

The Long Road to Nowhere

A Sermon by Christopher Patton
Sovereign Grace Church Middletown DE
9/27/2009

This morning we begin a three part series on spiritual guidance entitled "Just Do Something".

When it comes to life's decisions, the main thing most of us want to know is **"What does God want me to do?" – "What is His will for my life?"**

So for instance, the young person asks:

- Does God want me to go to this school or this other school?
- Does He want me to pick this major or that major?
- What career path does He want me to choose?

Others in a different season of life might ask things like:

- Does God want me to take this job, or this other job?
- Does He want me to start my own business, or stay where I'm at, where benefits and pay are more stable?
- Does God want me to tell my boss I am not satisfied with my current salary, or should I just not say anything, and be content?"

Sometimes folks ask other significant questions related to spiritual guidance like:

- Does God want me to live in this state or this other state?
- Does He want us to move closer to family, or stay where we are?
- Should I go to this church or a different church?

Sometimes parents will ask other questions like:

- Does God want me to home school my children, or send them to public or private school?
- Or does "He want us to try to have more children, or not?"

Singles might ask, "Should I enter into a courtship with so and so, or should I wait for someone else?" Now that's just a brief sampling of the kinds of questions seek answers to. However, there's just one problem, and it's a pretty big one! We struggle to know exactly HOW to discern God's will; how to know what He wants. This confusion is captured well in the tag line of Kevin DeYoung's book Just Do Something which reads, "how to make a decision without dreams, visions, fleeces, impressions, open doors, random Bible verse, liver shivers, writing in the sky, etc."

Now just be clear, I want to acknowledge that God sometimes will give a dream, a vision, and or an impression; and He will sometimes use open and closed doors as part of the way He chooses to guide us. According to Scripture He does sometimes guide his people in these ways (just read the book of Acts). However, many believers today tend to place the emphasis, the accent, on these more subjectively oriented means which alone form a very narrow, theologically incomplete and insufficient model of personal guidance.

The result is that many experience undue anxiety related to making decisions – because they can feel as if "I've got to have a direct word from the Lord" communicated through circumstances or impressions or something else in order to do anything." The other common result is people make poor decisions

because they exalt their own subjective sense of God's leading above biblical principles of wisdom and the counsel of others which the scriptures exalt again and again.

My burden is to equip you, from Scripture, with a more complete model of personal guidance which places the accent where the Bible places it—on the Holy Spirit's work of providing guidance primarily through biblical discernment and wisdom, which God graciously and liberally gives through a variety of means, which we will explore in this series.

So with that in mind, please turn in your Bibles to the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy to chapter 29. I want to begin our series by talking about this idea, this concept of God's will and how we as Christians should relate to it. When it comes to this subject, I can think of no better text to consider than Deuteronomy 29, verse 29.

The Secret Things

"The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law."

Now, in order to help you better understand this verse, I want to give you some background. Here in the book of Deuteronomy, we have recorded for us a sermon or perhaps a set of sermons where near the end of his life, Moses addresses the people of Israel. At the time Moses give this sermon, the vast majority of first generation of Israelites had already died in the wilderness as they were not permitted to enter the land of promise, the land of Canaan, because of their sin.

In this sermon, Moses passionately appeals to that generation's children, the next generation, to faithfully keep the law, which had been given 40 years earlier on Mt. Sinai. Now it's important to note that chapter 29, the chapter where we find today's text, marks the beginning of Moses' conclusion to his sermon. And in this chapter, this new generation of Israelites responds to Moses' preaching contained in the prior chapters by renewing their covenant with Yahweh.

Yet even as they do so, Moses warns them about the severe consequences of failing to abide by the stipulations of God's covenant and God's law even going so far as to communicate his fear that in the future they as a people might possibly forsake the Lord. Now just think for a moment, what that must have been like for the people to hear Moses, their leader, say that!

They were probably at least tempted to think something like, "Great sermon Moses. We've listened carefully to you. We're moved we're convicted. We have reaffirmed our covenant with Yahweh. Now you're telling us you think it's quite possible that as a nation we will still eventually rebel, and turn our back on God? What's up with that?"

It's likely they thought, "Well Moses, if that really might happen, why should we obey the law? Why should we keep the Sabbath, and resist the strong temptation to worship false god's, and continue to make sacrifices, and tithe if in the end, we as a people might not even continue to follow Yahweh?"

What the people felt might have been similar to what a godly parent feels when discouraged by their child's bad behavior or attitudes. "What's the use of working so hard to train this child in the fear of the Lord, if they might just grow up to rebel anyway?"...I don't think it's a stretch to imagine that's the kind of thing the people were thinking when Moses declares the words we find in vs.29: *"The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law."*

"Why keep following Yahweh if our future might be so bleak?", was their unspoken question. Moses' answer is simple: 'the secret things belong to God' and 'the revealed things belong to you'.

Let's consider what he means by that, beginning with what Moses calls "the secret things". The secret things, are those things, that as Moses says, belong to God alone, which He has chosen NOT to reveal to us. To introduce some helpful terminology here, the "secret things" are what theologians call the secret will of God, God's will of decree or God's sovereign will. These terms refer to what God has sovereignly ordained will come to pass; his eternal, all-encompassing plan that cannot be changed or thwarted by any circumstance.

May I remind you that no detail of your life or mine, falls outside of God's secret will. Where you were born, the parents you were born to, the siblings God has given you, the spouse God has given you, the children He's given you, the job you have, even the ways you've failed: none of it falls outside of God's secret will, His sovereign will, His ultimate purposes for your life, the lives of your family members and everything and everyone else your life is connected to.

And nothing you can or will do in the future will change God's secret or sovereign will. This truth is affirmed in Psalm 139:16, where David declares "Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them." So nothing can change God's secret, but good purposes. That's wonderful, and comforting to know, isn't it? Even the most difficult seasons of our lives have been ordained by God, for his glory and the good of those who love Him.

What Moses is doing is making it clear that the people's question regarding their future faithfulness was a question that fell into the realm of God's secret will, so it wasn't for the people to know the answer. Furthermore, the answer has no bearing on them pleasing God through heartfelt obedience to God's law.

In other words, Moses says "I know what you're thinking...and as to whether as a people you will ultimately abandon God or not, the answer is not accessible to us...that is part of God's secret will and such knowledge is not needed or required to do what He has called you to do TODAY, which is to obey Him!"

Regarding this verse John Calvin writes:

"It is a remarkable passage, and especially deserving of our observation, for by its audacity and excessive curiosity are condemned...We know how anxious men are to understand things, the knowledge of which is altogether unprofitable, and even the investigation of them injurious. All of them would desire to be God's counselors, and to penetrate into the deepest recesses of heaven, nay, they would search into its very cabinets."

We need to realize, that at times God will withhold information we think we must have to move forward, simply because the insight we crave about the future is part of "the secret things that belong to the Lord." Sometimes I think we believers long to penetrate the deepest recesses of heaven and search into its cabinets—we long for the dream, the vision, the impression, the open door because we're afraid; afraid of making a decision outside of God's will; and we want God to calm our fears regarding the future by revealing secret things.

And we need to realize that seeking after secret things really is the Long Road to Nowhere, because the secret things are the secret things are the secret things no matter how hard we might try to change that. In this verse God condemns what can be, at times, our excessive curiosity and desire to know and understand things he has not revealed. He just says to you and to me as he did to the people of Moses' day, " Son, daughter, not knowing the secret things is no reason to be directionally challenged, trust me with the secret things and just do something!" ...

But, the question remains, what are we to do?

Thankfully Moses makes it clear. Let's read the verse again.

"The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law."

The Revealed Things

The words of the law, are the words of the ten commandments and the ten commandments are part of what theologians call "God's revealed will" or "God's will of desire" because God has revealed to us the 10 commandments and He desires that we do them.

So for the next generation of Israelites that Moses addressed, they weren't to be preoccupied with divining, or attempting to figure out God's secret will (the things he has not revealed), but instead Moses tells them that they are to be preoccupied with the things God has already revealed in His law, that they might do them. This indeed was the reason Moses shared his sober warning in the first place: to provoke them to obey God's revealed will.

And inspired by God, his words have been preserved in Holy Scripture, to provoke us, to stir us to do the same. It must be said that in the NT, God reveals that obedience to God's revealed will, His will of desire begins first with obedience to the Gospel. The Gospel is the Good news of Jesus Christ, which is this:

God created, He made us, and everything that there is. He made us as people to enjoy unbroken and unhindered fellowship with God as our Father. However, each one of us has tragically chosen to separate ourselves from Him by living according to our own will for our lives instead of God's will for our lives. We've chosen to do what we want rather than what He reveals in His Word that He wants us to do. Such disregard for and disobedience to God's commands is what the Bible calls sin. And because God is a just God, he must punish sin. He can't just let bygones be bygones. And in light of how wicked our sin is before an infinitely pure, holy, perfect and righteous God, the appropriate punishment the Bible says, is eternal separation from God in hell. Yet in His amazing mercy this same God, who we've so offended and grieved by our sin, this heavenly father that we've in effect told to "get out of my life" this very same God has come and sought us out.

The eternal son of God, God Himself, entered our world and took on flesh; he became a man. His name is Jesus of Nazareth, born of the virgin Mary. And what he did for us is amazing. He lived the perfectly obedient life we should have lived and on the cross received the punishment that we should have received. On the cross, he died, but death could not hold him in the grave so on the third day He rose from the dead proving and vindicating His claims to be the Son of God and the Savior of the world. 40 days later, Jesus ascended to heaven and now He invites every person here who has not already done so to trust in Him and in His finished work on the Cross and to turn from your sins in order that you might receive forgiveness for your sins, be reconciled to the Father, and enjoy eternity in Heaven with Him! If you have not done that, I would like to talk with you and pray with you after the meeting.

So obeying God's revealed will, begins with believing the Gospel. After initially responding to the Gospel, obeying God's revealed will means that by the power of the Gospel, we must make it our aim to do all that God in His Word clearly says to do, and to not do all that which God clearly says not to do. I say, "by the power of the Gospel" because, as John Owen has stated so articulately, "To suppose that whatever God requires of us that we have power of ourselves to do, is to make the cross and grace of Jesus Christ of none effect."

The Cross and grace is what makes obeying God's revealed will possible. And when we fail, due to remaining sin in our hearts, we must look again to our Savior, receive the forgiveness that Jesus death has secured for us and continue to seek to obey Him.

Scripture is NEVER wrong, and we are commanded by God to obey it. So when we are busy doing what God has already said to do, we can rest secure that we are doing the will of God, even if we don't have the full picture of what God is up to and where He is leading us.

However, our impressions of how God is leading, our dreams, our reading of the open and closed doors that's another matter. They can be right...and they can be wrong, and nowhere does scripture tell us to obey our impressions or dreams or to follow the messages we think the open and closed doors are sending. However, the psalmist does say regarding the scriptures, "your Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path."

The good news I want to offer you this morning is this: **God hasn't called anyone here to figure out secret things;** to somehow discern the future; instead, he's just called you to focus your attention on obeying revealed things, and what I hope to show you in the coming weeks is that when it comes to spiritual guidance, focusing our attention on the revealed things gets us a lot closer to doing what God has called us to do than at first, we might think.

Over the course of my Christian life, and in my pastoral experience, I've watched as feelings, hunches, and open or closed doors -- have lead the way in decision making for many Christians. I think at some level, this is a reflection of the feeling-oriented, feeling-driven orientation of our culture which has crept into the church.

At times, we myopically zero-in on a prophetic sense, or a subjective feeling, or on how circumstances are lining up, before we've thought long and hard, or sought counsel about, what biblical principles God has already revealed might apply to the decision at hand. What not everyone is always aware of is that even when the direction we seek involves questions not directly answered in Scripture, applying biblical principles to those questions often makes the right choice quite clear, even when it comes to questions like where God wants you to go to school, or where he wants you to work, or where He wants you to live, or where He wants you to go to church.

Now admittedly, there will be times when even after applying biblical principles, and getting the input of wise friends who help you to apply biblical principles, the right decision will still be unclear. However in those moments, all things being equal, God gives us the liberty to just make a decision. Of course if God gives a solid sense or impression in the process GREAT; if he opens or closes doors in the process GREAT. But thank God **we don't have to live in bondage, waiting endlessly for a dream or a vision or an impression or for an open door.** We can just do something, knowing that God is with us and is behind us; He's for us as we seek to glorify him in the decisions we make.

So may God be glorified as we learn to make decisions, small and big, informed by biblical principle and driven by a longing for God to be glorified.

I invite you to come back next week to hear how Jesus' Sermon on the Mount points the way to following the will of God and how seeking first the kingdom of God should inform all our decisions.

I also invite you back the following week as well, as we consider how God's Word and the counsel of others are wonderful means God has given us to help us to discern and walk in the will of God. I can't wait to see how God meets us!