

THE MYSTERY OF GOD'S WILL

STUDY ONE

Foundational Principles about God's Will

Selected Scriptures

God's will is a profound, unfathomable subject. The better you get to know the Word of God, the less confusing is the will of God. Those who struggle the least with the will of God are those who know the Word of God best.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

TRAGIC news flooded the airways. Two young, athletic brothers, one an accomplished professional ice hockey player, were instantly killed by a drunk driver while riding their bicycles together on a rural road. What made this tragedy worse, if even possible, is that the event occurred on the eve of their sister's wedding, and these men were groomsmen.

Such senseless accounts horrify us. They cause us to ask, "How could this happen?" and "Where was God?" . . . along with *many* other questions. For Christians, such tragedies can be even tougher to understand because we know God is good and powerful and could prevent them. And yet, He allows them to happen, and we wonder, *Why?*

Like astronomers studying the night sky, we peer into the vastness of God, searching His mind for reasons, motives, and intentions. When calamity strikes, we *look up* for answers. But even our best theological telescopes are too weak to reveal the furthest reaches of God's purposes.

Thankfully, God has not left us in total darkness. He has given us His Word which sheds light on the subject of God's will—even though many things about His ways remain mysterious on this side of heaven.

This *Searching the Scriptures* Bible-study series explores the mystery of God's will. Truth about God's heart, ways, and purposes thread through every page of Scripture. In this study, we lay foundational principles that elucidate important facets of God's will, including what He *decrees* and what He *permits*.



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PREPARE YOUR HEART

Offer this prayer as you prepare to dig deeply into the Scriptures:

Father, in this broken world, we frequently encounter trials we don't understand and can't remedy. I am finite and want to trust You in Your infinite knowledge, goodness, grace, mercy, and wisdom. You are the Potter; I am the clay. Deepen my knowledge of Your revealed ways and plans. Help me to lean fully on You even when my circumstances remain a mystery. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

Unfathomable is the word Job chose to describe the mysterious ways of God (Job 9:10 NASB). The footnote in the *New American Standard Bible* defines this word as “until there is no searching out.” We could spend our lives exploring the ocean of God’s mind and never reach its depths. There’s no searching out God! No one can say of His plan, “I’ve got it! I’ve figured it out!”

How did Paul describe the unfathomable nature of God in [Romans 11:33–36](#)?

One reason God’s ways are a mystery is that God operates on a different plane than we do. What did the Lord declare in [Isaiah 55:8–9](#)?

What *can* we know about God’s will? Theologians have helpfully described it from two angles. The first is the angle of God’s sovereignty, which includes His decretive will, also known as His determined will. The second angle is human free will, through which we view the permissive side of God’s will. Let’s start with these perspectives as we survey this vast subject.

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Observation: God Decrees . . . God Permits

Observation is the first phase of *Searching the Scriptures* Bible studies. You simply want to read very carefully what the passage says.¹ Below are two collections of passages that describe God's decretive will and His permissive will.

The Decretive Will of God

According to the prophet Isaiah, God sits on the seat of ultimate authority, declaring, "I am the LORD, and there is no other" (Isaiah 45:6). What decrees does God issue from His throne in [Isaiah 45:7–12](#)? What awaits those who dispute Him?

As sovereign ruler, God is always at work, accomplishing His plan exactly as He decreed it to be. He "does whatever He pleases," the psalmist says (Psalm 115:3 NASB). But He will never act in a way that contradicts His nature. So what conclusion does Paul draw in [Romans 8:28–30](#)? Note the key words that describe God's decretive will.

What phrases did Peter use to describe God's will regarding Jesus in [Acts 2:23–24](#)?

This is the determined will of God, which is not subject to change, which has never been altered, which was put into motion as soon as the Godhead determined the plan. It is running its course precisely as arranged ahead of time in the mind of our great God. This decreed will of God is not something you need to determine ahead of time. You can only know it after it's happened.
—Pastor Chuck Swindoll

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The Permissive Will of God

Under the umbrella of God's sovereign control, He allows humans to make choices. We have free will. Like a chef lays out a delicious meal, God reveals His plan for our lives, but we can turn up our noses to it if we wish. Or we can gratefully receive it as a gift from His hand.

Through Christ, God offers salvation to all humanity. What does He desire, according to [2 Peter 3:9](#)?

God doesn't cause sin, but He does permit it. What did James say is the source of sin in [James 1:13–14](#)?

The whole issue of evil emerges here and comes into play. This is one of the unreconcilable difficulties in our theology. No one has ever been able to reconcile the battle between the determined will of God and the responsibility of humanity—the need to make Christ known to the world, knowing that the whole world won't believe. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Interpretation: God's Decretive Will and Permissive Will in Balance

Let's review what we've learned so far and draw some principles.

From the perspective of God's decretive will, nothing happens outside God's plan. God alone captains the ship of creation, which means that His will is supreme, good, and just. Write down other words that describe the sovereign nature of God's will.

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Write a principle—a timeless statement of truth—that expresses the Lord's full control of your life's course.

From the perspective of God's permissive will, humans make choices which lead to consequences. Write a principle that describes our freedom and how people are accountable for their choices.

When a tragedy occurs, like the deaths of the brothers in the introduction, we try to reconcile God's permissive will that allows suffering and God's decretive will that is good and just. The best we can do is accept both as true. What principle can we write that balances these two truths?

The will of God is a biblical truth we can take comfort in because it is always in concert with His character. Nothing occurs in our lives that hasn't passed first through His fingertips. We may be surprised, but God is never surprised.

No one can frustrate God's plan. No one who lets us down surprises God. His whole plan covers it all. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

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Correlation: God's Declared Will and Revealed Will

In addition to God's decretive will and permissive will is His *declared* will and His *revealed* will. His declared will includes God's desires for us. His revealed will is Scripture, which expresses His desires, reflects His moral perfections, and summons us to mirror His character.

Read the passages below and describe what the statements teach about God's character. This is just a sample of God's declared will in Scripture. Then, write a principle you can follow to do God's will according to that passage.

Scripture	God's Character	Principle to Follow
<i>1 Thessalonians 4:3</i>		
<i>1 Thessalonians 5:18</i>		
<i>1 Peter 2:13–15</i>		

Some things in the Scriptures are very clearly declared to be God's will. You don't even have to pray about them. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Our example is Jesus who submitted His will entirely to His Father. Review His statements in *John 4:34; 5:30; 6:38–40; 7:17*. Offer a few timeless principles about God's will according to these verses. To probe their meaning further, consult your Bible-study resources like Dr. Constable's Notes at netbible.org.

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We have an inexhaustible source of truth. Go there. It will never contradict God's plan or God's nature. You can rely on it. It has come down through the centuries. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Application: Discerning and Doing God's Will

God's will is profound and mysterious. Yet, God has revealed His will in such a way that we can know Him intimately, trust Him fully, and walk with Him faithfully.

Describe how studying the Scripture passages above has sharpened your understanding of God's will.

God used miraculous events, visions and dreams, audible words, and inspiration to reveal His will to the authors of Scripture. Why are these approaches to discerning God's will unnecessary today compared to searching the Scriptures?

Did you find a promise that offered you encouragement? Did a command about the will of God speak to your heart? How is the Holy Spirit prompting you to respond to Christ from your time in His Word?

No matter how well we know the Scriptures, the mysteries of God's will still challenge us. We struggle to accept it from time to time. But we can be certain that someday it will all make sense. Until then, we trust, we obey, we love, and we hope.

My good friend says, "The first sound we will hear from every throat when we get to heaven is 'Ahhh!' Like, 'Now I see it! Now I realize why. Now it all unfolds before my eyes, one great panorama of events.'" —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

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A FINAL PRAYER

Close your study by making Pastor Chuck Swindoll's prayer your own:

We're so grateful, our Father, for Your Word. The very entrance of Your Word brings light to our darkened minds. We're grateful for Your Holy Spirit, who has been called alongside to help just as Jesus did in His earthly ministry with His Twelve. Thank You, Father, that You are consistent, that no shadow caused by our turning causes You to turn away or to change Your determination. How reliable and trustworthy and secure You are! In Jesus' precious name. Amen.

ENDNOTE

1. To learn more about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* Bible-study method, go to the web page, "[How Does Pastor Chuck Swindoll Study the Bible?](#)"

For the 2025 broadcasts, this *Searching the Scriptures* Bible study was developed by Marshall F. Davis in collaboration with Bryce Klabunde, vice president of *Searching the Scriptures* Ministries, based upon the original outlines, charts, and transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's messages. Copyright © 1998, 2025 by Charles R. Swindoll, Inc. All rights are reserved worldwide. Duplication of copyrighted material for commercial use is strictly prohibited.

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