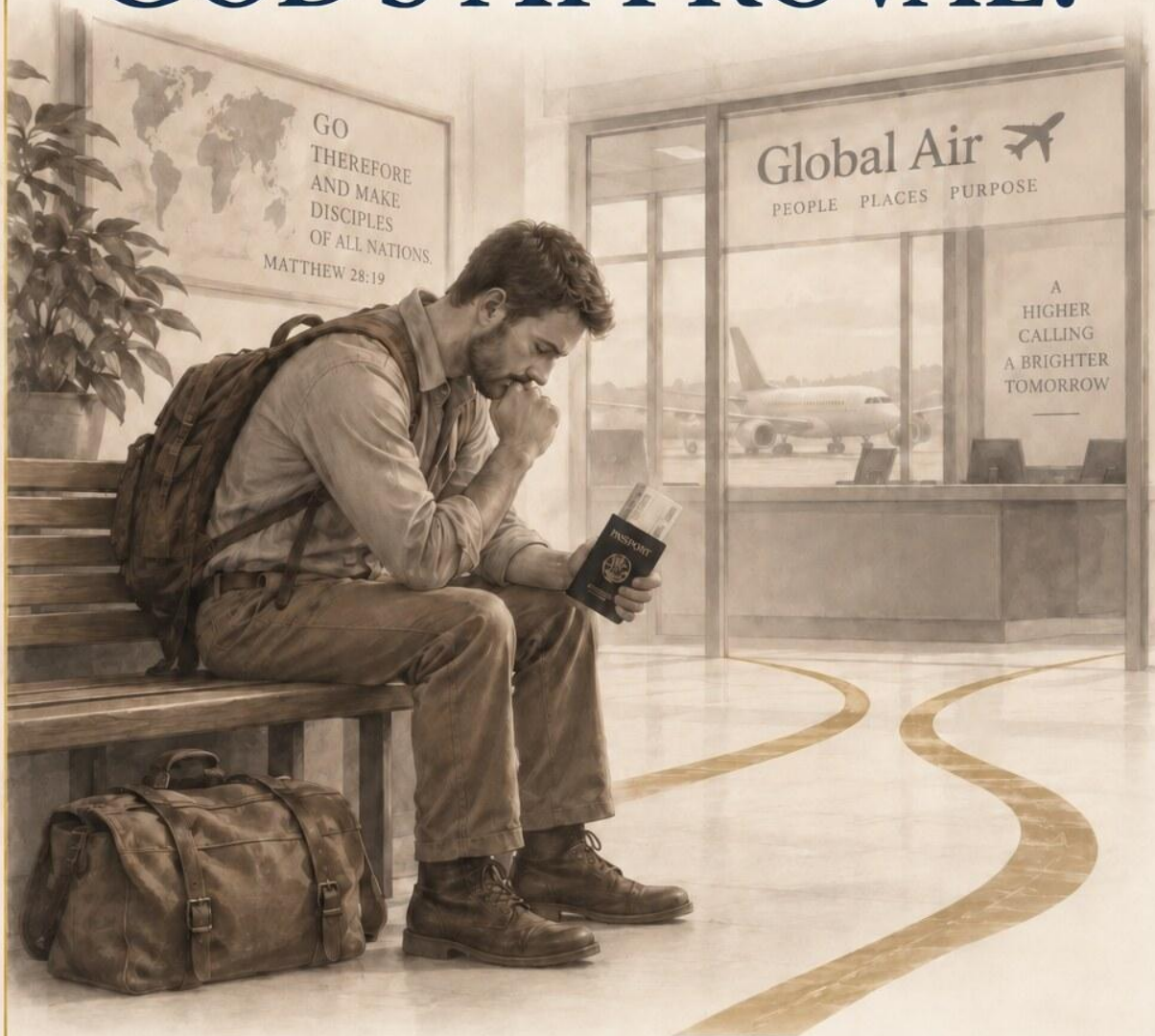


— REASON TOGETHER CHURCH —

HE SHALL DIRECT THY PATHS
A FOUR-PART SERIES | PART THREE OF FOUR

AM I SEEKING GOD'S WILL OR GOD'S APPROVAL?



PROVIDENCE • PROTECTION • SURRENDER • COVENANT

— DR. THOMAS W. HAWKSLEY —

Am I Seeking God's Will or God's Approval?

Sermon Transcript

Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley Aloha.

Welcome to Reason Together Church.

Bring your questions.

Open your Bible.

Let us Reason Together the Word of God.

If this is your first time with us, you are an honored guest.

You are welcome whether you arrived with strong faith, difficult questions or no certainty about what you believe.

We do not ask you to pretend.

We ask you to reason honestly with us from the Word of God.

If you would like us to stay in contact with you, our guest card asks for only your first name and email address.

We do not need your home address, telephone number or a complete history of your life. We simply want the opportunity to welcome you and let you know what is happening at Reason Together Church.

Our Keiki Kids Center is available for the children, and families are always welcome to keep their children with them if they prefer.

After the service, please join us at the Reason Together Cafe.

The coffee is free, and so are the refills on conversations.

COFFEE reminds us that Christ Offers Forgiveness For Everyone Everywhere.

Before we examine our plans and desires, let us invite God to examine our hearts.

Let us pray.

Our Heavenly Father, we come before You with our plans, hopes, fears and desires.

Some of those desires are good.

Some are confused.

Some have become so strong that we are tempted to call our will Yours.

Search our hearts today.

Show us where we are sincerely seeking Your direction and where we are merely requesting Your approval.

Give us the courage to obey an answer we would not have chosen.

Teach us the surrender of Jesus Christ, who prayed that the Father's will be done.

In the name of Jesus we pray.

Amen.

Our Scripture reading comes from Luke 22:41-42.

"And he was withdrawn from them about a stone's cast, and kneeled down, and prayed,

"Saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done."

Keep the surrender of Jesus before you, because it provides the standard for today's question.

Before we begin, I want to say a brief word about giving.

We do not pass an offering plate at Reason Together Church.

Our guests are never expected to give.

If you are a member of another church, I encourage you to support your home church faithfully.

For those who consider Reason Together Church their church home and feel led to give, there is a giving box in the back.

Second Corinthians 9:7 tells us, "Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver." God does not need to be persuaded by our money.

Giving is not a way to purchase His endorsement for our plans.

It is an act of surrender from a heart that already belongs to Him.

That is the heart of today's question.

We have now reached the third part of our four-part series, "He Shall Direct Thy Paths." This series began as Danielin and I approached our twentieth wedding anniversary and I found myself looking back at where our story started.

But we did not begin this series merely to remember what happened.

We began it because the story raises questions that many Christians face when trying to recognize the direction of God.

In Part One, we asked, "How Do You Know When a 'Coincidence' Is God?"

In Part Two, we asked, "Could They Have Been Angels?"

Today, in Part Three, we come to a question that may be even more searching:

"Am I Seeking God's Will or God's Approval?"

Then, in our final study, we will ask, "Does God Choose Whom We Marry?" The first two studies examined what was happening around me.

This study requires us to examine what was happening within me.

It is possible to pray for God's direction while secretly hoping that He will simply approve the direction we have already chosen.

That distinction became very important as my relationship with Danielin began to develop.

Last week we returned to a road in Cebu in the Philippines.

I had prayed four words for a young church worker named Danielin.

"God please help her."

When I looked again, two unusually tall and large men were walking beside her.

A few moments later, she stood safely before me and the men were nowhere to be seen.

Could they have been angels?

We concluded that the Bible permits the possibility, but the evidence does not permit me to claim certainty.

I still do not know exactly what I saw.

I do know that after that day I wanted to know Danielin better.

She agreed that we could spend some time together under one condition.

Someone else would accompany us.

Her church family took that responsibility seriously.

On our first supervised dinner, the Pastor acting as our escort announced the rules before we left the vehicle.

There would be no bad language.

There would be no inappropriate jokes.

There would be no improper behavior.

There would definitely be no touching or holding hands.

At the restaurant, he requested two tables.

I was relieved when he was the one who sat alone.

He read his Bible with one eye and seemed to watch every move we made with the other.

I found the arrangement unfamiliar, but I began to appreciate it.

Those people loved Danielin.

They cared about her testimony.

They did not know me well enough to assume that my intentions were honorable simply because

I called myself a Christian missionary.

Their caution protected both of us.

When we finished eating, the three of us walked through the mall for a couple of hours.

Then they returned me to my hotel.

I went down near the pool to relax and think about everything that had happened.

The problem was that the only person I could think about was Danielin.

The next morning, I attended a Pastors Conference at the large church in Cebu.

Danielin was teaching at her school, so we were in different parts of the city.

During the third message of the conference, the emergency cell phone in my pocket vibrated.

It was a text message from Danielin during her lunch break.

She said that she was looking forward to that evening and asked where I planned to take her.

I quietly stepped into the hallway to answer.

For nearly an hour, the messages passed back and forth as quickly as we could send them. After her lunch break ended and she returned to class, more messages continued arriving during the day.

That evening, we had another supervised outing.

On Wednesday we attended church together.

During the service, Danielin placed her hand on mine and smiled.

I was beginning to fall in love.

When I returned to the hotel, I walked through a garden area for hours.

I thought.

I prayed.

Then I thought and prayed again.

The practical side of my mind made a long list of reasons this relationship was unwise.

I lived in Florida.

She lived in the Philippines.

My home was roughly twenty-six hours away by airplane.

We came from very different cultures.

I had known her for only a few days.

I was scheduled to leave almost immediately.

The list of reasons to continue was much shorter.

I liked her.

I admired her faith.

I did not want to say goodbye.

Logic told me that the responsible choice was to end the possibility before either of us became more serious.

I decided I would explain that to her before church the following evening.

Our ride arrived nearly an hour late.

There was time only to eat quickly and reach the service where she was singing.

The conversation I had planned never happened.

The next day was supposed to be our final day together.

My luggage was packed.

My ticket was ready.

The clothes I planned to wear on the flight were laid out.

We walked around the city with Danielin's sister, Daisy, and then ate an early dinner at a beautiful restaurant.

I tried to enjoy the evening while knowing it was probably our last.

When the meal was finished, Danielin and I sat outside and talked honestly. I asked whether there might have been a future for us if we had met under different circumstances.

She said she was not ready for a serious relationship, especially with someone whose life was so different from hers.

She also acknowledged that if circumstances had been different and we had more time, there might have been a possibility.

But circumstances were not different.

She told me that I had an important life waiting in America and needed to return to it.

By almost any measure, that life was comfortable.

I had financial security, business success, influence and freedom.

I was active in church.

I was happy.

Yet while sitting beside this woman I had known for only a short time, none of that felt like the answer I wanted.

I prayed for guidance.

Then I turned my head and noticed the office directly beside the restaurant.

It was a Continental Airlines location.

A poster in the window invited travelers to come inside and extend their stay.

I had flown to the Philippines on that airline.

My passport and ticket happened to be with me.

Danielin and Daisy thought I was being impulsive.

One of them tried to reason with me.

I went inside anyway.

The agent said I could remain another ten days without violating the rules that applied to my visit.

The revised flight was less expensive, so there would be no additional charge.

Within minutes, I had a new ticket.

The sadness of the evening turned into celebration.

I told Danielin that we now had ten more days to see where God would take the relationship.

If no romance developed, it would not be because I had removed the opportunity.

At the time, that airline office felt like an immediate answer to prayer.

Perhaps it was providence.

Perhaps it was simply an available business located beside a restaurant.

Either way, the office gave me an option.

It did not make the decision for me.

That distinction matters.

An open door is an opportunity.

It is not automatically an instruction.

When I returned to the hotel, I discovered that Pastor Frankland wanted to meet me early the next morning.

He had expected both of us to fly home that day.

I explained that I had changed my ticket and planned to stay.

I expected him either to approve or to tell me I had lost my mind.

Instead, he handed me a sealed envelope with my name on it.

The envelope instructed me not to open it until that date.

The letter was in his wife's handwriting, which confirmed that it had been prepared before we left America.

It said that Pastor Frankland believed God had impressed upon him before the trip that I would find my wife before returning home.

It described details concerning the woman, her family and her background.

It said that something would occur on the day we met that would serve as a sign.

It also said I would remain behind for a time and would be safe.

Some of the details related to events and conversations Pastor Frankland could not have known through ordinary means.

To me, the letter plainly pointed toward Danielin.

Consider the weight of that moment.

I had prayed for guidance.

An airline office appeared directly beside me with a sign about extending my stay.

The change cost nothing.

Then a sealed letter written before the journey said I would stay behind and had met the woman who would become my wife.

It would have been easy to announce that the matter was settled.

It would have been easy to say, "God has spoken, and no further questions are allowed." But extraordinary circumstances do not remove our responsibility to discern carefully.

The letter was not Scripture.

The poster was not Scripture.

My relief was not Scripture.

My attraction to Danielin was not Scripture.

Every one of those things could be considered.

None could be allowed to outrank the Word of God.

For the next several days, I took Danielin to breakfast before she went to work.

Then I returned to the hotel, took my Bible and sat beneath a shade tree in the quietest part of the garden.

Except for lunch, I spent much of each day reading, thinking, praying and trying to listen.

Looking back, one fact about those prayers stands out above everything else.

I never once asked God to make the relationship work.

I continually asked Him to have and reveal His will in the situation.

That is the center of today's study.

There is nothing wrong with telling God what we want.

Jesus did that in Gethsemane.

He prayed, "Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me." The request was honest.

The suffering before Him was real.

The desire was clearly expressed.

Then came the surrender.

"Nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done."

Surrender does not require us to have no preference.

It requires us to place our preference beneath the will of God.

The difference between seeking God's will and seeking God's approval is not whether we ask for something.

The difference is whether we remain willing to obey when His answer is not what we asked for.

Many prayers that sound surrendered are actually negotiations.

We say, "Lord, show me Your will," but only one answer will be accepted as His will.

We say, "Open and close doors," then pry open every door that closes in front of us. We say, "Give me peace," then continue searching until we find a feeling that agrees with our decision.

We say, "Send me counsel," then ask new people until someone tells us what we want to hear. That is not guidance.

That is approval shopping with religious language.

Numbers 22 gives us a sobering example in Balaam.

The king of Moab sent men offering honor and reward if Balaam would curse Israel.

God's initial answer was clear.

Numbers 22:12 says, "Thou shalt not go with them; thou shalt not curse the people: for they are blessed."

That should have ended the discussion.

When more impressive messengers returned with greater promises, Balaam asked again.

His repeated inquiry did not reveal a shortage of information.

It revealed a struggle with desire.

He wanted another answer.

Sometimes we continue praying because we are faithfully waiting.

Sometimes we continue asking because we hope God will revise what He has already made clear.

First Kings 22 describes King Ahab gathering hundreds of prophets before going to war.

They gave him the answer he wanted.

Micaiah gave him the truth he did not want.

Ahab did not lack spiritual voices.

He lacked a surrendered heart.

Jeremiah 42 records another group asking the prophet to seek God's direction for them. They promised, "Whether it be good, or whether it be evil, we will obey the voice of the LORD our God."

That sounded surrendered.

When Jeremiah delivered the answer, they rejected it.

Their response revealed that the prayer had never truly placed every answer on the table.

They wanted God to authorize the course they had already chosen.

So how can we examine our own prayers?

Begin with the clearest test.

Does the decision agree with Scripture?

God will never guide you to disobey what He has already revealed.

No vision makes dishonesty righteous.

No coincidence makes greed obedient.

No prophetic word makes bitterness a virtue.

No feeling of peace makes any form of sin holy.

If an option contradicts Scripture, you do not need another sign.

You already have an answer.

The next test is honesty about desire.

Name what you want.

Do not hide it beneath spiritual vocabulary.

God is not confused by the desires we refuse to admit.

Psalm 139:23-24 gives us a better prayer.

"Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts:

"And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." Ask

God not only to show you the path, but also to expose what is happening in the heart choosing the path.

The third test is willingness to receive no.

Can you sincerely thank God and remain faithful if the answer closes the future you prefer?

That does not mean the loss will not hurt.

Jesus did not approach the cross without anguish.

Surrender and sorrow can exist in the same prayer.

But surrender says that obedience matters more than obtaining the desired outcome.

The fourth test is the counsel you seek.

Proverbs 12:15 says, "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes: but he that hearkeneth unto counsel is wise."

Wise counsel is not the same as collecting votes.

Do not ask only people who are impressed by you, dependent upon you or afraid to disagree with you.

Seek mature believers who know Scripture and possess enough courage to tell you no.

Then listen before defending yourself.

The fifth test is patience.

Urgency sometimes belongs to the situation.

It can also be a tool desire uses to silence wisdom.

We tell ourselves that we must decide immediately because careful thought might expose a problem.

Isaiah 28:16 says, "He that believeth shall not make haste."

Faith does not always move slowly, but it does not need panic to hold it together.

The sixth test concerns circumstances.

God can use open and closed doors.

Acts 16 describes the Holy Ghost forbidding Paul and his companions to preach in certain places before directing them toward Macedonia.

But circumstances require interpretation.

An easy path is not automatically God's path.

A difficult path is not automatically the wrong path.

The road to obedience sometimes opens smoothly.

The road to obedience sometimes leads through a storm, a prison or a cross.

Treat circumstances as evidence, not as your Bible.

The seventh test is peace.

The peace of God is precious.

Philippians 4 teaches us to bring our requests to God with thanksgiving and promises that His peace will guard our hearts and minds.

But peace is not an infallible detector that turns every personal feeling into revelation.

Jonah slept during a storm while running from God.

His ability to rest did not make his direction obedient.

People can feel calm because they have surrendered to God.

They can also feel calm because they have silenced conviction.

Peace should accompany Biblical discernment, not replace it.

The final test is present obedience.

Sometimes we ask God to reveal a distant future while neglecting the duty directly in front of us.

During those days in Cebu, I did not stop serving while I waited for guidance.

We attended church.

We joined visitation.

We shared the Gospel.

Danielin continued teaching.

She continued serving her church.

The question about our future did not excuse either of us from today's obedience.

Psalm 119:105 says, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path." A

lamp does not always illuminate the entire road.

It provides enough light for the next faithful step.

We often want a map of the next twenty years.

God frequently gives wisdom for today.

Romans 12:1 tells believers to present their bodies "a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God."

Verse 2 then speaks of proving "what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God."

Notice the order.

Surrender precedes discernment.

We want God to reveal His will so we can decide whether to surrender to it.

Paul calls us to surrender ourselves so that we may discern and live within His will.

A living sacrifice does not climb down from the altar when the answer becomes uncomfortable.

This does not mean that every decision will become obvious.

Two faithful Christians can examine the same situation and reach different conclusions.

God's moral will is clearly revealed in Scripture.

Many personal choices require wisdom rather than a secret message.

Which lawful job should I accept?

Where should I live?

Should I take this journey?

Should I pursue a relationship with this faithful Christian?

The Bible may not name the company, city, flight or person.

It gives us boundaries, priorities and wisdom within which responsible choices can be made.

We may pray for guidance while acknowledging that our judgment remains fallible.

We may make a decision without claiming that everyone who chooses differently has disobeyed God.

We may say, "I believe this is the wisest faithful step," without pretending that Heaven handed us a signed itinerary.

That humility protects both us and the people affected by our decisions.

It would have been spiritually dangerous for me to tell Danielin that God had already declared she would marry me.

Even if I believed the letter, the circumstances and my prayers pointed toward her, she remained responsible before God for her own decision.

She was not required to accept my interpretation of God's will as a command for her life.

Spiritual language must never be used to manipulate another person.

"God told me you are supposed to marry me" is not a proposal.

It is pressure dressed in religious clothing.

Surrender respects the other person's freedom, conscience and responsibility before God.

During those added days, Danielin and I spoke honestly about our different lives.

I could afford impressive gifts and expensive experiences.

Part of me was tempted to give her the most exciting ten days imaginable.

But if the relationship continued, I never wanted either of us to wonder whether affection had been purchased by a glimpse of wealth.

Danielin made the matter easier.

She refused gifts.

She reminded me that she worked, supported herself, helped with her sister's education and assisted her family.

Money was not what she was seeking.

Her restraint helped both of us see more clearly.

As the days passed, our feelings deepened.

Eventually, the extended visit also came to an end.

On our final night, we sat at an observatory overlooking the city and talked until sunrise.

For the first time, we spoke seriously about a possible future.

We discussed our hopes, fears, concerns, desires and the very different lives we imagined years ahead.

We named the reasons a relationship might work.

We also named the many reasons it might not.

By sunrise, I knew that I loved Danielin.

I knew that I wanted to marry her.

I also knew that I had no idea how any of it could happen.

At the airport, I told her I would return within a month.

I told her I would call.

I told her that I loved her.

She said she had strong feelings for me, but she was not ready to use that word until she knew I would truly return.

As the final announcement instructed us to turn off electronic devices, one last message arrived.

In capital letters it said, "I LOVE YOU TOO!!!! PLEASE HURRY BACK." I

boarded that flight with more hope than answers.

I believed God had directed the path.

I also understood that a powerful experience, an open airline office, a sealed letter and mutual affection do not settle every theological question about marriage.

We had sought God's will.

Now we had to ask what it means to say that God brought two people together.

Does God select one particular spouse for each person?

Is there such a thing as "the one"?

Can two faithful Christians choose each other within Biblical boundaries, or must they discover a single predetermined name?

That is where our final study must go.

Next week, in Part Four of "He Shall Direct Thy Paths," we will ask:

Does God choose whom we marry?

Before we close, we must return to the greatest act of surrender in history.

Jesus prayed, "Not my will, but thine, be done." Then

He stood.

He faced betrayal.

He endured a false trial.

He was beaten and mocked.

He carried the cross.

He died for our sins.

His surrender was not passive resignation.

It was obedient love.

He was buried.

On the third day, He rose again.

Because Christ submitted to the Father's redemptive purpose, forgiveness is offered to sinners like us.

You do not become a Christian by asking God to approve the life you have already chosen.

You come by repentance and faith.

You turn from self-rule and trust Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Romans 10:9 says, "That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved." If you have never trusted Jesus Christ, you may come to Him today.

If that expresses the desire of your heart, you may pray with me.

The words do not save you.

Jesus saves.

Pray sincerely from your heart.

Dear God, I know that I am a sinner.

I know that I cannot save myself.

I believe that Jesus Christ died upon the cross for my sins.

I believe that He was buried and rose again.

I turn from my sin and place my faith in Jesus Christ.

Please forgive me.

Please save me.

Help me follow You from this day forward.

In the name of Jesus I pray.

Amen.

If you prayed that prayer sincerely, please speak with me or another trusted Christian before you leave.

We would be honored to pray with you and help you begin learning what it means to follow Christ.

For those who already know Jesus, take one unresolved decision before God this week.

Write down what Scripture clearly says about it.

Write down what you honestly want.

Write down the answer you are most afraid God may give.

Then pray, "Nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done."

Ask a mature Christian who is willing to disagree with you for counsel.

Do not ask that person merely to confirm your conclusion.

Listen.

Wait when wisdom requires waiting.

Act when obedience requires action.

Do not demand certainty God has not promised.

Do not use His name to make your preference unchallengeable.

And do not mistake surrender for the absence of desire.

Bring your desire honestly to God.

Then place it in His hands.

You will know that you are seeking God's will rather than God's approval when obedience remains possible even if His answer is not the one you wanted.

Let us pray.

Our Heavenly Father, search us and know our hearts.

Expose every place where we have used prayer to defend a decision rather than surrender it.

Teach us to recognize the authority of Scripture, the value of wise counsel and the limits of our own understanding.

Give us patience when the path is unclear.

Give us courage when the path is clear but costly.

Guard us from using spiritual language to pressure other people.

May our desires be honest, our judgment humble and our obedience sincere.

Teach us to pray with Jesus, "Nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done." In the name of Jesus we pray.

Amen.

As you leave today, carry one honest question with you:

If God's answer were no, would I still obey Him?

Do not ask God merely to bless the path you have already chosen.

Place the decision, the desire and the outcome in His hands.

Surrender does not mean that you have no preference.

It means that obedience remains possible even when God chooses differently.

Next week, we will bring this continuing story to its final question:

Does God choose whom we marry?

Please join us at the Reason Together Cafe.

Bring your questions and stay for the conversation.

Aloha Nui Loa.

REASON TOGETHER CHURCH
HE SHALL DIRECT THY PATHS A FOUR-PART
SERIES | PART THREE OF FOUR

PASTOR'S COMMENTARY

**Am I Seeking God's Will or
God's Approval?**

Surrender

Luke 22:41-42

Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley

Pastor & Teacher

www.ReasonTogether.Church

Bring your questions. Open your Bible.
Let's Reason Together the Word of God.

Introduction

We have reached the turning point of the series. Part One asked, 'How Do You Know When a "Coincidence" Is God?' Part Two asked, 'Could They Have Been Angels?' Those studies examined remarkable events around me. Part Three asks, 'Am I Seeking God's Will or God's Approval?' The investigation must now turn toward what was happening within me. Part Four will gather the story into the final question, 'Does God Choose Whom We Marry?'

This series began as Danielin and I approached our twentieth wedding anniversary and I looked back at where our story started. Sentiment supplied the occasion, but it cannot supply the theology. The events in Cebu raise questions many Christians face when desire, prayer, circumstance and spiritual language become intertwined. The more personally important the outcome becomes, the more carefully the interpreter must examine the heart doing the interpreting.

The controlling passage is Luke 22:41-42. Jesus prayed, 'Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done.' He did not hide His desire. He placed it beneath the Father's will. Surrender is therefore not the absence of preference. It is the willingness to obey when the answer is costly, delayed or different from the one requested.

Seeking approval begins with a protected conclusion. Prayer, counsel, open doors and feelings are then recruited to make that conclusion sound divine. Seeking God's will begins with submission to Scripture and leaves the preferred answer open to correction. The vocabulary of the prayer may sound identical. The structure of the heart is different.

Controlling truth: We are seeking God's will when obedience remains possible even if His answer is not the one we wanted. We are seeking approval when only our preferred result is permitted to count as His guidance.

1. The Story Reaches Its Turning Point

Accountability Before Romance

After the road scene examined in Part Two, I wanted to know Danielin better. She agreed to spend time with me only if someone accompanied us. Her church family took that responsibility seriously. A pastor serving as our escort announced boundaries before our first dinner: no improper language, jokes, conduct or physical contact.

At the restaurant he requested two tables. To my relief, he sat alone, reading his Bible while also watching us. The arrangement was unfamiliar to me, but it reflected care rather than obstruction.

Danielin was a teacher and church worker with a testimony, family and community. The people who loved her had no obligation to assume that a visiting American missionary's intentions were honorable.

Their caution also protected me. Accountability slowed a relationship that otherwise could have been carried by novelty, travel and unequal resources. It allowed ordinary conduct to become evidence. The relationship began in view of people who could observe, question and intervene.

From the Meal to the Messages

After dinner, the three of us walked through the mall before Danielin and the pastor returned me to the hotel. I went near the pool to think, but Danielin occupied nearly every thought. That fact matters because it establishes desire before the later signs. I was no longer interpreting circumstances as a detached observer.

The next morning I attended a Pastors Conference at the large church in Cebu while Danielin taught at her school elsewhere in the city. During the third conference message, the emergency cell phone in my pocket vibrated. Danielin was on her lunch break. She asked about our plans for that evening, and I stepped into the hallway to answer. Messages passed quickly for nearly an hour and continued after she returned to class.

This transition is not merely logistical. It shows how rapidly attention was narrowing. A conference message was occurring around me while a desired relationship commanded my focus. The texts did not prove God's will. They revealed that mutual interest was developing and that my interpretation could no longer be separated from hope.

The Practical Case Against Continuing

After another supervised outing and a church service together, I walked through the hotel garden for hours. I listed the reasons the relationship appeared unwise. I lived in Florida. Danielin lived in the Philippines. Travel required roughly twenty-six hours. Our cultures differed. We had known one another only a few days, and my departure was near.

The list for continuing was much shorter. I liked her. I admired her faith. I did not want to say goodbye. Practical caution was not unbelief. It was part of responsible discernment. A powerful desire does not make distance, culture, timing and limited knowledge disappear. Faith should bring those realities into prayer rather than dismissing them as enemies of destiny.

2. What Do We Mean by 'God's Will'?

The Revealed and the Secret

Deuteronomy 29:29 says, '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.' The verse creates a necessary boundary. God possesses complete knowledge of His purpose. Human beings are responsible for what He has revealed.

Christians often use the phrase God's will for different ideas. We may mean His revealed commands, His sovereign government of history or the wisest choice among several lawful options. Confusing the categories creates anxiety. A believer may attempt to discover a secret decree while neglecting a revealed duty.

God Has Revealed His Moral Will

First Thessalonians 4:3 says, 'For this is the will of God, even your sanctification.' First Thessalonians 5:18 identifies thanksgiving in every circumstance as God's will in Christ Jesus. First Peter 2:15 connects God's will with doing good. These passages do not provide a hidden name, location or itinerary. They describe the kind of life that pleases God.

When Scripture speaks clearly, the search for permission ends. No vision makes dishonesty righteous. No open door makes greed obedient. No prophetic claim makes bitterness a virtue. No feeling of peace makes any form of sin holy. A circumstance cannot amend a command.

Providence and Lawful Choice

God also governs circumstances we do not control. We may later recognize an interrupted journey, a conversation or a commercial opportunity as providential. That confidence rests first in God's sovereignty, not in our ability to decode each event. Providence is certain as doctrine. Our account of one event's exact purpose remains a human judgment.

Many personal choices remain within Biblical boundaries. Scripture may not name the company, city, flight or faithful Christian a person should choose. In those matters, guidance often means wisdom rather than a private message. The believer prays, counts cost, seeks counsel, acts responsibly and says, 'If the Lord will.'

Three Categories That Must Not Be Confused

Category	What it means	How it guides a decision
Revealed moral will	Commands and prohibitions God has made known in Scripture.	Binding now. No circumstance, peace or sign may authorize disobedience.
Category	What it means	How it guides a decision
Sovereign providence	God preserves and governs events according to His wise purpose.	Usually trusted while living forward and interpreted humbly while looking backward.
Wisdom within lawful choices	More than one option may remain morally permissible.	Pray, seek counsel, count cost, choose responsibly and hold the judgment with humility.

3. Gethsemane: Honest Desire Under Surrender

Jesus Named What He Wanted

Jesus did not approach Gethsemane with emotional numbness. He was sorrowful and very heavy. He prayed that the cup might pass if the Father were willing. The request was honest. The suffering ahead was real. Naming the desire did not make His prayer rebellious.

This corrects the idea that spiritual maturity requires pretending not to care. A Christian may ask for healing, reconciliation, employment, relief or marriage. Desire becomes dangerous not because it exists, but because it begins to dictate which answer God is allowed to give.

Nevertheless

The decisive word is 'nevertheless.' Jesus placed the request beneath the Father's redemptive purpose: 'not my will, but thine, be done.' Surrender did not reduce the cost. It ordered love and obedience above desired relief.

We must also preserve the uniqueness of Christ. Gethsemane was not merely a lesson in decision-making. Jesus moved toward betrayal, judgment and the cross as the sinless Son accomplishing redemption. Christians do not imitate His atoning role. We do learn from His obedient trust.

Surrender and Sorrow Can Coexist

A painful no may still hurt after it has been surrendered. Grief is not proof that surrender failed. Jesus prayed in anguish while perfectly obedient. The question is not whether the believer feels disappointed. It is whether disappointment will be permitted to redefine obedience.

This protects people from a shallow performance of peace. They may lament what was lost and still trust God. They may need time, counsel and tears. Surrender is not the denial of human feeling. It is the refusal to enthrone feeling.

4. When Prayer Becomes Approval Shopping

Balaam Asked Again

In Numbers 22, Balak's messengers offered Balaam honor and reward if he would curse Israel. God's first answer was clear: 'Thou shalt not go with them; thou shalt not curse the people: for they are blessed.' When a more impressive delegation returned with greater promises, Balaam asked again.

The narrative is complex because God later permitted Balaam to go under restriction and then expressed anger concerning his going. We should not flatten that complexity. Second Peter 2:15 and Jude 11 identify Balaam's love of gain and error. The reliable warning is that renewed inquiry followed both clear prohibition and stronger inducement. Sometimes repeated asking reveals that desire wants different terms.

This does not condemn persistent prayer. Jesus taught persistence. The distinction is whether God has made the moral answer clear and whether the petitioner remains willing to hear the same answer again. Persistence seeks God. Resistance keeps searching for an exception.

Ahab Collected Favorable Voices

First Kings 22 presents Ahab surrounded by prophets who supported his plan for war. Jehoshaphat asked for another prophet of the LORD. Ahab admitted that Micaiah existed but hated him because Micaiah did not prophesy good concerning him. Ahab did not lack religious voices. He rejected the unwelcome one.

The passage warns against vote collection disguised as counsel. A large number can be wrong, but the lesson does not authorize stubborn independence. Counsel must be evaluated by Scripture, truthfulness, competence and freedom from incentives to please us.

Jeremiah 42: Surrender Before the Answer

The remnant asked Jeremiah to seek God's direction and promised, 'Whether it be good, or whether it be evil, we will obey the voice of the LORD our God.' Ten days later, the answer instructed them to remain in the land rather than flee to Egypt. They rejected it and accused Jeremiah of speaking falsely.

Their response exposed the earlier promise. The prayer had sounded surrendered before the cost became specific. Approval shopping often becomes visible only when the preferred future is denied. It is easy to say, 'Thy will be done,' while privately assuming that God's will will resemble ours.

5. Search the Heart That Chooses the Path

A Better Prayer Than Follow Your Heart

Psalm 139:23-24 prays, 'Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.' David asks God to examine the chooser as well as lead along the way.

The Bible neither tells us simply to follow the heart nor commands us to distrust every judgment. Jeremiah 17:9 warns that the heart is deceitful. Proverbs warns that a way may appear right in our own eyes. The answer is a heart instructed by Scripture, searched before God and corrected within faithful community.

Name the Desire

Hidden preference is difficult to test. Say plainly what you want, what you fear and what outcome would disappoint you. God is not confused by the desire we refuse to admit. Confession does not make a lawful desire sinful. It makes the desire available for examination.

During the days after the ticket change, I wanted the relationship to continue. That fact does not prove that my interpretation was false. A desired conclusion may still be wise and true. It does mean that I had a reason to notice supporting evidence more readily than opposing evidence.

Confirmation Bias and Motivated Reasoning

Psychologists use confirmation bias to describe the tendency to seek or interpret evidence in ways favorable to an existing belief or hypothesis. Motivated reasoning describes how a desired conclusion may influence which memories, arguments and standards of proof a person uses. These concepts do not decide whether God acted. They explain why a sincere interpreter still needs safeguards.

A favorable interpretation is not disproved merely because the person wants it to be true. The practical response is procedural: ask what evidence would count against the conclusion, state facts fully to advisers, seek people who may disagree and allow time for character and consequences to become visible. Psychology names a vulnerability. Scripture supplies authority, moral judgment and hope.

6. Eight Tests of a Surrendered Decision

1. Begin With Scripture

Ask what Scripture clearly commands, forbids and permits. Read the relevant passages in context. If an option requires sin, another sign is unnecessary. The answer has already been given.

Scripture also prevents personal preference from becoming a universal rule. A wise decision for one believer may not be a command for every believer. The text governs both moral freedom and moral restraint.

2. Tell the Truth About Desire

Name the preferred outcome and the answer you least want to receive. Ask whether fear of loss has made urgency feel like revelation. Ask whether attraction, money, status or relief has changed the standard of evidence.

Desire is not automatically guilt. Jesus expressed desire. The safeguard is ordered love: no created outcome may become the condition upon which obedience to God depends.

3. Ask Whether You Would Obey a No

Imagine that the desired door closes. Would honesty, worship and service remain possible? Would you respect another person's refusal? Would you continue following Christ without turning disappointment into permission for sin?

This test does not require emotional ease. It asks whether faithfulness survives grief. A surrendered person may weep while obeying. An unsundered person may speak calmly while refusing.

4. Seek Counsel, Not Votes

Proverbs 12:15 says, 'The way of a fool is right in his own eyes: but he that hearkeneth unto counsel is wise.' Choose advisers who know Scripture, understand the facts and possess enough independence to say no.

Counsel fails when the story is edited to produce agreement. Give the adviser information that weakens your case as well as information that strengthens it. Listen before defending yourself.

5. Refuse Manufactured Urgency

Some decisions have real deadlines. Emotional pressure can also create a false emergency. Isaiah 28:16 says, 'he that believeth shall not make haste.' The principle is not that faith always moves slowly. It is that faith does not need panic to preserve truth.

Patience allows claims to be checked, counsel to be heard and character to become visible. Delay must not become an excuse to disobey a clear command, but speed must not become a strategy for avoiding examination.

6. Treat Circumstances as Evidence

Acts 16 shows the Spirit closing routes and directing Paul and his companions toward Macedonia. God can govern circumstances. Yet First Corinthians 16:9 shows an open door existing alongside many adversaries, and Second Corinthians 2:12-13 shows Paul leaving an open door because of concern for Titus.

An open door establishes an opportunity. It does not always establish an obligation. A difficult path may be obedient, and an easy path may be foolish. Circumstances belong in discernment, but they cannot serve as a second Bible.

7. Receive Peace as a Guard, Not an Oracle

Philippians 4:6-7 invites believers to bring requests to God with thanksgiving and promises peace that guards hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. The text does not define peace as an infallible yes-or-no device for personal choices.

Jonah slept during a storm while fleeing a clear command. Jesus experienced anguish while obeying perfectly. Calm and obedience are not identical. Peace is precious when it steadies the heart beneath Scripture. It becomes dangerous when it is used to excuse what Scripture condemns or facts challenge.

8. Obey What Is Clear Today

Psalm 119:105 calls God's Word a lamp to the feet and a light to the path. A lamp may illuminate the next faithful step without revealing the next twenty years. The absence of a complete map does not suspend present responsibility.

During those days, Danielin continued teaching and serving her church. I continued reading Scripture, attending church, joining visitation and sharing the Gospel. The unresolved future did not excuse either of us from today's obedience.

A Compact Discernment Audit

Question	Healthy evidence	Warning sign
What has Scripture said?	The text is read in context.	A sign is used to create an exception to holiness.
What do I want?	The preferred and feared answers are named.	Desire hides beneath claims of neutrality.
Would I obey a no?	Faithfulness remains possible through grief.	Only one outcome is allowed to count as God's answer.
Who may disagree?	Qualified advisers receive the full facts.	Counsel is collected until someone agrees.
What would count against me?	Contrary evidence is sought and weighed.	Every obstacle is reinterpreted as support.
Whose consent is affected?	Others remain free before God.	Private guidance is presented as their command.

7. The Airline Office: Opportunity Is Not Instruction

The Final-Day Conversation

My luggage was packed and the clothes for the flight were laid out. During an early dinner with Danielin and her sister Daisy, I knew the evening was probably our last. After the meal, Danielin and I spoke honestly. She said she was not ready for a serious relationship with someone whose life was so different. If circumstances had been different, there might have been a possibility, but she believed I should return to the important life waiting in America.

Her judgment belonged in the evidence. She was not a symbol inside my providence story. She was a person evaluating distance, culture, pace and responsibility. Any interpretation of God's will that erased her concerns would already have become morally distorted.

An Office Beside the Restaurant

I prayed for guidance and noticed a Continental Airlines office directly beside the restaurant. A poster invited travelers to extend their stay. I had flown on that airline, and my passport and ticket were with me. Danielin and Daisy believed I was being impulsive, but I entered the office.

The agent explained that I could remain ten more days. The revised ticket was less expensive, so the change required no additional payment. The convergence felt immediate and personal.

Perhaps it was providence. Perhaps it was an ordinary business offering an ordinary service.

Both statements can be considered without pretending that they carry the same certainty.

The office made an extension possible. It did not command the extension. I chose to enter and change the ticket. The option still required judgment, responsibility and acceptance of consequences. That is the central distinction between an open door and an instruction.

8. The Sealed Letter: Weighty but Not Scripture

A Letter Prepared Before the Journey

After changing the ticket, I learned that Pastor Frankland wanted to see me early the next morning. I explained that I intended to remain after his departure. He handed me a sealed envelope bearing my name and an instruction not to open it before that date. The letter was in his wife's handwriting, indicating that it had been prepared before we left America.

It said Pastor Frankland believed God had impressed upon him that I would find my wife during the journey. It described details concerning the woman, her family and her background. It anticipated an event on the day we met, said I would remain behind and said I would be safe. Some reported details concerned matters he did not appear able to know through ordinary means. To me, the letter plainly pointed toward Danielin.

Evidence With Limits

The letter deserves serious attention, but it does not become canonical revelation. The surviving account does not preserve every word, prior conversation, inference or link in the chain of custody. A striking prediction may increase evidential interest without making every interpretation attached to it infallible.

The approved language therefore remains personal and proportionate: the letter appeared to point toward Danielin. It was not Scripture. It did not remove Danielin's consent. It did not excuse further discernment. It did not permit me to end every question with the phrase, 'God has spoken.'

The Shade-Tree Prayers

For the next several days, I took Danielin to breakfast before she went to work. I then returned to the hotel with my Bible and sat beneath a shade tree in the quietest area of the garden. Except for lunch, I spent much of the day reading, thinking and praying.

One fact about those prayers remains central. I never asked God to make the relationship work. I asked Him to have and reveal His will. I had a preference, and the evidence felt remarkable, but I did not want the romance to survive by overruling God. That posture is the theological center of Part Three.

9. Counsel, Power and the Freedom of Another Person

Private Guidance Cannot Command Another Conscience

It would have been spiritually dangerous to tell Danielin that God had already declared she would marry me. Even if I believed the letter, circumstances and prayers pointed toward her, she remained responsible before God for her own decision. 'God told me you must marry me' is not a proposal. It is pressure clothed in religious language.

This principle applies beyond marriage. A leader may not use private guidance to silence a member, compel a gift, secure loyalty or avoid accountability. Surrender to God does not mean surrendering conscience to another human being's unverified experience.

Unequal Resources Create Additional Responsibility

I entered the relationship as an American businessman and visiting missionary with much greater financial resources and freedom to travel. Danielin was a Filipino teacher, church worker and contributor to her family. Those differences did not invalidate affection. They increased my responsibility concerning pace, gifts, expectations and pressure.

Part of me wanted to give Danielin an extraordinary ten days. She refused gifts and reminded me that she worked, supported herself, helped with her sister's education and assisted her family. Her boundary protected both of us from confusing affection with access to wealth. It also displayed agency, responsibility and character.

Mutual Discernment

On our final night, we sat at an observatory overlooking Cebu and talked until sunrise. We discussed hopes, fears, culture, distance and possible futures. We named reasons the relationship might work and reasons it might not. By sunrise, I knew I loved Danielin and wanted to marry her. I still did not know how that future could happen.

At the airport I promised to call and return within a month. Danielin said she had strong feelings but would not use the word love until she knew I would return. As the final announcement required electronic devices to be turned off, her message arrived: 'I LOVE YOU TOO!!!! PLEASE HURRY BACK.' Mutual affection was now clear. Marriage theology was not.

10. Witnesses Beyond the Canon

A Subordinate Historical Role

Historical writings can reveal how earlier believers described prayer, divided desire and spiritual discernment. They cannot establish doctrine. Canonical Scripture governs this Commentary. The

magazine and approved sermon control autobiographical claims. Confessions, early Christian writings and psychological studies serve only as explanatory witnesses.

This order matters because spiritual guidance can easily acquire authority through age, reputation or mystery. An ancient text may be insightful without being inspired. A respected pastor may be sincere without being infallible.

Augustine and the Divided Will

In Book VIII of his Confessions, Augustine describes a will divided against itself. He desired change and also resisted it. His struggle was not identical to a lawful decision about a relationship, but his account gives enduring language to a common spiritual problem: the barrier is not always missing information. Sometimes one desire has not been surrendered.

The application should not become self-condemnation. A divided heart is brought to grace, truth and obedience. Christian discernment does not rely upon perfect self-knowledge. It relies upon a faithful God who searches the heart and corrects His people.

Calvin on Prayer

John Calvin treated prayer as an exercise of faith marked by reverence, sincere need, humility and confident hope. Prayer does not inform an ignorant God or control a reluctant one. It brings the believer honestly beneath God's providence and promises.

That framework fits Gethsemane better than a technique for obtaining approval. The Christian asks boldly because God is Father, submits humbly because God is Lord and hopes confidently because access rests in Christ.

Sirach, Hermas and the Didache

Sirach 37 warns that advisers may counsel according to their own interest, commends a godly keeper of the commandments and directs prayer to the Most High for a true path. As a noncanonical Jewish wisdom witness, it confirms that questions about adviser incentives are ancient.

The Shepherd of Hermas, Mandate 11, warns about a false prophetic voice that answers according to the desires of those who inquire. The Didache 11 tests prophetic claimants by conduct and rejects self-benefiting demands. These early writings show that desire-shaped spiritual claims concerned the early church. Matthew 7, Galatians 1 and 1 John 4 remain the canonical authorities.

11. Surrender Before Discernment

A Living Sacrifice

Romans 12:1 calls believers to present their bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. Verse 2 then speaks of proving the good, acceptable and perfect will of God. The order matters. We often ask God to reveal His will so that we may decide whether to surrender to it. Paul calls us to surrender ourselves so that renewed minds may recognize and live what pleases God.

A living sacrifice does not reserve one protected outcome. Yet this image must never be weaponized by human leaders. The sacrifice is offered to God. Pastors, spouses and counselors remain accountable to Scripture and possess no right to demand unquestioning control.

A Faithful Decision May Remain Fallible

Two sincere Christians may examine a lawful choice and reach different conclusions. One may accept the job, and another may decline it. One may move, and another may stay. The Bible may provide boundaries and priorities without naming a single required option.

A believer may therefore say, 'I believe this is the wisest faithful step,' without pretending that Heaven supplied a signed itinerary. Humility does not prevent action. It prevents human judgment from borrowing divine infallibility.

Grace When We Misunderstand

Discernment safeguards reduce error but do not eliminate creaturely limits. A Christian may pray, consult, wait and still misunderstand part of a situation. Faith does not rest upon the perfection of the decision process. It rests upon Jesus Christ.

That truth does not excuse carelessness. It makes honest correction possible. If facts change, advice exposes a danger or another person says no, the believer may revise a judgment without fearing that faith has collapsed. God is not honored by defending an error merely because His name was once attached to it.

12. Christ and the Final Question

The Greatest Surrender in History

Jesus prayed, 'Not my will, but thine, be done.' He then faced betrayal, false accusation, mockery and the cross. His surrender was not passive resignation. It was obedient love. He died for our sins, was buried and rose again on the third day.

A person does not become a Christian by asking God to approve an already chosen life.

Conversion is repentance and faith. We turn from self-rule and trust Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. The Gospel is not a private sign to decode. It is the revealed good news of what Christ has done.

More Hope Than Answers

I boarded the flight from Cebu with more hope than answers. I believed God had directed the path. I also understood that a powerful experience, an airline office, a sealed letter and mutual affection did not settle every question about marriage.

The first two studies examined providence and angelic possibility. This study has examined surrendered desire. The final study must bring providence, choice, consent and covenant together. Does God select one particular spouse for each person? Is there such a thing as 'the one'? Can two faithful Christians choose each other within Biblical boundaries? Part Four will ask, 'Does God Choose Whom We Marry?'

Pastoral Summary

Seeking God's will does not require the absence of preference. Jesus named His desire and placed it beneath the Father's will. The decisive test is whether obedience remains possible when the answer is painful, delayed or different from what was requested.

God's revealed moral will governs every option. No sign, letter, circumstance or feeling can authorize sin. God's providence governs events, but our interpretation of one event remains fallible. Many lawful choices require wisdom, counsel and responsible action rather than a secret message.

Approval shopping can appear through repeated asking after a clear answer, collecting favorable voices, rejecting unwelcome counsel, manufacturing urgency, treating an open door as instruction or using peace as an oracle. The antidote is not paralysis. It is truthfulness about desire, submission to Scripture, willingness to receive no, independent counsel, patience, honest evidence and present obedience.

The airline office offered a real opportunity. The sealed letter carried striking personal weight. Neither was Scripture. Neither made the decision for me. Neither removed Danielin's right to discern and answer freely. Spiritual language must never become pressure upon another conscience.

Above all, confidence rests in Jesus Christ. He obeyed the Father's saving purpose, died for sinners and rose again. A personal decision may remain uncertain while the Gospel remains certain. We can act humbly, accept correction and entrust the outcome to the Lord who knows the path completely.

A Surrender and Discernment Worksheet

1. What does Scripture clearly command, forbid or permit in this decision?
2. What outcome do I honestly want, and what answer do I most fear receiving?
3. Would obedience remain possible if the desired door closed?
4. What facts are established, and what parts are interpretation?
5. What evidence would count against my preferred conclusion?
6. Which qualified advisers know the full story and are free to disagree with me?
7. Am I facing a real deadline or manufacturing urgency to avoid examination?
8. Am I treating opportunity or peace as evidence, or as an unquestionable command?
9. Whose consent, conscience or welfare would be affected by my decision?
10. What revealed duty can I obey today while the larger future remains unclear?
11. What level of confidence does my conclusion actually deserve?
12. If my interpretation proves incomplete, will my faith still rest securely in Christ?

Questions for Reflection

1. When have I asked God for guidance while allowing only one answer to count?
2. What does Gethsemane teach me about the relationship between desire, sorrow and surrender?
3. Am I trying to discover a secret decree while neglecting a revealed command?
4. Have I continued asking because God was silent or because I disliked what was clear?
5. Do the people counseling me have permission and courage to tell me no?
6. What would I notice differently if I wanted the opposite conclusion?
7. Have I confused an available opportunity with a divine obligation?
8. Has a peaceful feeling ever kept me from examining Scripture or difficult facts?
9. Have I used spiritual language to pressure another person's conscience or consent?
10. What present act of obedience matters more than knowing my distant future?
11. Can I describe my judgment humbly without attaching God's name to every inference?
12. What marriage question remains after desire has been honestly surrendered?

A Prayer of Surrender

Our Heavenly Father, search us and know our hearts. Expose every place where we have used prayer to defend a decision rather than surrender it. Teach us to recognize the authority of Scripture, the value of wise counsel and the limits of our understanding. Give us patience when the path is unclear and courage when the path is clear but costly. Guard us from using spiritual

language to pressure another person. Help us name our desires honestly, receive correction humbly and obey You faithfully even when the answer is not the one we hoped to receive. Fix our confidence upon Jesus Christ, who surrendered to Your redemptive purpose, died for our sins and rose again. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

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