

# TRUTH ON TOUGH TEXTS

EXPOSITIONS OF CHALLENGING SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

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FROM SOLA SCRIPTURA PUBLICATIONS

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## UNDERSTANDING THE WILL OF GOD

EPHESIANS 5:17

**A**MONG SEVERAL TOPICS IN SCRIPTURE THAT ARE misunderstood, and often even misrepresented, is that of the will of God. This is tragic, indeed, since knowing God's will in any (and every) matter is essential to right living. Out text, therefore, declares: **Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is.** What exactly is God's will and how can we *know* it?

### Defining "Wisdom"

"Wisdom" itself is actually another misunderstood term. **Unwise** here in our text is *aphrōn*. The root *phrēn* is interesting. As Greek scholar Spiros Zodhiates writes, it literally referred to "the diaphragm, that which curbs or restrains" and figuratively spoke of the "seat of all mental and emotional activity." He goes on to explain:

It was the diaphragm which determined the strength of the breath and hence also the human spirit and its emotions. It precisely refers to the ability not only to think, but also to control one's thoughts and attitudes. It is the heart as the seat of passions as well as the mind as the seat of mental faculties.<sup>1</sup>

Preceding this root, however, is the "alpha-negative (*a-*), which makes the root into the exact opposite. In all the other ten occurrences of *aphrōn* in the NT, it is translated "fool," "fools," or "foolish." Such an **unwise**, foolish person not only does not think correctly, but also cannot control the thoughts and attitudes he does have. In other words, he not only doesn't think the right things, but when he does think, that's not right either. Joseph Thayer, 19<sup>th</sup>-century Greek scholar, defines it, "Without reason . . . senseless, foolish, stupid, without reflection or intelligence, acting rashly."<sup>2</sup> In Luke 11:40, the Lord Jesus calls the Pharisees "fools" because they thought doing something external would satisfy God. Nothing is more foolish than thinking that a Holy God could be satisfied by any works a man could do. Likewise, He called the rich farmer a "fool" in Luke 12:20 because he thought wealth and possessions were all he needed. Here again is the height of folly. Paul uses the term "fool" in 1 Corinthians 15:36 to refer to someone who rejects the resurrection by using the analogy of a seed, that it must die before it can truly live.<sup>3</sup>

So, instead of being fools, Christians must be wise. Two verses earlier, Paul reminds us to "walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise" (v. 15). **Wise** is *sophia*, a concept that was very important to the ancient Greeks; they wrote and thought much about it. *Sophia* speaks of a quality or an attitude rather than an action. The basic meaning, according to Aristotle, is, "Knowledge of the most precious things." To be more specific, this is the intellectual knowledge of ultimate realities such as life and death.

Paul also used the word "prudence" back in 1:8. This is *phronesis* and, like *sophia*, was an important word to the Greeks. Its basic meaning is "a way of thinking, a frame, intelligence, good sense," but it often has the fuller idea of "discernment and judicious insight." Again, Aristotle tells us that this is the knowledge of human affairs and of things in which planning is necessary. Plutarch, describes this as practical knowledge of the things which concern us.<sup>4</sup> That is crucial. It's one thing to know something, but quite another to put it into practice.

To correlate all this, there are times when these words are interchanged, but again, *phronesis* is more practical than *sophia*.<sup>5</sup> This is further substantiated by the words being used together. Surely Paul is not being repetitious here; rather he is referring not only to *theoretical knowledge*, but also *practical application*. To the Greek mind, if a man had both of these, he was thoroughly equipped for life. God wants us to use our knowledge correctly. Therefore, God wants His people to *have* and *use* the *right kind* of knowledge. He wants us not only to know *things*, but to know the *right kind* of things. Further, He not only wants us to *use* that knowledge, but also to use it *correctly*.

### Understanding God's Will

With the above in mind, the only way to avoid being foolish is to **[understand] what the will of the Lord is.** The fool tries to run his own life and tries to do things his own way, but the wise person desires to know God's **will** in each and every given circumstance. In this part of our study, we will examine how to make the right decisions, how to know God's **will**. I pray this will be a blessing to all Christians in making decisions, but especially to young people as they are early trained to make the right choices in life. **Understanding** is

*suniēmi*, another fascinating word. It “originally meant to bring together.”<sup>6</sup> Spiros Zodhiates again explains: “The comprehending activity of the mind denoted by *suniēmi* entails the assembling of individual facts into an organized whole, as collecting the pieces of a puzzle and putting them together. The mind grasps concepts and sees the proper relationship between them.”<sup>7</sup> A graphic occurrence of this word is in Matthew 13:13–15:

Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they *understand*. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias [Is. 6:9–10], which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not *understand*; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive: For this people’s heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, and should *understand* with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them. (emphasis added)

Our Lord uses *suniēmi* (“understand”) three times to emphasize why He began to speak only in parables. Those who rejected Him and did not want the Truth would not be able to “put the pieces together” from the stories He told. They would not be able to comprehend the fuller meaning. He was actually presenting deep truths that demanded deep thinking, but the majority just couldn’t get it.

How true that is today! If our Lord were here today, He would undoubtedly speak in parables! We hear much about “loving God” and “loving Jesus,” but much of such talk is nebulous at best and empty at worst. Many people (*including pastors*) who say such things abhor doctrine and deep Bible preaching and teaching. But Scripture makes clear that *only those who love the Word of God truly love the Lord*. Tragically, many books today are written about “loving God” and having a “relationship with Jesus” but never exposit Scripture. They speak of mysticism, feelings, and impressions but never speak of doctrine and Scripture Truth. Scripture, however, could not be clearer that love for God means love for His Word.

The Apostle John, for example, declares early in his first epistle that “whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him” (1 Jn. 2:5). Again he emphasizes near the end of the same letter, “By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous” (5:2). There is no mysticism here, no new revelation that God gives the seeker, rather God’s revealed Truth.

David is another example. Of its 176 verses, all but one in Psalm 119 mention the Word of God using one of eight synonyms. David mentions four out of the eight when writing of his love for Scripture: “O how love I thy law!” (v. 97); “I love thy *testimonies*” (v. 119); “I love thy *commandments* above gold” (v. 127); and “I love thy *precepts*” (v. 159) (emphasis added). Why are Christians today shallow? Why is church ministry geared toward entertainment? *Because people don’t love Scripture*. Scripture alone is not enough to get people and/or keep them coming back. Church leaders, therefore, try everything else under the sun and call it “loving God.” We submit: *If we don’t love God’s Word, we don’t love God.*

Specifically, Paul adds that we understand **what the will of the Lord is**. When we speak of “the will of God,” we understand two aspects of it.

*First*, there is God’s “sovereign will,” His predetermined plan and purpose. This has also been called God’s “decretive will” or His “hidden will” (Latin *deus absconditus*). This is what He has determined will come to pass. Paul wrote of God’s sovereignty back in 3:1. There he acknowledged God’s sovereign rule in his life even in the face of being “the prisoner of Jesus Christ.” So central is sovereignty to an understanding of God, that it is more than just an “attribute” of God. It is the prerogative that arises out of His very nature and that permits Him to do as He wills. To say that God is sovereign is to say that God is God.

*Second*, there is God’s “moral will,” which involves what He has spoken in His Word and what is therefore absolute. This is also called His “perceptive will” or His “revealed will” (Latin *deus revelatus*). It is that aspect of God’s **will** that is in view in our text because God’s *will* is already revealed in His *Word*. **Will** is *thelēma* (cf. 1:11), which denotes a desire that springs from the emotions. God’s **will** is not a cold calculation, but rather a heart’s desire. Where do we find God’s heart desire? It doesn’t come from some “mystical experience,” rather it comes from the knowledge of His Word.

Both these aspects of God’s will are referred to in a most important verse: “The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law” (Deut. 29:29). “Secret” is *sātar*, to “hide or conceal” and “has the sense of preventing someone to know or see something.”<sup>8</sup> This verse, therefore, makes it clear that God has a will that He alone knows, that He keeps to himself and hides from everyone else. It is neither our concern nor even our business to know what God is doing in this aspect of His will.

The other aspect, however—“those things which are revealed”—are most certainly our business. These are the things of God’s will that He gives in His Word and demands we obey. Part of this verse’s importance lies in where it appears. The title “Deuteronomy” can be traced back to the Septuagint, where the title is *Deuteronomion*, literally, “second law.” The ancients based this title on 17:18, which refers to this book as “a copy of this law.” Deuteronomy, then, is a copy of God’s law, a restatement and amplification of God’s law. So, God’s law is “revealed” (Hebrew *galah*, uncover or disclose) to us. God has revealed exactly what He wants us to know in His Word. *That* is His moral will.

We see, in fact, no less than seven principles in Scripture that specifically tell us what God’s **will** is for our lives:

*First*, it is God’s will that you are Spirit-filled. The verse that follows our text declares, “And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit” (Eph. 5:18). “Filled” is *plēeroō*, which speaks of filling a container and means “to influence fully, to control.” To put it succinctly: *to be filled with the Spirit is to have our thoughts, desires, values, motives, goals, priorities, and all else controlled by Him through the Word and set on spiritual things and spiritual growth*. When that statement is true of a Christian’s life, all other things will fall in line behind it.

*Second*, it’s God’s will that you are morally pure (1 Thes. 4:3–7). Every believer is to rightly possess, rightly control, his

own body. If we are living in the Spirit, we “mortify the deeds of the body” (Rom. 8:13).<sup>9</sup> This all-inclusive passage declares three principles: stay away from sexual sin (pre-marital, extra-marital, homosexual, etc.), control your body (that is, *any* lustful excess to gratify the flesh), and never defraud (cheat) someone else. This leads to another principle.

*Third*, it is God’s will that you are constantly being transformed by the renewing of your mind (Rom. 12:2). Such renewal of the mind comes only by holiness and exposure to the Word of God. We should grow weary of those today who say “I want to know God’s will” but who don’t want doctrine and teaching. Such people do not want *God’s will*, rather they want *their way*.

*Fourth*, it is God’s will that you thank Him in all things, that is, you are submissive to the sovereignty of God. This is a hard one: “In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you” (1 Thes. 5:18). How many of us would admit to sometimes thinking, “I sure wish that verse didn’t use the word *everything?*” But God’s will is that we thank Him in *everything*; no matter what happens, we trust His sovereignty. How many of us say we want to know God’s will, but when something happens that we don’t like, we murmur and complain? We have just violated God’s will.

*Fifth*, it is God’s will that you pray. As Paul instructed Timothy: “I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting” (1 Tim. 2:8). Prayer is not just “saying prayers” but constant communion, a continuous consciousness of God’s presence in us (cf. Lk. 18:1; 1 Thes. 5:17).

*Sixth*, it is God’s will that you submit to authority. There was no one better to write on this subject than Peter: “Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well. For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men” (1 Pet. 2:13–15).

*Seventh*, it is God’s will that you be willing to suffer for Christ. Here’s another tough one. We are being told today that you shouldn’t preach about sin because it offends people, or that we shouldn’t take a stand on anything because it might alienate people or invite criticism of our ministry. But Peter also writes in his first epistle: “For it is better, if the will of God be so, that ye suffer for well doing, than for evil doing” (1 Jn. 3:17) and again, “Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator” (4:19). In fact, this will be the case when we stand for Christ, as Paul declares: “All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution” (2 Tim. 3:12). Yes, standing for truth might offend, alienate, invite criticism, or even cost us our lives, but our willingness to do just that is part of the will of God.

Over and above all that, however, is every other precept, principle, and precedent in God’s Word. It is God’s Word that should rule, regulate, and run our lives. It is His Word alone that should command, control, and conduct our living.

Sadly, however, while every evangelical would agree with those statements and claim to do them, the fact is that the Bible is becoming less and less the authority in the Church. Harry Ironside recounts an incident that is a telling indict-

ment on Christianity. Back in the mid-1930s there was an open forum on religion in Chicago. In addition to a representative from Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, and Judaism, also present was the infamous atheist Clarence Darrow. Each of the first three rose and told why he was what he was. Darrow then rose and said, “Gentleman, I have been very much interested in one thing. I notice neither Protestant, Catholic, nor Jew ever referred to the Bible. Evidently they no longer value that so-called Holy Book as they used to.” He then went on to declare that he was an atheist because he had no use for the Book that they never even mentioned.<sup>10</sup>

Oh, how much truer that is today! The Scripture is far from being the *sole*, much less *final*, authority. Christian leaders use marketing techniques for building the Church, psychological jargon for dealing with personal problems, and even secular resources to supposedly teach moral values. One graphic illustration is found in the pastors who a few years ago showed episodes of the old *Andy Griffith Show* to their people for the moral lessons they contain. Where is the Word of God? Yes, we say in our doctrinal statements that we believe the Bible to be the Word of God, but in practice we not only don’t use it *exclusively*, we don’t seem to use it even *occasionally*. But Scripture is to *be our* authority because it alone *is the* authority. No man, system, religion, philosophy, or anything else has any authority. Only God does, and He has revealed His *will* in His **Word**. *Period*.

## Making Right Decisions

With all the foregoing in mind, however, the question immediately arises: “But what about the countless things that are not spelled out for us in Scripture?” What about where you should go to college or who you should marry? What about buying that new house or car? What about where you should go to church? What about starting a particular ministry or church program? Some might even ask, “Should I fix the chicken or the fish for dinner?” Some insist that before we do *anything*, no matter how mundane, we mustn’t move until we stop, pray, and seek some sign from God for what move we should make.

Most of us have heard the old story of the man who wanted to know God’s will on a particular matter, so he took out his Bible, opened it at random, and dropped his index finger onto a page, assuming the verse his finger landed on would tell him God’s will for the moment. Much to his embarrassment, however, the verse was Matthew 27:5, which says that Judas “went and hanged himself.” He thought he should try again, but this time his finger fell on Luke 10:37, “Go, and do thou likewise.” Trying one more time, his finger found John 13:27, “What thou doest, do quickly.”<sup>11</sup>

As silly as that is, many Christians actually believe and practice similar methods. One of the most common is “putting out a fleece,” using Gideon as a model. Some say, “Lord, if You’ll do this, then I know I should do this.” The interesting thing about that incident, however, is that Gideon is actually an example of how *NOT* to find God’s will. God’s *clear word* to Gideon was that he would win the battle, that God would use him to deliver Israel from the Midianites (Judg. 6:16), but that wasn’t good enough for Gideon, so in his unbelief he asked for a sign (vv. 36–40). He simply did not believe what God said.

Once again, the same is true today. God’s Word isn’t

enough so some look for something else, or make it up themselves. One might say, for example, “I’m looking for a sign not to marry that unbeliever,” when God has stated categorically that a Christian should *never* do that (2 Cor. 6:14—7:1). The same is true of Christians who rely on feelings, impressions, circumstances, and burdens to dictate their decisions. While these things might *confirm* a decision, they should not *control* a decision. Nowhere in Scripture are we told that such things are to be used to dictate decision-making. In fact, the concept of God’s “individual will” as another aspect of God’s will that is apart from His sovereign will and moral will is not a biblical concept. One writer puts it very well:

The phrase “will of God” is simply not used in this sense of idealized personal plan that forms a pattern of decision making. This supposed “individual will” is not God’s sovereign will, which is behind providences, nor is it the revealed will of God in Scripture. It is something in between these two and separate from them. The passages that are cited (Col 1:9; 4:12; Rom. 12:2; Eph. 5:17; 6:6), all actually refer to God’s will as revealed in his commandments and applies to our lives. So advocates of this view are using a category that is not introduced in Scripture—a big problem!<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, there are basically four biblical principles for making decisions: *Scripture* is first, followed by *wisdom*, *desire*, and *counsel*, all of which are *also* based on Scripture. Let’s test this Scripture-centered approach with an example, probably the biggest decision a Christian will make: who to marry.

*First*, what does *Scripture* dictate? The common idea is that there is “that one certain person” I should marry and that “I must wait for God to reveal that person to me.” But Scripture says several things about who we should marry. One, as mentioned earlier, is that the person must be a believer. Some teachers stop there and feel that as long as someone is a Christian, then all is well. But the principle of the “unequal yoke” goes further. There should also be agreement concerning biblical doctrine. Radically differing doctrinal viewpoints are the ingredients for big conflicts. Each spirit should bear witness of the other. Another dictate is agreement concerning the biblical roles of men and women. Do you agree about those roles as outlined in Ephesians 5:21–33 and elsewhere? Do you agree in how to train children as outlined in 6:1–4 and elsewhere? If there is not an “equal yoke” in such areas, you better take another look at the relationship and where it will end up. (See TOTT 99, Mar./Apr. 2016, “The Unequal Yoke.”)

*Second*, what does *wisdom* contribute to the decision? As James declares, “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him” (Jas. 1:5). This entails just examining the relationship and wisely discerning compatibility. Do you get along well with each other? I’ve seen dating couples who argue constantly but who think they want to get married. Do you both have some of the same interests? This undoubtedly won’t include everything, but are there some things you can do together? What are your goals and priorities? What are your views of money and how to handle it? Each of those questions, and others that will arise, must be tied back in with Scripture. More often than not, these first two principles will dictate your decision, but there are two others to consider

when there are still questions.

*Third*, how does your *desire* fit into the equation? I was listening to one teacher on this very issue who asked, “Well, what if there are two choices of a prospective mate, two that meet the qualifications? Simple—pick one. Which one do you want?” Desire does have something to do with our decisions. Now, the most important aspect of desire appears in James 4:3: “Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.” Be sure your desire is not just lust, but a Godly, biblical desire. With that established, what do you want to do? Psalm 37:4 declares, “Delight thyself also in the LORD; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart.” Ecclesiastes 11:9 agrees, “Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes: but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment.” There is nothing wrong with desire, as long as the desire is pure. Paul speaks of desire in this very area: “The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord” (1 Co. 7:39). “Will” is *thelō*, “to will, desire” and “by implication . . . to be disposed or inclined toward [something], delight in, love, in which case it is a synonym of *phileō*, to love.”<sup>13</sup>

There are a couple of extremes to avoid here. I’ve heard some people say, “Love God and do what you want,” but that is clearly weak. It’s quite possible to love the Lord but still not have the right desires in a particular situation. I’ve heard others say, “If you’re saved and living right, then whatever you choose will automatically be what God wants.” But that assumes that you already know what Scripture and wisdom dictate on every single question that exists, and that, of course, is not likely.

*Fourth*, how does godly *counsel* influence the decision? Here is the final “safety valve.” Proverbs says much about Godly counsel. “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes: but he that hearkeneth unto counsel is wise” (12:15). “Without counsel purposes are disappointed: but in the multitude of counsellors they are established” (15:22). “Hear counsel, and receive instruction, that thou mayest be wise in thy latter end” (19:20). “Ointment and perfume rejoice the heart: so doth the sweetness of a man’s friend by hearty counsel” (27:9). A godly friend, parent, or pastor might see something you don’t or might offer an encouragement you didn’t consider.

This same procedure will apply to those other questions we asked earlier. What about where you should go to college? What about buying that new house or car? What about where you should go to church? What about starting a particular ministry or church program? And it will apply to any others that come our way.

In closing, we have examined the basics of understanding the will of God and how it relates to making decisions. If you want to go deeper or have more questions, I would recommend the book *Decisions, Decisions: How (and How Not) to Make Them* by Dave Swavelly.<sup>14</sup> It should be the desire of every Believer to **[understand] what the will of the Lord is.**

Dr. J. D. Watson  
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**NOTES**

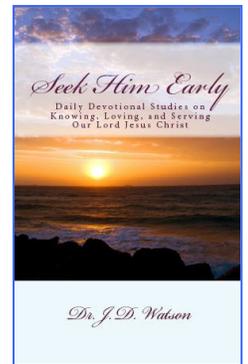
- <sup>1</sup> Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary* (AMG Publishers, electronic edition), entry #G878.
- <sup>2</sup> Joseph Thayer, *Thayer's Greek Lexicon* (electronic edition, public domain), entry #90.
- <sup>3</sup> Other instances: Rom. 2:20; 2 Cor. 11:16, 19; 12:6, 11; 1 Pet. 2:15.
- <sup>4</sup> Colin Brown (Ed.), *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Zondervan, 1975), Vol. II, 616.
- <sup>5</sup> Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Abridged in One Volume by Geoffrey W. Bromiley ("Little Kittel") (Eerdmans, 1985), 1277.
- <sup>6</sup> Brown, Vol. 3, 130.
- <sup>7</sup> Zodhiates, #G1344.
- <sup>8</sup> Zodhiates, #H702.
- <sup>9</sup> Some interpreters hold that "vessel" is a synonym for "wife," but the context makes it clear that it is synonym for "body." Albert Barnes writes: "The word body . . . accords more naturally with the usual signification of the word, and as the apostle was giving

- directions to the whole church, embracing both sexes, it is hardly probable that he confined his direction to those who had wives. It was the duty of females; and of the unmarried among the males, as well as of married men, to observe this command. The injunction then is, that we should preserve the body pure."
- <sup>10</sup> Ironside, *Ephesians* (Loieaux), 264-5.
- <sup>11</sup> Dennis DeHaan, *Windows on the Word: Illustrations from "Our Daily Bread"* (Radio Bible Class, 1984), 59.
- <sup>12</sup> James Petty, *Step By Step: Divine Guidance for Ordinary Christians* (P&R Publishing, 1999). Cited in Dave Swavely, *Decisions, Decisions* (P&R Publishing, 2003), 55-56.
- <sup>13</sup> Zodhiates, #G728.
- <sup>14</sup> See note 12. I much prefer this book over *Decision Making and the Will of God* by Garry Friesen (Multnomah). Swavely is far more readable, and I think at times Friesen's emphasis on "wisdom" overshadows the centrality of Scripture. Whether by *precept* or *principle*, Scripture always has the answer, but Friesen seems to miss this. I also feel he is a little weak on the Sovereignty of God.

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