



# Auburn Presbyterian Church

*Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to everyone*

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## “How Can I Know the Will of God?”

### Genesis 12:1-3

### Healing Ministry

I appreciate that you're here after my sermon last week. I was not happy with it. I think I tried to cover too much, to cram too many abstract ideas into a short time. And so I may not have been as helpful as you (and I!) might have wished. Sorry about that! Today, I'll try more familiar and personal territory, on the question about “how can I know God's will”. Some of you may wish to talk with me about the sermon content for last week or for this week, and because it's not possible to have a conversation like that at the door, I'll have our worship leader Karen Luttinger greet you, while I slip outside, grab a cup of coffee, and stand in a place we can gather for this “talk back” time. And if you want some personal one-to-one time, just let me know and I'll give you a call.

Let's dig in. To answer the question, “How do I know God's will?” we look at the record of God's design in nature as a whole (one of the points from our time together last week), and the record of God's interaction with His people, from the Bible as a whole. From these broad sources we can discern what God is about, what is important to God.

It's like getting to know some other person. When you are first introduced, you can then say that you have met. But you don't really know that other person. You have to spend a lot of time with them. You ask others who know them. You check the records of their lives. These are the same ways we get to know God and what's important to God.

The men in Friday morning's Bible study hear me say this all the time: “The most important verses in the Bible are Genesis 12:1-3.” These verses are the start of the answer to the question, “How can I know the will of God”. Let me show you why. Open your Bibles to the first book, Genesis, and find chapter 12. It's just a few verses, but I like to look at the context as well, so keep your Bibles open. Genesis 12 is really the start of Biblical history in the sense that we know it. Listen with me for God's Word TO US TODAY, as I read these words aloud.  
*[text]* You might want to put a “star” in the margin of your Bible here.

The record of God's interaction with people is here in the library we call “The Bible”. And the first extended relationship with God we can study begins in these verses. This is the call of Abram. God calls him to do something very hard—to leave his home, his family, and all his familiar surroundings. God wants to bless this man who is ready to respond to God's call, and to build a whole new nation through him. (For a childless old patriarch of a clan, this is an offer he would never refuse.) And this new nation is not going to be just another nation of people. God is preparing blessings for them (long after Abraham has died and been buried) that they are, in turn, to use to bless others. “Blessed, to be a blessing,” is the short way to remember this. Say that with me: “Blessed, to be a blessing.”

But do you also notice that in addition to this “long-term call” aspect, God gives a “short-term obedience” aspect to His call? We’ll return to the “short-term” part later, but let me sketch for you the “long term-aspect” as the record shows us.

In our Bible’s order, the “pre-history” stories just before this in Genesis have shown us God extending himself in creation to establish a freely-chosen relationship with humankind, and we have seen humanity consistently grasping God’s gifts without the Giver, rejecting the relationship God has offered. This is not acceptable to God, so he throws our first parents out of His garden, and later, reserving Noah and his clan, wipes out the rest of creation with a flood and starts again. This time, when people decide to get together to build a tower that stretches to heaven so they can run the world instead of God, God confuses their languages so they can no longer cooperate, and this arrogant project is abandoned.

In our text today, God has searched and found a man who has the character to commit to God’s call. So with Abraham and his clan, God now starts a demonstration project, or “pilot plant”, to serve as a living example to all people what God wants of us, and what our highest level of living looks like.

Fast-forward. Abraham’s descendants do communicate with God, but as for creating a demonstration project, they don’t seem to have gotten the manual. What they do create is one dysfunctional family after another. We see greed and jealousy, theft and trickery. So God lets his chosen people stew for years as slaves in Egypt, where they had migrated when the food ran out back home in Canaan, and where they got stuck there building Pharaoh’s self-glorifying public projects.

Then in the Exodus, God starts again with Moses, to lead all these slaves to freedom. (By the way, this is not just God’s Chosen People, though they form the core and carry the promise among these slaves from many nations. No, all the slaves are offered liberation from Pharaoh’s oppression—because God blesses His people and through them wants to bless everyone--*are you seeing the pattern?*) And what do the people do? They grumble, they complain, they want to return to Egypt where they had “three hots and a cot”.

God extends Himself again in creating the Law, His gift to guide people in this special relationship He seeks. God then fights with the Hebrews against the petty states of Canaan, to open a place and space for His people to set up His “pilot plant population”. For their part, the people seem to have already forgotten that when they are blessed by God, they are to use those blessings to bless others. In each of the chapters of the book of Judges, we see one or more of the surrounding groups try to take back land they had lost, or to add more land they want, at the Isrealites’ expense. In response, God raises up one leader after another to beat off the invaders.

After years of this, Israel makes a big blunder—they demand that God appoint them a “king”, one who will have a standing army ready to respond immediately to foreign invasion, rather than this cumbersome method of having to get new leaders and raise up a volunteer force to repulse every raid by foreigners. Samuel is God’s prophet at that time, and Samuel goes to God to talk this over. Sam doesn’t want to be part of what the people are demanding. But God is willing to let the people have their way. But they will suffer the consequences of this decision; they are rejecting God’s leadership in favor of leadership by one of their own. So God point out Saul to be anointed the first king, then David, and then Solomon. Especially after Solomon, things went downhill fast. Solomon’s son Rehoboam took the throne and decided to squeeze the

people with high taxes and forced labor to create his own set of self-glorifying public projects. (My, that sounds a lot like old Pharaoh, doesn't it?) So the northern tribes seceded from the nation, and the Kingdom was divided from then on. No mention is made of the call of God upon the nation, to bless others with God's blessings.

Fast forward. A woman from Nazareth conceives a child who grows up to be Jesus of Nazareth. He LIVES God's call to Abraham. He blesses others with the blessings God gives. He calls all to follow him. Indeed, he shows himself to be God's Son in so many ways. Cooperating with God's design, extraordinary power flows through him to bless many.

Jesus' chief opponents were the Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes and priests—the whole religious establishment. These guardians of the faith kept trying to hold on to God's blessings—the Promised Land, the Law. It was as though they had heard the first part of God's call to Abraham—“become a nation, I will bless you”—but had never heard the second part—“so that others will be blessed through you.” And they rose up and coerced the Romans into murdering Jesus of Nazareth, so they could have a real savior—a guy named Jesus bar-Abbas, who had already killed Romans and had a following. Bar-Abbas had potential to rid them of the Romans through revolution—something useful—instead of Jesus bar-Joseph from Nazareth, who was this itinerant preacher threatening the security of the nation without the force to make something better.

Crucified and buried, the Son of God was raised from death by the power of God, and that same powerful Spirit of God's life fell upon Jesus' followers, giving them that Jesus-life, as Acts shows us. And unlike the Jews throughout their story, the early Christ-followers DID use God's blessings in order to bless others, though not without losing their way from time to time. The letters toward the end of what we call the New Testament document the work of church leaders to return people to this original calling of God. They pointed to Jesus, and invited others to follow Jesus with them—for they had had lived the Jesus-life, and many of them made great sacrifices to follow Jesus faithfully in their own time. //

So, do you see why the verses of Genesis 12:1-3 are the three most important verses in the Bible? They are the key, in my mind, to the whole of it, God's whole story given to us. We can discern more about God's values and desires from this source than any other.

And for us today, we are to continue that story. We are to live the Jesus-life, which is only possible if we are powered by that same Spirit that joined Jesus with God as one. In John 17, Jesus prays, “I pray for those who will believe in me through the message of my disciples, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you have me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (John 17:20-23, NIV, edited) We are to be one, even as God/Jesus/Spirit is one. We are to use our blessings to bless others. Being, and doing. “Being” is relationships, “doing” is actions. We won't do the “doing” well without the “being”. With “being” and “doing” together, we bring all of our lives to be part of God's story.

How do you know the will of God? Genesis 12:1-3—in relationship with God, use the blessings you have from God to bless others. Be God's conduit of care, in word and deed; become transparent to God, so God has a clean shot at the heart of this one to whom you have

shown love, deserved or not. Then lead them to know and respond to God. In turn, they can be a source of God blessing others, with you, with God. How can you know God's will? Does it bless others with God's blessings? Is God involved, or can God be involved in it?

Another way to test to see if you are on target with God's will is to, "Test the spirits, to see if they are of God" (1 John 4:1). Take it to God—ask God (as Eve and Adam did not). To ask means to pray, to pray persistently (as Jesus said), and to LISTEN. Expect confirmation or correction. That's another way to know you are moving in God's will. You will feel God's pleasure.

You can ask other Spirit-led Christians to ask God about this, too. You don't have to—you should not—be doing this alone, but as part of Christ's Body, the church. Who in your Life Group could you ask to talk with God about your situation?

There are also clues that should alert you that what you are hearing is NOT from God. If it speaks in some strange "God voice"—like James Earl Jones in an echo chamber—that's not God's voice. If you are feeling driven by guilt or shame toward something—that's not God's voice. In these cases, in your own loud voice bind Satan from interfering in your relationship with God, and start listening again.

Now what if you are facing a choice between two ways—two job offers, two possible mates, two ways to spend your Saturday night? And what if you are getting no guidance whatsoever to choose between the two? It may be that God is asking you to wait—depending on the circumstances. But it might also be that God really wants you to decide. If you have asked these questions we've listed this morning, talked to another believer etc., perhaps God could be happy with either of these choices!. Go ahead and make the choice. As Martin Luther used to say, "Love God--and do as you please."

Last week, from a study of where God is going in His world, in nature, we discovered God's directions in Creation. And so we are in line with God's will if we align ourselves with the directions God is going:

Am I increasing diversity, creativity and complexity?

Am I increasing cooperation and interdependence with God and others?

Am I increasing communication with God and among others?

Am I increasing awareness of God and God's Universe?

All these questions are ways to approach discernment of God's will. Of all of these, "asking God" is the most important. Let the Holy Spirit nudge you. And if you're not used to tuning in to God's Spirit, start practicing now so that when a decision is before you, your capacity to hear from God will be ready at hand.

Remember, we noticed in Genesis 12 both God's long-term vision and the short-term obedience in God's call to Abram. The long-term vision was God's promise to make from Abram a great nation that the world would admire. And we've seen the whole story of Abram's

seed. The short-term piece was God's command that Abram leave his family and homeland, to journey without a destination disclosed.

When we seek to discern God's will, we need to keep these twin aspects in mind. This great journey with God on which Abram embarked began with short-term obedience that was open ended, and might be paraphrased as, "Come away from all you know. Depend on me." So even as we seek God's call on our lives for the long-term—a sense of purpose, so we don't waste our lives--there is a more immediate call to heed in our present circumstances. And the same procedures apply.

It won't do, for example, to be a pastor preaching God's will, and also to neglect your family. The short-term doing of God's will cannot be sacrificed to serve the grand purpose one may have identified. In the immediate and in the long-term, we belong to God.

So, when you get home today, spend some time with God, and lay before God the long term (what you want your life to stand for, as you make your life serve God) and the short-term (what you've done today and plan to do tomorrow that serves this call from God). How are you using your blessings from God to bless others? (The greatest blessing is connecting them with God, too.) How are you using your being (your relationships) to bring others to know and love God?

Does your being and doing reflect where God is going over the long, long term, God's values, God's desires? Then take some time to feel God's pleasure, and enjoy God. Praise, pray and play with God. This is how we fulfill our purpose as God's people—to glorify and to enjoy God, forever.

To God be the glory! Now! Always!

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on November 8, 2009 by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]