

Making Decisions within G-d's Will

1) Questions:

- a) What does "G-d's will" mean?
- b) Does G-d have a plan for *my* life?
- c) How can I discover G-d's will?
- d) How can I know G-d's will for sure in a specific situation?

Part 1 – The Traditional View

2) What does "G-d's will" mean?

a) Three meanings of "G-d's will:"

i) **G-d's sovereign will.**

- G-d's secret and predetermined plan that determines everything that happens in the universe.
- Cannot be discovered in advance.

Daniel 4:35; Proverbs 21:1; Revelation 4:11; Ephesians 1:11; Proverbs 16:33; Romans 9:19; Acts 2:23, 4:27-28; Romans 11:33-36

ii) **G-d's moral will.**

- G-d's revealed commands in the Bible that teach how men ought to believe and live.
- Is fully revealed in the Scriptures.

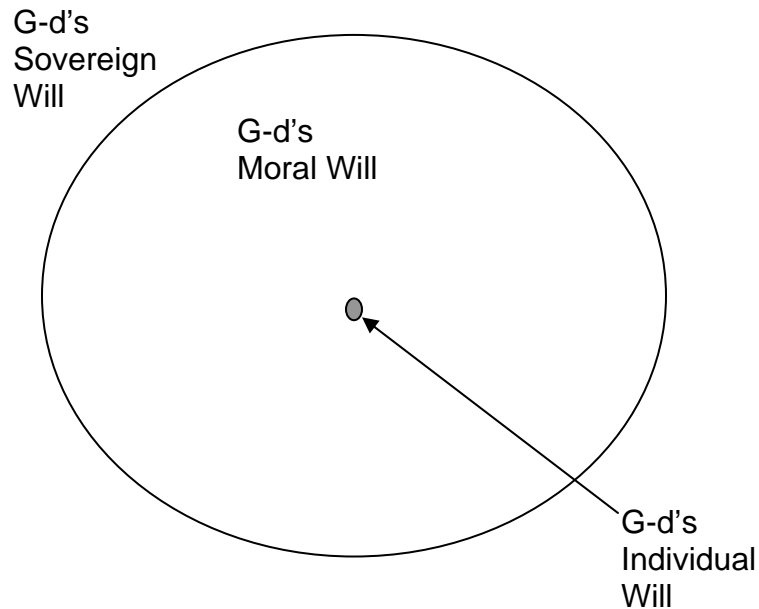
Romans 2:18; 1 Thessalonians 4:3, 5:18; 2 Corinthians 6:14; plus all other commands found in the Scriptures.

iii) **G-d's individual will.**

- Also called "G-d's perfect will" or "the center of G-d's will."
- G-d's ideal, detailed life-plan uniquely designed for each individual person.
- Must be discovered by each individual for every decision on a daily basis.
- Guidance is given through the indwelling Holy Spirit who progressively reveals G-d's life-plan to the heart of the individual believer.
- The Spirit may use many means to reveal this life-plan and will always give confirmation at the point of each decision.

Proverbs 3:5-6; Psalm 32:8; Isaiah 30:20-21; Colossians 1:9, 4:12; Romans 12:1-2; Ephesians 2:10,5:15-17, 6:6; Proverbs 16:9; Genesis chapter 24

Traditional View: The center of G-d's will – the Bull's-eye.



3) Does G-d have a plan for *my* life?

a) The proof for the existence of G-d's individual will comes from four sources:

Reason	Experience
Biblical Example	Biblical Teaching

4) How can I discover G-d's individual Will for *me*?

a) Read the road signs:

Bible	Inner Witness
Personal Desires	Circumstances
Mature Counsel	Common Sense
"Special Guidance"	

5) How can I know G-d's will for sure in a specific situation?

- Prayer.
- Communion with the L-RD.
- Agreement of the "road signs."
- Results

Part 2 – Challenge of the Traditional View

- 6) Does G-d have three wills (Sovereign, Moral, and Individual)?
- a) The traditional or individual will, view says, “Yes.”
- i) The Bible clearly teaches that G-d has a sovereign will and this is freely acknowledged. See paragraph 2.a.i above.
- ii) Likewise, G-d’s moral will, fully revealed in the pages of the Scriptures, is accepted by virtually all Christians. See Paragraph 2.a.ii above.
- iii) But, what about the individual will, G-d’s “perfect” will for each individual believer?
Although widely accepted, can the idea of an *individual will* of G-d for every detail of a person’s life, being essential in making correct life decisions, be proven – or disproven?
- b) Those who promote the individual will, or traditional view, cite proof for the existence of G-d’s individual will from four sources:
- Reason
 - Experience
 - Biblical Example
 - Biblical Teaching

7) Reason:

a) Rule of Biblical Interpretation:

Reason and experience can support a doctrinal position, **but they cannot prove it**

b) G-d's orderliness and omniscience.

(1) The order observed throughout G-d's creation is a product of His Sovereign Will, not his individual will for any particular person, or even group of people.

(2) G-d's omniscience (knowing all things, actual and possible) could allow for an individual will, but doesn't demand an individual will.

c) Is it "reasonable" to think I must seek G-d's will for **every** decision in life, i.e., which socks to wear today and which one to put on first?

- Which clothes to wear to the breakfast today?
- Route to take to drive to Rehoboth?
- Which car to buy?
- What house to live in?
- City and/or State to live in?
- Vocation?
- How to use my money?
- What amount, \$1.00 or \$1,000, requires guidance?
- Marriage partner?

We are forced to abandon the idea of an individual will for the "little" decisions of everyday life and G-d's will becomes open to subjective interpretation. What constitutes a decision worthy of G-d's interest?

d) G-d as our Father, Shepherd, and King.

(1) Fathers don't dictate every action or decision of his children.

(2) Shepherds don't control every activity of the sheep.

(3) Kings don't rule on every activity of any subject or group of subjects.

In each case, the father, shepherd and king establishes guidelines or boundaries (G-d's moral will) within which the child, sheep or subject is free to move without intervention or specific guidance. These guidelines are established so that the father, shepherd or king may realize the final goal set to accomplish his purpose (G-d's sovereign will)

8) Experience

a) Rule of Biblical Interpretation:

Experience alone cannot determine truth; only confirm truth.

- b) Scripture promises success to the one who is obedient to G-d's moral will. Cf. Psalm 1:2-3; 1 Kings 2:3; 1 Chronicles 22:13; Joshua 1:7-8; John 13:17; 2 Timothy 3:16-17.
- c) Was Hudson Taylor's success in China the result of his obedience to G-d's individual will for his life or his obedience to G-d's moral will revealed in the Scriptures? If Hudson Taylor had gone to Africa instead of China, would he have been just as successful? Of course, we cannot know. Hudson Taylor's success in China only proves that he went to China and had a successful ministry there. The experience gives no indication of the reason for that success.
- d) Likewise, our experiences only prove what happened, or what we think happened. The experience cannot prove the source or reason for the experience.
- e) But, what about those strong inward impressions or series of circumstances that seem to be pointing toward some specific course of action?
- (1) First, many, or most, of these impressions lead nowhere. To have value as proof of an individual will they would have to be uniformly, consistently productive.
 - (2) Second, they can be accounted for in the same way that Hudson Taylor's success in China can be accounted for, through obedience to G-d's moral will.
 - (3) Impressions can only be proven to be impressions and nothing more.
- f) Experience can neither prove nor disprove the existence of G-d's individual will.

9) Biblical Example

a) Rule of Biblical Interpretation:

Scriptural examples can add strong support to a doctrinal position **if they can be shown to be normative.**

b) The Scriptures are full of examples of direct, individual guidance given to specific individuals. The NT examples should be weighted when examining the question of an individual will for the believer today. The NT, and many OT, examples have the following in common:

- Direct, supernatural guidance for specific decisions was the exception to the rule, not the norm.
- Direct guidance was not given for “ordinary” decision of life, i.e., vocation, selection of a wife, where to live, etc., with few special exceptions.
- In the NT, direct guidance was provided only at critical points during the formative years of the church.
- Direct guidance was always communicated by means of supernatural revelation – an angel, a voice, a talking donkey, a vision, etc., not a vague “feeling” or “signs” that could be interpreted various ways.
- Direct guidance was infrequent, limited in scope and directed at people who had a special role in the outworking of G-d’s program (sovereign will) on Earth.
- In the Scriptures, the Apostles often gave reasons for their decisions, but never in the terms we use today – in terms of “G-d’s individual will” for the believer.

c) The exceptional example proves only the exceptional occurrence.

d) Biblical example neither proves nor disproves the concept of an individual will.

10) Biblical Teaching

a) Some more basic rules of Biblical interpretation:

- **It is the straightforward teaching of Scripture** that must determine and establish our viewpoint on any issue.
- In cases where two (or more) equally possible interpretations of a passage are possible, **the interpretation that is most likely, most reasonable, most in agreement with other sound Biblical teaching is to be preferred.**
- We must take careful consideration of both the immediate and wider context in which any passage(s) are set. **Content without context is pretext.**

Matthew 27:5 clearly says that Judas hanged himself.

Luke 10:37, Yeshua clearly says “go and do likewise.”

b) The following Scriptural passages are most often quoted as teaching G-d's individual will for each life (ranked from most often used to least often used - more or less):

- (1) Proverbs 3:5-6
- (2) Psalm 32:8
- (3) Isaiah 30:20-21
- (4) Colossians 1:9
- (5) Colossians 4:12
- (6) Romans 12:1-2
- (7) Ephesians 2:10
- (8) Ephesians 5:15-17
- (9) Ephesians 5:15-17
- (10) Ephesians 6:6
- (11) Proverbs 16:9
- (12) Genesis chapter 24

See the following discussion of each passage.

Proverbs 3:5-6 “Trust in the L-RD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.” (NASB)

“. . . and He shall direct thy paths” (KJV)

Most Hebrew lexicons and commentaries on the Psalms and Proverbs agree that the correct translation of Proverbs 3:6b is: “. . . and He shall make your paths straight, (or) smooth, (or) successful.”

The noun “path” is frequently employed in the Psalms and Proverbs but it does not have the idea of an individual will of G-d. Hebrew writers use it to describe the general course or fortunes of life (cf. Proverbs 4:18-19; 15:19). When the verb “make straight, make smooth” is connected with the noun “paths,” the meaning of the statement is, “He shall make the course of your life successful.” This meaning is clearly indicated in Proverbs 11:5: “The righteousness of the blameless will *smooth his way*, but the wicked will fall by his own wickedness.” This contrasts the righteous man who experiences true success in life with the wicked man who brings trouble upon himself by his own devious behavior. This is a common theme in Proverbs (cf. 4:18-19; 11:5; 15:19; 22:17-21).

The point of Proverbs 3:5-6, then, is that those who trust G-d, and trust in His wisdom rather than their own worldly understanding, and acknowledge G-d in each part of their life, will reap a life that is successful by G-d’s standards. This understanding fits the larger context precisely. Proverbs 3:1-10 is a series of two-verse couplets. Each couplet describes the internal or external blessings that come to the person who acknowledges G-d.

Keep my commandments and have long days and peace (v.1-2)
Keep kindness and truth and find favor and a good reputation (v. 3-4)
Trust in the L-RD and He will make the course of your life successful (v. 5-6)
Fear the L-RD and it will bring healing to your body (v. 7-8)
Honor the L-RD with your wealth and your barns will be filled (v. 9-10)

The way one acknowledges G-d in all his ways is by believing and obeying G-d’s commands and instructions (G-d’s moral will) rather than trusting and following man’s finite, worldly philosophy for success and happiness.

The correct understanding of Proverbs 3:5-6 is to present a pattern to be followed to experience true success in life – a pattern that demonstrates our trust and obedience to G-d’s moral will, not specific guidance into a separate, individual “path” marked out by G-d for each person.

Psalm 32:8 “I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go; I will counsel you with My eye upon you.” (NASB)

“. . .I will guide thee with mine eye.” (KJV)

The rendering of “counsel” in the NASB is to be preferred over the KJV “guide” as the correct translation. The “counsel” referred to is given in the form of instruction and teaching rather than direct coaching.

The traditional view understands the speaker to be the L-RD who is promising specific guidance in a particular “way” – i.e., the individual will of G-d.

The speaker could be G-d but it is more likely David who is speaking. In v. 1-7 it is clearly David that is speaking. In Psalm 51 David prays for forgiveness and restoration after his sin with Bathsheba is exposed. In that prayer, David promised that if G-d forgave him, he would teach transgressors G-d’s way (Psalm 51:10-13). Psalm 32 records David’s response when he received word that G-d’s forgiveness had been granted. What David promised in Psalm 51:13, he fulfilled in Psalm 32:8.

The “way which you should go” refers to the course of life one should follow, as in Proverbs 3:5-6. This is the way of righteous living which the Law revealed and David taught. Even if G-d is viewed as the speaker, He is seen teaching His way of righteousness, i.e., the commands and instructions found in the Scriptures – G-d’s moral will). This customary usage fits the context, so an individual will is not in view. It’s G-d’s moral will that is being taught.

Isaiah 30:20-21 “Although the L-RD has given you bread of privation and water of oppression, He, your Teacher will no longer hide Himself, but your eyes will behold your Teacher. And your ears will hear a word behind you, “this is the way, walk in it,” whenever you turn to the right or to the left.” (NASB)

This passage suggests that whenever a believer strays from the path of G-d’s will for his life, the Holy Spirit will communicate that fact and give directions for return to the proper road (path).

The translators of the NASB capitalized the word “Teacher” and added the italicized “*He*” (indicating, correctly, that the pronoun is not in the original text) indicating that their conclusion was that the teacher who gives the directions is G-d.

But it is more likely that the teacher was a prophet sent to teach the people. Since the time of King Ahaz, the prophets had to be in hiding for their safety. This fact is even mentioned in the near context (Isaiah 30:8-11).

This being the case, the “eyes” and “ears” in this passage should be taken literally. The promised blessing was that when Israel repented (Isaiah 30:19), G-d would bring the prophets out of hiding. When He did that, they would see their teacher(s) with their eyes, and hear him (them) with their ears. If the teacher were the Holy Spirit, it is difficult to grasp in what way He could be seen with the eyes. A literal interpretation, which fits the context well, removes that difficulty.

This understanding fits the larger context as well. In Isaiah 30:1-17, G-d declared His judgment against wayward Israel. Then in verses 18-26, He listed the blessings that would come upon the repentant nation. One of those blessing would be the needed return of the teaching prophets.

The message of the prophets is: “This is the way, walk in it.” Although some of the prophets did predict future events, the primary prophetic message was that of appealing to the nation to return to the L-RD and live in obedience to His moral law so the people could repent and avoid G-d’s judgment.

Whether the speaker in this passage is the L-RD or a prophet, “the way” is the way of G-d’s moral Law. This is the consistent meaning of the term throughout the Old Testament. And, frequently, full obedience to the moral law was described in negative terms as “not turning to the left or to the right” (cf. Deut 5:31-33; 17:18-20; 28:13-14; Joshua 1:7; 23:6). In Deuteronomy 5:31-33, “the way” is defined as “all the commandments and the statutes and the judgments. . . .” From this teaching Israel was commanded “. . .you shall not turn aside to the right or to the left.” Clearly, “the way” is the righteous way of G-d’s Moral Law.

The point of Isaiah 30:20-21 is that G-d has blessed us with teachers to clearly instruct us in the way of G-d’s moral will and call us to return to the path of righteousness when we stray as Israel did.

Colossians 1:9 “For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.” (NASB)

Whenever the phrase “G-d’s will” appears in the text we must decide in what sense the phrase is being used. In this passage, did Paul pray that the Colossians might know G-d’s sovereign will, His moral will, or His individual will for each member of the church at Colossae?

We can rule out Sovereign Will because G-d’s sovereign will is hidden and cannot be discovered in advance. Whatever the sense of His will, in this verse, it can be known. Further, this knowledge is desirable for spiritual wisdom and understanding but it can be missed. To decide between moral will and individual will the context of the verse proves decisive. The context is revealed by looking at verses 10 through 12:

“ . . .so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the L-RD, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of G-d; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light.” (NASB)

That Paul was praying for knowledge of G-d’s *moral* will is clear from the stated purpose for the knowledge of that will – namely, that believers might *walk worthy* of the L-RD and *be pleasing* to Him. When Paul used that same terminology in other passages, he was referring to the moral will of G-d. In Ephesians 4:1, the worthy walk is described in terms of obedience to the general moral commands that immediately follow in the context. Actually, Ephesians 4:1 introduces the section of that epistle that is devoted to moral commands concerning Christian behavior.

Paul used the same terminology in his writing to the Thessalonians (Thessalonians 2:12; 4:1-3). His directions on how they should “walk and please G-d” are termed “commandments” (4:2) and “the will of G-d” (4:3) The context is clearly G-d’s moral will, not an individual will for each believer. See also 2 Cor. 5:9-10; Romans 14:18; Ephesians 5:10, 17: 6:6 and 1 John 3:22.

Back to Colossians 1 – there is further evidence that “His will” means His moral will. In the clauses that follow verse 9 G-d’s will and the worthy walk are defined in terms of a series of actions – bearing fruit in every good work, growth in the knowledge of G-d, strengthening by G-d’s power, steadfastness, patience, joy, and thanksgiving. G-d’s moral will includes every item on that list and G-d desires all of those things to be true of every believer.

Paul’s teaching throughout his epistles, and the immediate context of Colossians 1, is that it is G-d’s moral will that is the basis for G-dly living.

Colossians 4:12 “Epaphras, who is one of your number, a bonds slave of Jesus Christ, sends you his greetings, always laboring earnestly for you in his prayers, that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of G-d.” (NASB)

Whether Paul is referring to G-d’s moral will or an individual will cannot be determined from the immediate context of this verse so we must examine the wider context for direction.

Paul is conveying the content of Epaphras’ prayers, not his own, so it’s difficult to see what Epaphras’ motive or understanding was. But, it would be strange to understand this reference to Epaphras’ prayer, containing the same phrase that Paul used and understood in 1:9, with a different meaning or intent from what Paul intended by the same expression.

Also, the request that the Colossian believers “may stand perfect and fully assured” is almost an echo of Paul’s statement concerning the goal of his ministry made in Colossians 1:28 – “. . . that we may present every man complete (or perfect) in Christ.” What Paul was striving for, and what Epaphras was praying for, were the same thing – the perfection or maturity of the believers at Colossae. The means that Paul used to accomplish this goal was to “. . . proclaim Him (Christ), admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom . . .” That is, Paul was bringing the moral will of G-d to bear upon the lives of those to whom he ministered. Epaphras’ prayer that the believers might stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of G-d would be a request that the moral will of G-d would accomplish the same purpose as Paul’s ministry to the same people, using the same method and with the same result.

The wider context of the entire epistle indicates that G-d’s moral will is in view in the prayer of Epaphras. Paul’s purpose and concern in the letter was to refute heretical teachings from a combination of Jewish and Gnostic sources. His antidote for such error was a correct understanding of and faith in correct doctrine of the person and work of Yeshua (2:16-23). In the wider context of moral will vs. individual will this agrees perfectly with Epaphras’ prayer – that the believers would mature and be fully assured in the true doctrine of the Word of G-d, that is, His revealed moral will.

Romans 12:1-2 “I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of G-d, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to G-d, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of G-d is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.” (NASB)

This passage is often interpreted to mean that one must prove or find G-d’s individual will, and that personal surrender is a prerequisite to finding it.

Romans chapter 12 marks the beginning of the second major division of this epistle. Chapters 1-11 contain a remarkable exposition of doctrine and chapters 12-16 contain exhortations regarding behavior that corresponds to the doctrine taught in the first 11 chapters. So, the context of chapter 12-16 is established in chapters 1-11.

In 12:1 Paul is saying to surrender your body to G-d in obedient living on the basis of G-d’s mercies, which have just been explained in detail in the first 11 chapters. Then, beginning in verse 3 and extending through the next four chapters Paul spells out the commands that ought to be obeyed. As soon as he completes the exhortation to “prove what the will of G-d is,” he begins giving specific examples of that will. These examples are all moral commands addressed to all believers (using one’s gift in 12:6-8, love in 12:9, devotion to other believers in 12:10 rejoicing in 12:12, hospitality in 12:13 etc.), not narrow examples to be discovered by individuals such as choosing one’s mate, finding a vocation, or living in Jerusalem vs. Jericho or Beersheba.

Also, the three words that qualify “the will of G-d”—“good, and acceptable and perfect” – are very similar to a three-fold description used in 7:12 with reference to the Law of G-d, i.e., G-d’s moral law.

Lastly, the contrast between conformity to the world and transformation of the mind, established by other passages such as 2 Corinthians 3:14-18, is a function of the Word of G-d which is an expression of His moral will. See also James 1:25 and Ephesians chapter 4-5

Romans 12:1-2 does not summarize a process for discovering detailed guidance for specific individual decisions but rather promotes a basic approach to Christian life for all believers whereby the moral will of G-d is the central instrument in the transformation.

Ephesians 2:10 “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which G-d prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

This verse is not often used to promote the individual will viewpoint although it's surprising because it has stronger possibilities than some other verses that are used.

This verse could be used to establish that G-d has prepared, in advance, certain good works for each believer and each of us should seek the leading of the L-RD to learn what good works are that He has chosen for us. This appears to make good sense.

However, there are two alternate possible interpretations.

First, since there is no article or adjective qualifying “good works” the works referred to are described only in general terms. The idea is that since good works are one of the purposes for which Christians are created, G-d prepared these works “beforehand” by providing what was needed for them. That is, He created new creatures with new hearts capable of producing good works. He then gave those creatures the Holy Spirit for enablement and gave clear instruction in the Word of G-d (His moral will) to direct them in the use of His power to accomplish these good works.

A second alternative views the good works “prepared beforehand” from the perspective of G-d's sovereignty. Romans 9:23 is the only other verse in the NT to use the expression “prepared beforehand”. In this verse, Paul is obviously referring to G-d's sovereign plan or His sovereign will. Romans 9:23 is very close in meaning to Paul's description of G-d's sovereign plan, or will, in Ephesians 1:4-5. In English the similarity is not nearly as apparent as it is in Greek. The Greek shows a remarkable similarity in meaning.

Ephesians 2:8-9, immediately preceding v.10, points out that salvation is due to G-d's grace and not our good works. This is the same sovereign grace (will) that prepared in advance the “good works” in V.10.

Ephesians 2:10 can be cited as strong support of either an individual will position or a moral will / sovereign will position but Ephesians 2:10 cannot be used as a proof text to *prove* either position.

The following passages are not often used to support an individual will viewpoint but may sometimes be cited. The argument thrown up by these passages is so weak that they carry little, if any, weight in support of an individual will.

Ephesians 5:15-17 “Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men, but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil. So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the L-RD is.”

Although this passage is sometimes used to promote the individual will viewpoint, it has such little merit as to warrant little comment.

Even a casual reading the Ephesians chapter 5 shows the context, both preceding and following this passage, is without doubt the moral will of G-d.

Ephesians 6:6 “not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of G-d from the heart.”

Beginning with Ephesians 4:1 and continuing to the end of the epistle, this entire section of Ephesians is an exposition of G-d’s moral will. These instructions are for all believers everywhere at all times bearing on every aspect of life as a Christian.

Proverbs 16:9 “The mind of man plans his way, But the L-RD directs his steps.”

The context of Proverbs 16:1-9 is G-d’s ultimate control of mankind; G-d’s sovereign will, not G-d’s will for a particular individual.

Genesis 24 – Finding a wife for Isaac.

The method used by Abraham’s servant is a unique incident and cannot be shown to be normative, i.e., not a normal, Biblical method to select a wife, or anything or anyone else for that matter.

Conclusion:

11) It cannot be shown from reason, experience, Biblical example, nor Biblical teaching that G-d has a unique will, or plan, for each individual believer, that we must discover and comply with to be in G-d's will.

12) Biblical principles of decision making within the will of G-d:

- In those areas specifically addressed by the Bible, the revealed commands and principles of G-d (His moral will) are to be obeyed.
- In those areas where the Bible gives no command or principle (non-moral decisions), the believer is free and responsible to choose his own course of action. Any decision made within the moral will of G-d is acceptable to G-d.
- In non-moral decisions, the objective of the Christian is to make wise decisions on the basis of spiritual expediency – that course of action that best conforms with G-d's moral will and common sense.
- In all decisions, the believer should humbly submit, in advance, to the sovereign will of G-d as it touches each decision.
- You cannot discover G-d's "perfect will" for your life because the "perfect will", or "G-d's individual will", or the "center of G-d's will" doesn't exist.
- You can know you are in G-d's will if you are obedient to G-d's moral will, i.e., the commands, requirements, and prohibitions set forth in the Scriptures. Within G-d's moral will, we are free to make decisions - and we are **required** to make those decisions.

