

Are we closet pagans?

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[0 : 00] Well, you might open your Bibles to the passage that we read in Deuteronomy chapter 29. We will look at that a little bit, although this evening we are on a thematic study, really, not an exposition as such of the text.

My title this evening is this, Finding the Will of God, Are We Closet Pagans? Yes. And the reason for that, I hope, will become clear.

And I think the answer to that, I'm afraid, very often is yes. So, listen on and prepare to be offended, perhaps. One great area of confusion among Christians, especially perhaps young Christians, is this whole area of the will of God.

And it's something I want to tackle. In fact, we've got to tackle it. We're going to spend two Sunday evenings on it. Because that confusion results in all kinds of anxiety and heart-searching and, alas, often real spiritual inertia, spiritual paralysis.

People waiting for God's guidance, waiting for some sort of confirmation before we can act or do something. A fear of somehow getting outside God's will, making a wrong turning, losing his blessing.

[1 : 23] That paralyzes us. And I'm afraid it especially seems to be a problem among evangelical Christians. And it ought not to be. It must not be. And that's why we're tackling it.

Now, the reason for all of this, as in most things, is fundamentally it's a problem of wrong thinking. It's a problem of wrong thinking about God and about ourselves.

In other words, it's wrong theology. But it's not just an intellectual problem. It's actually, at its heart, a moral problem. It's a problem with our hearts. The bottom line is that, you see, by nature, actually we are all pagans.

That is, we reject the truth of God and we replace it with falsehood of our own making. Our thinking is futile, Paul says in Romans 1. Our hearts are darkened.

By nature, we want to worship created things, not the Creator. And especially the reality is that we've put ourselves at the heart of the universe, at the heart of the created order.

[2 : 28] We've inverted the natural order of creation. God created us in his image to serve him. But we constantly, by nature, want to recreate God in our image and make him serve us.

So that what really matters is our story. And we want God's story to fit into our story, my life. In other words, we're self-centered, not God-centered.

That's our basic nature. That's the problem that lies at the heart of almost everything in our lives. And despite the fact that we're believers, we're converted, we're born again, we're renewed, use whatever language like that you want to use.

Nevertheless, the truth is that we face a constant battle. We face a constant drift back to the ways of our old self. That's the battle of the Christian life.

It's the fight of faith. It's the battle of sanctification. It's our ongoing walk, keeping in step with the Spirit of God. But because it is a battle, we face a constant struggle.

[3 : 29] A struggle between God's ways and our ways. A struggle between the Spirit and the flesh. And that's what lies at the bottom of our problems. All of our problems in this area of the will of God and guidance.

That's why very, very often as Christian believers, we're actually living as closet pagans. You may not think we do, but in reality, that is what we do.

So this week and next, I need to take this subject of the will of God and God's revelation of that will to us to help us think about this whole area of guidance that troubles us so often. And we've got to be prepared for searching thinking about this.

Got to be prepared perhaps for some correction. And I think some of us might find it quite unsettling. Some of us might find some of these things hard. Some of these things rather contrary to the way that we've tended to think about it.

But friends, we mustn't be afraid of God's truth. We don't have to be afraid of God's truth. He gives us his word for guidance. And often that means that he gives it to us for rebuke, for challenge of our thinking, as well as for reassurance.

[4 : 39] So this week, I want to concentrate on what the Bible teaches us to think about the will of God and give something of a critique of how we tend to misunderstand that in our contemporary ideas about guidance.

And then next week, I want to go on to give more of, I suppose, a comprehensive biblical pattern of how we are to understand how God leads his people today. And I guess perhaps we'll have some questions and answers after the service next week, as I think perhaps you'll want to come back on some of these things.

So by way of introduction, let's think first about this whole concept of the will of God. First of all, we need to define what we mean. What is the will of God? See, when you ask, what's the will of God? You could be asking a number of different questions, couldn't you? To a theologian, you see, they would understand that question as one of definition. What is the will of God?

And there's various answers to that question. That would bring up all kinds of issues of theology in terms of understanding of God, as well as what we call exegesis, reading the scripture.

[5 : 45] There are all kinds of different words in the Bible that might convey the will of God. We read about God's will, but we read about his wishes, what's his good pleasure, what's his command, what's his decrees.

All these are ways of expressing the will of God. So it's important to begin with this question because it is all about God. It's all about his will and what's important to him.

That's very, very important for us. And it could be that some of us are a bit impatient and we want to forget all that theology and we want to get on to the practical stuff about God's will for my life, help me sort out my decisions.

But wait a minute, we're starting to display our pagan thinking again. Not us and our will that's most important, it's God's.

So at its most basic, God's will is what God wants to happen. And what God wants to happen does happen. Or else he wouldn't really be God at all, would he?

[6 : 47] Now, there are those today who would dispute this. There's a field particularly called open theism. This would want to suggest that God doesn't have control over absolutely everything that he wants to happen.

I'm not going to go into all of that just to say that it seems to me at least that they haven't read the book of Isaiah for one thing. Here's Isaiah 46, verse 8. I think that's all that needs to be said, really, about that view.

If you want to go into that, I can recommend you a book by John Frame called No Other God. But God's will is what happens. Period. Full stop.

However, it's not quite so simple as that, is it? Because the Bible does quite often seem to talk about what God wants to happen, but then it seems that something rather different actually does happen.

So he tells us in the Bible he wants all men to be obedient to him, to be saved, to be blessed. But on the other hand, Scripture is equally plain that that isn't so.

[8 : 11] So what are we to make of that? Well, one way of trying to resolve that is to elevate the will of man, the free will of man, to a level that, in reality, actually makes man's will just as important and powerful in determining what happens as God's will.

That's a position of logic known as Arminianism, or especially the open theism that I mention today. So they would say this. Well, God has what we might call an antecedent will, a will that goes beforehand, something that God considers his best, for example, salvation for all, something that he wants.

But he also has a consequent will, a will that comes after that. And there he chooses what happens based on the free decisions of human beings.

Of course, the problem with that position is that ultimately it actually means that the will of man decides the will of God. And the Bible teaches us very, very clearly that that is absolute nonsense.

Paul says in Romans 9.18, Therefore, God has mercy upon whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden. One of you will say to me, Then why does God still blame us for who resists his will?

[9 : 29] You see, that is what we say immediately. That's not fair. What's the answer? Who are you, O man, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, Why did you make me like this?

That's God's answer. He doesn't get into a discussion. He just says, Don't be silly. I'm God. So that way of resolving this doesn't help. There is, I think, a much more biblical distinction that's been used traditionally by theologians, by Bible teachers in the tradition of the Reformation.

They talk about God's, on the one hand, his decretal will, his decrees, and on the other hand, his perceptual will, his precepts, his commands. So God's decretal will is his decrees.

It's like we read in Isaiah 46. It's his infallible purpose, that which he decrees will happen. But his preceptive will is his precepts, his commands, his desires, the things that he's revealed to us in his word.

So in scripture, for example, we find the word will used in both those senses. Here's an example from Matthew's gospel that we've been studying, Matthew 11, 25, and 26. At that time, Jesus declared, I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you've hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children.

[10 : 44] Yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. That's God's decree. Incidentally, the word used there is actually the word for his good pleasure.

This goes to show that the word will and many other words are used for the same thing. But here's another verse in Matthew's gospel, chapter 7, verse 21. Well, will is used in a different way.

Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. That's his perceptual will. That's God's command.

A different sense. Or again, in Ephesians chapter 1, verse 11. In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things in accordance to the counsel of his will.

His decree, what God says will happen. But Ephesians 5, verse 17. Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. That's the other sense of precepts, commands.

[11 : 47] Understand what God's telling you. Now, that sense of distinction is clearly present in Scripture, in many, many other places. And it can be very helpful to help us when we're trying to understand the Bible, when we're reading the Bible.

It still leaves us, of course, with this issue of God's sovereignty and our human responsibility. But it does exclude that unbiblical idea of the total freedom of human will.

It excludes that, but at the same time, it recognizes that human beings have responsibility. You see, God's will, in terms of his decrees, exhibit his total sovereign control over all things, including the will of man.

We cannot successfully resist God's will in that sense. God wills what will happen. He's God. He has control.

He has control over everything. But on the other hand, God's will, in terms of his precepts, exhibit God's authority over all things, again, including the will of man.

[12 : 51] Now, we can oppose the will of God in that sense. We do, all the time, by our disobedience. And the Bible says we are responsible for resisting his will, his command, his precept.

Now, again, we could say an awful lot more about that whole area. That would take the rest of tonight and about the next three weeks as well. Well, this whole area of God being sovereign and us being responsible. Again, let me recommend to you Jim Packer's book, Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God, or Don Carson's book, The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God, or another book by John Frame, The Doctrine of God, a very large book, but a very excellent one.

But you see, it is important to get off on the right footing. The most basic issue when we're talking about guidance and God's will is that it is God's will, that it's what he commands that's important.

Personally, I think perhaps an easier, maybe a more helpful way of looking at it, a more simple way of putting things, perhaps a more practical way, is the way that Moses put it at the end of Deuteronomy chapter 29, that verse that we read.

I really do think it's a very, very important verse. Just look at it again. The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.

[14:17] Now that's very helpful because our big problem is getting those two things mixed up. Getting mixed up between what's God's business and what's our business.

Because of the basic problem that we actually at heart want to be God, our own God. But you see, there are things that are for God to be concerned with and we're to leave him to be concerned with. And then there are things that we are to be very concerned with and not to forget about and not to leave to God. Not just in theory, we're to do them. We're to do all of the things that he reveals to us in his law, that is in his covenant faith, in the gospel faith, the way of obedience, the way of obedience to the revelation that God has given to his people.

Now, in one sense, the secret things, I suppose, are closely akin to God's decrees. Much of it's hidden from us. It's God's business. Although he does reveal to us something of his decrees, he reveals to us his big plan for the world, his gospel, his plan of redemption.

Ephesians 1, 9 and 10 says to us, he's made known to us the mystery of his will. In Ephesians 3, he says, he's made known to us the mystery which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations, as it's now been through his holy prophets and by the Holy Spirit.

[15:39] So God has revealed to us a great deal of his big plan, but there are many, many things that are a mystery to us still. But that's God's business, not ours.

Sometimes also he does reveal to us his will in terms of his providence. In other words, what he allows to happen in the world. So Paul says in Acts chapter 18 to the Ephesians, I will come back to you again if God wills.

And if he's able to come back, that will show that that was something that God did allow to come to pass. And thirdly, in the Bible, at certain times, he does reveal specific things, specific decisions or choices or outcomes.

So God said, choose David, not his brothers, as a king. Or in Acts chapter 21, for example, the prophet Agabus tells the outcome of Paul's journey to Rome that he'll be bound and imprisoned. Actually, that sort of thing is quite rare in the Bible. Much, much rarer than perhaps we think. And it's a very, very real question as to whether we should expect anything like that today.

[16:47] And even if we do, whether we should ever, ever look for that sort of thing today. I'll say more about that later on. But for the most part, it remains true that there must be an abundance of things, a vast abundance of things, the secret things of God, which we will never, ever fathom in this world.

And I suspect we will never, ever fathom many of them in the next world either. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, says the Lord, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Oh, the depths of the riches and the wisdom and the knowledge of God, says Paul, how unreachable are his judgments, how inscrutable his ways, for who has known the mind of the Lord, who has been his counselor?

You see, that's the proper response to the secret things of God, that response of Isaiah and of Paul, to rejoice that God is in control of all things, and to leave him to be in control of all things, the unknown things, the unknowable things.

That's just what it means to trust God. But, God doesn't just leave us trusting in his hidden secret will, in his mercy, and in his wisdom.

[18:02] There are many, many things he has revealed to us, things he's made crystal clear, and these are the things he says he wants us to know, and he wants us to do.

And all the things he wants us to know he's revealed to us. He hasn't got mixed up between what's his business and ours. That's our problem. And, so we're not to leave these things to God to reveal to us again in some spectacular way.

No. Nor are we to just consider them in theory as though, well, it didn't really matter, they didn't have to be acted upon. No. They are to do the words of this law. That's why God reveals things to us.

It's just what it means to obey God. And that's the other side of trust. Trust and obey. That's what walking by faith is. They're not separate things where it's just simply not getting confused between ourselves and God.

We let God be God. And we trust him to be the kind of God he says he is, not another. We show that trust in our daily lives by obeying what he has told us to do.

[19 : 13] Assuming that the things he has told us to do are clearly the very important things for us. And the things that he hasn't told us or leaves a mystery or doesn't leave very clear at all aren't the things that he places such an enormous high value in.

Aren't the things that should take up all our emotional angst, all our worry, all our endless thinking. That seems fairly straightforward, doesn't it? But the problem is, isn't it, it's often the other way around in our lives.

All the things we want to know God doesn't seem to have made all that clear. Isn't that right? But if that's the case, maybe, maybe we have to stop and ask, am I actually concerned then with the things that God's really concerned with?

In other words, am I really being godly or am I acting like a pagan? See, it's important, isn't it, to keep reminding ourselves that what matters is God's will be done, not our will be done with God's endorsement tacked onto the top of it.

So it is important to define God's will is God's will. The for our lives bit is a subtitle only.

[20 : 35] What about then finding God's will? Having thought a little bit about what we mean by God, we can go on to think about what we mean when we say we're trying to find God's will.

People often ask that, don't they? I'm trying to find God's will for my life. What is God's will for my life? It's usually in a particular number of things that we're asking. In my experience, it tends to relate to matters of marriage and career and perhaps big decisions about changing a job or a location or where we're going to live, something like that.

So is there such a thing? Does God have a plan for every life mapped out to the tiniest detail, does he? Well, the answer to that is both yes and no.

It's an emphatic yes in the sense that it is all in his control, that he does see the end from the beginning, that he brings to pass every single thing that he wills, even down to the tiniest detail. he tells us that the very hairs on our head are numbered. He tells us not even a sparrow can fall to the ground without his say-so.

[21 : 46] And he tells us that you are of more value than many sparrows. So yes, we can trust him. We don't have to fear. We can be assured.

God's perfect will cannot be thwarted by your stupidity, by your lack of wisdom, can't even be thwarted by your sin. Although I'll say more about that again later.

And also it's an emphatic yes in terms of what God has revealed in his word for the way we are to live a godly life. Yes, he has got a purpose for that. Ephesians 5, 17 tells us, do not be foolish but understand what the will of God is.

Verse 10 he says we're to test and approve and experience what God's will is. Actually in Ephesians 5, verse 10, the ESV, translation is particularly unhelpful. It says try to discern what the will of God is.

That's a very bad translation. Test and prove in your experience what it is. And God's given us many, many commands down to intimate details for the way we are to live.

[22 : 52] So if that's what we mean, does God have a plan for my life? The answer is yes, but that's often not what we're meaning, is it? We tend to think that a pre-planned and secret will of God must be something that's bit by bit revealed to us as we go along in life, in terms of specific signs and instructions at every key decision just before we're to make that decision, like a marriage, like career, like a move of job, or whatever it is.

And if that's what we mean by the question, does God have a specific plan for my life? well then the Bible gives a similarly emphatic answer, and that answer is no, no, that's not at all how we're to think of how God guides us.

In fact, that is the very antithesis of godly trust and obedience, that is the essence of paganism. Because you see, that is seeking out the secret things of God, the things that belong to him, not us, while at the same time, generally ignoring the things that he has revealed to us, being much less interested in them.

That's the essence of our old pagan nature, that's craving after the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that God's told us not to eat from, while at the same time ignoring the clear word of God that he has given us to obey him, and to live life according to faith, trusting him and obeying him in our walk.

That's the essence of sin, rebellion against God. See, what that is doing is looking for power for living apart from the demands for discipline, apart from the demand of living according to God's commands, according to his revelation to us.

[24 : 42] To want that, you see, betrays the fact that actually we don't really trust God to be in control of the secret things. We're not willing to leave that to him. And at the same time, we're not too interested in obeying God in the revealed things either.

That's boring, that's irrelevant, that's not practical enough for my life. I want a shortcut to the secret code, I want a shortcut to the plan that gets me to the goal without all the hassle.

I want the treasure map, you see, that will get me one up on fate. But what I'm doing when I think like that is I'm just using God, using him as a lucky charm. God, that's what that is.

That's a view of the world that sees it as in the grip of some kind of fatalistic force, that you and your behavior is not actually responsible for what happens to you. Ethics and behavior become totally divorced, totally separate from the course of your life.

And your idea of guidance, if you think that way, is actually no different to the pagan idea of divination, trying to find out the future by the means of secret divine knowledge.

[25 : 55] It's not ethical obedience to God and his will that counts. It's some kind of secret knowledge, totally independent of that. That's what's at the heart of that kind of thinking.

You see, that actually is the essence of paganism. That whole approach to life is what God again and again throughout the scripture totally contrasts with the way for his own people.

So, all through the Old Testament, for example, we have exposed and critiqued the pagan methods of guidance. Astrology, big in Babylon, the Chaldeans, the word Chalde even means astrologer.

Or divination by cups. Remember Genesis 44 when Joseph's cup was stolen and it was found in Benjamin's sack? He said, is this not the cup that your master uses for divination?

The kind of Egyptian version of reading the tea leaves. Magic spells, incantations, mediums, necromancers, consulting the dead, all kinds of omens, people reading the entrails of animals, livers, and all the rest of it.

[27 : 04] Ezekiel 21 verse 21 gives a good example of this. For the king of Babylon, God says, stands at the parting of the way, at the head of the two ways to use divination. He shakes the arrows, you see, you fire an arrow, and that gives you the answer.

He consults the teraphim, the totem poles. He looks at the liver. Into his right hand comes the divination. All of that, you see, to find the secret will of God, to gain the advantage in life by knowing the future.

But that is consistently and contemptuously repudiated by God again and again and again. He constantly warns his people to have nothing to do with that.

Deuteronomy chapter 18 verse 9 When you come into the land the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of the nations. There shall not be a find among you anyone who burns his son or daughters as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens or a sorcerer or a charmer or a medium or a wizard or a necromancer, whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord.

And because of these abominations, the Lord your God is driving them out before you. You shall be blameless before the Lord your God. For these nations which you are about to possess, listen to fortune tellers and diviners, but as for you, the Lord your God has not allowed you to do this.

[28 : 32] Not so for you, says God. Not so for you to seek the secret things of God. God. Now that's a terribly great temptation for them as it is for us, to get a power for living that doesn't depend upon the discipline of obedience to God's clear revelation of his will for our lives.

But what God has commanded for his people is clear. They don't need to try and penetrate an unseen world for guidance. God's revealed himself and his ways very clearly they just have to obey. We read it in Deuteronomy chapter 30 verse 11. For this commandment I command you today is not too hard for you. Neither it's far away. Not in heaven. Do you have to go up there? It's not beyond the sea.

No. It's near you. Because I've given it to you. It's in your heart. It's in your mouth. So that you can do it. You don't need all that mumbo-jumbo.

I've given it to you already, says God. Now come on, choose life. It's easy. Obey the word that I've given to you.

[29 : 42] Your future doesn't depend on capricious whims of gods or fate. That's all totally unrelated to morality. No. It's all bound up with obedience to the truth of God as God has plainly revealed it to us.

So he says, love the Lord. Obey his voice. Hold fast to him for he is your life that you may dwell in the land. That's the guidance you need, says God. The word of life.

My gospel. You don't need anything else. So the pagan way of guidance seeks to divine the secret hidden things unrelated to obedience.

But believers are to obey the clear voice of God's revelation, the revelation that he's made known in the covenant faith that he himself has spoken in his word.

to his people. Now, of course, in the Old Testament period, the way God made his revelation known to people, the way he spoke to them took varied forms.

[30 : 46] So Hebrews chapter 1 tells us that. In the past, God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times in various ways. What were those ways? Well, above all, his law that he revealed to Moses, as we read in Deuteronomy.

But also through the prophets. Now, remember, the prophets were not, for the most part, people coming along and telling the future. They were, for the most part, expounding the covenant, Moses' words, and applying it to God's people today, warning them of the things the covenant warned them about, promising the things the covenant promised about.

But, especially in the early times of settlement, God did sometimes speak specifically through prophets to give specific commands. For example, through Samuel, as we said, choosing David. You read that God spoke directly into Samuel's ear.

Also through things like dreams, we know the story of Joseph, of Daniel. He guided through the priesthood, especially through the Urim and the Thummim, the rather mysterious stones that we think they were, in the ephod, the jacket that the high priest wore.

Sometimes even through lots. But the fact is that all of these things, all of them, despite the diverse ways, were always very, very clearly marked off as different from pagan divination.

[32 : 11] I've got a very clear example of that in 1 Samuel 28 verse 6, when Saul seeks guidance. When Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly.

And when Saul inquired of the Lord, the Lord did not answer him either by dreams or by Urim or by prophets. Then Saul said to his servant, Seek out for me a woman who is a medium, that I may go to her and acquire of her.

You see, that revealed the truth about Saul. Deep down, all along, he was a pagan. He's not really seeking the way of the Lord. He's trying to use God to get his own ends, to get information.

So if God doesn't answer, he'll go to the witch. But the point is that even in those days far off, when God spoke to his people in many and varied ways, there was all the difference in the world between seeking success by divination and submitting obediently to God's revelation.

Ultimately, it's all about a matter of the heart. Of course, that's why we find it so hard. That's why we still get these two things confused today.

[33 : 16] many contemporary Christians do in fact have an approach to guidance from God that seems respectable, it seems pious, it seems very holy, but actually, it's just a form of pagan divination.

It's just dressed up in a guise of Christianized language. And the reality behind it all is that consciously or not, that pagan attitude to seek out the secret things of God is driving it.

And that always seems to be much more interesting, doesn't it? Much less challenging and hard to seek out those secret things than actually to submit and obey the revealed things of God.

Isn't that right? But what we're really doing by thinking like that is actually opposing God's clear revelation to us in two ways. First of all, we're denying its authority.

By devaluing God's priorities for our response to him, we show that we're actually unwilling to submit to him, unwilling to obey to him. We deny his authority. But we're also denying his sufficiency in his revelation.

[34 : 25] By devaluing what he's given to us in scripture and wanting more, we show that actually we're unwilling to trust him. We don't really believe what he's given us is enough. We think there's something else.

In other words, we're guilty of unbelief. to be looking for more than what God has given us, to look for more than the things that are revealed which belong to us and to our children forever, that's not

a mark of spirituality.

That's in the Bible a mark of sin. But that's what we do. It's all around us in evangelical culture. Yes, it's dressed up in pious language.

People look for guidance from feelings. So God is mysteriously going to infuse into their heart a feeling, a warm feeling usually seems to be a very effective one. Or from dreams, or from all kinds of signs sometimes so bizarre that it's almost impossible to believe it.

Dick Lucas tells the story of the man who was desperately wanted to be a missionary, had this terrible dilemma about where God would send him. Couldn't go until God had told him which country he was to go to, wrestling in prayer day after day after day asking God to tell him.

[35 : 44] One day he came, rang his pastor's bell, face lit up with joy, the Lord has told me where I'm going. Well how did that happen, he said. Well I went down to buy my newspaper this morning, and in the newspaper shop just as I was going in they were setting up a display of sweets and they were all chocolate Brazil nuts.

And so the Lord has told me I have to go to Brazil. This pastor just looked at him and said well isn't it a good thing it wasn't Mars bars. But you see some people see signs in everything.

It's absolutely bizarre. Friends that is on the same level as auctioning a piece of toast on eBay for thousands of pounds because it supposedly got a vision of the Madonna on it.

It's mumbo jumbo. Or perhaps it's more circumspect and seemingly very sound. We seek guidance by texts of scripture. Texts that you get from God yourself or maybe somebody else gets it for you. Or perhaps you just open your Bible and there it is, God's going to guide you. Like the young man, he was very depressed about the ending of his relationship with his girlfriend.

[36 : 55] He prayed to God for guidance and opened his Bible to see what God would say and it fell open at Matthew 27.5. Judas went out and hanged himself. He thought, oh dear, that's terrible. He tried again and prayed a bit harder.

This time it came open at Luke 10.37. And Jesus said to him, you go and do likewise. Utterly depressed, he closed it, prayed very hard for a half night of prayer.

He opened his Bible again at John 13.27. Jesus said, what you are going to do, do it quickly.

Friends, that's all very amusing, isn't it?

But you know, it's not really. It betrays the reality of the nonsensical way that so often we think. We mustn't have anything to do with that kind of bizarre behavior.

That is not Christianity. That is paganism dressed up with a veneer of Christian piety. It's not just foolish either. It's wrong.

[37 : 54] It's unbelief. It's something we must repent of. And more to the point also, it robs us of the wonderful liberty that we have in Christ.

We are not chained to currents of fate. We are not chained to the capricious will of a God whose will is so impossible to discern that we live in fear of getting on the wrong side of it and bringing curses upon ourselves.

We don't live with a God like that so that we are so fearful we can't ever dare to step out and do anything unless we have seen some sort of green light in the heavens. Something that will reassure us that we don't put ourselves on God's bad side and he is going to punish us.

No. It's for freedom that Christ has set us free. Don't be enslaved again by the yoke of slavery. slavery. We mustn't allow ourselves to be enslaved to the same old pagan things just dressed up in new Christianized clothes.

We serve a God who controls everything, who loves us, who cares for us, who has revealed to us in Jesus Christ and his gospel everything we need for life and godliness.

[39 : 11] Everything we need to launch out in life with confidence and with joy, knowing that we can trust our heavenly father who holds even the hairs of our heads in the palm of his hands.

Knowing that his commands are not burdensome, that he's given us the things revealed.

Knowing that his commands and what he does tell us to do are a delight, are for our best, that his yoke is easy, that his burden is light. We mustn't live under this concept of a crippling yoke that makes us live in fear, faltering, never feeling that we can trust to go and do anything.

Ultimately, all of it just comes back to this. We have a wrong understanding of God and a wrong understanding of ourselves because our hearts are sinful constantly.

We drift into ungodly thinking. And in the whole issue of guidance in the will of God, that is the thing that we have to come to first. That's what we have to come to terms with.

And if you're impatient about all of this sort of stuff, if you think it's all too general, if you want specifics to help you with my life, with my decisions, you're disappointed with tonight because it's really all vague and doesn't answer the questions that you're wrestling with, well, let me just ask you this.

[40 : 39] Think about it. what if God just isn't all that interested in the things that you are so desperately interested in? What if he's not?

What if he's not that interested in who you marry or what career you follow or what house you buy or what car you drive? You know, if you read the Bible, you find that these things do seem to be really rather trivial in God's value system.

In fact, Jesus explicitly says, doesn't he, in Matthew chapter 6, we studied it a few months ago, don't rabbit on with prayers about these sorts of things. That's what the pagans do, he says. Don't go on and on in prayer about what you'll eat or what you'll wear or where you're going to live. That's what the pagans do. I often think the Lord must get really rather downcast and depressed having to listen to so many endless prayers about guidance and comparatively few prayers zealously seeking for our own godliness.

Don't you think? Seeing his children use his word like a like a horoscope, desperately listening out for what the Lord's saying about whether I should marry Jenny or Jemima or Jane or whoever it might be.

[42 : 00] Instead of receiving the word that God is loudly trumpeting day by day into my life, challenging the sin in my life, calling me to repent, calling me to follow him obediently day by day.

That's what really matters. That's what God's interested in. I can't hear. Because actually, I don't want to know God's will.

I want him to endorse my will. And I suspect some of you are like that too. See, far too often, the simple fact is we're just asking God the wrong questions.

And we aren't listening to the answers that he is giving us to the questions that we won't ask. Now, I am not saying there's not more to guidance than this.

And next week we will deal with some more of these things, including some of these practical things that we're also concerned about. But, let's get first things first.

[43 : 03] The things revealed belong to us that we might do them. It's not us who sets the agenda for God's guidance, it's God. And if some of us tonight here are having struggles about decisions we have to make and we're confused about guidance and so on.

And indeed, for all of us here tonight, we need to get that order straight. Or we're never going to get anywhere in understanding God's will. It's the things that God really thinks important that we've got to put first.

But as we close, let me leave you tonight with a word of knowledge. A word of revelation that I have received for you. A word of knowledge for this congregation tonight, direct from the Holy Spirit of God.

Yes, it's a specific word for you tonight. And for me. And your reaction to this word will tell you a great deal about whether godliness or paganism is actually what's uppermost in your thinking. Here it is, from the Holy Spirit of God. Finally then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you receive from us how you ought to live, so to please God, do so more and more.

[44 : 18] For this is the will of God, your sanctification, that you abstain from sexual immorality, that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the pagans who don't know God.

For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this disregards not man, but God who gives his Holy Spirit to you. And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with them all, see that no one repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, verse 4 and verse 5, a letter very, very concerned with people living not as the pagan world, but as God's people.

So first things first. The things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do every word of this law.

[45 : 42] Let's not get our thinking about God's will and God's guidance back to front. Well, let's pray together. Father, help us, we pray, to understand you.

Help us to repent of wrong attitudes that prevent us from hearing your voice, which is loud and clear, which is never faltering, which is never hard to understand.

Help us with our real problem, which is not understanding your will, but doing it. For we ask it in Jesus Christ's name.

Amen.