

He Will Send His Angel Before You

by John Piper

To discover God's will for our lives, we must become familiar with the trajectories of his Word and trust in his power to guide us.

Scripture: Matthew 12:50

Topics: "Gods Will", "Biblical Meditation"

Description

John Piper preaches on the importance of discovering God's will for our lives by studying the trajectories of His Word, emphasizing the need for meditative study to discern God's direction. Using the example of Abraham in Genesis 24:1-9, Piper highlights how Abraham traced out trajectories from God's past revelations to discern His will for the present, showing the confidence we can have in God's power to overcome obstacles when we aim to do His will. Piper encourages believers to immerse themselves in God's Word to understand His will and experience His supernatural intervention in their lives.

Transcript

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Genesis 24:1-9

Jesus taught us to pray, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Therefore, everyone who confesses Jesus as Lord aims daily to know and do the will of God. If we do not make it our aim to do the will of God heartily and consistently as the angels do it in heaven, then we probably do not belong to Christ. For Jesus himself said, "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." (Matt. 12:50). The family resemblance of all the people of God is not the perfect performance of God's will, but the persistent purpose to do it. The mark of the child of God is not that he always hits the bull's-eye, but that he aims at the targets appointed by the Father. The great aim of the church is to do God's will on earth the way it's done in heaven.

For many of us life is a constant struggle on the one hand to know what God's will is and on the other hand to maintain a happy confidence that God will overcome all the obstacles that would prevent our doing it. In Genesis 24:1-9 there is an incident from Abraham's life that shows how he discovered God's will and kept his confidence strong that God would enable him to do it. And I believe that the reason God put this story in the Bible is that we might learn how to know God's will and be encouraged to trust in God's power to get it done.

I think the main point to be learned about these two things is this: we can know God's will and maintain trust in his help if we are familiar with the trajectories of his Word. The trajectory of a rocket is the path it will follow on the basis of its shape and speed and weight and direction. You can know ahead of time where it's going if you understand its trajectory. That's the way it is with God's Word. The Bible does not give us a detailed description of God's will for our lives. But if we listen carefully and study its shape, and speed, and weight, and direction, we will see trajectories that give guidance and strengthen faith. Let's see how this worked for Abraham.

Sometimes God spoke to Abraham directly and made his will unmistakably clear. But as far as we know from Genesis, those times were few and far between. Most of the time it seems Abraham had to trace out for himself his own trajectories of obedience from what God had said and done in the past. I think that is what's happening in Genesis 24:1-9.

Three trajectories from God's Word combine to show Abraham what God's will is at the present time. The first trajectory is that Isaac, his son, must have a wife. Second, the wife may not be taken from the Canaanites. Third, Isaac may not return to the land which Abraham had left. As Abraham ponders these three trajectories of God's Word, he sees them merge into a single line of decision. The decision is: I will send my trusted servant to find a wife for my son among my own kindred and in my own land and he will bring her back. Abraham determines what the will of God is by forecasting where the trajectories of God's past revelation are leading. And Abraham is so confident that this is God's will, he says to his servant in verse 7, "God will send his angel before you and you shall take a wife for my son." Once we know the will of God we can have tremendous confidence that God will use his supernatural power to overcome obstacles for those who aim to do it.

I think most of us here want that very much. We want to be able to project God's will for our lives into the future from the trajectories we have seen in the past. We want questions answered about marriage, and children, and job changes, and major purchases, and schooling, and the use of leisure time, and involvement in special ministries, and church affiliation, and what percentage of our income to give away, and on and on. And we want to enjoy that same confidence Abraham did--that when we aim to do God's will, he will send his angel before us and overcome the obstacles. We want to be led by God, and we want to be led in triumph (2 Cor. 2:14).

Scriptures like Genesis 24 are given to us for our instruction and encouragement. So let's look at it more closely. I said that three trajectories from God's past Word merge to show Abraham God's will in the present. The reason I call them trajectories and not commands is that God had not said "Isaac must have a wife." God had not said, "His wife must not come from the Canaanites." And God had not said, "Isaac shall not return to the city of Nahor from which you came." But God had said things that pointed in this direction. The rocket of God's will had been launched and several times God had pulled back the clouds so that Abraham could see its size and shape and speed and direction. And from what he had seen and heard, Abraham traced its trajectory on into his present circumstances and discovered the will of God.

Let's go back with Abraham to those glimpses of revelation and see if we can learn better how to project the trajectory of God's will in the future from its path in the past. The first trajectory Abraham projected was that Isaac must have a wife. Not every father can see that trajectory for his son. God wills for some people to be single for the sake of his kingdom. Not so with Abraham and Isaac. Even though God had never said, "Isaac must marry," almost all his promises point in that direction. In Genesis 12:2 God said to Abraham, "I will make of you a great nation." And in Genesis 15:5 he said, "Look toward heaven and

number the stars, if you are able to number them. . . So shall your descendants be" (cf. 22:17). So clearly one trajectory of these promises was that Abraham's child must marry and have children. But couldn't it be Ishmael, Abraham's first son? No. Because God gave Abraham another glimpse of how the rocket of his will was aimed. In Genesis 21:12 he said, "Through Isaac shall your descendants be named." And in Genesis 17:19 he said, "I will establish my covenant with Isaac as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him." So for Abraham the trajectory was clear--Isaac, who was forty years old in Genesis 24 (cf. 25:20) must have a wife. It was God's will, though he never said it.

The second trajectory Abraham saw was that Isaac's wife may not be taken from the Canaanites. God had not said this to Abraham explicitly as far as we know. What had he seen of God's will that caused him to come to this conclusion? I can think of two things God had said that would point Abraham in this direction. When Sarah couldn't have children for Abraham, he took Hagar, her maid who was Egyptian, and had a son by her. He hoped that the promise would be fulfilled through Ishmael. But God said in Genesis 17:19, "No. But Sarah your wife shall bear you a son... I will establish my covenant with him." Perhaps Abraham looked back on that regrettable escapade and saw hints of a divine trajectory, namely that God aims to work through a uniquely Jewish line to fulfill his promise.

But maybe even more important than the Hagar incident was a prediction that God made to Abraham in Genesis 15:16. God tells Abraham that his descendants will be oppressed 400 years in Egypt and then says, "And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete." The Amorites here represent all the pagan peoples of Canaan. They are marked out for judgment because of their sin, but God will not drive them out until the history of their sin is so appalling no one will accuse God of injustice when he sweeps through Canaan destroying these nations.

Now if God had said that to you about the people surrounding you, would you not hear a warning against forming marriage alliances? Abraham saw a trajectory in God's Word that probably went something like this: "Through your son I will fulfill my covenant to be the God of his descendants and to bless all the nations through him. So take heed lest he marry a woman who worships other gods and could bring him into a snare." That's the way Moses warned Israel hundreds of years later when they were about to enter the promised land: "You shall not make marriages with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons. For they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods" (Deut. 7:3,4). So from all God had said, Abraham traced out this trajectory: "You will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites" (24:3).

The third trajectory Abraham saw in God's word was that Isaac may not return to the city of Nahor, Abraham's brother. Abraham is adamant on this point. He says to his servant in verse 6, "See to it that you do not take my son back there." And at the end of verse 8, "You must not take my son back there." Why? What had God said that made Abraham so sure of this?

I believe the answer is that God had called Abraham out of his land and promised him and his descendants a new land. To go back could only mean unbelief in God's promise and power to fulfill it. God said in Genesis 13:14,15, "Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward, and eastward and westward; for all the land you see I will give to you and to your descendants for ever." And in Genesis 17:8 God said, "I will give to you and to your descendants after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan for an everlasting possession." Abraham could not even contemplate seeing Isaac leave the land of promise.

So I conclude that the word of promise which God had spoken to Abraham in the past gave rise to three trajectories which merged into a single line of decision. Isaac must have a wife, for God promised descendants. She must not come from the Canaanites, lest she draw him away from the God of promise and expose him to the coming judgment. And he must not return to Mesopotamia, for God had promised the land of Canaan as his everlasting possession. Thus by looking back on the trajectories of God's word, Abraham discerns the will of God, namely, that his servant should go and take a wife for Isaac from his brother's household and bring her back.

And he is confident, so confident that when his servant says, "Maybe the woman won't be willing to follow me to this land," (v.5) Abraham says in verse 7, "The Lord the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my birth, and who spoke to me and swore to me, 'To your descendants I will give this land,' he will send his angel before you and you shall take a wife for my son from there." Abraham believed in the God of the promise. He glorified God because he was fully convinced God could do what he promised (Rom. 4:20). When the trajectories of God's Word merge to form a decision in our heart, we can count on all God's sovereign power to carry it through. He will send his angel before us and overcome all obstacles.

So it seems to me that there are two lessons to learn from this story. One is that we discover God's will for our lives from the trajectories of his Word. The other is that God really does work powerfully for those who aim to do his will. He sends his angel before them.

Do you see the implications now of saying that we discover God's will from the trajectories of his Word? It means that if you are really serious about wanting to do God's will you will become a meditative student of his Word. I say meditative because it's not just memorized facts that we need. It is a knowledge of trajectories. And we get that by asking: What's the point of this? Where does that lead to? Why did he say this? Where is he heading here? What does this imply? To ask those questions prayerfully is to meditate. If you are not spending much time in meditative study of God's Word, then probably doing God's will on earth is not the passion of your life. And if you ever ask the question, "What is God's will?", you probably get very confused.

Listen. Satan devotes himself 168 hours a week trying to deceive you and fill your mind with junk. He has seen to it that you are surrounded almost entirely by a Christless culture whose mood, and entertainment, and advertising, and recreation, and politics are shot through with lies about what you should feel and think and do. Do you think that in this atmosphere you can maintain a vigorous, powerful, free, renewed mind with a ten-minute glance at God's book once a day? The reason there are church people who are basically secular like everyone else except with a religious veneer is that they devote 99% of their time absorbing the trajectories of the world and 1% of their time absorbing the trajectories of the Word. If you want to bring forth the will of God in your life like a mother brings forth a child, you must marry the Bible. For some of you it is a stranger that you greet on the way to work but never have over for a relaxed evening of conversation, and seldom invite along to spend significant time with you on vacation. Do not then be surprised if you are ill-equipped to read the trajectories of God's will for your own life.

Summer is a time for experiments. May I suggest one? If you are discouraged, and perplexed about God's will in some area of your life, plan in the next couple weeks to find a quiet place totally alone and read the Bible meditatively for four hours interspersed only by prayer. Here's what will happen. For some of you the clouds of confusion will lift and the trajectory of God's will will be perfectly clear. For others the precise decision won't come that quickly, but you will experience a wonderful purifying and stabilizing of your

mind.

Last June I sent Noel and the boys home from our first week of vacation so that I could be alone for three days. I wanted to know God's will for my sermons this fall. I bound myself to four things as I sought God's will. First, I vowed not to speak or hear a human word for three days except in prayer - no radio, no T.V., no neighbors, and the only words that would pass my lips would be addressed to God. Second, I vowed to fast one meal a day. Third, I vowed to read the Bible one hour in the morning, one hour at noon and one hour in the evening, and to interrupt it only for prayer. Fourth, I vowed to spend the other hours taking walks in the field or writing my thoughts or reading books to help me understand the Bible. I believe the Lord met me there and he gave me my texts for the fall.

Now as I face the fall schedule, I lay hold on the second lesson of our text: that God will work powerfully for me if I don't forsake the direction he gave. He will send his angel before me and prepare the hearts of the hearers just like he prepared the heart of Rebekah. The great thing about being a Christian and the pastor of Christians is that we can have the happy assurance that God employs all his power to lead us in triumph when we see the trajectory of his will and follow it.

One final observation. Someone may say, "But you can't be absolutely sure you've read the trajectories accurately. You can't know the will of God with mathematical certainty." That's true. We are not God and all our thoughts are open to correction. And so Abraham says in verse 8, "If the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be free from this oath of mine." He says, as it were, "All right, I won't dispute the possibility, remote as it is, that I may have misread God's will. So in that case you are free from your oath. But listen, my dear servant, I am as confident about this decision as anything I have ever done. So you go. And take heart: the Lord will send his angel before you."

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