

# YOU TEACH VOL.3 STUDY GUIDE

## WHAT IS GOD'S WILL?

### **YOU TEACH: THE MAIN POINT**

Knowing God's will for our lives may be as easy as knowing what we like and don't like, what we're passionate about and not passionate about, or what we're good at and not good at. If things we enjoy or want to do aren't contrary to what the Bible teaches, then they very well could be God's will for our lives—those things that we're good at and make us smile (and make God smile).

### **YOU TEACH: THE BIG PICTURE**

How many people feel confident that they know God's will for their lives? Odds are, many simply do the best they can with what they have, but they may not feel too confident that they're truly experiencing God's will. If given the choice either to know or not to know God's will, it seems logical that most would probably choose to know. After all, who doesn't want to know the answers to questions such as...

- What college should I attend?
- What major should I choose so I'll be ready for the career path that's best for me?
- Whom should I date and eventually marry?
- Where should I live?

Knowing the answers to these big questions is definitely a part of discerning and experiencing God's will for our lives. However, it's also true that part of God's will for us is wrapped up in so-called "smaller" questions—those everyday dilemmas that help fill in the details around the big-picture stuff, as well as a long string of very good small decisions centered on God's will. Navigating these will almost certainly lead us to discern God's will on a grander scale:

- Should I try out for the basketball team or the soccer team?
- Should I have the burger or the salad for dinner?
- Should I download that new song or not?
- Should I call her? Email him? Text her? Talk to him in person?

It's been said that God loves us and has a plan for our lives—but what if we mess up on a decision? Can God's plan still come to fruition? If each situation, each decision—big or small—is part of God's will for our lives, then how are we supposed to know what is and what isn't in God's will—especially when one option is no better than another? Tough stuff!

These are certainly worthy questions to consider. But it's possible that we'd go mad trying to figure out every detail in regard to God's will, as if there's only one right answer and the rest are “wrong.”

Could it be that discerning God's will simply boils down to what we want to do, what we enjoy, or what we desire? Instead of laboring over what dressing to put on your salad, could it be that God's will is simply based on what tastes good to you that day?

If you're worried about which college to attend, God could be thinking something like this:

**Choice A is great and so is B. However, what I'm primarily interested in is who you'll choose to be as a person—regardless of where you choose to go to college. I desire to bless you in either place, as long as you continue seeking me with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength. That being said, where do you want to go? I plan on being at both campuses, so just choose one. Wherever you go, I'll be with you to lead, guide, and direct your life.**

Certainly God never desires that we choose things contrary to biblical standards. God's will never violates God's Word. But Scripture doesn't speak to every issue we face. So in these hazy situations, it's perfectly okay to ask yourself questions such as:

- What do I want to do, and what do I enjoy doing?
- What am I interested in?
- What am I passionate about?
- What's my preference in this situation?

## YOU TEACH VOL. 3 OUTLINE · WHAT IS GOD'S WILL?

If it's true that God is our Creator who's woven the finest details into our beings, such as having taste aversions for some foods and pure joy for others, could it be that we may zero in on knowing and living God's will by simply knowing ourselves...by knowing our likes and dislikes—and being comfortable enough to admit them? It makes sense that the more we know ourselves as the created, the more likely we'll come to know our Creator—and our Creator's will for our lives.

God didn't create humans to be carbon copies who all like and dislike the same things and have the same tastes. After all, what may taste "right" to one person may not to another—yet both are completely in the will of God. Each person is simply living according to the desires that God has placed inside of her.

So, some of the big-picture questions can be broken down in this way:

- What college should I attend? (*Where do I want to go? Which place seems to be the best fit for me based on who I am and where my interests lie?*)
- What major should I choose so I'll be ready for the career path that's best for me? (*What am I interested in, good at, and passionate about? What do I value?*)
- Whom should I date and eventually marry? (*As I run after God with all of my heart, what other Christians are running at my same pace and in the same direction...and, of course, are attractive to me?*)
- Where should I live? (*Am I a beach person or a mountain person? Do I like the pace of the big city or the relaxed feel of rural areas?*)
- Should I try out for the basketball team or the soccer team? (*What interests me more?*)
- Should I have the burger or the salad for dinner? (*What sounds good to me today? Do I need more protein or more fiber?*)
- Should I download that new song or not? (*Are the lyrics healthy for me to dwell upon? Do they honor or dishonor God? Do they bring me closer to God or push me away from God? How will this song influence my decisions about who I am and who I want to be?*)
- Should I call her? Email him? Text her? Talk to him in person? (*What approach feels the most comfortable? Or maybe I need to take a risk and do something uncomfortable?*)
- Should I steal that item, cheat on that test, gossip about that person, lie to my parents, or participate in that illegal activity? (*No. God has already spoken about these things in Scripture, and God's will is clear. Case closed.*)

## YOU TEACH: THE BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE

The Bible has much to say about discerning and experiencing God's will. The Bible also has much to say about how God creates people and how sin has messed with people and how they choose to live. But before we unpack the biblical perspective on discerning the will of God, here are a few foundational biblical statements to consider:

- Although God has created us with preferences concerning tastes, likes, dislikes, passions, and desires, sin influences how we make choices. Thus, at times we struggle to discern choices that are both within God's will and in line with our desires, yet not influenced by sin. Followers of Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit, can and do struggle with sin that works against our finding God's will for our lives.

The apostle Paul writes in Romans 7, especially verses 21-25:

**So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.**

Likewise Jeremiah in chapter 17, verses 9-10:

**The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? "I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward everyone according to their conduct, according to what their deeds deserve."**

- Because of sin's influence in our lives and hearts, it's always good, right, and healthy to have accountability intentionally built into our lives to help us discern truth, consider wisdom, and see areas where sin may be influencing our decision-making process. Also, true accountability happens when those who know and love us have the freedom not simply to endorse our decisions and desires, but to speak to us in love about their understanding of the truth regarding any of our choices that lack wisdom or are in opposition to God's standards.

**Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed. (PROVERBS 15:22)**

**As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another. (PROVERBS 27:17)**

**There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. "For whom am I toiling," he asked, "and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?" This too is meaningless—a miserable business! Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their labor: If they fall down, they can help each other up. But pity those who fall and have no one to help them up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. (ECCLESIASTES 4:8-12)**

When such biblical perspectives are in place in our lives—and all choices to be acted upon are in line with Scripture—our discernment of God's will may shift to questions of preference, such as:

- What do I want to do, and what do I enjoy doing?
- What am I interested in?
- What am I passionate about?
- What's my preference in this situation?

When you're in this phase of determining God's will, at least three biblical texts are worth considering. The first is Psalm 139:13-18.

**For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. How precious to me are your thoughts, God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand—when I awake, I am still with you.**

This text speaks to God's attention to detail, precision, and intricacy when creating people. It reflects a God who meticulously weaves together each fine thread of life into unique masterpieces. The original language literally means God *embroidered* the details into our lives like a weaver sews a fine garment or colorful piece of cloth on a loom. The Israelites regarded "my inmost being" as the seat of one's desires and longings—the soul and mind and heart.

In addition, the Jews of the Old Testament believed "the secret place" as being the deepest concealment where God is completely focused on the prenatal fashioning of each person. This is God's private laboratory where the finest combinations of creation are put together. The language of the psalm reveals God's emotional and purposeful investment. Thus, nothing about God's creation is left to chance. All details have been thoughtfully included—right down to the taste buds embroidered on a person's tongue.

Now consider Psalm 37:3-5.

**Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Take delight in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this.**

Some scholars believe the author of Psalm 37 was at the twilight of his life. It seems he may have been looking back on the timeless faithfulness of God's provision and direction in his life. And God offers the same guidance to all people who choose to walk faithfully with him, rather than down the paths of wickedness that may seem beneficial for a season but ultimately lead to death.

This psalm is known as an instructional poem or wisdom psalm. Young Jews have learned it as part of their spiritual training—their education about how life with God is meant to work. (It's interesting to note that each stanza in the psalm begins with a different letter of the entire Hebrew alphabet—an

“alphabetic acrostic”—which perhaps helped young minds to memorize the psalm’s words and gain a better understanding of God’s will for their lives.)

This psalm calls us to make a choice regarding where we direct our emotions and desires in our search to find true fulfillment. Because God created us, those who choose to place their finite understanding and delight in the security of the infinite Creator who truly knows them are certain to find real fulfillment. This is only logical because the Creator knows what will satisfy a person’s true desires, and the Creator made the discovery of this information possible only by finding fulfillment in him. When the psalmist calls for people to “delight in the Lord,” the Hebrew words literally mean to live delicately and tenderly in our approach to the life we’ve been given. Instead of choosing with reckless abandon, we must cautiously and intentionally make every attempt to put our lives in sync with our Creator’s—to align the rhythms of our lives with the beat of God’s heart.

The psalmist also calls people to “commit your way to the Lord.” The Hebrew word for “commit” (*galal*) means “to roll upon another.” Thus, rather than simply going with the flow of society’s attempts to find happiness and success in life, we’re to roll that burden of desire off our shoulders and hearts and onto the life of our Creator. Such an act is one of deliberate trust drenched in the hope that Another knows more fully, completely, and with greater reward than we ever could in our own wisdom and understanding.

With these two passages from the book of Psalms in place, the third biblical text to consider is found in Paul’s letter to the Christians in Rome.

**Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is true worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (ROMANS 12:1-2)**

One insight worth mentioning is that the imagery surrounding the words in this text—such as *offer*, *holy*, *pleasing*, and *sacrifice*—is rooted in the Hebrew system of animal sacrifice for sins. These sacrificial gifts were brought to the altar of God and then no longer “owned” by the giver. Rather, a total and complete transfer of ownership was understood to have taken place—from humans to God. From created to Creator. In a sense, Psalm 139:13-18 has come full circle here, with the created *choosing* to give back to the Creator in a willing act of humble-yet-intentional worship. In fact, the language Paul uses in this offering of “your bodies” refers to our whole selves. Not a portion. Not 99.99 percent, but everything—100 percent of ourselves. And just as Psalm 139 notes that God has created us down to our tiniest details, we’re to offer back to God all of who God made us to be in the first place.

Paul goes on to suggest that such acts are not only worship, but also “spiritual acts of worship.” The Greek word used here for “spiritual” is *logikos*, from which the English word *logic* is derived. In other words, it makes sense that the things we enjoy, which aren’t sinful or against God’s Word, are clues to how God wants us to live in his will. After all, God created us for such purposes.

Paul goes on to speak about the importance of “being transformed by the renewing of your mind” in the overarching process of knowing and doing the will of God. The word for “transformed” in the original Greek is *metamorphoo*, from which the English word *metamorphosis* is derived. It means to change the outside to agree with what’s on the inside.

The mental aspect of knowing God’s will is of utmost importance. What Paul is saying in this text speaks to the intentional engagement of one’s mind when seeking God’s will. In other words, our emotions—while important—shouldn’t play the starring role in the drama of determining God’s will for our lives. Such engagement of a mind that’s consistently seeking God and doing the disciplined work of knowing God’s laws and nature, as they’re described in the Bible, leads to a greater capacity to “test and approve what God’s will is.”

Speaking of the latter phrase, the Greek word used here for “approve” is *dokimazo*. The depth and texture that this word brings to the verse is significant. It suggests that when we come to a place of understanding what God’s will is for our lives, we begin to agree with God about his desires for us. And even more, we also begin to put these desires into practice in such ways that they *become our desires*. This is just as God intended for his created beings. It echoes Psalm 37:4—“Take delight in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart.”

True worship means agreeing with God’s will in such a way that we not only nod in harmony with what we understand to be God’s desires for us, but we also choose to order our lives accordingly. Then we not only know God’s will, but we’re also living God’s will.

### **YOU TEACH: THE QUESTIONS TO PROCESS**

An important part of the learning system is to allow for everyone to process concepts and questions together. A healthy exchange of sharing and listening sparks new ideas and leads to more consequential growth. These questions are designed to help your group process and own the material from this lesson. Feel free to moderate the dialogue in directions pertinent to your group and encourage your group members to practice active listening when others are speaking. As the leader of your group, be proactive in asking others for feedback, insights, or different perspectives.

1. Is God’s will confusing? Why or why not?
2. What is a good first step in pursuing God’s will for your life? What biblical backing do you have for this thought process?
3. Have you ever felt discouraged while traveling along a certain road in your life—one that you once believed was God’s will for you, but for various reasons, didn’t seem like God’s will anymore? What was the outcome? Even though it may have been painful, could that whole experience still have been God’s will for you? Explain.

4. Read Psalm 139:13-18. What does knowing this do for you as you contemplate how much God loves you?
5. The Bible talks about getting “wise counsel” in order to understand how to live your life or discern God’s will. Do you have wisdom-filled people in your life?
6. What decision are you facing right now for which you need wisdom? Is this something you can share with the group?
7. What are your talents and gifts? How can these be used to honor God and to see God’s will at work in you?
8. Do you believe there’s only one path to God’s will being accomplished in your life? Several? An unlimited number of paths?
9. How much of a part does trust play in knowing God’s will?
10. Could any life circumstance that contradicts the Bible be God’s will?

### **YOU TEACH: THE PRAYERS TO PRAY**

Throughout the history of the church, followers of Jesus have recorded their prayers. The preserved prayers that follow can be echoed by those who pray to Jesus today. You can use these with your group as examples of how to pray authentically. The final prayer is intended as a prompt for you to finish the prayer in your own words.

**“O God, the true and only life, in whom and from whom and by whom are all good things that are good indeed; from whom to be turned is to fall, to whom to turn is to rise again; in whom to abide is to dwell for ever, from whom to depart is to die; to whom to come again is to revive, and in whom to lodge is to live: take away from me whatsoever thou wilt, so that thou give me only thyself.”**

**—THOMAS DEKKER, 1570–1632**

**“Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and all my will, all that I have and possess. Thou hast given them to me; to thee, O Lord, I restore them; all things are thine, dispose of**

**them according to thy will. Give me thy love and thy grace, for this is enough for me.”—IGNATIUS OF LOYOLA, 1491–1556**

**“O Lord, let me not henceforth desire health or life except to spend them for thee and with thee. Thou alone knowest what is good for me; do therefore what seemeth thee best. Give to me or take from me; conform my will to thine; and grant that, with humble and perfect submission, and in holy confidence, I may receive the orders of thine eternal providence; and may equally adore all that comes to me from thee, through Jesus Christ our Lord.”—BLAISE PASCAL, 1623–1662**

**“O God, what I really need to tell you today is...”**

## **YOU TEACH: THE HOMEWORK**

1. Have each person in the group make a list of the following:
  - Things they're good at
  - Things they're not good at
  - Things they like to do
  - Things they don't like to do
  - Things they're interested in
  - Things they're not interested in
  - Things they're passionate about
  - Things they're not passionate about

Challenge them to keep their lists in a place where they can easily refer to them as they make choices and try to discern God's will for their lives.

2. Make a list of people whom you consider wise, who know you well, and who have close

relationships with God. Then take time either to meet individually with these people or to call each of them this week and ask them to “speak into your life” about what they can visualize you becoming. Ask these people of influence and trust to tell you not only what they see you excelling at, but also how you might go about clarifying God’s will for your life. Finally, ask them to commit to pray for you—that you’d be a person who knows and does God’s will throughout your life.

3. Challenge your students to participate in the following spiritual exercise every day for the next week. At the end of each day, have them write a response to this question:

“When did I feel most alive today?”

Challenge them to write down or describe the specific activities they were involved in when they felt the most alive. At the end of the week, have them look for themes that may have emerged from their collections of “I felt most alive when...” moments. Ask them to consider if the times when they felt most alive might also be times when they could’ve been doing God’s will. Have them share their findings at your next group meeting.