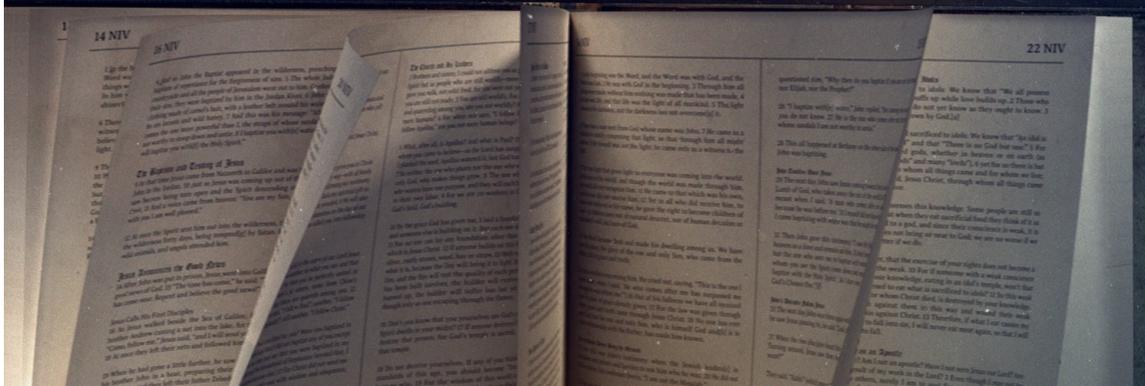


Understanding God's Will



Last week, I mentioned that Sister Margaret and I had had some conversations about me providing some basic outlines that the members here could use to study with others. I thought that was a wonderful idea, so I solicited outline topics from y'all.

I got several suggestions, and I had a few ideas of my own. This morning, I'm going to be presenting the first of those outlines. My hope for this sermon, and for all others in this series, is that it will equip you to lead a short, half-hour study with somebody on this topic.

Logically speaking, the study I'm about to present has to come at the very beginning. I can teach somebody any number of things from the Bible, but before that, we have to agree on what the Bible is and the significance of what it says. Without that, what makes the Bible any different than some self-help book I pull off the shelf at Barnes & Noble? For that matter, what makes the words of the Bible different than the words of some random priest or pastor? These are important questions, and we need to answer them by understanding what the Scripture says about understanding God's will.

The first issue that we must settle from the word is HOW GOD SPEAKS TO US. Consider here Paul's words in Ephesians 3:4-5. Notice that this passage describes a process. This begins with the mystery of Christ. Here, I don't think that Paul means that Christ Himself is mysterious. Instead, I think the point is that Christ had a mystery, some unrevealed thing. The Holy Spirit took that mystery of Christ and revealed it to God's apostles and prophets, of which Paul was one. Paul wrote that revelation down in the book of Ephesians. The church in Ephesus then could read what Paul had written and perceive his insight into the mystery of Christ. This is how God reveals His will to His people.

This is extremely important for a number of different reasons. First, there are plenty of people out there who think that God speaks to them directly. A question to ask them from this text is "Do you think you're an apostle or a prophet?" If they do, well, a little later, we're going to be doing a study on spiritual gifts, and that would be a good thing to study with them! If they don't, then they are not the recipients of revelation. Only apostles and prophets are inspired.

Second, we need to pay particular attention to what Paul says in Ephesians 3:4. Speaking to the ordinary Christians of the Ephesian church, he tells them that they could read his letter and understand his insight into Christ's mystery. By extension, when we read the Scriptures today, we can understand Christ's mystery too.

It's almost impossible to overstate how important and empowering this is. There are whole denominations out there that are founded on the notion that ordinary Christians can't understand the will of God for themselves. Well, the apostle Paul tells us that we can understand it!

This is not to say that figuring out God's will from His word will always be easy for us. Nor is it to say that we can't make mistakes, or that we won't grow in our understanding. Figuring out God's will takes work and skill.

However, it is possible. It's possible for me, it's possible for you, and it's possible for everyone who is spiritually accountable. God has given us the power to learn the truth for ourselves, and that is a beautiful thing!

Next, we have to see what the Bible says about THE RELIABILITY OF SCRIPTURE. Consider the words of Peter, another one of those inspired apostles, in 2 Peter 1:19-21. Once again, there are many things to note in this passage. First, though we might think of prophecy as only foretelling the future, in this passage, the word has a broader meaning. It's not only about foretelling. It's about forthtelling. It's about revealing the will of God.

Second, Peter says that these foretellings and forthtellings are fully confirmed. Particularly important here is the Bible's record of fulfilled prophecy. If the Bible isn't the word of God, how come David could predict in Psalm 22, a thousand years beforehand, that Jesus' enemies would pierce His hands and His feet and gamble for

His clothes? There are many other such fulfilled prophecies. They reveal that the Bible is the product of supernatural wisdom.

Third, Peter tells us that none of the prophecies of Scripture originate from human will. Instead, every one of them comes from God and the Holy Spirit. Everything in this book is inspired! The same God who can foretell the future can protect His revelation from people who want to tamper with it.

We can have confidence, then, that the books of the Old and New Testaments that we have are the books that God wants us to have. None of them are the work of human authors and ended up here by mistake. If God permits mistakes in such things, 2 Peter 1:20-21 is not true.

Additionally, God has safeguarded the contents of His revelation. Biblical skeptics like to raise a fuss over the fact that we have manuscripts of the Bible containing 100,000 variations. However, 99.99 percent of those variations are utterly insignificant, and even the more significant textual disputes do nothing to change our understanding of God's will one way or another. In short, we can be completely certain that we can rely on the Bible as the inspired word of God.

Finally, let's learn about THE SUFFICIENCY OF SCRIPTURE. Here, look at 2 Timothy 3:16-17. There's a lot of meat to pull off this bone too. First, this is another passage that confirms the inspiration of the Scripture. It claims that all of it comes from God, and as we have seen before, we have good reason to believe that claim.

Second, this text describes the operation of the Scriptures in our lives. I read this as having a main heading—teaching—and three subheadings or kinds of teaching—reproof, correction, and training in righteousness. Basically, what Paul is describing here is a spiritual U-Turn. Reproof is a fancy word, but all it means is telling somebody that they're doing wrong. In other words, "Stop going this way." Correction is turning somebody around, "Not that way, but this way." Then, training in righteousness is helping somebody to keep doing the right thing. "Keep going this way."

Last, we come to Paul's inspired views about what the Scripture can accomplish. He tells us that through them, the man of God—or woman of God, for that matter—can become complete and equipped for every good work. This is an extremely strong claim, brethren. Paul does not say mostly complete or equipped for some good works. He says complete, period, and equipped for every good work.

In other words, if we need something to make us spiritually complete, it's in the Bible. If there's a good work that we're supposed to do, the Bible equips us to do it. As a result, we can conclude that the Scriptures are sufficient. We don't need anything other than the Bible in order to please God. Everything else that anybody might say is at best unnecessary and at worst harmful.

M. W. Bassford