



FOREWORD

It is God's will for you to read this book. Yes, I'm talking to you. What are the odds that you would “just happen” to pick up this book and flip open to this page and start reading? Obviously it's a sign. Of all the millions of books in the world, you found this one. Wow. I have chills. Do not pass up this divinely orchestrated moment. If you miss this moment there's a good chance you will completely miss God's will for the rest of your life and spend your days in misery and regret.

Now that I've scared you, let me acknowledge that everything in the previous paragraph is total baloney. It's bunk. Not true at all. Actually, I don't know if it's God's will for you to read this book. But I do think that reading it could be a really good idea.

If you're prone to think of God's will in the way I so threateningly described it, this book will help set you straight. Kevin DeYoung is a skilled pastor, theologically astute, and a clear

communicator. He gives you serious content but makes it easy to absorb and understand.

In *Just Do Something* Kevin will show what trips us up from moving forward in making decisions. He'll talk about how God speaks to us and what it means to be guided by wisdom. In a gentle and loving way he will challenge you.

There's a good chance that you've picked up some faulty ways of thinking about this issue. I love the no-nonsense way Kevin pulls us back to truth: "God is not a magic 8-ball we shake up and peer into whenever we have a decision to make. He is a good God who gives us brains, shows us the way of obedience, and invites us to take risks for him."

I'm a pastor. And the highest praise I can give this book is that this is my new go-to book on decision making and "finding God's will." If you were in my church and you came to me and said, "I have a big decision to make (marriage, job, house, etc), and I need to know what God wants me to do." I would put this book in your hands.

It's liberating and encouraging and even where it smacks you upside the head (which it does once in a while) you'll be better for the smack. You'll think more clearly and more biblically.

So read this book. You'll be wiser because of it.

Joshua Harris

Senior pastor of Covenant Life Church and
author of *Stop Dating the Church!*

The **LONG** **ROAD** to **NOWHERE**

I grew up playing with Tinkertoys. Like most Americans over the past one hundred years, our family had the classic long tube full of sticks, wooden wheels, and colored connectors. Hitting the market in 1913, Tinkertoy (now owned by Hasbro) has sold about 2.5 million construction sets per year for almost a hundred years. The impetus for Tinkertoy construction sets—which initially sold for sixty cents and were called by the less-than-catchy name “Thousand Wonder Builders”—came from Charles Pajeau and Robert Petit, who dreamed up the toy as they watched children tinkering around with pencils, sticks, and empty spools of thread.

With almost a century gone by, there’s still nothing fancy about Tinkertoy sets, especially in a digital age where children seldom go anywhere without microchips of entertainment close at hand. Kids still like Tinkertoys because kids like to tinker.

And apparently, so do adults.

In the book *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings are Shaping the Future of American Religion*, Robert Wuthnow describes twenty-one to forty-five-year-olds as tinkerers.¹ Our grandparents built. Our parents boomed. And my generation? We tinker. Of course, as Wuthnow points out, tinkering is not all bad. Those who tinker know how to improvise, specialize, pull things apart, and pull people together from a thousand different places. But tinkering also means indecision, contradiction, and instability. We are seeing a generation of young people grow up (sort of) who tinker with doctrines, tinker with churches, tinker with girlfriends and boyfriends, tinker with college majors, tinker living in and out of their parents' basement, and tinker with spiritual practices no matter how irreconcilable or divergent.

We're not consistent. We're not stable. We don't stick with anything. We aren't sure we are making the right decisions. Most of the time, we can't even make decisions. And we don't follow through. All of this means that as Christian young people we are less fruitful and less faithful than we ought to be.

Granted, youth tends to come with a significant amount of youthfulness. And with youthfulness comes indecision and instability. Young adults who tinker are not confined to any one generation. Baby boomers, and probably even builders (the generation that grew up during the Great Depression and fought in World War II), tinkered around with God and life when they were young adults. The difference, however, with my generation is that young adulthood keeps getting longer and longer. It used to be that thirty seemed old and far removed

from youth, but now it is not uncommon to hear of folks “coming of age” at forty.

Consider this one statistic: In 1960, 77 percent of women and 65 percent of men completed all the major transitions into adulthood by age thirty. These transitions include leaving home, finishing school, becoming financially independent, getting married, and having a child. By 2000, only 46 percent of woman completed these transitions by age thirty, and only 31 percent of men.² It’s stunning for me to think that less than a third of men my age are done with school, out of the house, married with kids, and have a job that pays the bills. “Adulthood” is the new normal.

Now, I know there are lots of good reasons why someone may still be in school past thirty. After all, multiple college degrees take time. And I realize there are legitimate reasons why a thirty-year-old might have to live with his parents (e.g., illness, unexpected unemployment, or divorce). Concerning marriage, maybe you have the gift of celibacy. And as for a family, maybe you’ve been trying to have kids but can’t. There are lots of reasons for delayed adulthood. I understand that. Just because you’ve been on the planet for one-fourth to one-third of your life and still haven’t completed “the transition” to adulthood doesn’t mean you’re automatically a moocher, a lazy bum, or a self-indulgent vagabond.

But it could mean that. It is possible that your “unparalleled freedom to roam, experiment, learn (or not), move on, and try again” has not made you wiser, cultured, or more mature.³ Perhaps your free spirit needs less freedom and more

faithfulness. Maybe your emerging adulthood should . . . I don't know, emerge.

But let me be clear: This is not a book *just* for young people. I'm not going to attempt a generational analysis of my fellow thirtysomethings. I'm not issuing a new manifesto for baby busters and mosaics. This book is much simpler than all that. This is a book about God's will—God's will for confused teenagers, burned-out parents, retired grandparents, and, yes, tinkering millennials . . . or whatever we're called.

I bring up this whole business of adulescence because it is related to the spiritual issue of God's will. You'll find in this book some of the typical will-of-God fare—how to make wise decisions, how to choose a job, whom to marry, etc. But answering these questions is not really the aim of this book. My goal is not as much to tell you how to hear God's voice in making decisions as it is to help you hear God telling you to get off the long road to nowhere and finally make a decision, get a job, and, perhaps, get married.

The hesitancy so many of us (especially the young) feel in making decisions and settling down in life and therefore diligently searching for the will of God has at least two sources. First, the new generations enjoy—or at least think they enjoy—"unparalleled freedom." Nothing is settled after high school or even college anymore. Life is wide open and filled with endless possibilities, but with this sense of opportunity comes confusion, anxiety, and indecision. *With everything I could do and everywhere I could go, how can I know what's what?* Enter a passion to discern "God's will for my life." That's a key

reason there is always a market for books about the will of God.

Second, our search for the will of God has become an accomplice in the postponement of growing up, a convenient out for the young (or old) Christian floating through life without direction or purpose. Too many of us have passed off our instability, inconsistency, and endless self-exploration as “looking for God’s will,” as if not making up our minds and meandering through life were marks of spiritual sensitivity.

As a result, we are full of passivity and empty on follow-through. We’re tinkering around with everyone and everything. Instead, when it comes to our future, we should take some responsibility, make a decision, and just do something.

2

THE WILL of GOD in CHRISTIANESE

If God has a wonderful plan for my life, as the evangelistic tract tells us, then why doesn't He tell me what it is?

After all, our lives down here are a confusing mess of fits and starts, dead ends and open doors, possibilities and competing ideals. There are so many decisions to make and none of the answers seem clear. What should I do this summer? What should my major be? What kind of career do I want? Do I want a career? Should I get married? Whom should I marry? Do I want kids? How many kids? Should I play sports or sing in the choir? Where should I go to college? Should I even go to college? Should I go to grad school? What job should I take? Should I stay in my current job? Should I be a missionary? Should I be a pastor? Should I volunteer here or there? Should I leave home and test the waters elsewhere? Is now the time to buy a house?

For some there are serious money, relationship, and even retirement questions. How should I spend my money? Where

should I give my money? Where should I go to church? How should I serve my church? What should I be doing with the rest of my life, and where and with whom should I be doing it? When should I retire? What should I do in retirement?

With so many questions to face in the next years—or sometimes in the next several weeks—it’s no surprise so many of us are desperate to know the will of God for our lives. Which brings me back to a rephrasing of the question that began this chapter: If God has a wonderful plan for my life, how can I discover what it is?

A lot of books have been written trying to answer this basic question, and my answer may not be what you expect from a will-of-God book. My answer is not original to me, but it is quite simple and, I hope, quite biblical. I’d like us to consider that maybe we have difficulty discovering God’s wonderful plan for our lives because, if the truth be told, He doesn’t really intend to tell us what it is. And maybe we’re wrong to expect Him to.

ARE YOU CONFUSED YET?

“The will of God” is one of the most confusing phrases in the Christian vocabulary. Sometimes we speak of all things happening according to God’s will. Other times we talk about being obedient and doing the will of God. And still other times we talk about finding the will of God. The confusion is due to our using the phrase “the will of God” in at least three different ways, typified in the previous three sentences. Two of these

ways are clearly demonstrated in Scripture; the third is a little more complicated. So we'll start with the first two.

GOD ALWAYS GETS HIS WAY

If we examine the Bible, we see that God's will has two sides to it. On the first side is God's *will of decree*. This refers to what God has ordained. Everything that comes to pass is according to God's sovereign decree. And all that He decrees will ultimately come to pass. God's will of decree cannot be thwarted. It is immutable and fixed. God is sovereign over all things—nature and nations, animals and angels, spirits and Satan, wonderful people and wicked people, even disease and death. To steal a line from Augustine, “The will of God is the necessity of all things.” In other words, what God wills, will happen, and what happens is according to God's will. That's what I mean by God's will of decree.

God's will of decree is taught in numerous passages of Scripture:

Ephesians 1:11: “In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will.”

God works out everything—the big picture, the little details, and everything in between—according to His own good and sovereign purposes.

Matthew 10:29–30: “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?

And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered.”

God micromanages our lives. He doesn’t just plan out a few of the big ticket items. Praise the Lord, He knows the smallest sparrow and the grayest hair. And neither falls to the ground unless our heavenly Father wills it.

Acts 4:27–28: “For truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.”

Every human lamentation and woe must look to the cross. For there we see the problem of evil “answered”—not in some theoretical sense—but by pointing us to an all-powerful God who works all things for good. Shocking as it sounds, the most heinous act of evil and injustice ever perpetrated on the earth—the murder of the Son of God—took place according to God’s gracious and predetermined will.

Psalms 139:16: “Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there were none of them.”

Our lives unfold, open and close, according to God’s providence. As the crafters of the Heidelberg Catechism put it so eloquently back in the sixteenth century, “Providence is the

almighty and ever present power of God by which he upholds, as with his hand, heaven and earth and all creatures, and so rules them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and lean years, food and drink, health and sickness, prosperity and poverty—all things, in fact, come to us not by chance, but from his fatherly hand.”¹

Isaiah 46:9–10: “I am God, and there is no other; I am God and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.’”

God knows all things and sovereignly superintends all things. God’s will of decree is absolute. It is from before the creation of the world. It is the ultimate determination over all things, and it cannot be overturned.

GOD POINTS OUT THE WAY

The other side of the coin is God’s *will of desire*. This refers to what God has commanded—what He desires from His creatures. If the will of decree is how things are, the will of desire is how things ought to be. I realize that I am not dealing with the massive question of how God can decree all that comes to pass while also holding us responsible for our actions. That’s the old divine sovereignty and human responsibility question. The Bible clearly affirms both. For example, God sent Babylon to punish Judah, but God also punished Babylon for acting

wickedly against God's people (Jeremiah 25). Likewise, God planned the death of His Son and yet those who killed the Christ were called lawless men (Acts 2:23). I believe there are theological categories that can help us reconcile divine sovereignty and human responsibility, but diving into these ideas would take us far beyond the scope of this short book. I am simply noting that God is sovereign, but He is not the author of sin. We are under His sovereignty, but we are not free from responsibility for our actions.

Both sides of God's will are in Scripture. God's will of decree—what He has predetermined from eternity past—cannot be thwarted. God's will of desire—the way He wants us to live—can be disregarded.

Let me highlight a few passages that speak of God's will as His will of desire:

1 John 2:15–17: “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.”

The will of God in this passage does not refer to the way God ordains things, but to the way God commands us to live. Walking in the will of God for the apostle John is the opposite of worldliness. Doing the will of God means we say no to the desires of the flesh, the desires of the eyes, and our pride in possessions.

Hebrews 13:20–21: “Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.”

The will of God, as His will of desire, means that we do what is pleasing in His sight.

Matthew 7:21: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”

Again, we see the will of God is shorthand for obedience to God’s commands and walking in His ways—this time from the lips of Christ Himself.

Deuteronomy 29:29: “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.”

This is the closest we come to finding the will of decree and will of desire side by side in the same verse. God has secret things known only to Him (His inscrutable purposes and sovereign will), but He also has revealed things that we are meant to know and obey (His commands and His Word).

DOES GOD HAVE A SPECIFIC PLAN FOR YOUR LIFE?

There's a third way in which we sometimes speak of God's will. Most of the time what we really are looking for is God's *will of direction*.

We hear it in those questions we asked at the beginning of this chapter: What does God want me to do with my life? What job should I take? Where should I live? Those are the

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questions we ask when we seek God's will of direction. We want to know His individual, specific plan for the who, what, where, when, and how of our lives. We want to know His direction.

So here's the real heart of the matter: Does God have a secret will of direction that He expects us to figure out before we do anything? And the answer is no. Yes, God has a specific plan for our lives. And yes, we can be assured that He works things for our good in Christ Jesus. And yes, looking back we will often be able to trace God's hand in bringing us to where we are. But while we are free to ask God for wisdom, He does not burden us with the task of divining His will of direction for our lives ahead of time.

The second half of that last sentence is crucial. God does have a specific plan for our lives, *but* it is not one that He expects us to figure out before we make a decision. I'm not saying God won't help you make decisions (it's called wisdom, and

we'll talk about it in chapter 8). I'm not saying God doesn't care about your future. I'm not saying God isn't directing your path and in control amidst the chaos of your life. I believe in providence with all my heart. What I am saying is that we should stop thinking of God's will like a corn maze, or a tight-rope, or a bull's-eye, or a choose-your-own-adventure novel.

When I was a kid, I loved to read choose-your-own-adventure stories. You'd get to a turning point in the story and if you wanted to flee the country, you'd turn to page 23; and if you wanted to hide out in the cave, you'd turn to page 36. And, oops, the cave turns out to be the side of a volcano, and you die. You made the wrong choice. Fun books for little boys, but not so much fun if that's how God's will works. Many of us fear we'll take the wrong job, or buy the wrong house, or declare the wrong major, or marry the wrong person, and suddenly our lives will blow up. We'll be out of God's will, doomed to spiritual, relational, and physical failure. Or, to put it in Christianese, we'll find ourselves out of "the center of God's will." We'll miss God's best and have to settle for an alternate ending to our lives.

Several years ago I read *The Will of God as a Way of Life*, by Gerald Sittser. His book helped me crystallize my understanding of what I felt was wrong with the traditional understanding of God's will. Here's Sittser's explanation of the usual, and misguided, way of looking at God's will.

Conventional understanding of God's will defines it as a specific pathway we should follow into the future. God knows what this pathway is, and he has laid it out for us to follow. Our responsibility is to discover this pathway—God's plan for our lives. We

must discover which of the many pathways we could follow is the one we should follow, the one God has planned for us. If and when we make the right choice, we will receive his favor, fulfill our divine destiny and succeed in life. . . . If we choose rightly, we will experience his blessing and achieve success and happiness. If we choose wrongly, we may lose our way, miss God's will for our lives, and remain lost forever in an incomprehensible maze.²

This conventional understanding is the wrong way to think of God's will. In fact, expecting God to reveal some hidden will of direction is an invitation to disappointment and indecision. Trusting in God's will of decree is good. Following His will of desire is obedient. Waiting for God's will of direction is a mess. It is bad for your life, harmful to your sanctification, and allows too many Christians to be passive tinkerers who strangely feel more spiritual the less they actually do.

God is not a Magic 8-Ball we shake up and peer into whenever we have a decision to make. He is a good God who gives us brains, shows us the way of obedience, and invites us to take risks for Him. We know God has a plan for our lives. That's wonderful. The problem is we think He's going to tell us the wonderful plan before it unfolds. We feel like we can know—and need to know—what God wants every step of the way. But such preoccupation with finding God's will, as well-intentioned as the desire may be, is more folly than freedom.

The better way is the biblical way: Seek first the kingdom of God, and then trust that He will take care of our needs, even before we know what they are and where we're going.

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