures. Proverbs 1:5 tells us that we can receive guidance from the Scriptures. The fact is, we know 99% of God's will for our lives. Throughout the book of Proverbs often uses the image of the path—going on the right path, **knowing the right path**—but every time it mentions the path it is speaking of **how to live morally**.

So, when choosing a major or career we look to Scripture. You are not going to get a lot specifically laid out, but you do get some principles. **Can you glorify God in it?** For most legal jobs the answer to this question is yes. Another question may be, **“Can I provide for a family with it?”**, because 1 Tim 5:8 says, we should provide for our family. We also know that God cares about our involvement in the body of Christ—so we ask if there is a **good local church** in the city of your employment. These are some examples of some of the principles we glean from the Scriptures.

2. He guides us through our wise thinking and reflection. (Proverbs 20:5) This can look a simple as pro/con list for what you are considering. As you make decisions related to a career let me tell you two things you should consider.

Desires of your sanctified heart: (Romans 12:1-2) Psalm 37:4 talks about this. As we delight ourselves in the Lord, it says that He will give us the desires of our heart. So, as we walk with Him, **He begins to download certain passions or desires.** And as our hearts are transformed, then we can start to trust our hearts more. When we think about God’s will for our career, we need to pay attention to our desires. What we do **enjoy**, what gives us **energy?** Some people love languages, others business, others sciences, others psychology or kids. God may have wired or rewired you with that passion. We should pay attention to that.

Our giftings. (1 Peter 4:10) If we believe that God gives us all specific gifts, we should really consider what we are good at. When I was in college, I ended up being a business major because it came easy to me. Not only did I like it, but I got it. Now, foreign languages that is a different story all together. What are you good at?

3. God guides us on the basis of wise counsel. (Proverbs 12:15, 15:22, 19:20, 20:18) Time after time in Proverbs we are told the wisdom of getting wise counsel. I believe one of the problems in our individualistic culture is that we often attempt to discern God’s will on our own. We have this picture of going into our prayer closet, or even going on a personal retreat and discerning God’s will, and then coming out and telling people what God told us.

But the problem with this is that it removes the discernment process from the context of Christian community and mentors. Over and over again, we see in Proverbs the folly of not involving our community—family, friends, mentors—in our decision making. But, when we bring other **people who are wise, people of faith and people who know us well**, into the process we will make wiser decisions. Not only will we be more likely to make wiser decisions but we will also have less angst and emotional upheaval in the process, because we won’t feel like it is all resting upon our shoulders.

When you do get counsel and wisdom, **don’t start the conversation by saying “God told me...and I have a peace”**, because at that point, you are pitting your mentor against God. You are really looking for a rubber stamp of approval not wisdom and counsel. It renders them unable to give any feedback. Instead, lay out in detail the situation that you are considering and humbly ask them what they think. If the community that knows you and loves you cannot affirm your sense of direction, you should probably back off.

In his book, *When the Church was a Family*, Joseph Hellerman, talked about a great idea that his church implements. When they have someone in their church making a big decision, they get people from their church family together for what they call a **“wisdom council”**. They will invite a pastor or leader of the church, some close friends from the church, and maybe a respected older couple from the church who have made a similar decision before and they get together for dinner. Over the course of the dinner the

people share about the decision that needs to be made, and the wisdom council openly discusses the pros and cons associated with each option. Then they pray together. What a great way to walk in community and wisdom!

4. God guides us through Providence. Proverbs 19:21 says, “Many are the plans of a man’s heart but it is the Lord’s purposes that prevail.” There are times **God guides us by putting us in the middle of circumstances that makes it possible** for us to go in a direction. For example, we have sent many Chi Alpha alumni to the mission field in Cairo, Egypt and Granada, Spain. The reason why many of them went to these locations is because in the Providence of God they were in Chi Alpha, and as their hearts began to desire to give a year on the mission field they were exposed to missionaries in Cairo, Egypt or Granada, Spain. As a result of our partnerships with these missionaries, these students went to the field and served with them. It was because of circumstances that this was made possible.

5. God guides through divine intervention. As I mentioned before, I do believe the gifts of the Spirit are for today and that God uses them to guide. However, I believe that it is not the norm and should not be the focus.

We should pray when making big decisions, but we don’t see people in the New Testament praying asking God to show them the future. We should pray for God to lead us in wise thinking—help us to have proper motives; help us not make decisions out of our insecurity and desire for esteem, or our love of money; help us to see accurately; help us to be honest with ourselves. We should pray for God to give us wisdom through wise counsel, to guide us by His providence, and yes, if that is not going to lead us in a place God desires us to go, then we keep our hearts open to Divine Intervention.

But what I often see is that people tend to think God only guides through this one means. The point of this article is to say “No, **God guides us in many ways**. Many of us God has been guiding for years and years, giving us desires and giftings. He has been arranging providential circumstances and leading you through the Scriptures. He holds our future and yes, we can trust that He will intervene if necessary, but not as a default method.

Remember, when we face a decision there are three options:

1. That God doesn’t really care which way we choose. Either option would be good. We are free to choose!
2. He does care and He will lead you through the path of wisdom.
3. He does care and will intervene in a specific way if wise thinking isn’t enough to get you there.

Your life is not a tightrope act where you have to nail every step or you plunge to your demise. So, with this in mind, with hearts that are submitted to Jesus and open to the Spirit, we can walk through life not full of angst, pressure and fear, but we can take a deep breath and by the grace of God we can walk in wisdom and faith!

Further Reading

Just Do Something by Kevin DeYoung

When the Church was a Family, Chapter 8 “Decision Making in the Family of God” Pg 163-181

Scripture Reading

Questions:

CHI ALPHA DISCIPLESHIP TOOL

1. Before reading this article, when you thought about making major decisions what emotions did you experience?
2. How have you seen God lead you in the past? How did He do it? What step in the Path of Wisdom was the most influential?
3. Is there an area right now that you are seeking guidance? If so, take time to walk through the path of wisdom and discuss it:
 - What Scriptural principles apply?
 - What do you discover through wise thinking?
 - What does faith filled, wise counsel say?
 - What circumstances are before you?
 - Has there been some supernatural gift of the Spirit related to this decision?
 - Finally, what is holding you back from making a decision? What do you need to know that will help you move forward? (We need to move from the nebulous feelings of being unsure to being specific about what we are unsure about.)
4. What is your biggest take away from the article?