

James Boice



How to
**Know the
Will of God**



ALLIANCE OF CONFESSING EVANGELICALS

James Montgomery Boice (1938-2000) was the pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia from 1968 to 2000. During that time, he took up the mantle of Dr. Donald Barnhouse's Evangelical Ministries, which reorganized in 1994 as the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals.

James Boice served as the chairman of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI), which in 1978 drafted the seminal "Chicago Statement." He also served as assistant editor of Christianity Today, and as editor of Eternity Magazine. James Boice's Bible teaching continues on The Bible Study Hour radio and internet program, which prepares listeners to think and act biblically.

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How to Know the Will of God

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How can you know God's will?

If God has a plan for your life, how does He reveal it to you? How can you find that plan? How can a sinful, finite man come to know the mind of a holy and infinite God?

Our starting point is Philippians 3:15, which assures us that God will reveal unto us the guidance we need for every aspect of our lives. Once an amateur pilot explained to me how airliners are kept on their course by radar. A pilot cannot always see what is coming, particularly in bad weather. At best he can see only about a hundred miles. And yet he can fly his aircraft safely in all weather, for the course is marked out for him by radar. If he deviates either to the right or to the left, the radar warns him accordingly. It is thus that God guides us. Our text does not mean that we shall always be able to see more than one step ahead in our Christian lives. It does not mean that we shall even always be able to see ahead at all. But it does mean that God has a plan for our lives-for your life and mine-and that He promises to reveal the steps of that plan to us.

The basis for this assurance lies in the nature of God. For it is God's nature to reveal Himself and His purpose to man. Quite a few years ago when I was in seminary I learned the famous definition of God contained in the Westminster Shorter Catechism: "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth." The first time a person hears that definition I suppose he inevitably thinks that just about everything that could possibly be said about God is wrapped up in it, for the definition is so long. And yet, as I began to memorize and study it, I learned that it was far from

comprehensive. For one thing, there is no mention of God's being love. And God is certainly infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in His love. Moreover, today I believe I should also like to see God's desire to reveal Himself to man included. I should like to say, "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in His being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, truth, love, and desire to reveal Himself to man."

In one sense all that God has ever done has been directed to this end. When God made the world it was to reveal Himself to those who would eventually live on it. Creation reveals God. Hence, Paul tells us that "the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse" (Romans 1:20). When God caused the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be written, this too was to reveal Himself to man. Finally, just as God revealed His power in nature and His purpose in Scripture, so did He reveal His personality in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. That is why Jesus could properly say, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9).

It is God's nature to reveal Himself. And God's revelation always involves a disclosure of His will for the individual person. On this basis Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse used to say that it was actually impossible for a Christian who wanted to know the will of God for his life not to know it.

Willing His Will

Now this statement by Dr. Barnhouse also brings us to the first of the great biblical principles by which a Christian may come unquestionably to know God's will. For the Bible teaches that if you really want to know God's will, you must be willing to do it even before you know what it is. This is clearly taught in John 7:17: "If any man will do His will [and the phrase means 'wants to do it'], he shall know of the doctrine whether it be of God, or

whether I speak of myself." In this verse, although Jesus was speaking literally of the rejection of His doctrine by the Jewish leaders, He was actually teaching the great principle that knowing the will of God consists largely in being willing to do it.

Now if we are going to come to the point where we are willing in advance to do God's will, we must recognize first that in ourselves we do not want to do it. If you are saying to yourself, "Oh, but I have always wanted to do the Lord's will," you are kidding yourself. For "the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither, indeed, can be" (Romans 8:7). And there is a great deal of the carnal mind in all of us.

In ourselves we are a bit like the Israelites when they had first come out of Egypt. They were a huge company. The Bible says that there were 600,000 men, and in addition to that there were the women and children. So the total must have been in the neighborhood of two million. Now this great host had been led into the desert where the temperature goes much above 100 degrees in the day-time and often falls below freezing point at night. When I was in Egypt in the middle of the summer of 1961, the temperature was 140°F at Luxor. And it was even hotter in the middle of the desert. In these circumstances the people would have perished from the extremes of temperature if God had not performed a great miracle to save them.

The miracle was the miracle of the cloud which signified God's presence with the people and led them in their wanderings. The cloud was large enough to spread out over the camp of the Israelites. It provided shade during the day-time; and it gave warmth by night, when it turned into a pillar of fire. It was the banner by which they regulated their march. When the cloud moved the people moved, and when the cloud stopped they stopped.

One of the great hymns describes this by saying:

*Round each habitation hovering,
See the fire and cloud appear,
For a glory and a covering,
Showing that the Lord is near.
Thus, deriving from their banner
Light by night and shade by day,
Safe they feed upon the manna,
Which he gives them when they pray.*

The cloud was the single most distinguishing feature of their encampment.

Now we must imagine how it would be when the cloud moved forward and how weary the people would have become of following it. We read in the final verses of Exodus, "When the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the children of Israel went onward in all their journeys; but if the cloud were not taken up, then they journeyed not till the day that it was taken up" (Exodus 40:36-37). Sometimes it moved often, at other times not at all. We must imagine a family coming to a stop under the cloud's guidance in the middle of a hot afternoon and immediately beginning to unpack their baggage. They take down their bedding and set up their tent. And then, no sooner has it all been arranged, than someone cries out, "The cloud is moving." And so they repack their baggage and start to go on again. One hour later the cloud stops. They say, "We'll just leave our things packed this time and sleep on the ground." Well, they do. And the cloud stays that night and all next day and all that week. And as they are going into the second week the family says, "Well, we might as well get it over with." They unpack. And immediately the cloud begins to move again.

Now the people must have hated the moving of the cloud by which God guided them. But no matter how much they hated the cloud they still had to follow its guidance. Because if someone had said, "I don't care if the cloud is moving; I'm going to stay right here," the cloud would have gone on, and he would have died in

the heat of the desert, or he would have frozen at night. They hated God's leading. But by this means God was molding a nation of rabble, of slaves, into a disciplined force that would one day be able to conquer the land of Canaan. And He was teaching them absolute obedience.

It is the same with us. Neither you nor I naturally want God's will. We want our will. We will always hate God's way, and particularly His way of training us to be soldiers. But we must go through it. For through that training we must learn to say, "Father, even though I do not naturally want Your will, nevertheless, I know that it is the best thing for me; and it is necessary for my spiritual training. Lead me in the way I should go." And God will do that. For to know God's will we must come to the point where we first want to do it.

Nothing Contrary

The second great principle for knowing the will of God is that nothing can be the will of God that is contrary to the Word of God. The God who is leading you now is the God who inspired the Bible then, and He is not contradictory in His commandments. Consequently, nothing can be the will of God for you that is not in accordance with what is taught in His Word.

God's will is expressed in great principles. Take John 6:40, for instance. I call this verse the will of God for all unbelievers. It says, "And this is the will of Him that sent me, that everyone who seeth the Son, and believeth on Him, may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day." If you are not a Christian, God is not at all interested in telling you whether you should accept a job with General Motors or with Dupont. He is not interested in whether you should marry Sally or Mary, or Henry or John, or whether you should enlist in the army. He is interested in whether or not you will believe in Jesus Christ and receive Him as your personal savior. God's will for you starts there. This is His will.

And you must accept this demand before you can begin to go forward on any other level.

Another passage is Romans 12:1-2. It is an expression of God's will for the Christian. "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God." If you are a Christian, you can take it as an unchangeable principle that anything that contributes to your growth in holiness is an aspect of God's will for you. And anything that hinders your growth in holiness is not His will. God is interested in having you become like His Son, the Lord Jesus.

Colossians 3:23 is an expression of God's will for your work. It says, "And whatever ye do, do it heartily, as unto the Lord, and not unto men." I think this is especially applicable to young people. Not long ago a member of my congregation remarked that all too often young people interpret a difficulty in their work or their schooling as being an indication that what they are doing is not God's will for them; actually, she said, it is probably God's indication that they should work harder at it. This verse tells us that God wants us to do everything we have to do well.

A principle that is closely related to this one is found in Ephesians 6:5-6: "Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear the trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; not with eye-service, as menpleasers, but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart." This is for you if you have a difficult boss, or a difficult teacher. The Bible says that it is God's will that you should avoid gossiping about him or her and instead work as well as you are able under his guidance. And you should do it, not only when he is watching, but when he is not watching-as unto the Lord and not unto men.

Perhaps you are saying, "Well, these principles are good, but they do not touch the small things with which I am wrestling." You want to know whether you should go to the movies as a Christian, join a bridge club, make friends with the people at work, join in social drinking, or some other thing. Well, let me give you a final principle that covers most of these. Philippians 4:8. "Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things." Do you see the instruction? God says that you are to pursue the best things in life. If these things are the best things for you, then do them. If not, you are to go another way. Just be sure that you take your guidelines from Scripture.

Regular Fellowship

The third principle is also important. It is the principle of daily and even hourly fellowship with the Lord. Psalm 32:8 states it like this: "I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go; I will guide thee with mine eye." Clearly, if God is to guide us with His eye, He must first catch our eye. And this means that we must look to Him regularly throughout the day.

Let me illustrate this by a story. I have a good friend who is a gospel singer and who for many years was a bachelor. He once said, "You know, Jim, it is always easy to find a Christian girl to marry. And it is always easy to find a beautiful girl to marry. But it is not always so easy to find a beautiful, Christian girl to marry." I suppose he was partly right. At any rate, he eventually found a beautiful, Christian girl and married her. And she was perfect in every way but one. The one imperfection lay in the fact that at times she talked with a very shrill voice, especially in the presence of company. And because he was a great baritone singer, her voice often grated on his ears. This was the making of a serious problem in their marriage.

Well, the Lord had given him a great deal of tact among many other talents, and he used his tact to go about the problem in this way. One day he came to his wife and said to her, "Look, dear, do you know the first thing that a drama coach teaches an actress when she begins training?" His wife said, "No." "He teaches her to lower her voice. By nature a woman's voice is shrill, but it becomes warm and pleasing when it is lowered about an octave. A drama coach will teach an actress to say a phrase, count down eight notes, repeat it again, and then practice that repeatedly. I think your voice would be improved if you would do that." When my friend's wife agreed, they arranged a signal by which she would be reminded to lower her voice in the presence of company. The signal was for him to tuck in his chin.

My friend told me that there were times when this produced the funniest effect you could imagine. There they would be, sitting around the dining room table talking, and his wife's voice would be rising higher and higher. He would tuck in his chin and look at her. And then, often right in the middle of one of her sentences, she would catch his eye. She would notice his chin, and her voice would drop like a lead marshmallow and then go on at a pitch one octave lower.

She saw the sign when she looked at her husband. It must be the same in our daily walk with the Lord. The Lord knows that we shall go astray. It is our nature to go astray. Our speech will become unpleasing, or our conduct. And we will always do things that displease Him. But we must get into the habit of looking to Him often-in church, in our quiet time, in the various periods of our day-to catch His eye, to notice His sign. For if we do, we shall find Him watching. He will direct us. And He will guide us with His eye.

The Way You Should Go

Now there is only one more point that I need to make, and it is not difficult at all. If you are serious about knowing the Lord's will and

honestly seek it, then you must be prepared for the Lord to guide you into new ways. If there is one thing that I have most learned about the Lord's guidance it is that He does not often lead us in old ways. God is creative. He is infinite. And He is infinite in His plans for His children.

David Wilkerson, the author of *The Cross and the Switchblade* and a minister who has been greatly blessed in a unique ministry to teenagers in New York City, tells in the opening chapter of his book how he was led in new paths in his ministry. He had been a Pentecostal preacher in central Pennsylvania, and by his personal standards he was doing quite well. The church had grown. There were several new buildings. And yet he was discontent. One day he decided to spend the late evening hours, when he had been used to watching television, praying. He sold the television set after much hesitation and began to spend time with the Lord. He did this for some time. Eventually, out of these times of prayer he was led to begin his work helping the youth caught up in drug addiction and delinquency in Manhattan. God's will for David Wilkerson meant leading a country preacher into the heart and the heartbreak of the city.

It will also be true for you. If you will seek God's will, determining to do it even before you know what it is, if you will look to Him while responding to His voice in the Bible, then God will reveal His way and direct you in ever widening and ever more interesting paths. He will be close to you, and He will lead you in the way that you should go.

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Philippians

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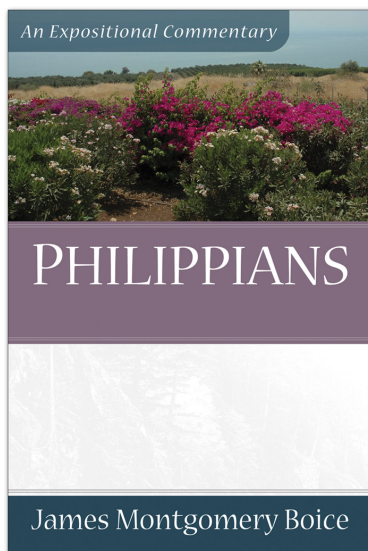
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