

Exodus 28:15-17, 29-30 (Part II)

Introduction

Last week, we saw that the High Priest wore a breastpiece of judgment – or, a breastpiece for God’s judgments and decisions. It was called this because inside the breastpiece were the Urim and the Thummim, which God had given to His people as a means for revealing His will to them in particular situations.

So last week I asked the question: “**How convenient** would that be? If only we could use the Urim and the Thummim today **whenever we wanted** to know the will of the Lord!” We may not be so blatant, but I want to say again that in much of today’s preoccupation with knowing the will of God there is a deep, underlying motive of selfishness – a subtle self-promotion, and even a self-worship. We saw this already last week as we looked closer at the Urim and Thummim and began laying the foundation for a true, biblical theology of revelation (versus simply proof texts). A biblical theology of revelation involves seeing revelation in the context of (or *impacting*) the whole covenant community. But this isn’t how we think, is it? We want *personal* “**revelations**” from God for our lives in particular. A biblical theology of revelation involves seeing all revelation in the context of God’s redeeming plan for the world (a redemptive-historical context). But this isn’t how we think, is it? We want to know God’s will before any number of things in our lives that *we* would classify as of major significance. Already, we’re seeing how a true, biblical theology of revelation has a way of exposing the selfishness behind much of what can look to be like our “spirituality.”

But can’t we still ask the question: What about *me*, individually, today, even *after* God has spoken His final word in Christ? Doesn’t God care about me? Doesn’t He personally lead and guide each one of us? And the answer to these questions is “yes.” God does care about *me*. And God does **personally** and even **intimately** lead and guide each one of us. But how? What does this mean, and what does this look like? Before we can answer this question, we need to add another very important point to our biblical theology of revelation.

I. A biblical theology of revelation teaches us that all revelation from the one, true God is always *explicit* and *clear*.

We see this illustrated in the Urim and the Thummim through which God always gave clear “yes” or “no” answers. We see this illustrated everywhere else in the Bible, wherever God is said to speak or communicate with men or women (angels, dreams, visions, prophetic utterances, etc.). When God “speaks,” His words are never muffled and garbled – there’s never any mistaking His word.¹ We know this because of the unanimous witness of Scripture. But we also

¹ Some popular Christian teachers have appealed to Jesus’ words in John 10 to support the idea of hearing a kind of “fresh” or “new” word from God.

- John 10:24-29 — So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, “How long will you keep us in suspense? **If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.**” **Jesus answered them, “I told you, and you do not believe.** The works that I do in my Father’s name bear witness about me, but **you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. My sheep hear my voice**, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.

know this because of the biblical teaching that God's word always requires our absolute and immediate *obedience* – our total conformity.

- Isaiah 66:2 — This is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and **trembles at my word**.
- Psalm 103:20 — Bless the LORD, O you his angels, you mighty ones who **do his word, obeying the voice of his word!**

But this required obedience and this trembling before God's Word assumes, then, that when God speaks, He speaks **clearly** and **unmistakably**. Can you see how for all practical purposes, the **authority** of God's "voice" in our lives absolutely depends upon its **clarity**? This is why we've changed the words of the hymn from "I will listen *for* your voice" to "I will listen *to* your voice." We cannot be fully accountable to something that's not absolutely clear; we *are* always fully accountable to God's voice – or word; therefore, when God speaks, it must always be crystal clear.

- Deuteronomy 30:14 — The word [revealed in the Law] is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.

This doesn't mean that there are not things "hard [for us] to understand," things that "the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures" (2 Pet. 3:16), but it does mean that God, for His part, has always spoken **clearly**. This is what explains how it can **only** be the "ignorant and unstable" who twist the "hard to understand" Scriptures. This is also what explains how those who twist the "hard to understand" Scriptures are still held fully **accountable** for their own ultimate destruction.

Today, there are many Christians who would not call themselves "prophets," but who are still looking for "revelations" of God's will in various circumstances and for various decisions. We're not necessarily looking for visions or dreams, or angelic messengers, or writing on the wall, or an audible voice from heaven. We're looking to "discern" (or divine?) God's will in other, **less explicit**, not so crystal clear ways. We might think of various "signs" or "tests," "*so-called* coincidences," an "inner peace," the Spirit's "prompting," etc. Think of how we commonly use the language of "finding" or "discovering" the will of God – as though it was somewhere "out there," but hidden from us until we do the necessary work of bringing it to light. The question is, how do these ways of finding or discovering (or divining) God's will fit with a biblical theology of revelation — a theology which teaches us that all revelation from the one, true God is always overtly explicit and crystal clear, such that it can, and does always require our full submission and immediate obedience? I would suggest to you that our modern preoccupation with finding/discovering/divining God's will is completely opposed to this theology of revelation. I'm not saying that God doesn't work through circumstances, or that God doesn't grant an inner peace, or that the Spirit doesn't testify within. The question is, what are *we concluding* from our

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- John 10:14–16 — I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And **I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice**. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

In context, to "hear" Jesus' voice is to hear His clear and explicit claim to be God's Messiah and so to believe in Him and to obey and follow Him. This hearing of Jesus' voice has everything to do with saving faith, and nothing at all to do with hearing fresh words from God, or divine directions for specific life decisions.

circumstances? What does that “inner peace” actually, and really *mean*? And, what really is the Holy Spirit’s work with respect to “revelation,” and knowing the will of God? In order to answer this question, we need to build a little more of our theology of revelation. I cannot possibly overstate how important it is for us to see that the Bible talks about the will of God in two different ways:

II. In the Bible, there’s the “will of God” that He has **already revealed** to us **by special revelation** (Christ; cf. the apostles and prophets, Scripture) and there’s the will of God that is **secret**, and **not already revealed** to us **by special revelation**. Let’s look first at what the Bible has to say about the will of God that He *has already revealed* to us **by special revelation**.

- Colossians 1:9–11 — We have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of **his will** in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.

Notice that according to these verses we are, all of us, to be **filled** with the knowledge of His will. Paul isn’t telling us, here, to work at being filled with the knowledge of anything God has so far kept hidden, but rather to be filled with the knowledge of His will that He has already **fully** and **clearly revealed** to us.

Notice also that to be filled with the knowledge of God’s will requires “all spiritual wisdom and understanding.” This spiritual wisdom and understanding isn’t about attaining to some “secret mysteries.” The reason spiritual wisdom and understanding is required is because our “**flesh**” always rebels against God’s will – which is to “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him.” We can know in our heads what God’s will is, but in order to truly and faithfully grasp it and live it out, we need a “spiritual wisdom and understanding.”

So, the question is: Are we constantly, daily, being filled with the knowledge of God’s will – which He has already **fully** and **clearly** revealed to us in Christ (cf. the apostles and prophets / Scriptures)?

- Romans 12:2–3 — Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

Notice how it is that we discern the will of God: By not being conformed to this world, but by being transformed by the renewing of our minds. This discerning of God’s will is not about finding something out what was previously unrevealed, but rather about having the strength and wisdom to *live out* what *has* already been **fully** and **clearly** revealed – all that is “good and acceptable and perfect”.

Why is this discerning of God’s already revealed will such a challenging task? The reason is that it’s not just an academic exercise, but a spiritual exercise; and God’s will for us is holy and

righteous, while our flesh is fallen and sinful. (cf. Heb. 5:11-14) So, we know that the will of God for us is that we should not think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think. (cf. Rom. 12:3) We know this, but have we truly “**discerned**” it, and understood it with a “spiritual wisdom and understanding” so that we are truly living it out from day to day?

Are we constantly, moment by moment and day by day, discerning what is the [already fully revealed] will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect?

- Colossians 4:12 — Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the **will of God**.

What does it mean to stand “*mature*” in “*all* the will of God”? It doesn’t mean to figure out what God has so far kept hidden. It simply means to live in full **obedience** to *all* of the will of God that He has already so clearly and explicitly **revealed** through Christ (cf. the apostles and prophets, and the Scriptures). What does it mean to stand “*fully assured*” in “*all* the will of God”? It doesn’t mean to be confident that we have “divined” the hidden mysteries of God’s will. It means to have the joyful assurance that our faith is a genuine, saving faith because we see our lives being conformed daily—moment by moment—to what God has already **clearly** revealed His will to be.

There’s only one obstacle to standing fully assured in all the will of God, and it’s *not* any lack of revelation. God has already fully and explicitly revealed all that we need to know of His will for our lives through the revelation of Christ. The only obstacle to our standing “mature and fully assured in all the will of God” is that this will is **against** the desires of the flesh which still reside within us. This explains why Epaphras feels the need to “struggle” on behalf of the Colossians in his prayers.

So, is it our aim and our desire each day to “stand mature and fully assured in *all* the will of God”? God’s will for us has already been fully and clearly revealed.² But have we truly “discerned” it, and understood it with a “spiritual wisdom and understanding” so that we are truly living it out from day to day?

- 1 Thessalonians 4:1–3 — Brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that **as you received from us *how* you ought to walk and to please God**, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more. For **you *know* what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus**. For **this is the will of God**, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality.
- Ephesians 5:17–20 — Therefore do not be foolish, but **understand what the will of the Lord is**. And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

² All of the following Scriptures also speak of the will of God as that which God has already fully and completely revealed, and which, therefore, we can already fully and completely know: Mark 3:35; Jn. 7:16-17; Heb. 10:36; Heb.13:20-21; 1 Pet. 4:1-2; 1 Jn. 2:15–17; 1 Jn. 5:14; Mat. 7:21.

- 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18 — Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for **this is the will of God** in Christ Jesus for you.
- Ephesians 6:5–6 — Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, **doing the will of God** from the heart.
- 1 Peter 2:13–15 — Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For **this is the will of God**, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people.

Now, we said a moment ago that the Bible talks about the will of God in two different ways. There’s the “will of God” that He has **already revealed** to us **by special revelation** and there’s the will of God that is **secret**, and **not already revealed** to us **by special revelation**.

IV. Let’s look, now, at what the Bible has to say about the will of God that’s **secret**, and **not already revealed** to us **by special revelation**. The key verses here are found in James.

- James 4:13–15 — Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”— yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, “**If the Lord wills**, we will live and do this or that.”

Notice what we are *not* told to say: “Once I **find out** the Lord’s will, I will do this or that.” No! We are never told to make any efforts at “**divining**” the will of the Lord when He has not already sovereignly chosen to clearly and explicitly reveal that will to us by special revelation. Instead, we simply say, “**If** the Lord wills, **we will** do this or that.”

- John 21:22 (cf. Acts 21:14) — Jesus said to [Peter], “**If it is my will** that [John] remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me!”

One thing we learn from this verse is that if God hasn’t *already* chosen to clearly and explicitly reveal something, then it’s not for us to try and “discover” what His will is (that would ultimately be a form of divination). When will Peter know if it’s Jesus’ will that John should live until He comes again?—If, and when, it actually *happens* that way.

- 1 Corinthians 4:18–19 (cf. Acts 18:21; Rom. 1:9-10; 15:30-32) — I will come to you soon, **if the Lord wills...**

Notice that Paul’s definite desire and plan is to come to the Corinthians soon. But how will Paul know this is the Lord’s will?—If, indeed, he comes to the Corinthians soon.

- 1 Peter 3:17 — It is better to suffer for doing good, **if that should be God’s will**, than for doing evil.

It’s no more appropriate for us to try and divine whether there is suffering in our future than it is to try and divine which house God has purposed for us to live in. It’s no more appropriate for us

to try and divine which job God has planned for us to have than it is for us to try and divine whom the Lord will have mercy upon, and whom He will harden. (cf. Rom. 9:18) “Divination” is never appropriate, no matter how spiritual, or how “Christian” we try to make it look.

V. In the Bible, knowing or discerning the will of God is never about **finding out** or **discovering** what has not yet been (or will not be) clearly and explicitly revealed by special revelation. That’s divination.

On the one hand, this should *free* many of us from the impossible burden of trying to find out things that God has not already chosen to tell us. (cf. 1 Cor. 7:39) This should also **convict** many of us as we examine our motives for *wanting* to know what God has not chosen to tell us. So often, what we’re looking for is the assurance, ahead of time, of “success.” We want to know, going in, that all will be well and that we won’t regret our decision later because of what we would consider to be undesirable results. And so we see that this so-called “spiritual” pursuit of finding out what God has not already told us is really no different, in the end, from the idolatry and self-promoting worship of pagan religion and divination.³

It’s popular, today, to interpret “inner peace” as a sign that some decision we’re about to make is God’s will. But in the Bible God’s peace is never a sign that God gives us ahead of time in order to reveal His will. Instead, God’s peace is the *result that follows* when we are **already** standing “mature and fully assured in all the will of God.” Because we are already standing mature and fully assured in all of the revealed will of God, we can have the peace that passes understanding as we make all our decisions in humble faith and trust. (cf. Phil. 4:6-9; Isa. 26:3-4; Rom. 14:23)

➤ Philippians 4:6–7 — do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

The point, here, isn’t that we’re guaranteed “good results.” The point is simply that *as we are truly walking in the revealed will of God*, we can have a deep, abiding peace no matter what the “results” of any decision may ever be.

It’s popular, today, to interpret various circumstances as signs that reveal to us God’s previously unrevealed will. I knew a very godly and faithful couple who decided they would only make an offer on a house if they both agreed on the same dollar amount. They went into separate rooms, prayed about the amount, wrote the amount down on a piece of paper, and then came out to see if they were the same – and they were. So what did this mean? Did it mean that God had just “spoken” and revealed to them a part of His will that had previously remained hidden? And if so, are we really to assume that this is now the *authoritative* will of God which they are bound to

³ “There was almost no end to the different devices people in the ancient Near Eastern world employed in order to divine the will of the gods. A few examples include necromancy (consulting the dead); lecanomancy (observing the water’s reaction to dropped oil or stones); cleromancy (casting lots); extispicy (observing the entrails of sacrificed animals); hepatoscopy (examining the liver of sacrificed animals); psephomancy (drawing or throwing black stones and white stones from a bag). **Divination literature is the most prevalent genre that Meopotamia has produced.**” (Hamilton)

obey (“You **shall** make *this* offer on *this* house”)? You see, in our pursuit of the will of God, we’ve turned parts of the will of God (the parts that are *not* so clearly and explicitly revealed) into mere suggestions, or permissions, or “**green lights**.” But we need to understand that in the Bible, at the end of the day, **all** of God’s *revealed* will is nothing less than His **command**, which we are duty-bound to obey. There is no such thing as a part of God’s will which is less explicitly revealed, and so, therefore, also less morally binding. So what did the identical dollar amounts written down on the two pieces of paper *mean*? Unless God had clearly revealed by special revelation that this method was to be used in this particular circumstance, I would suggest that it really couldn’t mean anything – except that husband and wife were in full unity and agreement.⁴

VI. In the Bible, knowing or discerning the will of God is never about finding out or discovering what has not yet been clearly and explicitly revealed by special revelation. Instead, in the Bible, knowing or discerning the will of God is all about having a true spiritual wisdom and understanding so that we will be faithful and obedient in every aspect of life to the will that He has already revealed so clearly and explicitly, and so fully and completely, through Christ (cf. the apostles and prophets; the Scriptures).

If, on the one hand, we are freed from the impossible burden of trying to find out what God has not chosen to reveal, on the other hand, we find that our true responsibility in knowing and discerning the will of God is far, far greater than maybe we ever imagined.

It’s popular today to see prayer as “two-way communication” – in other words, prayer as a means of “listening,” a means of “revelation.” But in Scripture, prayer is always one-way communication. We call our communication with God, “**prayer**,” and we call God’s communication with us, “**revelation**.” We must be careful not to confuse prayer and revelation. We must be careful not to turn prayer into a means of hearing God’s voice, or discovering any part of God’s will that He has not *already* chosen to clearly reveal. And yet, prayer *is* absolutely essential in truly knowing and living out the will of God. Remember that ***because of our sinful flesh***, we can very easily “know” what the will of God is, but not truly discern it and understand it with a “spiritual **wisdom** and understanding.” And so James writes:

⁴ In connection with this general topic, we may often think of the story of Gideon’s fleece. It’s important to remember that Gideon’s fleece was not meant to “find out” the will of God, but rather to strengthen Gideon’s weak faith in the light of what God had already clearly revealed was His will. (cf. Judges 6:36-40) This explains why it was certainly appropriate for Gideon to preface his request for a *second* “fleece sign” with these words: “Let not your anger burn against me...” (cf. Judges 6:39) We should also remember that Gideon’s decision to obey had everything to do with the covenant people as a whole and everything to do with the progress of God’s redeeming plan for the world.

We may also think of the early believers’ decision to appoint a twelfth apostle in place of Judas Iscariot. Once again, it’s important to remember that the believers were fully aware of the redemptive-historical significance of this decision as a fulfillment of Scripture (cf. Acts 1:15-20), *and also* the foundational significance of this decision for the entire New Covenant community. So, after choosing two men who were equally qualified from all outward appearances, they prayed that the Lord would reveal His will through the casting of lots. (cf. Acts 1:21-26) It was through the casting of lots that God revealed His authoritative will which the believers were then morally bound to obey. At no other time in the recorded history of the New Testament church do we see any similar method being used or encouraged, and I would suggest that this is because in no other set of circumstances was it ever again appropriate.

(The point of Proverbs 16:33 is not to encourage the use of lots as a means of finding out God’s will, but rather to affirm that in the end, there is no such thing as “chance.” In all things, and at all times, God is sovereign. [cf. Jonah 1:7])

- James 1:5–8 — If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.

If we want to truly discern and understand the clearly revealed will of God and how we are to apply it and live it out in our daily lives, then we *must* prayerfully ask God for spiritual wisdom and understanding. And we *must* prayerfully ask for this wisdom in faith – truly **wanting** and **expecting** to get exactly what we ask for. You see, if we don't ask in faith, then we aren't really wanting the wisdom that God promises to give; instead, we're "double-minded" and "unstable" in all our ways.

Today, the church is full of people who know something of the will of God, but are almost wholly lacking in spiritual wisdom and understanding. We live as though God's will was simply a matter of a proof text here and a proof text there which I can then "mechanically" (and yet also "sincerely") obey. But nothing could ever be further from the truth! Why are we so lacking in spiritual wisdom and understanding? It's simple. Because we haven't asked, or because we haven't truly asked in faith. Earnest, believing prayer for spiritual wisdom and understanding is a *non-negotiable* to being filled with the knowledge of God's **clearly revealed** will, so that we may "walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God." Let me put it another way: *Apart* from earnestly seeking God for spiritual wisdom and understanding, we *cannot possibly* be filled with the true knowledge of God's will or be faithfully and obediently living it out from day to day. We will think that we are, but we're not.

Conclusion

So, in closing, what exactly is a "*spiritual* wisdom"? Spiritual wisdom is wisdom given and enabled by the *Spirit* – whom God has sent to personally indwell each one of us as His children.

We asked at the beginning: What about *me*, individually, today, even *after* God has spoken His final word in Christ? Doesn't God personally lead and guide each one of us? And the answer is "yes." God does **personally** and even **intimately** lead and guide each one of us. God is faithful to lead each one of His children in the clearly revealed paths of **righteousness** for His name's sake. (cf. Ps. 23:3; Ps. 5:8; 139:24; 119:105; 143:10) And how does God do this? By providing us with His **Holy Spirit** who personally indwells each one of us, and whose work is to overcome the blindness of our flesh and lead us always to a truer understanding and application of God's revealed will in every part and aspect of our lives. The Lord promised His people in Ezekiel thirty-six:

- Ezekiel 36:27 (cf. Isa. 30:19-22; Rom. 8:1-17; Gal. 5:16-25; Jn. 16:7-11) — I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

Do you have a spiritual wisdom and understanding so that you are truly **filled** with the knowledge of God's will? Are you standing mature and **fully** assured in all the will of God? May

our lives truly reflect the joyful conviction that here, in the completed canon of Scripture, we have clearly and explicitly revealed to us *all* of the will of God that we will ever need to know for the living of our lives in a way that is wholly pleasing to Him.