

INTRODUCTION

It seems doors of opportunity open and close before us in life. Is it God opening and closing these doors? For many years I’ve heard the saying, “When God shuts one door, He opens another!” Well, no, those exact words are *not* found in the Bible anywhere. However, of all the phrases we’ll examine in this series this statement is closer to the truth. I haven’t found the original source of the saying, but it sounds similar to a famous quote by Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone. He said: “When one door closes, another opens; but we often look so long and so regretfully upon the closed door that we do not see the one which has opened for us.”

The best example of open and closed doors is found in Acts 16:6-12. Paul and his friends launched their second missionary journey from Antioch. Along the way, they encountered some closed doors and then an open door.

“Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. During the night, Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding [“knit together”] that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace and the next day to Neapolis. From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district of Macedonia.”

God called Paul to take the gospel to the Gentiles and he was obeying God. As he was traveling, he decided to try to go northeast into Asia Minor, but Holy Spirit said “no.” God shut the door. Then he traveled on and tried to go north into Bithynia toward Russia, and once again God shut the door. It must have been a puzzling time for Paul. He was on mission for God and the doors kept shutting in his face. But he didn’t go back, and he didn’t camp out, he kept moving west. When he came to Troas, God opened the door for him to go over into Macedonia, which is modern-day Greece. He had a vision of a man standing in front of him saying, “Come help us!” Paul understood this to be God’s directive, so he took the gospel into Greece instead of Asia Minor. That was the first time the gospel penetrated the European continent, and many of us have a European heritage. We should be glad Paul paid attention to God’s closed and opened doors. As we consider open and closed doors, let’s learn four things about finding and following God’s will.

1. GOD WILL GUIDE YOU IF YOU’LL TRUST HIM

You aren’t just placed on this earth to stumble around in the dark trying to find out what you should do. The God of the Universe is interested in you. He has a plan for you; He has a pathway for you. The Bible says in Proverbs 3:5-6 “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will direct your paths.”

God wants to guide you, but there is a lot of confusion about finding God's will. As you seek to follow God, it will be helpful to understand two very important guiding principles:

(1) The wrong question: What is God's will for my life?

You may be surprised and wonder what's wrong with that question. Here's the right question: "What is God's will?" On the surface, the difference between those two questions may seem minor—but they are as different as a lightning bug and lightning. In the first question the focus is on me. What's God's will for ME? In the second question, the focus is on God and what He is already doing in the world. I'll quote Henry Blackaby later in this message, but in his book *Experiencing God*, he points out that God is already active in this world and our job is to find out what God is doing and to join Him in His work.

In Acts 16, God was at work saving the Gentiles. God was in the process of taking the gospel to the Roman Empire, and Paul found closed doors until he got in on God's plan. So, stop asking God to show you His will for your life and ask Him to show you what He is doing, and then join Him!

(2) God often reveals His will in segments

When God first called Paul to take the good news to the Gentiles, He didn't tell him all the details. God didn't say, "Paul, go to Philippi, then to Athens, then to Corinth." God just said, "Go!" And Paul went. As Paul traveled, God revealed each step. That's the same thing God told Abraham in the Old Testament. He didn't say, "Abraham, I have a land for you and your descendants." God simply said, "Go." And Abraham went.

Many young people want God to show them the full picture of His plan for them. Wouldn't it be nice if God would say, "This is where I want you to go to college, these are the classes I want you to take, this is who I want you to marry, this is where I want you to live, this is the job I want you to work at, and here's where I want you to retire, and here's where I want you to die and be buried!" But it doesn't work that way. Following God isn't about the destination; it's all about the journey. It's like that song by Caedmon's Call, "Step by Step" which says, "Oh, God you are my God, and I will every praise you. I will seek you in the morning, and I will learn to walk in your ways, and STEP by STEP You'll lead me; and I will follow You all of my days."

2. DON'T BE DISAPPOINTED BY CLOSED DOORS

As Paul followed God, he encountered a closed door into Asian Minor. Then when he tried to head north toward the Black Sea, God shut the door again. Sometimes a child of God can become frustrated because it seems as if doors of service and opportunity are constantly being closed.

When you look in the Bible for references to opened and closed doors, you'll find there are six or seven times it speaks of God "opening a door of opportunity." However, there is only one verse that infers God "closes doors." In Revelation 3:7-8 Jesus is speaking to the church at Philadelphia. He identifies Himself by saying, "These are the words of him who is holy and

true...what he opens, no one can shut; and what he shuts, no one can open. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.” So, it is true that God shuts doors, but He isn’t the only one who shuts doors. When you are trying to serve God and you encounter a closed door your first question should be, “Did God close this door?” Sometimes other people “close” the door, and sometimes the devil and his demonic forces will try to place obstacles in the way of your service and devotion. So just because you encounter resistance or difficulty, it doesn’t necessarily mean God has shut the door. If God has clearly sent you in a certain direction and the devil tries to close the door—then knock it down!

There’s a funny story about a gospel singing group invited to a country church. As they were singing, the members of the church started bringing out snakes and handling them. The lead singer took one look at the snakes on the stage with him and asked the pastor, “Where is the back door?” The pastor said, “We don’t have a back door.” The terrified singer said, “Well, where would you like one?” He was out of there! When Satan, our adversary, tries to block out way, knock through his resistance!

But if you are certain that God closed a certain door, don’t be discouraged, just start looking for the door that He has open for you. Henry Blackaby wrote: “When you begin to follow God and circumstances seem to close doors of opportunity, go back to the Lord and clarify what God said. He most often is not calling you to a task, but to a relationship. Through that relationship He is going to do something through your life. (*Experiencing God*, p. 159)

When God said, “no” to Paul it was because he was going to say “yes” to something better. Sometimes our disappointments in life can become God’s appointments, so don’t let closed doors bother you. The things we think of as failures and problems can often end up being blessings in disguise.

In the late 19th century, cotton was king in South Alabama. Cotton was the sole crop and brought prosperity to that part of the country. In the early 20th century a natural disaster occurred. The Mexican Boll Weevil crossed into Texas and spread from here. Those little boll weevils loved cotton and by 1915, the farmers in South Alabama were broke. One farmer decided to try growing peanuts and in the first year produced over 6,000 bushels. Other farmers planted peanuts and other crops, and prosperity soon returned.

What was first seen as a disaster—a closed door for cotton—actually became a tremendous blessing because the farmers were forced to diversify. In 1919 the city of Enterprise, Alabama erected a monument to the Boll Weevil. That’s a great attitude: When one door is shut, don’t be disappointed! That leads to the next principle about doors and God’s will.

3. BE ACTIVE AS YOU LOOK FOR GOD’S OPEN DOOR

When Paul encountered the closed doors at Galatia and Mysia, he didn’t give up and return to Antioch. Nor did he sulk and complain. The worst thing he could have done would have been to sit still and say, “Okay, God I’m not moving until you show me which way to go.” Instead, he kept on moving; he took another direction—West. And as he was moving West, God directed him to take the gospel into Europe.

Have you ever been excited about an opportunity and suddenly found the door closed? The worst thing you can do is to camp out at that closed door. Don't quit—keep on moving, and God will direct your paths. Do not object, "But what about 'waiting on the Lord?'" Waiting is not a passive experience. "Waiting on the Lord" is acting like the waiter or server in a restaurant who takes your order and brings your food. Waiting on the Lord is asking God, "May I take Your order? Is there anything else You need?" God doesn't tip—but His retirement benefits are out of this world!

There is an important principle I call "spiritual momentum." It's easier for God to direct a person if he or she is already in motion serving Him. A boat sitting dead still in the water can't be turned by the rudder. That vessel is "dead in the water." It has to have forward motion in order for the rudder to be effective. In the same way, if you are seeking God's direction, don't sit still—if you do, you're "dead in the water." If you are active in serving God *anywhere* you can, it's easier for Him to direct you into different paths of service.

You can walk through God's open door of opportunity, and you'll often be confronted by angry people who oppose you. Paul had an open door in Ephesus, but He also faced great opposition. He wrote: "But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me." (1 Corinthians 16:9) When you are actively looking for God's open doors, you may face opposition, and it may not feel right—but go through the door anyway. The most important consideration is not whether it seems right to you—but will God be glorified if you proceed.

When you find God's direction, move immediately. Acts 16:10 says they "sailed immediately." As they headed west they made a "straight line" to the coast—in other words, they had a heavenly tail wind. When you are going in the right direction, there may be human opposition, and it may not feel right, but you'll have a tailwind from heaven!

4. DON'T DEPEND ON "DOORS" ALONE TO FIND GOD'S WILL

Circumstances aren't the best way to discern God's direction. I remember speaking with a couple in Alabama who met when they worked together at the post office. They were both already married, but they became romantically involved. The result was two divorces and two broken families—and when I spoke to them, their new marriage was unraveling. Both of them claimed to be Christians. I'll never forget a question the man asked me: "If God hadn't wanted us to be together, why did He open door for us to meet each other? And if He didn't want us to proceed into a romantic relationship, why didn't He close the door?" Whew! I politely suggested to him that perhaps it wasn't *God* who opened the door, and it doesn't do any good to lock your door after the thief is already inside!

Using opened and closed doors to find God's will can be risky business. Circumstances can be deceiving when you look at them from the wrong perspective. Henry Blackaby wrote: "Be very careful how you interpret circumstances. Many times we jump to a conclusion too quickly...A whole lot of wrong things can happen if you try to look at God from the middle of circumstances. When you face difficult or confusing circumstances, the Spirit of God will take

the Word of God and help you understand your circumstances from God’s perspective.” (from *Experiencing God*, pp. 97)

The old Sears and Roebuck Catalog we got when I was a kid often listed three levels of quality for the same product. For instance, you could order a basic lawn mower—it was good. Or you could order one with more horsepower—it was labeled better. Or you could opt for the most expensive one that was self-propelled—it was listed as best. When it comes to finding God’s will, I think there is a good way, a better way, and the best way. Let me give you three sources for finding God’s Will.

Three sources for finding God’s Will:

(1) Good: Circumstances

Circumstances can often be God’s external guide for us. This is often called God’s providential guidance. Sometimes you *can* determine God’s will by looking at circumstances that seem to reveal open and closed doors. God has promised in Psalm 32:8-9: “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you. (KJV: “I will guide thee with mine eye”) Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle, or they will not come to you.”

The key is to have such an intimate walk with the Lord that He can guide you with His eye. When my girls were little, if they misbehaved in a public setting, all I had to do was give them the old “raised eyebrow” look, and they knew that I meant, “Settle down, or you’re going to get it!” It worked for them, but it doesn’t work for other kids...see...because they aren’t as close to me as my kids.

(2) Better: Holy Spirit

God’s Spirit dwells inside His children, so this is His internal guide. It’s interesting in Acts 16 that Luke writes the Holy Spirit prevented Paul from going into Asia Minor. Then he writes that Paul was prevented by the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Those are two and the same. The Holy Spirit IS the Spirit of Jesus as well as the Spirit of the Living God. In John 14-16 Jesus promised He would send the Holy Spirit who would “guide the disciples.” As He spoke about the Holy Spirit in John 14:18, He said, “You know Him for he lives WITH you (that was Jesus in the flesh); and will be IN you (that’s the Spirit of Jesus). It means we need to be listening for that still small voice. If we are seeking God’s guidance, He will speak to us. In Isaiah 30:21 God says, “Whether you turn to the right or the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you saying, ‘this is the way; walk in it.’” Have you ever heard God’s still small voice? When God speaks to your heart, He usually doesn’t employ an audible voice: It’s louder than that. The problem with many of us is that God IS speaking, we just aren’t listening very carefully.

In 1898, Frances Barraud was an artist living in Liverpool, England. His brother gave him a dog named “Nipper” because of his tendency to nip at the heels of visitors. Frances Barraud was fascinated with the revolutionary gramophones which played back recorded voices. He had his voice put on a gramophone roll and as he was playing it, Nipper cocked his head and barked at

the sound. So Barraud painted a picture that later became the logo of RCA Victor entitled “Listening for his master’s voice.” He sold the picture and the rights for a total of £100 (more than \$6,300 today)! Are you listening intently to what God is saying to you? Are you tuned in to hear the Master’s voice? If you are child of God, you will learn to recognize His voice.

In Bible times many flocks of sheep were placed in a central sheepfold. When a shepherd entered the sheepfold, he could call out, and only those sheep belonging to him would follow. They recognized his voice. If you belong to Jesus, you will recognize his voice. Jesus said, “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.” (John 10:27)

(3) Best: God’s Word

Circumstantial guidance is good, the inner voice of God’s Spirit is better, but the very best is to read and study the Bible. It is God’s eternal guide. The way you find God’s will in the Bible is *not* to flop the Bible open and randomly point at a verse or two. One man tried that and his finger pointed to, “and Judas went out and hanged himself.” He didn’t like that, so he tried again. This time his finger came to rest on a verse that said, “Go thou, and do likewise.”

But if you are a serious and consistent student of God’s Word, you will find the Word of God will light your pathway. Psalm 119:104-105 says, “I gain understanding from your precepts; therefore I hate every wrong path. Your Word is a lamp unto my feet; and a light unto my path.” Reading God’s Word will teach you the wrong paths. You start walking on wrong paths when you enter the wrong doors. God’s Word teaches you what *not* to do as much as it teaches how to live. As you regularly devour God’s Word, you’ll find God will use a phrase, or verse, or passage and apply it your current life situation. It’s as if the words literally jump off the page and grab you by the throat. I’ll illustrate that in a minute.

There is a harbor in Italy that can only be reached by sailing through a narrow channel filled with dangerous rocks. Through the years, many ships were wrecked when they tried to enter the harbor at night. Before Loran and GPS, they erected three lights on tall poles. One light was in the harbor and the other two were on the shore. When the three lights were perfectly lined up, the ship could proceed safely into the harbor. If only two were lined up, the captain knew he was off course. Just so, God has provided three lights for us, and when you line up circumstances, the voice of the Holy Spirit, and His Word, you know you can proceed safely.

CONCLUSION

Thirteen years ago, I was serving as pastor of a wonderful church in Alabama. We were very happy, and then I started getting phone calls from the Pastor Search Committee for a church in Tyler called Green Acres—I thought Green Acres was a television show! As we struggled with determining God’s will about coming to serve at Green Acres, God used circumstances, the voice of the Holy Spirit, and scripture. The circumstances would be that while I was serving as a pastor in Birmingham, I was contacted by the Pastor Selection Committee. But the circumstances were confusing, because I was very happy where I was and God was blessing our church. My brother lived in Alabama and my sister lived just over the Alabama line in Georgia. Cindy’s parents and brother lived in Montgomery, and we didn’t want to move away from them. We

recently moved into a beautiful new home and were very happy—settled and content that we were in God’s Will.

We knew nothing about Tyler, and thought it was like West Texas, flat and dry, but after the committee started visiting with us, Cindy opened her latest issue of *Southern Living* and found an entire article on the roses of Tyler—was God trying to tell us something? When I came in January to preach in view of a call, I did not receive a unanimous vote; it was something like 94%. The other three churches I served had all been a unanimous vote so I wondered if God was using circumstances to tell us not to come. Basically we were confused.

That Sunday evening we were at the staying at the Residence Inn down the road, and had pretty much decided we would go back to our friends and family in Alabama, and to the church that had given us a unanimous call! We decided we weren’t supposed to leave our house, friends, and family and come here where we didn’t know anyone.

Late that night Cindy was reading her Bible as she does every day, and she yelled to me when she read a particular verse. It was Mark 10:29-30 and she was reading it out of the Bible she still uses. It says, “Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers, or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My sake and the gospel’s, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time—houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands—with persecution—and in the age to come, eternal life.”

We were pretty blown away by that verse, but I still wasn’t convinced. On Monday morning, some of the men asked if we could have a prayer meeting in what used to be our chapel. I really didn’t want to pray about it, because I was fairly certain we weren’t coming, but it looks bad if you refuse to pray, so I reluctantly agreed. During that prayer meeting as some of those guys were weeping and praying, God broke my heart, and He spoke to me with that inner voice. His message was simple: “David, I want you here in Tyler, if you don’t obey me, I’ll take my hand of blessing off of you.” That did it. I got up crying, the other men were crying, and we were hugging. I drove back to the Residence Inn, and when Cindy saw my tear swollen eyes, she said, “Well, I guess we’re staying.” It didn’t *feel* right, and there was plenty of *opposition*, but today, I am convinced it was God’s will. When I lined up the three lights of circumstances, the voice of the Holy Spirit, and His Word—I knew this was His direction for us.

So when you face a shut door, first make sure God shut it. Then look for His open door but make sure you depend on His voice and His Word before you walk through any door.

There is another door in scripture God can’t open—the door to your heart. In Revelation 3:20 Jesus says, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock (it’s the door of your heart). If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will go in and eat with him, and he with me.” In Holman Hunt’s famous painting, “The Light of the World” Jesus is standing at a door knocking. Art critics pointed out that Hunt had made a mistake because there is no doorknob. Hunt corrected them by explaining that the door was the door to a person’s heart, and the only doorknob is on the inside. Jesus won’t force His way through the door of your heart. He is standing there, knocking, waiting, and asking to come into your life. Will you open your life to Him?

OUTLINE

1. GOD WILL GUIDE YOU IF YOU'LL TRUST HIM

(1) Wrong: What is God's will for my life?
Right: What is God's will?

(2) God often reveals His will in segments

2. DON'T BE DISAPPOINTED BY A CLOSED DOORS

3. BE ACTIVE AS YOU LOOK FOR GOD'S OPEN DOOR

4. DON'T DEPEND ON "DOORS" ALONE

Three sources for finding God's will:

- (1) Good: Circumstances – external guide
- (2) Better: Holy Spirit – internal guide
- (3) Best: God's Word – eternal guide



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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes