

# **DISCERN THE WILL OF GOD**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

When Paul set out on his second missionary journey in 49 C.E. he was accompanied by Silvanus and Timothy. Around 50 C.E., he arrived in Greece, where he converted people in Philippi and Thessalonica to Christianity. However, he faced severe opposition from Jews and Gentiles alike. Paul was forced to flee for Athens while his companions stayed back and continued their missionary endeavours. In the summer of 51 C.E., Paul received Timothy who informed him of the situations in the church at Thessalonica. Soon Paul composed a letter to instruct and strengthen the faithful in Thessalonica to continue walking with Christ.

## **PAUL'S FIRST LETTER TO THE THESSALONIANS**

Timothy's news about the church in Thessalonica was positive. Paul was impressed by the commitment of the Thessalonians to Christ and decided to compose a letter of thanksgiving. Despite this, there were some minor issues within the community which Paul addresses in the letter. He reminds the Thessalonians that his stay with them hadn't burdened them since he had provided for his own expenses. Furthermore, he had taken care of their spiritual needs as a mother cares for her children. In addition, Paul instructs the community regarding the second coming of Christ. Christians in Thessalonica were concerned whether those believers who had believed and died in Christ would share in the glory of His second coming. These discussions had led them to lose their initial zeal to continuously strive for Christian perfection. Paul strengthens the community by reminding them that all those had died in Christ will receive all the blessings of Christ's second coming. He follows this up by exhorting the believers to keep striving to be found blameless on the day of the Lord's second coming.

Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians can be divided into two parts. In the first part (1 Thess 1:2–3:13), one finds sections of thanksgiving, Paul's defence of the true faith and a reference to the current problems within the community. Paul's gratitude is a result of the manner in which the community has been striving for spiritual growth and the concern they have shown for those who have spent time with them preaching the Gospel. He defends the true faith against certain people who had started preaching a new faith in Thessalonica. To counter them, Paul stresses the value of the Gospel and reminds the faithful that it is a gift of God's grace that they have freely received.

In the second part of the letter (1 Thess 4:1–5:25), one finds a set of exhortations. Paul reminds the community that they are called to practice the Gospel values in their daily lives. He stresses the norms and moral standards of Christian life that each one of them is called to practice. This can only be possible

if each of them develops a personal relationship with God through Christ, which is strengthened by the coming of the Holy Spirit. In a sense, a perfect Christian life, that is, a life filled with a good ethical conduct, is a sign of one's Christian faith.

## **"DISCERN THE WILL OF GOD"**

The theme for OVBS 2020 is "Discern the will of God." This is based on 1 Thessalonians 5:18 which says, "*give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*" This verse can be broken down into three parts.

### 1) *Give Thanks in all Situations*

Being thankful to God is a very prominent theme throughout the Bible. Paul himself repeats this often in his writings. In the letter he asks the Thessalonians to thank God for everything. This means thanking God for all the worldly blessings that one has received in this life, for the blessing of life itself, for the proper preservation of life, for the food and nourishment that one receives, for God's mercy and compassion, for all the spiritual blessings, etc. Furthermore, one is called to thank God in every situation in life. This means that one is called to thank God even in adversity just like the figure of Job in the Old Testament.

Even though Job was not in a very comfortable situation, even though he was going through terrible times of loss and despair, even though he was going through a bad phase in life which he had not wished for, we find Job being thankful to God. Similarly, there are times when we will face great and heavy temptations in life. Even in times like these we are called to be thankful. In the fourth century, the bishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom, reminded his congregation that they are called to give thanks, "*not only in deliverance from evils but also at the time when we suffer.*"

The question arises, "why are we called to be thankful?" Paul reminds us that God gives us the strength to overcome everything in life (Philippians 4:13). This is why we must be thankful, because we have a God who stands with us in our times of affliction and delivers us out of all our troubles. We have a God who does not leave us alone to tackle these challenges. He is there with us in all our life situations helping us overcome all our challenges.

### 2) *This is the Will of God*

In the context of this verse, what is the will of God? It is that one should always be full of thanksgiving. According to Paul, giving thanks to God is not merely a duty. It is something that should come naturally to each one of us. God does not want to give us sorrow. He only wishes to fill us with thanksgiving, to bless us in all our endeavours. Hence, giving thanks to God in all situations is possible. So Paul encourages the faithful of Thessalonica to be thankful for all that they have received in life.

### 3) *In Christ Jesus for You*

The Gospel of John teaches us, *“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life (John 3:16).”* This means that God’s love for us is most clearly manifest in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Hence, whatever God has in mind for each one of us, whatever His will is for you and me, is manifest in Christ Jesus.

#### **HOW NOT TO DISCERN GOD’S WILL**

There is an old story about a man trapped on the top of his house during a flood. *The water was swiftly rising around his house. As this man sat on his roof, he was afraid of being swept away by the current. He cried out to God, “God please deliver me.” A few moments later, a friend arrived with his boat and said, “Hey, friend, want a ride to safety?” “No,” replied the man on top of his house, “God is going to deliver me.” An hour later, the water rose up to the gutters. A voluntary rescue person came by on his raft. “Hey, let’s get you off of there—and on to safety,” he yelled. But the man on top of his house refused to go. Once again he replied, “God is going to deliver me.” Another hour passed and now the water was halfway up the roof. The man had now climbed on top of his chimney, and was nervously looking down at certain death and destruction. Fortunately, a Red Cross volunteer swung by in a canoe and offered to ride him to safety. But the man refused again saying, “No, God is going to deliver me.” A couple of hours passed by and the water swept over the top of his house. He was carried away by the current and drowned. When he reached Heaven, he met Jesus and asked, “I thought you were going to deliver me.” Jesus looks down at him and said, “I sent a boat, an inflatable raft, and a canoe—but you refused my help each time.”*

Most of us have heard this story. Whenever we hear it, we are inspired to think about the entire episode. Unfortunately, we soon forget it until someone else comes and reminds us of it once again. Quite often this is the story of our attempts to discern God’s will. Even today there are many children who come up and say, “Father, I just want to do God’s will.” Indeed, this is a very good thing. More and more children should surrender themselves to God’s plan for their lives. However, these well-meaning children act as if God’s will is some sort of vague, hazy thing. They aren’t able to understand God’s will and thus, are unable to journey on His path. It really does not have to be so. There are ways in which we can discern the will of God. However, we should not expect some secret formula that can unlock God’s will. It is certainly not like science where you can have a formula for everything.

Talking about scientific ways to know the will of God, there was a man who had just found an ingenious method to discern the will of God.

*One day this man said to himself, “I will use the Bible to know the way of God.” He had the old flip and boom methodology. He said to himself, “This is the most scientific way to find the way of God.” So he prayed, prayed and said, “You know what God? God I need to know what to do in life, and I am praying and trusting you.” And he flipped the Bible and he put his finger down and it said, “Judas went*

*out and hung himself.” So he, like you and me, said to himself, “Let’s go two out of three.” So he flipped, flipped, flipped and he put his finger down and it said, “Go and do likewise.” He told to himself, “Third time is going to be the charm. This will be the last one.” So again he flipped, flipped, flipped, put his finger down and it said, “What you do, do it quickly!”*

Clearly, this is not the best way to discern the will of God. It is a warning to all of us – there is no scientific method to know the will of God.

Today we live in a society that presents us with a number of attractive choices. We can choose between consumer products, activities, entertainments and so on. The list of choices before youngsters and old alike is limitless. Many a time, this distracts us from making that one real and crucial life choice. The most important decision that we all need to make in our lives is whether or not we want to do God’s will in our lives. In a sense, all the distractions brought by various choices in life are attacks of the evil forces to prevent us from fulfilling God’s will of which we continuously pray, *“Thy will be done (Luke 11:2).”* Hence, we need to be always on guard and choose the one thing that matters, to do the will of God. If we do so choose, then the question remains, “How do we discern the will of God?”

## **WALKING WITH GOD**

Firstly, to know God’s plan for your life, you must learn to walk with God. You need to develop a relationship with Him. Christianity has always been more than a religion. The foremost concern has always been about one’s personal relationship with the one true God. Let us go back to Thomas’ first words when he met the Risen Lord. In that moment of revelation, he gasped, *“My Lord and my God (John 20:28)!”* Thomas does not refer to Christ as ‘our Lord’ but as ‘my Lord.’ It evidences his personal relationship with God. Hence, it is crucial that one builds and strengthens this relationship right from a young age. Each one of you must try to know God and not merely learn about Him in the Sunday School.

So how does one know God? One knows God by studying the Bible. One builds a relationship with Him by spending time in prayer. One recognises His presence by helping those around who are in need of love and care. When one is able to practise these things in life, one slowly starts knowing God. This is when God starts revealing His will to you. So let us pray like David and say, *“Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths (Psalm 25:4).”*

## **SURRENDERING YOUR WILL TO GOD’S WILL**

Often when we try to discern God’s will, we actually pray for God to approve our will. We want Him to accept our will so that we can have what we truly desire. However, this is not the right manner to discerning God’s will for us. Abba Poemen reminds us that, *“Our will is like a wall of brass between us and God, preventing us from coming near to Him or contemplating His mercy.”* Ephraim the Syrian complements this by saying, *“In the measure to which a man cuts off and humbles his own will, he proceeds toward success. But insofar as he stubbornly guards his own will, so much does he brings harm to himself.”* Indeed, God will reveal His will

to us. However, we need to be committed to doing whatever it is that HE WANTS us to do in our lives. And so we first need to put our will aside in order to understand what it is that He truly wants from us.

In addition, we need to remember that God will not reveal His will to us at the very moment that we seek to know it. Jesus reminds us that it is not for us to know the times or seasons that God has decided by His own authority. God will reveal His will to us when the time is right. We need to be patient and keep striving to know what it is. At the same time, remember the words of the Apostle, “*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect* (Romans 12:2).” This means that keeping aside our own desires, not conforming to worldly trends and surrendering to God’s will are crucial in order to discern the will of God.

To conclude, choosing to do God’s will is the most important thing in life. If only Adam and Eve had not been distracted by the choices presented before them by the Evil One, they would have continued obeying God’s will and remained in Paradise. Yet, God did not want humankind to suffer a life of misery. He wants us to enjoy a life of fulness with Him in His divine presence. And so He sent His Only Begotten Son so that all of us can follow Jesus’ example and choose to do God’s will and return to our heavenly home. Let us walk with God, develop a personal relationship with Him and know Him better so that we can truly understand His will. When we pray, let us truly mean the words ‘Thy will be done’ so that as we surrender ourselves to God, He will reveal His will to us. Hoping that the OVBS will help you all to know God and discern His will better. Humble prayers and best wishes for a successful OVBS 2020. God bless!