

Beset With Snares on Every Hand*Philip Doddridge (1702–1751)*

Beset with snares on every hand,
 In life's uncertain path I stand:
 Saviour divine! diffuse Thy light,
 To guide my doubtful footsteps right.

Engage this roving treacherous heart
 Wisely to choose the better part;
 To scorn the trifles of a day,
 For joys that none can take away.

Then let the wildest storms arise;
 Let tempests mingle earth and skies:
 No fatal shipwreck shall I fear,
 But all my treasures with me bear.

If Thou, my Jesus, still be nigh,
 Cheerful I live, and joyful die:
 Secure, when mortal comforts flee,
 To find ten thousand worlds in Thee.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ*In the Nick of Time***Knowing God's Will: Part Nine***Kevin T. Bauder*

Years ago I began an unsuccessful career in sales. My manager warned me that I would have to learn to help people past "Buyer's Blues." He explained that many people experience feelings of doubt, anxiety, panic, and guilt either immediately before the decision to make a large purchase or immediately afterward. Part of my job would be to coax people through their Buyer's Blues so they would finalize the sale. This same phenomenon operates in the lives of Christians who have to make big decisions: they so fear missing God's will that they either cannot make a choice or immediately regret the choice they've made.

Buyer's Blues can be exacerbated by circumstances. An acquaintance accepted a pastorate in Alaska. Driving up the Alcan Highway, his moving van blew a tire. The rental company took days to send help. Then the "help" actually overturned the van, damaging many of my friend's goods. This was only one episode in a nightmare of a move. Finally, another friend told him, "It's obvious that you've missed God's will." My friend didn't listen to that counsel, but I've seen Christians who would gauge their grasp of God's leading by how well the decision works.

When things don't seem to work out well, does that mean we've missed God's will? And if we have missed His will, is there any way back? Or are we doomed to some permanent spiritual disablement? I suggest the following by way of answer.

First, God's leading is neither miraculous nor prophetic. God leads through Providence, and because His leading is providential, it does not yield certainty. Therefore, as long as we are following the precepts and principles of Scripture, God's leading is not a simple matter of obedience or disobedience. It is more akin to the exercise of wisdom and sound judgment. It is possible for us to make an apparently sound decision that turns out to be a mistake, at least from some points of view.

Second, God is quite capable of using our mistakes. In fact, since judgment and wisdom grow through use, and since use involves making mistakes, God must intend that we make at least some mistakes. While we cannot



In the Nick of Time is published by Central Baptist Theological Seminary.

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blame the mistakes on Him, we can trust Him to help us make the best of them.

Furthermore, growth in character relies upon endurance, and endurance requires suffering (Rom. 5:3-4). Whether we are in the will of God or not, some of our choices will result in unexpectedly difficult circumstances. God's will is for His children to suffer enough to require endurance so as to build up their character, producing hope or anticipation. We cannot always judge whether our choice was according to God's leading by whether it leads to a rose-strewn future.

Third, every choice, whether mistaken or not, opens before us a new path. Once we are on that path, there is no point asking how we might have fared had we chosen a different path. God's will is always that we make the best of the path that we now tread for His glory. Part of going forward includes "forgetting those things which are behind" (Phil. 3:13). We have no true knowledge of counterfactuals; we never really know how things might have turned out had we chosen otherwise. Habitual second-guessing of our choices results only in misery.

Fourth, the choices that we make often bring with them new obligations. These obligations will determine at least some part of God's will for the future. For example, the time to ask whether God is leading you to marry a particular person is *before* the nuptials. During the wedding you swear oaths that are lifelong and binding. God never wills that you violate your wedding vows. Once you are married, you must never think that God's will was for you to marry someone else. God's will is for your present marriage to succeed.

Similarly, if you have run up debt on your credit cards, God's will is that you pay what you owe. You may decide that the charges were unwise and out of God's will (and they probably were), but that no longer matters. God's will is for you to fulfill your obligations, even if doing so means *not* doing some other things that you might have thought were God's leading.

Fifth, sometimes we make choices that are so conspicuously bad that we ought to retrace our steps. Bad choices come from not paying attention to the criteria for good choices—criteria such as those that we have discussed in previous essays. Bad choices may not always be sinful, but they are choices for which we are obviously unsuited. When that happens, we should recognize the difference between endurance (which is a virtue) and obstinance in folly (which is a form of vicious pride).

Sixth, we must learn to be perplexed without despairing (2 Cor. 4:8). We have no guarantee that we'll be able to make every choice with confidence. We have no assurance that every choice will work out well. After all, even with access to direct, divine revelation, the Apostle Paul made choices that landed him in horrible circumstances. Some Bible teachers still question

whether each of those choices really represented God's will for his life. One even wrote a book entitled *Blunders of Paul*. What distinguished Paul was not that he made the right choice every time (though I disagree with the premise that his ministry was characterized by blunders). What distinguished him was that, even in the worst of circumstances, he kept pressing forward in the ways that matter most: seeking to minister the gospel, strengthen the saints, and glorify Christ. Indeed, the entire epistle to the Philippians is a testimony to this aspect of his life.

As far as I know, the Bible contains no promise that God will give us absolute certainty in our important choices. My personal testimony is that I have rarely experienced that degree of confidence. Often I have had to make major decisions without even ninety or eighty percent probability. Sometimes I have made them with only the slightest inclination in one direction: fifty-one percent or less. I have made decisions that were followed by joyful excitement; I have also made decisions that were followed by shattering experiences with Buyer's Blues. That doesn't mean that those choices were out of God's will or that I didn't have His leading.

God doesn't seem to be interested in having us torture ourselves with regret. He doesn't want us constantly to be looking over our shoulder, wondering whether each choice that we made was "in His will." Yes, God does have a plan for each individual believer, and He does lead His children. If we are seeking to honor Him, if we are choosing within the bounds of Scripture, and if we are employing the canons of wisdom and careful choosing, then we can trust Him to guide us providentially into the choices that He wants us to make. Choose carefully. Choose boldly.



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.
