

Lord, I Cannot Let Thee Go

John Newton (1725–1807)

Lord, I cannot let thee go,
'Till a blessing thou bestow;
Do not turn away thy face,
Mine's an urgent, pressing case.

Dost thou ask me who I am?
Ah, my Lord, thou know'st my name!
Yet a question gives a plea,
To support my suit with thee.

Thou didst once a wretch behold,
In rebellion blindly bold,
Scorn thy grace, thy power defy,
That poor rebel, Lord was I.

Once a sinner near despair,
Sought thy mercy seat by pray'r;
Mercy heard and set him free,
Lord, that mercy came to me.

Many days have passed since then,
Many changes I have seen;
Yet have been upheld till now,
Who could hold me up but thou?

Thou hast helped in every need,
This emboldens me to plead;
After so much mercy past,
Can'st thou let me sink at last?

No—I must maintain my hold;
'Tis thy goodness makes me bold,
I can no denial take,
When I plead for Jesus' sake.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Knowing God's Will: Part Four

Kevin T. Bauder

Throughout this discussion I have assumed that God has an individual will for each Christian and that His will can be discerned. To this point, I have described criteria for determining God's will that are straightforward and objective. God's leading never contradicts Scripture rightly understood. The person who wishes to know God's will must be willing to do God's will, and this willingness is characterized by actual obedience to as much of God's will as is already known. God's will is always for Christians to fulfill their duties.

The remaining criteria are less straightforward and more subjective, though they may be as important as the objective criteria. Employing these criteria requires wisdom and a sense of balance. Consequently, those who wish to seek God's leading need to fulfill at least one prerequisite.

That prerequisite is prayer. To receive wisdom from God we have to ask for it, but if we ask, we receive it generously (Jas. 1:5). Since wisdom is necessary to discern God's will, the process of seeking God's direction must be bathed in prayer.

You may wonder why I have waited until this point to mention prayer. If it is so important, then does it not take priority over all other considerations? Should it not have been discussed first?

Remember, however, that the first considerations are objective. We know them because God has spoken. God reveals a good bit of His will in the Bible. God's leading never contradicts what God has revealed. When we seek God's will, we begin by obeying His revealed will. Even our duties are plain because they are revealed in Scripture.

In other words, we do not have to ask God what His will is in any of those matters. His will is already settled, stated for us in black and white. We determine God's revealed will, not by praying about it, but by reading the Bible. We do not have to ask God whether His will for us is to embezzle from our employer. We do not have to pray about the decision to abandon a spouse. We have no need to seek God's face about using methamphetamine for amusement. We need not question whether we ought to covenant with a

local church, to testify of God's grace, or to give money toward God's work. In all of these matters, God has already told us what His will is, either in so many words or by good and necessary consequence.

For us to pray about these matters is to confess that we have not been paying attention to what God has already said. If we had paid attention, we would already have our answers. These are not matters that require discernment. Deciding whether to view pornography (for example) requires no special spiritual insight. It just requires obedience. We don't need to pray about God's will, we just need to obey it. If we pray about things like this, we reduce piety to a game and Christianity to a show. In effect, we are mocking God—and God is not mocked (Gal. 6:7).

The time to pray for God's direction is when Scripture by itself does not give us clear guidance. That is when we must come to our Father and humbly ask Him for wisdom that we do not possess in ourselves. It is the time to ask Him to make clear to us the best way forward.

Of course, we do not pray specifically for the small, every-day choices. We do not pause at the medicine cabinet to seek divine guidance concerning Crest versus Colgate. We do not prayerfully ponder whether we ought to eat the green beans or the Brussels sprouts (or both). Each day we ask God to direct our paths, and we prayerfully commit the keeping of our ways to Him. As the normal decisions of life come our way, we roll along with them and simply make the choice that seems best at the moment, trusting God to oversee our determinations.

Sometimes, however, we are confronted with choices that obviously carry serious consequences. We do not wish to make a bad decision. Instead, we want to make the best choice possible, and it may not be obvious to us. Those are the times when we need real wisdom; those are the times when we absolutely must seek God's guidance. In fact, we really ought to seek wisdom and guidance even when the choice does seem obvious to us. God just might know something that we do not.

We might spend days or even weeks in prayer over a serious decision. If it is a decision that affects our families, then we might very well ask our spouses and perhaps other family members to pray with us. We might solicit the prayers of our Christian brothers and sisters. We might even commit ourselves to fasting so as to give ourselves more fully to prayer. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working (Jas. 5:16, ESV).

Nevertheless, prayer is not a magic formula to secure a personal revelation. We should not expect the answer to be written in the sky or to become audible to the ears of the soul. We should expect no signs and we should trust no sudden overwhelming convictions. Such things are too easily counterfeited. The prayer for guidance will be answered through the exercise of wisdom, judgment, and discretion.

That is where the subjective criteria come in. Exercising wisdom requires us to appeal to several sources and to weigh several considerations. Just what these sources are will be the subject of future essays.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
