

The Practice of Discernment

Recognizing God's Voice and His Will

By Jamie Overholser



The frustration of trying to discern God's will sometimes feels like the frustration many of us experience when someone sets a timer and places a Rubik's cube in our hands.

But Scripture tells us this: "God does speak—now one way, now another—though no one perceives it" (Job 33:14). There are two underlying truths here:

1. God speaks in multiple ways.
2. We don't always recognize it.

In this passage, Job's friend Elihu admitted the great tension in discernment: we are not always attuned to God's voice.

What Does God Sound Like?

So, where is God expressive in our lives? How does He communicate with us from day to day? I am not asking, "Does God answer your prayers or does He respond to your list of requests?" It goes far beyond that.

Where is God animated in your life? Where is He easy to read? What does He sound like? What does He say? How is Jesus "the Word" to you?

If we are to be discerning people, we have to be convinced that God is still actively speaking into our lives on a variety of levels. In his book *Hearing God*, Dallas Willard wrote, "Christians are not just people who believe certain things about the Bible. They are also people who lead the kind of life demonstrated in the Bible: a life of personal, intelligent interaction with God."¹

Adam and Eve conversed with God in the garden. Moses had multiple conversations with God. The Lord called to young Samuel during the night and spoke to him. Elijah heard that still, small whisper. The apostle Paul was taken away for three years into the desert where he interacted personally with Jesus. The disciples had a give-and-take, back-and-forth interaction as a part of their discipleship experience. There are multiple occasions in Scripture when "David inquired of the Lord" and "the Lord answered him." This happened a lot when David was contemplating going to war against his enemies. He consistently asked God if he should, then waited for God to tell him how to do it. And it wasn't always the same way every time. God would give different instructions depending on the situation.

But what do we do? We tend to default to what God said previously and then just do it that way every time! In doing so we fail to "inquire of the Lord"; we fail to discern each situation. God may want us to approach each circumstance

differently.

Inquiring of the Lord

Paul said, “This is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ” (Phil. 1:9–10).

In an attempt to get our minds around what discernment means, let’s start here: Discern, in its simplest form, means to examine or investigate with the goal of approving which way is best. Paul knew that knowledge and depth of insight are crucial in examining and investigating what is best.

Many people do this nonchalantly. They try to make the best decisions about such things as what car to buy, where to go on vacation, what job to take, what kind of dog to adopt, how many kids to have, what to spend their money on, who to be friends with, what church to go to, and what ministries to be involved with. We normally do it on a pros-and-cons basis—and most of the time it doesn’t seem all that spiritual.

In other words, my guess is that many times we do not inquire of the Lord. We’re not sure we really want to hear His voice, mainly because of what we might hear! But if we do not inquire of the Lord, it is not discernment; it is just plain old human decision-making.

And if we do inquire of the Lord in those moments of frantic indecision, it’s most likely several quick, desperate prayers for wisdom from on high or for God to write something in the sky. But as G.K. Chesterton said, “You cannot grow a beard in a moment of passion.”²

In other words, when our human process of decision-making breaks down, we often remember one last resort: a few anxious prayers in God’s general direction, thinking that will do the trick and we will suddenly hear the clear, articulate,

undeniable voice of God. Or, when confronted with a decision, we glibly use the phrase, "I'll pray about that." But we don't understand that if a person is not living a prayerful life to begin with, "I'll pray about that" sounds good but is a poor substitute for spiritual discernment.

Practice Makes Better

Becoming practiced in hearing the nuances of how God expresses Himself to us is part of our continuing spiritual formation. It's a critical part of the maturing process that takes our prayer life from snorkeling to scuba diving. It will be very difficult to hear God on the big things in life if we have not practiced on the smaller things.

Romans 12:2 offers some key insight as we venture into this spiritual territory. Paul says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (esv). Do you know why God does not write stuff in the sky? Do you know why He doesn't just tell us what to do? He wants us to discern what His will is. He wants our interaction.

And notice what it begins with: transformation. One of the primary steps in discernment is simply an ongoing spiritual transformation and mind renewal. This will continuously lead us out of the world's operating procedures and lead us into the way the Kingdom of God works. Greek scholar Spiros Zodhiates translates it this way: "Stop being molded by the external and fleeting fashions of this age, but undergo a deep inner change." Then you will be able to discern what God's will is for you.

If that is true—and it is—then the converse must be true as well. If you are being molded by the external and fleeting fashions of this age, and you are not undergoing deep inner change, then you will not be able to discern what God's will

is for you. Try as you may, true spiritual discernment will elude you.

In or Out of the Speck

So how do we discern God's voice? Growing up I was taught that God's will is like a tiny speck on a piece of paper and that I had to be in the middle of that speck at all times. That's a bit of an exaggeration, but that's what it felt like. My spiritual leaders called it being "in the center of God's perfect will."

It drove me to live in fear for a good portion of my life. I was never sure if I was in the middle of the speck because the percentages were against me. I was more likely to be outside of the speck than be directly in the middle of it. There was way too much white space compared to the speck!

I would try to search for that peace you're supposed to feel when you are in the middle of God's will. I knew the saying about not being in His will: "I didn't have peace about it."

The fact that Jonah—a Jew from the nation of Israel—ran the opposite direction surely indicates that he didn't have peace about God telling him to go to Nineveh (modern-day northern Iraq). He feared pronouncing gloom and doom on his enemies if they didn't repent. But we all know it was God's will. Be careful how you play the "peace card."

Peace is a gift from God that transcends our human understanding. When there is an inner stillness and calm in the midst of the uncertainty of God's will, you have peace. Peace usually comes after you've said yes to God, not before.

Paul writes, "You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord" (Eph. 5:8–10).

This is far different than trying to find the center of the speck. Paul offers much freedom in what he says here. “Live as children of light.” Live a life that produces goodness, righteousness, and truth. Go out and discern (find out) what pleases God within the boundaries of all that is good, righteous, and true.

We are not trying to decipher the hidden speck. God does not play games with us. He is not sneaky or coy. He does not sit back and expect us to find the proverbial needle in a haystack called His will. Instead, discernment is chasing after what pleases the Lord. And there is a lot that pleases Him—as long as we are living in the light and producing fruit that consists of goodness, righteousness, and truth. Discernment should not be fear-based but adventure-based!

Free to Live Freely

I love the analogy Dallas Willard uses. Life in the Kingdom of God is like a child playing in the backyard after her mother chases her out of the house on a warm, sunny day. She is free within the confines of the yard. She can swing, she can play in the sandbox, she can shoot baskets, she can play hide-and-seek with her friends, or she can simply lie in the grass and soak up the warmth of the sun. She has freedom to choose without having to go ask her mother every time she wants to change activities.

Oh, to live life that free! Discernment is not like solving a Rubik’s cube before the time runs out. It’s not about the speck. It’s about pursuing goodness, righteousness, and truth. That’s where I want to be.

¹ Dallas Willard, *Hearing God: Developing a Conversational Intimacy with God* (Downer Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 137.² G.K. Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles* (Digireads.com Publishing, 2011), 40.

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