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04 Jul 10

Today, we welcome new members into our church through baptism, transfer and reaffirmation. In the last series of pastoral letters, we have considered the importance and the Bible's command of being an active member in a local church. A person joins a club (fitness, sports, social country) mainly for his own benefit. The church, on the other hand, exists primarily for the world. A believer joins a church for the benefit of others; to be part of a body of believers that proclaims the Gospel to the world.

A church member has both rights and responsibilities. He has the right to be ministered to in times of need. He has the responsibility to minister to others who are in need. The benefit of church membership really depends on a person's involvement in the church and her activities. The early church thrived, and one of the marks of her vitality was that the believers had all things common (Acts 2:44; 4:32). That simply means that the members were ministering to one another. A member cannot enjoy the spiritual blessings of having "all things common" unless and until he plays an active role in the church. So let me urge all who have become members of Calvary to find an area of ministry in the church, join a Bible study group, come for prayer meeting. We welcome you, and we look forward to your co-labouring in the Gospel ministry.

From tomorrow till 30 July, my family and I will be ministering in Vancouver BP Church. I will be preaching at VBPC Bible Conference (6-9 July), and then we will be helping at the Vacation Bible School (19-23 July). God willing, I will be taking some time off to pray about what God would have us do in 2011. We do covet your prayers.

### **Knowing the Will of God (VI)**

The Word of God sets the parameters for our lives – our aims, our attitudes, as well as our actions. And to the degree that we, as God's people, pursue godly aims with righteous attitudes and biblical actions, we will be living our lives for His glory. The fundamental principle is this: when we align our lives with the Word of God, we are also at the same time aligning ourselves with His will.

### **The Sinner's Response**

In this regard the first and most important decision for a man seeking God's will is to "*confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead*" (Rom. 10:9), and you will be saved. This is the desire and will of God. "*For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.*" (1 Tim. 2:3-6; 2 Pet. 3:9-10). My friend, if you intend to live your life according to God's will, the very first step is to turn to God in repentance and be saved by faith through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **The Believer's Responsibilities**

The will of God is represented by the open Bible, and all the commandments and precepts that are found within the covers of the Holy Scriptures are binding upon the believer.

Any deed, word or thought that falls outside the Word of God is sin – "*Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law.*" (1 John 3:4). To transgress is to step outside the bounds of the law. Contrariwise, any deed, word, and thought that conforms to the Word of God would be acceptable and pleasing to God. "*If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them.*" (John 13:17). Note that the blessing of obedience (*if ye*

do) is dependent upon the understanding of God's Word (*if ye know*). In other words, we cannot do unless we first know.

**Know:** Therefore, the Christian's first responsibility is to have a good knowledge of the Word of God. The emphasis of the Bible is that believers must teach and learn:

· *And the LORD said unto Moses...I will give thee tables of stone, and a law, and commandments which I have written; that **thou mayest teach them**.* (Exod. 24:12)

· *For what nation is there so great, who hath God so nigh unto them...And what nation is there so great, that hath statutes and judgments so righteous as all this law... Only take heed to thyself, and keep thy soul diligently, lest thou forget the things which thine eyes have seen, and lest they depart from thy heart all the days of thy life: but **teach them** thy sons, and thy sons' sons.* (Deut. 4:7-9)

· *And Moses called all Israel...the statutes and judgments which I speak in your ears this day, that ye may **learn them, and keep, and do them**.* (Deut. 5:1)

· *And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt **teach them diligently** unto thy children.* (Deut. 6:6-7)

· *Thy word have I **hid in mine heart**, that I might not sin against Thee.* (Ps. 119:11)

· ***Give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine.*** (1 Tim. 4:13)

· ***Study to shew thyself approved unto God.*** (2 Tim. 2:15)

**Do:** The believer who knows must also do. As a Christian grows in his knowledge of the Word of God, he must also grow in obedience. This is what God requires of us – *“To fear the LORD thy God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve the LORD thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, To keep the commandments of the LORD, and his statutes”* (Deut. 10:12-13).

Obedience to the Word of God is so important that God made this the distinguishing mark between the believer and the unbeliever. *“Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that **doeth the will of my Father** which is in heaven”* (Matt. 7:21).

Obedience to God's Word also makes the difference between failure and success. *“This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that **thou mayest observe to do** according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success”* (Josh. 1:8; Ps. 1:1-3).

Obedience to the God of Word makes the difference between a man who walks with God and one who walks apart from Him. *“I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after Mine own heart, which shall **fulfil all My will**”* (Acts 13:22). Why did God give such a high honour to David? Consider what David wrote about God's laws? *“The law of the LORD is perfect...sure...right...pure...clean...true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. Moreover by them is thy servant warned: and in keeping of them there is great reward”* (Ps. 19:7-11).

“I am seeking for God's will for my life.” This is the concern of many Christians. The irony is that the will of God is never “lost” that Christians must search for it; the will of God is ignored. The reason Christians flip and flop in their spiritual walk is not because of God's secrecy but their own Bible illiteracy. The will of God rests upon the Word of God. Know the Scriptures, obey them, and you will be doing God's will. *“Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments”* (Ezra 7:10). May the Lord give us the hunger for His truth (to know) and His righteousness (to do).

11 Jul 10

## **Will of God (VII)**

Where the Word of God has explicitly stated, we must and can only obey. Where the Word of God is silent, then we are allowed to choose within the bounds that God has set.

This distinction can be seen in the commandment that God gave to Adam in Eden. God told Adam, *“Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die”* (Gen. 2:16-17). God explicitly stated that Adam could not eat of the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. With regard to this one specific tree, Adam must obey; he had no choice.

However, God also told Adam that he could *freely* eat of the fruits of any of the other trees in the Garden. God did not specify what fruits Adam should eat, or how many he could eat, or how he should eat them. With regard to the other trees in the Garden, Adam was free to choose. Adam is given the freedom to choose within the bounds that God had set.

Man is made in the image of God, and he is endowed with intelligence and free will, meaning to say he is able to make choices. That he is able to choose does not mean that he always does so wisely. In any case, the freedom of choice is the difference between man and animals and machines. Animals decide by instinct. Machines decide by a set programme. Man alone is given the dignity and the responsibility to judge and choose.

This principle of “freedom within bounds” is also found in other parts of Holy Scriptures. In the Old Testament, our Lord imposed certain dietary laws (Lev. 11; Deut. 14). The unclean animals, like the forbidden tree, stood outside of God’s moral will. The children of Israel must not eat those animals. They had no choice. Nevertheless, the menu for the Israelites was still extensive, and those animals that were clean, they were free to eat (Lev. 11:2). In fact, the Lord told the Israelites that they were free to treat themselves – *“Whatsoever thy soul desireth: and thou shalt eat there before the LORD thy God, and thou shalt rejoice, thou, and thine household”* (Deut. 4:26).

This principle of “freedom within bounds” is also seen in the Old Testament worship system, which comprised of mandatory sacrifices and free will offerings (Lev. 22:17-33). With regard to the former, the Israelites had no choice. With free-will offerings, the people were allowed to choose what animal they wanted to offer – cattle, sheep or goats (Lev. 22:19). The only requirement was that it should be a male without blemish.

The people of Israel could choose whether or not to make vows. However, once they decided to make a vow, then they had to keep God’s laws with respect to making vows (Deut. 23:21-23; Eccl. 5:4-5).

In the New Testament, this principle of “freedom within bounds” is applied to various issues in the church – eating of certain foods, giving of gifts, marrying. With regard to eating, the dietary restrictions in the New Testament are found in Acts 15:29 and 1 Corinthians 8:13. Believers are free to choose what to eat as long as they do not stumble the faith of another believer. Giving is a commandment of God; yet the Bible teaches that *“every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver”* (2 Cor. 9:7). With regard to marriage, the Word of God stipulates that it must be a union of believers, and that marriage is a life-long commitment. Only upon the death of one is the other freed from that covenant. The living spouse *“is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord”* (1 Cor. 7:39). There are several aspects to this decision of remarrying. First, the widow is free to marry or not marry; that is her choice. Second, if she chooses to marry, she must marry a believer. This is God’s command; in this she has no choice; she must obey. Third, from the list of potential Christian suitors, she is free to choose, wisely of course.

## **Conclusion**

In the exercise of his freedom, man's tendency is to swing to extremes. There are people who like to restrict that freedom by their own traditions and laws, like the Pharisees. Our Lord rebuked them for "*laying aside the commandment of God [to] hold the tradition of men*" (Mark 7:8). At the other extreme, there are people who abuse that freedom that God has given them to indulge in their carnal desires.

The balance is found in 1 Corinthians 10:23 – "*All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient: all things are lawful for me, but all things edify not.*" Paul is not saying that the believer is free to do anything because there are some things Christians are forbidden to do. The "all things lawful" refer to the things that are not forbidden by God, from which the believer is free to choose. However, it is important to bear in mind that the liberty of choice comes with the responsibility of choosing wisely. The reason is that even within the realm of all things lawful (not forbidden by God), there are some things which are "not expedient" (not profitable) and some things which "edify not" (things that do not strengthen one's spiritual growth). May we "*stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free*" and "*use not [our Christ-given] liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another*" (Gal. 5:1, 13).

18 Jul 10

## **The Best Over the Good**

Where God has spoken, we must obey. Where God is silent, we are free to choose within the bounds that He has set for us. The fact that we are free to choose does not mean that we will choose wisely. How does one choose wisely? Let me illustrate: A baby has no choice over what he eats. The bottle is put into his mouth, and he drinks. The responsibility is shouldered by the mother. The choice is made for the baby, and every loving mother will choose wisely and ensure that the baby is given the best.

A grown man, on the other hand, is free to choose over what he puts into his body. There are some things that are clearly bad for his health, such as drugs and cigarettes. Every born again person knows that these are out of bounds.

However, among the many foods, there are some that are good, and others that are not so good. In that case, whatever a man chooses, he has to shoulder the responsibility. If he chooses to indulge in fried chicken and french fries at every meal over a balanced diet, while his choice is not wrong per se, it is not wise either.

The lesson is this: when we are given the freedom to choose, it is incumbent upon us to choose wisely and biblically. It is easier to choose between the obviously good and the obviously bad. The line of distinction in that case is clear. It is not so easy to choose from among all that is good the best. This takes much prayer and spiritual discernment; in other words, wisdom. As God's redeemed people, we are to choose wisely. "*See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, Redeeming the time, because the days are evil*" (Eph. 5:15-16). "*Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time*" (Col. 4:5).

## **Wise Choices in the Old Testament**

God called Moses to be leader of the people of Israel. This was a command; Moses could not back away from the position of leadership without sinning against God. There were special circumstances in which God spoke directly to Moses and gave him specific directions; in those cases, Moses also had to do as he was told. However, the day-to-day running of the camp was left to Moses' wisdom. And at the start, Moses was inexperienced. Moses sat in judgment over two million people; and they stood in line waiting for their turn to ask advice from Moses (Exod. 18:3). Was Moses wrong? No. he did not violate God's specific command. Was he wise? Not really.

Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, told him, "*The thing that thou doest is not good*" (Exod. 18:17). Moses' management style was not good not because it was evil but because it was not wise. Jethro rightly said that Moses would wear himself out. Heeding Jethro's advice, Moses set up a team of counsellors to deal with the minor cases so that Moses' attention could be reserved for the major matters (Exod. 18:22). Moses did not receive any direct command from God to form teams of judges, but he heeded the wise counsel of his father-in-law. Where there is no direct command from God, we are free to choose wisely.

David was ordained by God to be the king of Israel. He was also known as the man after God's own heart. However, as far as the running of the country is concerned, David was to exercise his wisdom. We know from the biblical accounts, that not all of David's decisions were wise.

Absalom had usurped David's throne. David was forced to flee for his life. In 2 Samuel 18, David gathered his men to re-establish his kingdom. David told his generals that he wanted to lead them into battle (2 Sam. 18:2). His generals opposed the idea because David was more important as a king than as a soldier. If he were killed in the fighting, winning the battle against Absalom would be meaningless. David accepted the wise counsel of his generals – "*What seemeth you best I will do*" (2 Sam. 18:4a), and he stayed behind.

On a separate occasion, David rejected the same counsel, and led an army against the Philistines. During the battle, David felt faint, and he would have been killed but for Abishai. Later, David's generals told him, "*Thou shalt go no*

*more out with us to battle, that thou quench not the light of Israel*" (2 Sam. 21:17). The lesson is this – with no direct word from God, David was to act upon his own wisdom, and the wise counsel of His advisors.

Solomon, David's successor, came to be known as a wise king. He asked for wisdom, and the Lord answered his prayer, "*Behold, I have done according to thy words: lo, I have given thee a wise and an understanding heart; so that there was none like thee before thee, neither after thee shall any arise like unto thee*" (1 Kings 3:12). The wisdom of Solomon is captured in the *Book of Proverbs*.

### **Wise Choices in the New Testament**

Our Lord Jesus began His ministry by preaching about wisdom. The Sermon on the Mount ends with the comparison between the wise man and the fool. "*Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock...And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand.*" (Matthew 7:24-27). The lesson is clear: success comes from being wise, and wisdom is found in hearing, obeying and applying the Word of God in our lives.

When the disciples were sent out to minister, our Lord told them that they were to be "*wise as serpents, and harmless as doves*" (Matt. 10:16). As God's people, we have to be wise because we are sent as sheep amongst the wolves, but we are to be as harmless and benign as a dove like our Lord Jesus.

Paul also exercised wisdom in his ministry. After he fled Thessalonica to escape persecution, Paul sent Timothy to minister to the infant church. On this decision, Paul wrote, "*Wherefore...we thought it good to be left at Athens alone; and sent Timotheus, our brother, and minister of God, and our fellowlabourer in the gospel of Christ, to establish you, and to comfort you concerning your faith*" (1 Thess. 3:1-2). By the same manner, Paul "*supposed it necessary*" to send the ailing Epaphroditus to the Philippian church so that he could be nursed to health (Phil. 2:25-26).

Did Paul receive a vision to send Timothy to Thessalonica or to send Epaphroditus to Philippi? No! In both instances, Paul exercised his wisdom. He "thought it good," and he "supposed it necessary."

The question is how does Paul know what is good and necessary? The answer is found in the final goal of his decisions. Paul "thought it good" that Timothy should be despatched to Thessalonica because the believers in that city needed to be strengthened in the faith (1 Thess. 3:2). In the same way, Paul "supposed it necessary" for Epaphroditus to be sent to Philippi because his presence would bring joy to the church (Phil. 2:28).

As God's people, we choose wisely when we consider what the chief end of our life is. Paul chose wisely because he had the glory of God and the ministry of the saints uppermost in his mind when he made those decisions. May we also seek to do the same.

25 Jul 10

## **CHOOSING WISELY**

God's Word takes precedence over every aspect of our lives. What He has clearly revealed in His Word is also His will. The Christian who desires to do the will of God must begin by obeying His Word.

Where God's Word is silent, the believer is given the freedom to choose within the boundaries of God's moral precepts. The freedom of choice also requires the exercise of wisdom.

Wisdom is the application of the Word of God to life's situations, and the believer is especially equipped to make wise choices. The Bible tells us that we are to "*walk in wisdom toward them that are without*" (Col. 4:5); to "*walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise*" (Eph. 5:15).

This godly wisdom is also applied when making judgments. For this reason, the Apostle Paul said that Christians must never resort to the courts to settle their disputes. "*Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unjust, and not before the saints? Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world? and if the world shall be judged by you, are ye unworthy to judge the smallest matters? Know ye not that we shall judge angels? how much more things that pertain to this life? If then ye have judgments of things pertaining to this life, set them to judge who are least esteemed in the church. I speak to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you? no, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren?*" (1 Cor. 6:1-5).

The Bible teaches us that Christians must judge other Christians. After all, we are the ones with the sanctified minds. The question is what can we do to ensure that our choices are wise and our judgments are sound?

### **Mindset of the Believer**

First, the mindset of the believer is paramount because if a person thinks he knows, he will never ask. God grants wisdom to those who realise that his own wisdom and that of the world are foolishness to God. God grants His wisdom to those who are

- **humble**, "*When pride cometh, then cometh shame: but with the lowly is wisdom.*" (Prov. 11:2);
- **teachable**, "*Hear counsel, and receive instruction, that thou mayest be wise in thy latter end.*" (Prov. 19:20);
- **reverential to Him**, "*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding*" (Prov. 9:10).

### **Means of the Believer**

The Bible gives four means by which the believer can acquire God's wisdom.

**Fervent prayer:** Seeking God's counsel through prayer is the first step to wisdom. Seek God first before all else. "*If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed*" (James 1:5-6).

To those who ask in faith, God will answer abundantly. It must be pointed out that the wisdom that God promises the praying believer is not necessarily instantaneous.

God does not dispense wisdom like the charlatan doles out his “magic pill.” God’s wisdom comes step by step, which is why faith is required in the believer in every step. Wisdom of and faith in God is a growth process. As the believer seeks God’s wisdom through prayer and the study of His Word, God will grant wisdom for each situation.

**Search the Scriptures:** The Word of God is His wisdom. “*For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope*” (Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:11). The believer who neglects the Word of God is living on his own strength. On the other hand, the one who studies the Bible regularly is wise (Ps. 119:97-100).

**Careful research:** Even the unbelieving world recognizes the importance of research in decision making; and fervent prayer and diligent Bible study do not exempt a believer from doing the groundwork of research and analysis.

When Nehemiah heard about the dilapidated state of the wall in Jerusalem, he first prayed (Neh. 1:4-11), and then he made a careful survey of the situation (Neh. 2:11-15) before a single brick was laid. The lesson is that a plunge into the unknown is not faith but foolishness, and no Christian should use faith as an excuse for not doing careful research.

**Godly counsel:** Part of the research may involve seeking the counsel of godly Christians. “*He that walketh with wise men shall be wise: but a companion of fools shall be destroyed*” (Prov. 13:20). “*Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety*” (Prov. 11:14; 15:22).

Christians must first seek spiritual counsel from godly people to see whether the Holy Scriptures have anything to say on their situation.

Next, they may want to seek the advice of people who had similar experiences; these have real teaching values. Writing about his own experiences, David says, “*I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor His seed begging bread. He is ever merciful, and lendeth; and His seed is blessed*” (Ps. 37:25-26).

The ultimate source of wisdom is God. If we ask He will give wisdom through His Word, our personal research, or through the counsel of godly believers. The next question is obedience. I pray that God will grant us the humility to seek His wisdom and also obedience to obey.

01 Aug 10

It is good to be back after being away for three weeks. Praise the LORD for a blessed Bible Conference held at the Firs in Bellingham, Washington. There were 65 people who attended this year's conference, with about one-third of them first time attending a Bible Conference. On top of that, there were several new families and young people. We had three sessions a day – two in the morning, and one in the evening, and the evening always ends with a camp fire.

VBPC also held a 5-day Vacation Bible School. We had some 30 children from the neighbourhood who came, and nine children confessed our Lord Jesus as their Saviour in one-on-one sessions with Mrs Alice Chan and myself.

Mustard Seed, which is the name of the VBPC pre-school will begin operation in September this year, Please pray for Sis Wei Ping as she takes charge of the school. Also remember Rev and Mrs James Chan as they minister to VBPC. Bro. Mok Chee Cheong and his wife Carol (from Life BPC) will be there for a year to prepare and help with the ministry at VBPC.

For the three Lord's Days that we were there, the attendance at the Lord's Day Worship was about 90 people. The Sunday School was well-attended. The choir was just as busy, we praise God for His grace upon the leaders and congregation of VBPC.

This morning, we also want to extend our welcome to the Rev Peter Tan and his family into Calvary BPC. With effect from today, Pastor Peter is our new associate pastor. A church the size of Calvary, and as our congregation grows, the work is too heavy a burden to be borne by one pastor, and the elders have been praying that God will send the right man to co-labour with us. And Pastor Peter is indeed God's answer to our prayer. Again, a blessed welcome to Pastor Peter and his family.

### **GOD'S SOVEREIGN WILL**

Obedying God's Word, choosing wisely according to His precepts, exercising spiritual discernment, seeking wise counsel are key factors in our seeking of God's will for our lives. However, we must remember that God is sovereign. *"He is the governor among the nations."* (Ps. 22:28). *"God is the judge: He putteth down one, and setteth up another."* (Ps. 75:7). *"He changeth the times and the seasons: He removeth kings, and setteth up kings: He giveth wisdom unto the wise, and knowledge to them that know understanding."* (Dan. 2:20-21). The LORD is *"the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords."* (1 Tim. 6:15-16). *"And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and He doeth according to His will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay His hand, or say unto Him, What doest Thou?"* (Dan. 4:35). Needless to say in our decision making, we must humbly acknowledge God's sovereign control over our lives and joyfully embrace that reality.

### **God's Will is Fixed**

God's will is fixed means that no man can thwart it. The devil had tried to prevent God's will starting with his rebellion in heaven. When Satan deceived Eve and brought sin into the world, he thought he had won, but God had already provided a Saviour (Gen. 3:15) before the foundation of the world (1 Pet. 1:19-20). To frustrate God's plan of redemption, the devil had orchestrated several genocidal attempts to sever the Messianic line. But *"when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son"* (Gal. 4:4).

When our Lord Jesus was born, the devil tried to stop Him from fulfilling His mission. He entered into Judas Iscariot the betrayer (Luke 22:3) and manipulated the Jews and Romans to crucify our Lord Jesus. But in so doing, the devil was only aiding God's salvation plan. Jesus was crucified by *"the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God"* (Acts 2:23). Paul posed this rhetorical question, *"Who hath resisted his will?"* (Rom. 9:19). Answer: no one. God's will is fixed.

## **God's Will is All-Inclusive**

God's will covers everything from the movement of the stars to the casting of the lot, from the setting up of kings to the sufferings of the righteous, from the birth of a child to the death of His saints. God "*worketh all things after the counsel of His own will*" (Eph. 1:11).

## **God's Will is Mysterious**

Speaking about the Gospel, Paul says that it was "*the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to His saints: To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.*" (Col. 1:26-28). When we say that something is a mystery, in the biblical sense of the word, it means that it can only be known by God's revelation.

God's will is mysterious in the sense that He does not necessarily reveal His will to us. There are things that God has not chosen to reveal it to us. "*The secret things belong unto the LORD our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law.*" (Deut. 29:29).

God also does not reveal to us why certain things happen. As he sat on the ash heaps scratching his sores, Job demanded to know the reasons for his sufferings; his three friends pretended that they knew. But God asked a series of questions that exposed Job's self-righteousness and his friend's presumptuousness. God does not always reveal the secrets of or the reasons for His sovereign will.

## **God's Will is Perfect**

God's sovereignty always raises the question about His involvement in sin. If God is in control of the minutest details of human affairs, is not God also responsible for the sins of men? From human logic, that seems to be the natural conclusion, but divine revelation states otherwise. "*Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man.*" (James 1:13). The prophet Habakkuk raised this question with God, but he concluded by saying that whether the fig tree blossom or not, "*Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation.*" (Hab. 3:18). The Romans asked the same question, to which Paul said, "*What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid.*" (Rom. 9:14). God executes His sovereign will according to His nature, which is perfect and holy; as the Psalmist says, "*The LORD is righteous in all His ways, and holy in all His works.*" (Ps. 145:17)

Another question that is often raised concerning God's sovereignty is that if God is in full control, can man's actions be truly meaningful? This is another mystery. The Bible teaches us that while God determines, every man is held accountable for his decisions. God's sovereignty and man's responsibility are both biblical truths, meaning to say that they are not contradictions. Both are true at the same time, and whether or not our finite human minds can hold both thoughts together, we must accept them as God's truth.

God's will is perfect describes His final purpose. Man has a distinct disadvantage: not only do we have no inkling of the future, we also cannot accurately remember the past, and we cannot fully understand the present. Hence, we see life as a series of fading and blurred snapshots. For this reason, we describe some days as good and other days as not so good. Not God, He sees the beginning from the end, and to Him "*all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.*" (Rom. 8:28).

If God is perfect, why did He allow sin into this world? That is also part of His perfect plan. God did not say that all things are good, but that all things will work out for good. It is like looking at the back of a tapestry, and all we see are loose ends and dead knots, but if we see it from the right side, the loose ends and the dead knots come together to form a beautiful picture.

## **Conclusion**

The Christian's hope is not founded upon our knowing every part of God's plan and every working of His will. Our hope is founded upon the faith that He is good, and His will is perfect. As one of history professors used to say, "we do not know what the future holds, but we know the God who holds the future." And we know that He who holds our future is perfect and holy.

08 Aug 10

Tomorrow, Singapore celebrates her 45<sup>th</sup> National Day. We thank God for 45 years of peace and progress and prosperity – 45 years of God’s goodness and blessings. We thank God for granting to us the leaders whom God has put in charge of the country. As believers, we must never take these blessings for granted. All it needs is for the ego of one man to undo the good work that has been done over the last 45 years. And as we celebrate National Day, Singaporeans will do well to pray for our leaders as instructed by the Apostle Paul. *“I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty”* (1 Tim. 2:1-2).

There is also a Bible Study Seminar conducted in our church tomorrow (Monday, 9 August) from 9am to 2pm. The Rev. Ho Chee Lai will be bringing us through three sessions on how we can effectively prepare and lead a Bible Study. I urge all Fellowships, Bible Study Groups, Sunday School teachers, and Awana leaders to attend this seminar, and to be better equipped for the ministry of God’s Word.

Please also pray for Dn Jeffrey Soh as he leads a team to Sri Lanka to conduct a Vacation Bible School. The 14-member team will leave on Monday (9 August) and return on 15 August. Please pray for their safety and God’s blessings upon their ministry.

This Saturday (14 August), the Choir from the Mandarin Congregation will be celebrating their 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary. The Chinese Choir has been a source of blessing to our church as well as to other churches. I praise God for their ministry. There will be a thanksgiving service on 14 August at 7:15pm. Please come and join them as they render an evening of sacred music in praise of God.

#### **GOD’S SOVEREIGNTY IN MAN’S PLANNING**

The decision making process of a Christian must be different from that of the unbeliever. The unbeliever weighs the pros and cons; he does a cost-benefit analysis, and he decides based upon how a course of action would benefit him.

The Christian, on the other hand, puts God first. The Lord is, and should be, the major factor in his decision making. The course of action that the Christian has decided should be one that glorifies God.

Our Lord Jesus told the parable of the rich farmer who was planning for his future. The man said that he would build bigger barns to store his produce, and he would take time to smell the roses, to *“eat, drink, and be merry”* (Luke 12:18-19). But our Lord called the man a fool because he failed to see the foolishness of man’s plans and the brevity of life.

James also describes a similar situation in which a trader says to himself, *“To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain”* (James 4:13). But his self-confidence was too cut short with the reminder that even the immediate future is unknown to man, and that life is *“even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away”* (James 4:14).

These two passages beg the question: if God is sovereign in all things and at all times, and tomorrow is unknowable, what is the point of man making plans?

The Word of God does not frown on man’s planning. David planned for the building of the temple by collecting the building materials that were needed for the work. Nehemiah planned for the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. In Paul’s missionary journeys, he systematically planned his routes (1 Cor. 16:5-7; 2 Cor. 1:15-16). Our Lord Jesus asked the disciples to count the cost (Luke 14:28-32).

God's sovereignty does not absolve man of his responsibility to plan. The Lord is not against man's careful planning, but He does condemn man's callous presumptuousness.

Instead of a godless disregard for God's sovereignty, James offers this humble qualifier to us, "*ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that.*" (James 4:15). As Christians, we have to express our plans with the phrase – "*if the Lord will.*" It constrains us to recognize the sovereignty of God in our lives.

The problem is how do we know if a plan of action is the Lord's will. When things fall into place for the Christian, is it God's will? When a door of opportunity is opened, was it God who opened it?

### **When Things Fall into Place...**

When things fall into place, is it God's will? There are many Christians who seek God's will by interpreting their circumstances, thinking that if things fall nicely into place as they have hoped, it is God's will. If they do not, it is not God's divine plan. The folly of such an approach to seeking and doing God's will is that man's interpretation of his circumstances may not be correct.

There are numerous examples from the Bible that illustrate this truth: Jonah saw how things fell nicely into place for him as he was running away from God's explicit will for his life. God had told him to go to Nineveh, but Jonah wanted to go to Tarshish, in the opposite direction. When Jonah went down to Joppa, there was a ship sailing for Tarshish waiting for him. The circumstances certainly worked together favourably for Jonah, but he was wrong in his reading of the circumstances.

On the other hand, Job's circumstances, from man's point of view, looked like he was a man cursed by God for his sins. This was the interpretation of Job's three friends. Even his wife urged him to curse God and die. But we know how wrong they were in their understanding.

When Paul was bitten by a viper, the unbelievers concluded that it must be an act of divine retribution, and Paul was a murderer. But when Paul shook off the snake and appeared none the worse, they concluded, just as quickly, that Paul was a god (Acts 28:3-6). Paul was neither, and in both instances, the people were wrong.

Our Lord also corrected the disciples for coming to the wrong conclusion about the man who was born blind. They had assumed that the man's blindness was the result of his sin or his parents' sin when in fact he was blind so "*that the works of God should be made manifest in him*" (John 9:3).

These accounts teach us that we must be careful not to read God's messages in our life circumstances. As one Puritan preacher says, "providence is a Christian's diary, but not his Bible." When God's providence does not square up with His promises, we are to trust in His revealed Word.

Although circumstances in life should not have a pivotal role in our decision making, they do serve a purpose. Before a man makes a major change in his life, he will do well to study the Word of God, pray fervently, seek godly counsel, do the research, and then consider God's dealings with him and others who had made similar moves. These circumstances serve as a useful context for our decision making.

God willing, more next week as we consider the "open doors" in our lives. May our Lord shine His face and favour every Christian with His peace and grace. May the joy of the LORD be your strength!

15 Aug 10

We praise God for a blessed Bible Study Seminar held on 9<sup>th</sup> August 2010. There were over 40 people who turned up to learn from the Rev. Ho Chee Lai on how to lead a Bible Study. Those who missed this seminar will do well to get a CD on the three sessions. The Bible tells us that we are “being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever” (1 Peter 1:23). After being saved, we are not left to our own devices to live the redeemed life according to our whims and fancies, but God “hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue” (2 Peter 1:3). The emphasis is on knowing Christ. The only way we can know the living Word is through the written Word. So let me urge all who are not in any Bible Study to join one of many Bible study groups in the church.

Please continue to pray for the 14-member missions team led by Dn Jeffrey Soh to Sri Lanka. God willing, they should be back later this evening.

### **God’s Sovereignty in Man’s Planning**

When things fall into place for the Christian, it is not necessarily an indication of God’s will. We must never think that just because something is successful, it must be approved by God; nor are we to suppose that because something is a failure, it is a sign of God’s disapproval. Next, we consider the question of opened doors.

### **When Doors are Opened...**

When a door of opportunity is opened, is it God’s will? The phrase “open door” is often used in a Christian’s prayer. We pray for God to open the door for various things – business opportunities, places in the universities, life partners, even in God’s work. However, the phrase is merely Bible-speak for an opportunity. There are several passages in the New Testament that described the “opened door.”

### **1 Corinthians 16:8-9**

The Apostle Paul wrote this epistle to the Corinthians when he was still at Ephesus. He was writing to inform them of his travel plans. He intended to go to visit Corinth, but he said that he would only leave Ephesus after Pentecost because “*a great door and effectual is opened unto me, and there are many adversaries*” (1 Cor. 16:8-9).

It is interesting to note that this door was opened just after another door had been closed. Paul had desired to bring the Gospel to the east, but he was “*forbidden of the Holy Ghost to preach the word in Asia...the Spirit suffered them not*” (Acts 16:6-7).

Even when the Lord closed a door, He opened another one; the door that Paul was referring to was the opportunity to preach the Gospel. From this episode, we know that Paul did not regard the open door of opportunity as an indisputable sign that it was God’s will that he should remain in Ephesus. Neither did Paul look at the presence of the enemies of the Gospel as an indication that he should make an early departure from Ephesus.

Paul decided to stay until after the Pentecost because the season provided a great opportunity for him to preach the Gospel. Besides, it would take time for him to travel to Corinth, and he would like to remain there for a period of time. Hence, Paul decided that it would be best for the sake of the Gospel ministry to stay in Ephesus notwithstanding the adversaries.

Albert Barnes, sharing his insight on Paul’s decision, says that the Apostle regarded the presence of the enemies “as a reason why he should remain there. It was regarded by him as evidence that the Holy Spirit was there. It was proof that the enemies of God were alarmed, and that the kingdom of Christ was advancing. His presence also would be needed there, to encourage and strengthen the young converts who would be attacked and opposed; and he deemed it his duty to remain.”

## 2 Corinthians 2:12-13

In this passage, Paul was recounting his experiences at Troas. He had written to the church at Corinth on a matter of great concern and anguish for Paul (2 Cor. 2:4). He sent the letter ahead through Titus, and he would follow up with a visit. Paul stopped at Troas on the way to Corinth, planning to meet with Titus for the Corinthians' response to his letter.

While he was waiting for Titus at Troas, Paul was presented with an opportunity to preach the Gospel. *"When I came to Troas to preach Christ's gospel, and a door was opened unto me of the Lord, I had no rest in my spirit, because I found not Titus my brother: but taking my leave of them, I went from thence into Macedonia"* (2 Cor. 2:12-13).

We know Paul as the man who said, *"Woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!"* (1 Cor. 9:16). He would never forgo any opportunity to preach, but at Troas, Paul passed over the opportunity to preach the Gospel because he was concerned about the situation in Corinth and the welfare of Titus.

Paul did not regard the open door at Troas as God's indication to him to remain in the city and preach. There were other factors that Paul had to consider besides the "open door" opportunity; one of them being the problem in the Corinthian church. Paul did not fall into the trap of measuring the success of his ministry by the number of churches that he had founded. And before he jumped into starting a new church, Paul wanted to take care of the problems in the existing one.

There were other opened doors that Paul did not enter. When he and Silas were jailed in Philippi, an earthquake shook the foundations of the prison, and *"all the doors were opened, and every one's bands were loosed"* (Acts 16:26-27). The prisoners, including Paul and Silas could have taken that as a sign of God's deliverance. Instead, they chose to remain, and they were able to preach to the Philippian jailer. The lesson is that we would do well not to regard, as Paul did, every open door as God's opportunity for us.

## Colossians 4:3

Paul wrote the epistle to the Colossians when he was imprisoned in Rome (Col. 4:3b). He had hoped that upon his release, he would be able to preach the Gospel again. In the meantime, Paul wrote to the Christians in Colossae to pray for him, *"that God would open unto us a door of utterance, to speak the mystery of Christ"* (Col. 4:3a). It must be pointed out, however, that Paul was not praying for God's specific direction to preach.

Preaching the Gospel is God's direct command. Paul and Christians do not need God to provide additional signs to do what He has already commanded. Instead, Paul was praying for *"a door of utterance"* – opportunities to preach the Gospel.

## To Enter or Not to Enter

We must also bear in mind that not every open door is for us to enter. It would be utter folly for a Christian to enter any door just because it is open and seems welcoming. There are some doors that are clearly out of bounds – *"Enter not into the path of the wicked, and go not in the way of evil men"* (Prov. 4:14). There are doors that are inviting but which Christians ought to avoid – *"The lips of a strange woman drop as an honeycomb...her end is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a twoedged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps take hold on hell...Remove thy way far from her, and come not nigh the door of her house"* (Prov. 5:3-8).

With regard to the opportunities for the ministry, we must carefully consider God's Word, wait on Him in prayer, seek the counsel of godly men, and exercise due spiritual discernment. As we have seen, Paul did not enter every open door, nor did he casually pass over ever

22 Aug 10

Praise the LORD for the recent missions trip to Sri Lanka led by Dn Jeffrey Soh. Of the 14 who went, for nine of them it was the first time they went for a missions trip to Sri Lanka. Judging from their faces as they came out of the arrival hall and their testimonies, it was a blessed and fruitful experience.

Last Saturday (14 August), the Mandarin Choir celebrated its 21<sup>st</sup> anniversary, and they presented a most heart-warming praise service. All glory to God for what He has done through the Mandarin Choir. The effect of music upon the moods of men means that we have to be very vigilant in the kind of music we have in the church.

John Calvin, in the preface to the psalter, wrote, "There is scarcely in the world anything which is more able to turn or bend this way and that the morals of men...[Music] has a sacred and almost incredible power to move hearts in one way or another. Therefore we ought to be even more diligent in regulating it in such a way that it shall be useful to us." Calvin also wrote that music is God's gift to us, and therefore, we ought to "make [music] serve all honest things; and that it should not give occasion for our giving free rein to dissolution, or making ourselves effeminate in disordered delights, and that it should not become the instrument of lasciviousness nor of any shamelessness."

I am concerned that some of the young people in BP Churches speak highly of contemporary Christian music, where the tune takes precedence over truth, and stage performance replaces biblical precepts. Music is not amoral, and I pray that Calvinians will be discerning in their music choices, and this is an area where the church choirs – both English and Mandarin – play an important role.

### **God's Guidance in Decision Making**

Psalms, prophets, and preachers often speak about and pray for God's guidance. "*For this God is our God for ever and ever: He will be our guide even unto death.*" (Ps. 48:14).

"*Good and upright is the LORD: therefore will he teach sinners in the way. The meek will he guide in judgment: and the meek will he teach his way.*" (Ps. 25:8-9)

"*I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go: I will guide thee with mine eye.*" (Ps. 32:8)

"*Thus saith the LORD, thy Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel; I am the LORD thy God which teacheth thee to profit, which leadeth thee by the way that thou shouldest go.*" (Isa. 48:17)

Our Lord Jesus says that He is the Shepherd of the sheep; "*the sheep hear His voice: and He calleth His own sheep by name, and leadeth them out.*" (John 10:3). Yet is it not true that most Christians live day to day oblivious of God's sovereign superintendence over their lives. How does God guide? How can we seek His guidance?

### **God's Sovereign Guidance**

God guides by His sovereign will. This describes God's control over all circumstances and people to work together for the good of His people. God's sovereign guidance covers all situations, favourable and unfavourable, and all peoples, good and evil. By His sovereign power, God brings to pass some things, and He stops some others, and He allows for certain ones. In Hebrews 11, we read about God "*stopped the*

*mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire,*" but "*others were tortured...had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings...they were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented.*" (Heb. 11:33-37).

There are desirable things that God in His sovereignty did not allow to happen. Example: it was certainly desirable that every sinner should come to repentance, this is not the case. Agrippa heard the Gospel, and he was

almost persuaded (Acts 26:28). On the other hand, there are evil deeds that God allowed to take place. God allowed Satan to torment Job. The crucifixion of Christ is a cruel act of injustice yet it was also God's eternal plan. The point is that under God's sovereign guidance, we can only humbly submit.

### **God's Moral Guidance**

God also guides our decision-making by His moral precepts. He sets the boundaries of right and wrong by His revealed commands. When the Word of God commanded it, we obey. *"As the LORD commanded Moses his servant, so did Moses command Joshua, and so did Joshua; he left nothing undone of all that the LORD commanded Moses."* (Josh. 11:15) *"Be ye therefore very courageous to **keep** and to **do all** that is written in the book of the law of Moses, that ye turn not aside therefrom to the right hand or to the left; That ye come not among these nations, these that remain among you; neither make mention of the name of their gods, nor cause to swear by them, neither serve them, nor bow yourselves unto them:"* (Josh. 23:6-7). *"Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and **keep his commandments**: for this is the whole duty of man."* (Eccl. 12:13).

Under God's moral guidance, there should be no ambivalence in our decision making. God has said it; that settles it. There can be no valid rationalization for sin. Under God's moral guidance, the only question is whether or not we obey.

### **God's Wisdom Guidance**

There are some decisions that are neither commanded nor forbidden by God. Whether one decides to start your own business or work for someone else is not a matter of right or wrong. It must be pointed out that God's wisdom guidance only applies to decisions that fall within God's moral will. If the work is illegal (such as drug-trafficking) or sinful (such as working in an abortion clinic), the Christian should never have even considered such a line of work because it fails to satisfy God's moral precepts.

When the Word of God is silent, we must exercise spiritual discernment, and the decision we make must be one that draws us closer to Him and gives us more opportunities to glorify Him.

When there is a decision to be made, we must first believe in God's sovereign and perfect will. That is the faith that brings us to our knees to wait and pray; the faith to know that God is working out all things according to His divine counsel. Next, we have to consider His commands. All our motives, plans and actions must fall within God's moral will. Third, if God's Word is silent, we must decide based upon what is best for God.

### **The Example of Paul**

Paul's epistle to the Romans is the theological treatise of the Christian faith. When Paul wrote the letter, he had not been to Rome, but he was hopeful that he would be there soon. In his greeting, Paul wrote, *"First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers; Making request, if by any means now at length I might have a prosperous journey by the will of God to come unto you. For I long to see you, that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, to the end ye may be established; That is, that I may be comforted together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me. Now I would not have you ignorant, brethren, that oftentimes I purposed to come unto you, (but was let hitherto,) that I might have some fruit among you also, even as among other Gentiles"* (Rom. 1:8-13).

Paul desired to visit Rome. His decision-making process is instructive.

· First, Paul planned for the visit – *"I purposed to come."* God's sovereignty does not exempt man from planning.

· Second, he prayed – *"I make mention of you always in my prayers."*

· Third, he submitted to God's sovereign will – *"I might have a prosperous journey by the will of God."*

· Fourth, he set the goals – *"I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, to the end ye may be established."* There is no question that Paul's desire to go to Rome was within God's moral will. His motives were right as were his plans and actions. He was going to Rome to preach the Gospel. He did not rob or cheat to pay his way. Still, Paul had to decide wisely with regard to his goals for going to Rome. He wanted to establish and encourage the believers and evangelize the lost (Rom. 1:11-13). The average man just drifts about. The wise man sets goals. The godly man sets spiritual goals. Paul's goal was to *"press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus"* (Phil. 3:14); and that goal was the basis upon which he made his decisions.

· Fifth, he set his priorities. Why Rome? Were there no other places that could have benefited from Paul's ministry? Yes, Paul had to care for all the churches (2 Cor. 11:28b), which was why Paul had to prioritize. And Rome was not Paul's top priority. Consider his list of priorities in Romans 15. His top priority was to bring the Gospel to the places where the people had not heard of Christ (Rom. 15:20). Then he was heading east to Jerusalem because he had to minister to the believers and deliver the financial relief that he had collected from the churches in Macedonia (Rom. 15:25-26). Third stop in Paul's itinerary was Spain (Rom. 15:24), and on the way, if God so wills, he would stop at Rome.

Just as it is important for a believer to set spiritual goals, it is equally important for you to list your priorities. Priorities are important because there are many things competing for our time and resources. If we do not prioritize, we will end up doing the things that we like to do or things that are easiest to do.

Why did Paul place Spain above Rome? The simple answer was that Rome had the Gospel, Spain did not. Remember Paul's spiritual goals and his list of priorities. He made his decisions based upon how he could best serve our Lord Jesus. Paul could truly say that it was God's guidance because he lived under the wisdom of God; he lived in submission to God's sovereign will and in obedience to His commands.

"It is God's leading." This is how some Christians would qualify their decisions, even questionable ones. However, without fully understanding what it means and entails, the qualifier is nothing more than just an empty pious euphemism. Dearly beloved, God is the Shepherd, and He leads us – always and only – in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake (Ps. 23:3). May the Lord help you to walk in the path of righteousness for His glory.

29 Aug 10

The Mandarin Congregation will have a Gospel rally spread over two nights (3-4 September 2010) at 8pm. This will be an excellent opportunity for you to invite your Mandarin-speaking friends, neighbours, and loved ones to listen to the Gospel.

The English Congregation has been reminded at the family worship on 20 August of the importance of prayer in a believer's personal life. The Mandarin Congregation had a similar reminder of the importance of corporate prayer in the Lord's Day sermon. These calls to prayer are not coincidental. These calls to prayer are not new; these are calls to those who are sensitive to the inadequacies of man's strength, and the sufficiency of God's grace. Let me urge all to come and pray for and with the church. Let me also challenge that every household in the church sends at least one member to represent the family before the throne of grace.

Here's an advance notice: 30 November to 3 December (Tuesday to Friday) will be our church's prayer week. There will be a prayer meeting every night in that week. Please plan to attend.

### **GOD'S GUIDANCE IN PAUL'S MINISTRY**

God guides us by His sovereign will under which we must humbly submit. It is impossible for man to defy God's sovereign will. "*The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: He turneth it whithersoever He will*" (Prov. 21:1).

God guides us by His moral will to which we must obey. It is a terrible thing for man to disobey God's moral will. "*The LORD said unto Moses, Whosoever hath sinned against me, him will I blot out of My book*" (Exod. 32:33). The writer of Hebrews warns us that "*It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God*" (Heb. 10:31).

In areas where the Word of God is silent, He leads us by His wisdom through which we make good decisions. What is a good decision? A good decision is simply a godly one for what use is a good decision if it is not also godly.

### **The Example of Paul**

The life and ministry of Paul serve as an illustration of godly decision-making. Paul's epistle to the Romans is the theological treatise of the Christian faith. When Paul wrote the letter, he had not been to Rome, but he was hopeful that he would be there soon. How Paul arrived at his decision to visit Rome is an example of godly decision-making.

In his greeting, Paul wrote, "*First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers; Making request, if by any means now at length I might have a prosperous journey by the will of God to come unto you. For I long to see you, that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, to the end ye may be established; That is, that I may be comforted together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me. Now I would not have you ignorant, brethren, that oftentimes I purposed to come unto you, (but was let hitherto,) that I might have some fruit among you also, even as among other Gentiles*" (Rom. 1:8-13).

### **Plan**

Paul planned for the visit; he said, "*I purposed to come.*" Paul had a schedule. He had a plan. God's sovereignty does not exempt man from planning. God is in control, but that does not mean that believers are to just go with the flow. To plan is to be prudent. Our Lord Jesus asked: "*For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it? Lest haply, after he hath laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all that behold it begin to mock him, Saying, This man began to build, and was not able to*

*finish. Or what king, going to make war against another king, sitteth not down first, and consulteth whether he be able with ten thousand to meet him that cometh against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is yet a great way off, he sendeth an ambassador, and desireth conditions of peace” (Luke 14:28-32).*

## **Pray**

Second, he prayed – *“I make mention of you always in my prayers.”* Paul prayed for the people to whom he would be ministering, and he prayed for his upcoming visit with them. By praying, Paul was not asking God to rubber-stamp his plans; rather Paul was seeking God’s guidance and waiting on His will.

## **Submission to God**

Paul’s attitude of seeking and waiting was evidenced by his submission to God’s sovereign will – *“I might have a prosperous journey by the will of God.”*

## **Set Spiritual Goals**

Paul set the goals – *“I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, to the end ye may be established.”* There is no question that Paul’s desire to go to Rome was within God’s moral will. His motives were right as were his plans and actions. He was going to Rome to preach the Gospel. He did not rob or cheat to pay his way.

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## **Set Priorities**

Why Rome? Were there no other places that could have benefited from Paul’s ministry? Yes, Paul had to care for all the churches (2 Cor. 11:28b), which was why Paul had to prioritize. And Rome was not Paul’s top priority.

Consider his list of priorities in Romans 15. His top priority was to bring the Gospel to the places where the people had not heard of Christ (Rom. 15:20). Then he was heading east to Jerusalem because he had to minister to the believers and deliver the financial relief that he had collected from the churches in Macedonia (Rom. 15:25-26). Third stop in Paul’s itinerary was Spain (Rom. 15:24), and on the way, if God so willed, he would stop at Rome. Just as it is important to set spiritual goals, it is also equally important to list your priorities. Priorities are important because there are many things competing for our time and resources. If we do not prioritize, we will most likely end up doing the things that we like to do or things that are easiest to do.

Why did Paul place Spain above Rome? The simple answer was that Rome had the Gospel, Spain did not. Remember Paul’s spiritual goals and his list of priorities. He made his decisions based upon how he could best serve our Lord Jesus. Paul could truly say that it was God’s guidance because he lived under the wisdom of God; he lived in submission to God’s sovereign will and in obedience to His commands.

*“It is God’s leading.”* This is how some Christians would qualify their decisions, even questionable ones. However, without fully understanding what it means and entails, the qualifier is nothing more than just an empty pious euphemism. Dearly beloved, God is our Shepherd, and He leads us – always and only – in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake (Ps. 23:3). May the Lord help you to walk in the path righteousness for His glory.

05 Sep 10

Praise God for the Mandarin Gospel rally which was held over two evenings – Friday and Saturday (3-4 September 2010). Please continue to pray for those who came and that the Gospel seed which has been planted will bear fruit in due time.

### **God's Special Guidance**

The Apostle Paul was a man passionate about our Lord Jesus Christ. Here is what he said to the Philippians – *“But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ”* (Phil. 3:8). Paul was also passionate about the work of the Lord. He was a chief persecutor of the church, but he became her chief advocate. He set out to silence the Gospel, but he became the one who would not be silenced about the Gospel – *“Woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!”* (1 Cor. 9:16). He consented to the murder of Stephen, but he became one who had no regard for his own life – *“None of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God”* (Acts 20:24).

There is no doubt that Paul's ministry was unique. Although he was specially chosen by God to be the apostle to the Gentiles, we find that Paul planned by setting goals and priorities. He prayed over his plans. He was willing to change his plans according to God's will. Paul's plans might have changed, but his goals and priorities never wavered. Paul fought a good fight, he stayed his course; he kept the faith. The secret of Paul's success was that he planned his life to please and serve God.

However, there are some who say that the reason behind Paul's success was that he was directly and supernaturally guided by God. In his second missionary journey, after Galatia, Paul had wanted to preach the Gospel in Asia (Acts 16:6), but Luke recorded that *“the Spirit suffered them not”* (Acts 16:7). Later at Troas, Paul saw the vision of the man of Macedonia calling out to him, *“Come over into Macedonia, and help us”* (Acts 16:9). Paul saw the vision, and he changed his plans. He crossed the Aegean Sea, and started the first European church in Philippi.

There is no doubt that Paul's decision to move to Macedonia was the result of God's supernatural guidance. The call of the man of Macedonia was not a feeling; neither was it a hunch; it was a direct revelation from God. Paul's experience was not unique. The angel of the Lord led Philip into the Gaza desert to speak to the Ethiopian eunuch. In the Old Testament, God guided His people through the wilderness by a pillar of cloud in the day and a pillar of fire by night. The Lord confirmed the calling of Moses, Gideon, and the other prophets by supernatural signs. In the Holy Scriptures, we will find that God did guide by supernatural means.

The question is – does God guide us supernaturally as He did Paul and Philip? The quick answer is that God is able to do what He wants. However, from the passages of Scripture that show God's direct guidance through dreams and visions, we note several restrictions.

### **It is Extremely Rare even in the Bible**

First, the instances of God's supernatural guidance are rare for the Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles. The pillars of cloud and fire led the children of Israel for forty years from Egypt to Canaan. When Joshua led the people into the Promised Land, that supernatural guidance ceased. By then Moses had authored the Pentateuch, and God's instruction for Joshua was to obey His written Word, *“Only be thou strong and very courageous, that thou mayest observe to do according to all the law, which Moses my servant commanded thee: turn not from it to the right hand or to the left, that thou mayest prosper whithersoever thou goest. This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success”* (Josh. 1:7-8). Joshua was to do God's will not by seeking God's supernatural guidance, but by obeying His Word.

In the New Testament, the instances of God's miraculous guidance are also rare. The fact is that the *Book of Acts* has more records of believers praying together than of God's leading His church by special signs. The Bible commands us to obey God's Word and not to seek for His signs.

### **It is specific and unmistakable**

Second, in the few instances of God's supernatural guidance recorded in the New Testament, these are all applied directly and specifically to the fulfillment of His salvation plan and the preaching of the Gospel.

The angel of the Lord appeared to Philip and sent him to Gaza (Acts 8:26). The purpose was to preach the Gospel to the Ethiopian eunuch. Peter had a heavenly vision (Acts 10:9-17). In the vision, Peter was asked to preach the Gospel to Cornelius. Paul had the vision of the man from Macedonia (Acts 16:9). The purpose of that vision was to redirect Paul's ministry away from Bithynia (east) and to Macedonia (west).

Note that God's supernatural guidance is specific. Philip was asked to go to a specific place. Peter was asked to go to a specific person. Paul was directed to go in a specific direction.

God's supernatural guidance was unmistakable. In other words, there was no question in Paul's mind as to what God wanted him to do. God has a zero-tolerance for errors in prophets. The true prophet must always be right. This is a far cry from the so-called prophets of today who allow for their own mis-prophecies. They make wiggle room for their may-be's and failures. But what good is a prophecy if it is not certain that it will come to pass. The Lord regards such fallible prophets as false ones. And it would be utter folly for believers to claim that God's supernatural guidance if they cannot also be absolutely certain of His will for their lives.

### **It is to be obeyed**

Whenever God leads supernaturally, His guidance becomes a command. Before the angel of the Lord appeared to Philip, he was free to preach the Gospel wherever he wanted, and he would not do anything that was against God's will. However, after he had been told to go to Gaza, Philip would have disobeyed God if he did not follow God's specific guidance.

Similarly, Paul was free to bring the Gospel to anywhere, but when the vision of the Macedonian man came to him, there was only one place that he could go. Paul was restricted in where he could preach, and a failure to follow God's guidance would constitute an act of disobedience.

God is omnipotent. He can do what He wants. If God so decides to lead a person supernaturally, He can and He will. However, we must remember that such special guidance is not the norm.

Furthermore, from the various passages, we learn that God will lead a person who is already doing His will. Note that Philip, Peter and Paul were already preaching the Gospel before the Lord supernaturally directed them to do more of the same. In other words, the slothful Christian cannot excuse his idle inactivity as part of waiting for God's special leading. God can do what He wants, and we must do what He commands. This, every Christian can and ought to do without having to seek God's supernatural guidance in our lives.

12 Sep 10

Praise the Lord for the salvation of two persons at the Mandarin Gospel Rally on 3-4 September. We pray that their faith will grow with the help of church members, and that they be integrated into the Church.

Praise God also for the baptism of two elderly believers at the last Hokkien Worship Service (5 September). Their confession of faith in Christ is clear as the joy of salvation was etched on their faces on the day of the baptism. It was also encouraging to see the family members (children and grandchildren) attending their baptism. What a glorious testimony of their faith in Christ, and His love for them.

Please continue to pray for the leaders of the church. On Friday (10 September), the leaders had a retreat to evaluate our ministries and to plan for the future. God willing, over the next few months, I shall be sharing with you some of the ideas and plans that have been brought up. There is much to do, but it is up to Calvinians to rise up to the challenge and to co-labour in the work of the Gospel by your support in prayer, resources and manpower.

### **God's Gifts to Know His Will (I)**

The way we see things determine our outlook and responses to the world. Our worldview determines our approach and attitudes to the world. The Apostle Paul writes, "*The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man. For who hath known the mind of the Lord, that he may instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ*" (1 Cor. 2:14-16). This is one of the blessings of being a believer in Christ; we have the mind of Christ. Our Lord Jesus Christ says, "*I am the light of the world*" (John 9:5); He is the light that dispels the darkness of sin, and He is also the light that reveals the realness of everything else. There is no reality outside of Christ. Whatever opinions a man may have of life, death, or religion; without Christ, his opinions are neither true nor relevant.

It is only the worldview of Christ that counts, and the Christian has the mind of Christ. In this sense, the Christian is the one who is best equipped to handle life and all its attending trials and tribulations. The Christian is one who really knows the meaning of life and is able to live it to the fullest. After all, our Lord Jesus says, "*I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly*" (John 10:10).

The chief source of God's wisdom is the Bible, but God also blessed His people with certain abilities and gifts. The more we are immersed in His Word, the better equipped we will be to handle life. However, the Lord also provided His people with other means to know and do His will.

### **Common Sense**

To have common sense is to be sensible. Paul says that old men must "*be sober, grave, temperate, sound in faith, in charity, in patience;*" and the young men must be "*sober minded*" (Titus 2:2). The phrase "*sober minded*" literally means "to be in the right mind" (Mark 5:15; Luke 8:35) In Proverbs 3:21, believers are exhorted to keep "sound wisdom." Common sense is one of the means which God gives to us to know and do His will.

However, it must be remembered that common sense is not infallible. Common sense must always be set aside when it contradicts the commandments and precepts of God. The Psalmist says, "*I thought on my ways, and turned my feet unto thy testimonies*" (Ps. 119:59).

Common sense also does not deny that God may lead in uncommon ways. God's instructions to Noah to build an ark on dry land did not make sense. God's battle plans for Joshua in the conquest of Jericho was unheard of in military strategy. God's order to Gideon to reduce his forces from ten thousand to a mere three hundred men against the mighty Midianites was not common sense. But in these instances, God's revealed will superseded man's common sense. God is "*able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think*" (Eph. 3:20).

### **Sound Advice**

The advice of godly men is also a source of God's wisdom. They can provide knowledge, experience, and biblical counsel. Solomon says, "*Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety*" (Prov. 11:14; 24:6).

When seeking advice, there are several things you must take note. First, you must realize that even godly men are not infallible. When seeking advice, do not ask, "What is your opinion on this matter?" or "What would you do if you were in my position?" Instead ask, "Do you know of any biblical principles or Bible passages that would

help me in my situation.” Asking the right questions would prompt the counsellor to go to God’s Word and not to rely on his personal opinions.

Second, seek competent advice from the right people. If you are buying a car, you do not want the advice of a godly elder who knows nothing about cars. If you are seeking advice for your marriage, you do not go to your best friend who is still single.

### **Personal Desire**

“God has laid upon my heart to do such and such.” This statement is often used by Christians to mean that God has called them to a particular ministry. However, we must recognize that our personal desires are not authoritative; there is great danger in reading personal desires as God’s leading. We are often misled by our own desires. Eve was misled when she saw that the fruit from the “tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise” (Gen. 3:6).

Even a good desire may be the result of an unholy motivation. Simon the sorcerer wanted the power of the Holy Ghost, but Peter said that his desire was a wicked one (Acts 8:13ff).

When personal desires are in line with the Word of God, it can be a source of wisdom to seek the will of God. The undeniable fact, however, is that a person’s spiritual maturity will affect his desire. As you grow spiritually, your desires will also be more godly.

19 Sep 10

Last Friday, the Church held its second annual leaders' retreat. The whole day retreat gave an opportunity for us to evaluate the ministries of the church, to see the areas in which we can do better, and to plan for the new opportunities that God has in store for Calvary BP Church.

Calvary stands in the midst of coming of great physical and demographical changes. The Urban Renewal Authority has great plans for the neighbourhoods around our church. These changes will present us with opportunities to preach the Gospel and to proclaim Christ.

God willing, over the next few weeks, I shall be sharing some of these changes and the programmes that will be developed to seize these Gospel-preaching opportunities. I pray that all Calvarians will put our hearts and hands to the plough, to sow and water diligently, and trust God to bless our labours and give the increase. For a start, I want to encourage all of you be part of a ministry in the church. If you see a ministry which I am not aware of, let me know. If you want to start a Bible study group in your neighbourhood, let me know. Let us spend and be spent for our Lord Jesus Christ.

### **God's Gifts to Know His Will (II)**

God has provided several gifts for believers to know the will of God. We have considered three of these provisions – common sense, sound advice, personal desires. Common sense simply means a sensible approach to problem solving, with the condition that the approach does not violate the moral will of God. God has also provided us with competent and godly men to give us counsel in times of need. Thirdly, our personal desires can be used as an indication of God's leading. This provision, however, is conditional upon a person's spiritual maturity.

### **Prevailing Circumstances**

There are some decisions that are made on a case by case basis. This is not to be confused with situational ethics or moral relativism, where objective moral rules are applied depending upon the circumstances. In making a decision, no Christian should allow his circumstances to take precedence over the laws of God. Any decision that violates God's commandments is wrong in whatever the circumstance.

Circumstances are useful in the sense that they provide a context for a believer to make his decision. He has to choose, wisely, of course, by studying the situation and examining whether a particular course of action is feasible, cost-effective, etc. Believers have to interpret situations and make decisions based on circumstances, and to decide based upon a prevailing circumstance is not the same being morally ambivalent.

### **End Results**

When Gamaliel heard that the Pharisees were going to kill the apostles for preaching the Gospel, he said to them, *"Refrain from these men, and let them alone: for if this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to nought: But if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God"* (Acts 5:38-39). Gamaliel's view was simple: if the apostles were doing God's will, they would be successful; if not, their work would cease. Gamaliel's principle is that success is the ultimate proof.

However, the Holy Scriptures prove that Gamaliel's reasoning was seriously flawed. Noah preached for 120 years, and not one soul believed him except his own family, but Noah was not a failure. Jeremiah's prophetic ministry spanned across several kings. He preached until the day Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. Jeremiah lacked success but he did not fail.

Conversely, the wicked *"are not in trouble as other men; neither are they plagued like other men...their eyes stand out with fatness: they have more than heart could wish...Behold, these are the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase in riches."* (Ps. 73: 5, 7, 12). The wicked are rich, powerful and strong, but do their successes prove

that they are doing God's will? The successful preachers came to our Lord and claimed that they had preached in His name, cast out devils and had done many wonderful works, but our Lord's reply was "*I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.*" (Matt. 7:22-23).

Success in a particular venture can yield valuable lessons, but so does failure. Both must be viewed within the framework of God's sovereignty. As Christians, we must remember that while we sow and others water, it is God who gives the increase.

### **Private Intuition**

A young man says to his pastor, "Jane is the girl that God has prepared for my life partner."

The pastor, somewhat incredulous, asked, "How do you know Jane is the one?"

The young man replied confidently, "I know because I just feel it."

There are many people, including Christians who make decisions and discern the will of God by these personal feelings, or intuition, or hunch, or gut feeling. It is foolish to trust in these intuitive impressions for several reasons. First, there is no scriptural basis that God uses such means to reveal His will. When God speaks, it is unmistakably clear to the hearer that it is He who is speaking. There is neither ambiguity nor uncertainty in God's revelation. Second, there is no way for the hearer to ascertain the source and verify the veracity of the message. Thirdly, the lack of certainty also means the want of authority, and such private intuitions therefore cannot demand obedience.

Christians must exercise extreme care when we consider our private intuition as a means to know the will of God. We must never take these inner feelings as authoritative. We must carefully consider their sources – Are they from God or from the devil? We must evaluate these thoughts by the Word of God. We must never confuse creativity with God's leading.

### **Inner Peace**

Closely associated with private intuition is inner peace. Many Christians rate the rightness of their decisions by the absence or the presence of inner peace. This idea that we must be doing God's will when we have an overwhelming sense of inner peace is a tenuous one. The Psalmist writes about the peace of the wicked, "*Our soul is exceedingly filled with the scorning of those that are at ease, and with the contempt of the proud.*" (Ps. 123:4). Jeremiah and Ezekiel warn of false prophets who preached a false peace – "*They have healed also the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace.*" (Jer. 6:14; Ezek. 13:10).

Peace is the fruit of the Holy Spirit, and the lack of peace is certainly an indication of sin. However, a lack of inner peace in a person could mean that a person is uncertain about his decision, or that it may be an indication of his immaturity.

God has given us principles to follow when we seek His will. He has also given us wisdom to help us in our quest. And the best source of our wisdom comes from fearing the Lord – "*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding.*" (Prov. 9:10). May the Lord grant us that holy fear and the wisdom that comes with it.

26 Sep 10

### **Trusting God for His Guidance**

God is intimately interested in the way we live our lives. He has given us several means by which we can make decisions that will please Him. First, He has given us the Holy Scriptures. By studying the Word of God, we know

God's moral will; we know what pleases Him and grieves Him. Furthermore, He has also given us a new nature by which we can know and do His will.

Second, God continues to work in and through us. While we strive to live in obedience to His will, Paul reminds us that *"it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure"* (Phil. 2:13). He provides the grace to trust Him, strength to do His bidding, desire to please Him.

Third, God leads us by His sovereign providence. He opens some doors and shuts others. The Lord uses circumstances and people to bring to pass His purpose for our lives.

God is actively involved in our life and decisions. The reason some believers think of Him as being distant and aloof from their daily lives is that they have kept God out of their decision making process. We make hundreds of decisions every day. Admittedly, most of them are rather mundane and unimportant. However, the point is that decision making is part of living, and Christians must take this responsibility from a biblical perspective. As we walk the narrow road, we must walk by faith and not by sight.

### **Walking By Faith**

To learn to walk by faith is like learning to swim for the very first time. There is some degree of fear and anxiety when we get into the water for the very first time because it is not what we naturally do. From young, we learn to walk with both feet on the ground, and our eyes looking forward. Swimming involves a totally different set of muscles and requires different hand and leg coordination.

So it is with walking by faith. It requires a totally new outlook on and approach to life. We see things differently. The world will also look at us differently. A.W. Tozer writes about the paradoxes of a Christian, "He feels supreme love for One whom he has never seen, talks familiarly everyday to the Someone he cannot see, expects to go to heaven on the virtue of Another, empties himself in order to be full, admits he is wrong so that he can be declared right, goes down in order to get up, is strongest when he is weakest, richest when he is poorest, and happiest when he feels worst. He dies so he can live, forsakes in order to have, gives away so he can keep, sees the invisible, hears the inaudible, and knows that which passeth knowledge."

### **Having a Relationship with God**

Such is walking by faith, and it can only come when a person is wholly given over to God. That means that in order to know God's will, we must first know God. Before we can please God, we must first have a relationship with Him. What does it mean to have a relationship with God?

- God is a Person; I can know Him personally (John 17:3).
- I am a person; I can know God personally (1 Cor. 13:12).
- To know God, I must know about Him (Col. 1:9-10; 1 John 1, 3).
- God reveals Himself through the written Word and the living Word, even our Lord Jesus (Heb. 1:1-3). I can only know God through these two means.
- The Holy Spirit quickens, illumines, convicts, and gives me insight, faith, and obedience in the Word of God (Rom. 8:11; 1 Cor. 2:9-16; John 15:13; Eph. 2:2). I am alive in Christ and can know God only through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.
- As I obey God, He changes me from within (Rom. 12:1-2). My relationship with God must be an ever-growing one (Eph. 3:16-19).

When the children of Israel were travelling in the wilderness, God led them by visible means (pillar of cloud by day and fire by night). God told them when to stop, when to move, where to move, etc. There are people who look for such visible guidance from God. But Paul says that to be guided by God because of our relationship with Him through our Lord Jesus is far better. *“Now I say, That the heir, as long as he is a child, differeth nothing from a servant, though he be lord of all; But is under tutors and governors until the time appointed of the father. Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world: But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father. Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ”* (Gal. 4:1-7).

We see this relationship with our own children. When they are young, our guidance was more specific and direct. We teach them biblical principles. We make decisions for them – what to eat, how they should dress, what they should do, etc. As they mature, we give them freedom to make some of these decisions, while at the same time always present to provide them with wisdom.

Likewise, God does not tell us specifically what we should do in every situation, instead He expects us to use the wisdom and freedom that He has given us through His Son. He expects us to use our freedom wisely and in a way that expresses our love for Him. *“Brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh, but by love serve one another”* (Gal. 5:13). May the Lord help us to grow in our knowledge and grace of Him.