

THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE MIND: FACING THE MONSTERS THAT COME CALLING DAY AND NIGHT

Chapter 7

When your compass seems broken: Dealing with doubts about God's will

(Revised 8/26/05)

Four years after leaving a good job to start a promising new business venture, Rachel and Dick filed for Chapter 11. It had been their dream to start their own dot.com e-business. Bankrolled by friends and family members, they even took the risk of tapping into their own retirement funds to raise the necessary venture capital. They had been so confident that they would reach profitability in record time and every investor would become dot-com millionaires.

But like many other start-ups, the burn rate of their venture capital was faster than anticipated. With profitability still on the distant horizon and no new investors willing to come on board, they were forced to lay off their workers and close their doors.

After a fitful night filled with tears and anguish, Rachel wrestled with her doubts. Why was God allowing them to fail? Four years ago, they were so sure God was leading them to start this company. Why this? Why now? Had they been presumptuous in striking out in this business venture? Had they been out of God's will for the past four years?

I don't know about you, but when situations like this happen to me, the monsters pay a visit and try to get me to second-guess myself. They rear their ugly head often when decisions I made don't turn as planned and when plans that I have made go south.

They start to whisper insidious questions, “What did I think I was doing?” As I listen to their accusations, they start me questioning whether I was in God’s will to begin with. “After all, doesn’t God bless everything?” they whisper. “You must be out of his will to have failed so miserably.”

On one such occasion, I was scheduled to have breakfast with two businessmen. The problem was simple. I was there, but where were Jeff and John? I began to go through a list of possible questions. Am I at the wrong restaurant? The last time we met, we ate at the same restaurant chain, but in a different location. Did I misunderstand and go to the wrong one? Did I get the date wrong? Am I too early and no one has shown up yet? Am I too late and they’ve already left?

After thinking through all the possible scenarios over the course of the next 15 minutes, Jeff finally came. He had gotten stuck in traffic. John never did show up. We discovered later that he had an emergency at work and had been in the office since 4 am that morning. My worries were all for naught.

On another episode, I was scheduled to fly to New York City where I would meet a group heading for Moscow, Russia for a two-week ministry trip. I had arrived at the SeaTac airport two hours early, figuring that was plenty of time. I soon discovered that my flight to New York was canceled because of equipment failure.

In hindsight, I agree that it’s much better to have your flight canceled before it leaves the ground than have the equipment fail in the air. But at the time, it really messed up my day. By the time the agents had reissued tickets for some 300 passengers, I had missed all the connecting flights to get to New York City in time for the next leg of my journey. I was faced with the realization: “I can’t get there from here.”

As I stood in the airport, I didn't know whether or not to cry, scream, panic, or just go home. I distinctly remember Romans 8:28 going through my mind. "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

I remember crying out to God, "God, what are you doing??!! God, I love you. I believe that you have called me to participate in this ministry in Russia. I'm convinced that you can work all things for your good purpose. But what are you doing? How am I going to get there?! GOD!!!!!"

I finally did get to Moscow. After talking with several ticket agents at various airlines, conferring with our travel agent, I was rerouted through Vancouver and Frankfurt and had to travel all the way to Moscow by myself. I arrived, minus my luggage (which took a four-day detour to Lisbon) looking like a deer with headlights in its eyes. I continued to be clueless as to what God was trying to do. I also discovered the truth of the statement, "Jet lag is nature's way of making you look like your passport photo."¹

With the passage of time, those two stories provide comic relief on a serious day. No one would ever suggest that I was out of God's will or had misread his plan for my life because I missed a breakfast meeting or had a flight rescheduled. But when I was fired from my first ministry², I had friends who said, "You must be out of God's will to be going through such deep troubles." They intimated that if I were walking more closely with God, I would not be facing such difficulties.

The monsters chimed in with their comments at 3 AM as I stared at the ceiling wondering what to do. “Maybe you should never have gone into ministry,” they whispered. “It’s obvious you’re out of God’s will.”

I began to believe they might be right. “Had I misunderstood where I thought God was leading me? Did I get it wrong and was now out of his will? Maybe God is leading me out of ministry and I should consider becoming a school teacher” I said to myself more than once.

In my quest to better understand God’s will in general and for me in particular, I began to read the gospels. In Matthew, I stumbled across an incident in the life of John the Baptist that helped to crystallize one of the elements in how God leads us.

FOCUS ON WHAT GOD HAS ALREADY REVEALED

Oftentimes, our struggle with understanding God’s plan for our life intensifies when it collides like a runaway freight train with our unrealistic expectations. Based on our understanding of God, or lack thereof, we expect him to behave or perform in a certain manner. When that does not occur, we question whether or not we are out of God’s will. John the Baptist and the nation of Israel were no different in this regard. They all expected Jesus to bring imminent blessing on Israel and judgment on her enemies.

In Matthew 11, John sat in a prison cell in spite of his expectations. Life had not turned out as he thought it would. Trying desperately to piece the puzzle together, John sent a message to Jesus asking him a rather probing question. “After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee. When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask

him, ‘Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?’”

(Matthew 11:1-3)

How had things turned out for John and the nation of Israel?

As John the Baptist sat in prison and contemplated his circumstances, it is safe to say that John’s expectations had not been met. The kingdom had not come. Rome was still in power. Righteousness had not triumphed. And because of his commitment to preaching repentance, he now sat in prison.

John began to have doubts about what and whom he believed in. He felt demoralized and defeated. He felt like his life had been wasted.

In regards to the nation of Israel, chapters 11-13 of Matthew are held together by the rising tide of disappointment and opposition to the kingdom resulting from Jesus’ ministry. Jesus brought healing to many and seemingly, judgment to none. He was only a “good teacher” in the minds of the people, not the political leader and king they had expected.

Rather than merely answer the question posed by John’s disciples, Jesus pointed out what was already common knowledge and could be observed on a daily basis. “Jesus replied, ‘Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.’” (Matthew 11:4-6)

By answering in this manner, Jesus referred John the Baptist and his followers back to Scripture. He was reminding them of what was written concerning the Messiah and his ministry in Isaiah 29:18-19.³ “In that day the deaf will hear the words of the

scroll, and out of gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see. Once more the humble will rejoice in the LORD; the needy will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.” Jesus expected John and his disciples to make the connection between what they saw him doing and the prophecies concerning what the Messiah would do when he came.

Jesus ended his answer with a warning about not falling away. While outward signs can be helpful as validation, miracles are not the sole proof of who Jesus is. Jesus wanted all of his followers to base their understanding of God’s plan not on circumstances, but rather on what was revealed in Scripture. Faith is still required to believe he is the Son of God.

Jesus used the doubts of John the Baptist to teach two principles regarding knowing and doing God’s will. The first principle is that you can trust God’s plan even when you cannot trace it. I have often heard the maxim, “Don’t doubt in the dark what God has shown you in the light.” While it may sound like a cliché, it is still very true.

In this case, John the Baptist had already seen the truth about the Messiah in the light of God’s Word and his experience at the baptism of Jesus and observing his ministry. Just because he was now in prison and unsure of how God would fulfill the rest of those prophecies was no reason for him to start doubting what God was doing. John could trust the plan of God even though he could not trace it.

The second principle Jesus was trying to teach is that God’s plan can be known because it is revealed in Scripture. Granted, it had been misunderstood, but the truth about the Messiah was clear enough to those who wanted to see it because it had already been revealed in Scripture.

ASKING GOD FOR A SIGN

When it comes to understanding God's will, we are confused at best and rely too much on outward signs. Bolts of lightning, signs, phone calls at the right time, letters arriving on the right day are not the only proof of God's will. Likewise, the presence, or absence, of conflict is not confirmation of being in or out of God's will.

“What about Gideon?” you ask. “He asked God for a sign, didn't he? Didn't God grant him his request? If he could do that, why can't I?”

These are the questions we often ask when it comes to this issue. We could easily accept the fact that we need to live by faith without questioning God or asking for proof if it were not for Gideon. Because God granted his request and did not condemn or rebuke him, it makes us wonder if we can ask for a sign as well.

In Judges 6, the nation of Israel was under the oppressive thumb of their neighbors, the Midianites. The people were suffering the consequences of the cycle of sin that they had fallen into.⁴ They continually cried out to God for deliverance.

As he did so faithfully throughout that period of time, God raised up a deliverer in the form of a judge who would bring salvation to the nation. In this instance, the judge was Gideon, a man who, while God saw great potential in him, Gideon did not see it in himself.

As a result of his fear and low self-esteem, Gideon asked God to validate his instructions. He wanted proof that God was indeed leading him. In fact, he wanted to know beyond the shadow of a doubt so he asked God to do it twice.

Gideon said to God, “If you will save Israel by my hand as you have promised—look, I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save

Israel by my hand, as you said.” And that is what happened. Gideon rose early the next day; he squeezed the fleece and wrung out the dew—a bowlful of water. Then Gideon said to God, “Do not be angry with me. Let me make just one more request. Allow me one more test with the fleece. This time make the fleece dry and the ground covered with dew.” That night God did so. Only the fleece was dry; all the ground was covered with dew (Judges 6:36-40).

The confusing aspect of this whole account is that it appears that Gideon’s desire is to test rather than believe and obey God. And yet, God allowed him to do that. In addition, Gideon is listed as one of the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11:32. It would appear that based on the example of Gideon, it is perfectly all right to ask God for a sign.

If this were the only record or model of faith in the Bible, then we could conclude that we should always require proof whenever God asks us to do something. We should ask 10 friends for advice and if they all agree then we will know for certain that God is leading us to take a certain job. Or if the phone rings at 3:00pm or a letter comes on the 27th before 10:00am, then we will be assured of God’s blessing on our new business endeavor. Or if our horoscope gives its blessing or if a fortune cookie approves, then this must be a sign from God to ask for a raise.

If we can see God move in a clear, unmistakable way, then we can be certain of his leading and direction.

It would be great if God always gave us several clear, direct signs to validate and authenticate his instructions as He did to Gideon. What most people fail to see is that even after the signs and the fleece, Gideon was still not convinced. He was still afraid. Based on a vision, the enemy was more convinced than Gideon was.⁵

There are countless other examples in Scripture that indicate that God giving a sign for his direction is the exception rather than the rule. More often than not, God asks us to trust Him for the unknown even when we do not have all the facts. Instead of giving us visible proof or guidance, He often asks us to trust Him for the unseen. Rather than follow Gideon's example, we would be farther ahead following the example of Noah as we saw in chapter four.

WHAT IS GOD'S WILL FOR US TODAY?

I would hazard a guess that the average person is convinced that God's will cannot be known or understood, and even if it could, we wouldn't have the resources to do it. I disagree. I don't believe that God's plan for my life is a deep, dark secret.

I may be naive, but I am convinced that God's will can be known, proved, and done.⁶ In fact, I think that God wants me to know his will for my life and do it even more than I want to.

The question, "What God's will is for my life?" is one that tugs at the deepest recesses of our minds. When we ask that question, however, it is usually in relation to making some type of decision about investments, job offers, marriage proposal, school applications, or any of a dozen life-changing scenarios. As we will discover in the following section, God's will has more to do with the type of person we are to be than with what we do. God's will focuses more on our character than with clarifying our career choices.

By tracing the concept of God's will throughout Scripture, we discover that the Bible specifically mentions six things that are part of God's plan for every one of his followers.

The first aspect of God's will is that it is clearly his will for me to be saved.

2 Peter 3:9 states, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." In addition, Matthew 18:14 adds, "In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost."

This principle is so important that it became the mission statement for the life of Jesus. "And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:39-40).

Christ's last instructions to his followers indicate that we are to join him in that mission. "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Beyond salvation, it is God's desire for me to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Ephesians 5:17-18 clearly states that God wants us to understand that this is part of his plan for our lives. "Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit."

Following that statement, verses 19-21 explain that the reality of the Spirit-filled life is demonstrated in our communication, thanksgiving, and submission. How we relate with and speak to others, whether or not we complain or are thankful, and whether or not we demand our rights or willingly submit to our fellow believers becomes the litmus test of whether or not we are filled with the Spirit.

A third element that God has planned for each one of our lives is that he desires us to be sanctified. While it sounds like a big word, 1 Thessalonians 4:3-7 explains that sanctification means that God wants us to be sexually pure.

“It is God’s will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you. For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life.”

The way in which we live our lives on a daily basis indicates whether or not we are in God’s will. Anything that leads us away from a life of purity—books, magazines, movies, internet sites, romance novels, dance clubs—all need to be removed from our habits so that we can pursue a life of holiness. God’s plan for our lives clearly includes holiness in thought, word, deed, and attitude.

Following being saved, spirit-filled, and sanctified, God’s plan is for us to be submissive. 1 Peter 2:13-15 explains that believers should obey those in authority over them.

“Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men.”

In a culture where self-help books dominate the best seller lists and the cry of “ME FIRST!” echoes throughout the land, submission is difficult to understand and almost impossible to practice. The last subject we want to study is obedience. Yet, how we respond to our employers, parents, government officials, rules of the road, laws of the land, etc., are all an indication of whether or not we are following God’s will.

While people will always criticize us for being a follower of Jesus Christ, we don’t want a lack of submission to be one of their cutting comments. A lifestyle of doing good should at least quiet those arguments.

We need to be reminded that God has placed each of us in a particular place to be faithful there. Be it as a plumber, accountant, mother, father, or whatever, God expects us to be faithful where he has placed us. We are to be the best possible citizens in the society in which God has placed us, demonstrating our submission to those in authority over us. Why? To silence the foolish talk of ignorant men.

Another aspect of God’s plan for our lives is one most of us would just as soon do without. It gives us ulcers attempting to worry our way around it. Suffering.

1 Peter 4:19 states that God’s will includes this dreaded subject. “So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.” 1 Peter 5:10 adds, “And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast.”

If it were within my power, I would try to argue that these verses don’t clearly state that I have to suffer in order to be in God’s will. I would rationalize that they simply mention that if I suffer as part of his will, here’s what I can expect.

However, even if I could successfully weasel my way around what Peter said, I cannot get away from what Paul stated in 2 Timothy 3:12. He wrote, “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”

Based on these verses, I am forced to conclude that suffering is not an option. It is part of the Christian life. What Paul is not referring to here is the pain that is a part of daily life.⁷ Instead, Paul is talking about the pain, suffering, and persecution that we will receive simply because we are Christians.

If I am persecuted or punished for poor work habits, or because I demonstrate an arrogant or obstinate personality, then I deserve everything I get. But if my friends make fun of me because I share my testimony, or if I lose my job because I won't lie on my expense report as my manager instructs me, or if I am ostracized by my coworkers because I won't go with them to a strip club during an out-of-town business trip, then I should not be surprised in the least. In fact, I should welcome that suffering because it demonstrates I am following God's will for my life.

The sixth element that Scripture states is part of God's plan for our lives is that we are to be thankful. 1 Thessalonians 5:18 states, I am to “give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.”

According to this instruction, we are not allowed to pick and choose if we want to be thankful, or when or where for that matter. Whining and complaining should have no part of our vocabulary. The quality of thankfulness is to characterize our attitudes regardless of our outward circumstances.

Based on these verses, we can conclude with confidence that God's will for our lives has been clearly revealed in Scripture. He wants us to be saved, spirit-filled,

sanctified, submissive, suffering, and thankful. If all of these things are true in my life, then I can go anywhere and do anything with the confidence that I am in the center of God's will.

Studying the previous verses which talk about God's will reveals the following principle: God is more concerned about who we are than about what we do. Don't misunderstand me. I believe that God is vitally concerned with what we do. But God's will is not a place, job, husband, wife, or school—God's will primarily focuses on my relationship with God.

When I become a Christian, I am welcomed into God's family. When I am filled with the Holy Spirit, then I place myself under God's authority and allow him to have control of my life. When I pursue purity and sanctification, then I accept God's standards for living. I also allow him to begin to shape and develop my character. When I am in submission to authority rather than demanding my rights, then I demonstrate to those around me that I am a changed person. When I willingly accept suffering, then I have the opportunity to share in Christ's sufferings.⁸

When we follow these instructions regarding God's will for our lives, then God can direct our heart and desires. He can cause us to want what will please him. As a result, we can follow our desires and fulfill God's will. Once our heart is aimed in the right direction, and as long as we are seeking to please God, then we can rest with assurance that he will not let us go astray.

We can also have the confidence that whatever we choose will be in his will. This is what Augustine meant when he said, "Love God and do as you please." Perhaps it was

King David who said it better, “Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart” (Psalm 37:4).

PRINCIPLES TO FOLLOW IN DETERMINING GOD’S WILL

“Wait a minute!” I hear you say. “Is that all there is concerning God’s will in Scripture? What about my career, my love life, my family? How am I supposed to know what God wants for me in those areas that aren’t clearly revealed in Scripture?” If that is on your mind, it sounds very similar to a conversation I had with John not that long ago.

“Can you give me some advice?” he queried. “I’m really not sure what to do. I like my job very much, but I have an interview next week with another company that sounds pretty exciting. What do I do if they offer me the position? Should I stay here or should I take it?”

“On top of that, there’s someone I’ve been dating that I’m really interested in. If I take the job and move away, what happens to that relationship? What if I turn the job down for a potential marriage and then we break up? What do you think I should do? I’ve prayed a lot about this but I’m just not sure what God wants me to do.”

“Can I ask God to give me a sign so that I know for certain which way to go? I know that God wants me to live by faith, but sometimes I need some clear direction about what to do. I know the Bible tells me what God’s will is for my life in general terms, but sometimes that’s just not enough. I want him to show me specifically who to marry and what job to take. Is that too much to ask?”

As we have already seen, Scripture focuses more on the subject of “being” than the topic of “doing” as it relates to God’s will. The Bible doesn’t tell us what courses to

take in school, what job offers to accept, or what person to marry. Scripture focuses more on what type of person we should become.

While Scripture may not tell us specifically what decision to make, the book of Proverbs does provide us with some principle to guide us in making those decisions.

Principle # 1: Make your plans.

Proverbs 16:1 says, “To man belong the plans of the heart, but from the LORD comes the reply of the tongue.” Throughout our lifetimes, each one of us will come up with a variety of plans and dreams. It is natural to think and dream about what we would like to do, where we’d like to go, or who we’d like to become.

Principle # 2: Let go of your plans. Give them to God.

In Proverbs 16:3, it says, “Commit to the LORD whatever you do, and your plans will succeed.” We need to hold our plans and dreams with an open palm. Rather than become so enamored that we cannot see any other course of action, we need to place ourselves and our dreams in God’s good hands.

Principle # 3: Trust God to accomplish his plans.

Proverbs 16:4 explains that God’s focus is on accomplishing his plans, rather than ours. “The LORD works out everything for his own ends—even the wicked for a day of disaster.” Proverbs 19:21 continues that same thought. “Many are the plans in a man’s heart, but it is the LORD’s purpose that prevails.” When we submit our plans to God, he oftentimes reshapes them so that they fit into what he desires to accomplish.

Principle # 4: Let God guide your steps.

Proverbs 16:9 adds this thought: “In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.” I can plan, dream, strategize, draw flow charts, and follow

every management technique known to man, but ultimately, it is God who will guide my life. I need to listen for his direction.

A very familiar and oft-quoted verse which summarizes these four principles is Proverbs 3:5-6. “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.”

If you are an average member of the human race, there will certainly be times in your life when the best laid plans will go awry. As is often the case, life has a way of intruding on our plans. And if you’re average, you will probably second-guess yourself. When that happens, remember that you can trust God’s plan even when you cannot trace it. God has already revealed in Scripture everything you need to know. His plan for each one of us is to be saved, spirit-filled, sanctified, submissive, suffering, and thankful. He is far more concerned about who we are than what we do. When we are the right kind of people, then we can commit our plans to him and know with certainty that he will direct our steps in order to accomplish his plans and purposes.

The next time the monsters try to get you to second-guess yourself, tell them you’re not lost. Assure them that you are not out of God’s will.

WHEN YOU FEEL YOU’RE WANDERED AWAY FROM GOD’S PATH FOR YOUR LIFE,

1. Focus on deepening your relationship with God.
2. Remember that God is more concerned about who you are than what you do.
3. Study Scripture to discern God’s will for your life.
4. Commit your plans to God.

5. Trust him to direct your life.
6. Be confident that he will accomplish his plans and purposes.

QUESTIONS TO HELP YOU TURN ON THE NIGHT LIGHT

1. Have you ever experienced a time when you felt like you were out of God's will?
What caused you to feel that way?
2. After reading this chapter, summarize what you believe is God's will for your life?
3. How can you put the principles from Proverbs listed in this chapter into practice in your life this week?

¹ I wish I was making this up, but it's all a very true story. Not a very good one, but a true one.

² See chapters 1 and 2 for more details.

³ Jesus did not quote directly from any one Old Testament prophecy concerning the Messiah. Instead he referred to what was contained in several passages. Among those would be Isaiah 29:18, 19; 35:4-6; 61:1. Isaiah 29:18-19 is used here because it refers to the day that the nation would rejoice in the Messiah.

⁴ There is a five-part cycle that repeats itself seven times in the book of Judges. It begins when the people fall into Sin. God allows other nations to put them in bondage or Servitude. The people cry out to God in prayer or Supplication. He sends Salvation in the form of a judge. After he delivers them, the nation enjoys a period of Silence. Then the cycle begins again. For more information on the cycles, see *Talk Thru the Bible* by Bruce Wilkinson and Kenneth Boa, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1983, p. 62.

⁵ Judges 7:9-15.

⁶ I base my confidence on the fact that Romans 2:18 says that God's will can be known, Romans 12:2 states that his will can be proved, and Matthew 6:10 points out that it can be done.

⁷ We'll focus on dealing with pain that won't go away in Chapter 9.

⁸ For more on the subject of sharing in Christ's suffering, read Philippians 3:8-10.