

Life used to be much simpler. Have you considered recently how complex grocery shopping has become...? Consider the following choices you now face... when you just want to run into the store and quickly grab a few items...

- **Crest toothpaste:** 27 varieties
- **Campbell's soup:** 53 varieties
- **Tropicana Pure Premium Orange Juice:** eight sizes, from 8 to 128 ounces... with pulp... pulp free... or moderate pulp.
- **Breyers ice cream or frozen dairy dessert:** Natural... French... Half the Fat... No Sugar Added... Extra Creamy... Homemade... Lactose Free... CarbSmart (and that's just for vanilla ice cream)
- **Cheerios cereal:** Original... Honey Nut... Honey Nut Medley Crunch... Apple Cinnamon... Banana Nut... Frosted... Chocolate... Multi Grain... Multi Grain Peanut Butter... Dulce de Leche... Cinnamon Burst
- **Tide liquid laundry detergent:** regular... or HE (low suds)... Original Scent... Plus Febreze... Plus Febreze Sport... Free & Gentle... Plus Bleach Alternative... Coldwater... Clean Breeze... Mountain Spring... Plus Downy... With Acti-Life
- **Head & Shoulders shampoo:** Active Sport... Old Spice... Deep Clean... Hair Endurance... Refresh... Extra Strength for Men... Citrus Breeze... Ocean Lift... Dry Scalp Care with Almond Oil... Classic Clean... Sensitive Scalp Care... Itchy Scalp with Eucalyptus... Smooth & Silky... Extra Volume... Green Apple... Damage Rescue... Extra Strength... Clinical Strength... plus seven more

Little wonder... then... that 3 years ago...a Consumer's Reports survey of nearly 3,000 shoppers... found that 36 percent "were overwhelmed by the information they had to process to make a buying decision."

And if we are overwhelmed by our consumer choices... how much more overwhelmed are we... when it comes to things of greater importance... like... determining God's will... and finding a spiritual path for life... in the midst of so many possibilities.

I've spoken before of Christian comedian Ken Davis. In his stand-up comedy routine... he tells the following story about waiting for a "sign from God."

A Christian gets on an empty city bus, walks to rear, and sits down. *Lord, he prays, if you want me to speak to someone about you, please give me a sign.* At the next stop another passenger boards the bus, goes all the way to the back, and sits down right next to the Christian. The passenger asks, "Do you know anything about Jesus?"

The Christian excuses himself for a moment and slowly bows his head and once again prays, *Lord, if you really want me to talk to this stranger, I need just one more sign. Please turn the bus driver into an armadillo.*

Have you been praying for armadillos?

Researcher Dan Ariely claims that most of us are masters at deceiving ourselves and justifying our actions. In particular, we often make our decisions based not on what's right, but on what we want.

Ariely tells his own story of buying a car. "*When I turned thirty,*" he writes, "*I decided it was time to trade in my motorcycle for a car, but I could not decide which car was right for me. The web was just taking off, and to my delight I found a site that provided advice on purchasing cars.*" Professor Ariely describes how he answered all of the questions on the website, which then recommended that he purchase a rather boring (but practical) Ford Taurus. He describes his response in the following manner:

"So I did what I think anyone in my position would do. I hit the BACK button a few times, backtracked to earlier stages of the interview process, and changed many of my original answers to what I convinced myself were more accurate and appropriate responses I kept this up until the car-advertising website suggested a Mazda

Miata. The moment the program was kind enough to recommend a small convertible, I felt grateful for the fantastic software and decided to follow its advice..."

Commenting on what he learned in the process, Professor Ariely says, "The experience taught me that sometimes we want our decisions to have a rational veneer when, in fact, they stem from ... what we crave deep down."

Common' admit it! ... Whether it is a consumer choice we are making... or a more important spiritual decision... we tend to do this... don't we...? "Oh... I know that this is God's will..."

How do we know God's will...?

I spent a good deal of my time researching this when I wrote my doctoral dissertation. ... You know what I concluded...? Although we find examples of people discovering God's will throughout Scripture... we cannot write a formula for a prescription and say to someone who is searching to know God's will... "*Here are five things for you to do... and then you will discover God's will...*" There simply is no one-size-fits-all... step-by-step process... that guarantees to everyone... that they will discover God's will for a decision that they face.

But what I did find... is that God seems to be more interested in us being developed... as completely dependent followers... while we are seeking to discover what His will is. God seems more concerned in what the process does for us... than the actual conclusion of knowing "the steps and direction for our getting from point A... to point B... or even to know what "point B" is... (Getting to point B is not the most crucial thing)... It is the

process... not the outcome... that is most important. The spiritual development through our seeking (by being fully absorbed and dependent on Him) - **THAT** seems to be God's higher interest.

Now... there are some general principles... that certain passages of Scripture demonstrate... which I think can be helpful... in this process. Today's passage is one of those. ... Just don't be disappointed... if I do not provide you with a "fail-safe" formula that works every time you need to discover God's will for your life. There is none!

If you are trying to discover God's will for something in your life... do all that you can to draw close to the Lord. Cultivate an environment in which He can speak to you. Spend increased time with Him in His word and in prayer. But also... develop the right expectations of His communication... which is where our study in Matthew chapter two fits in. ... So... let's get started.

Last week we read in the first part of Matthew chapter two... that a group of wise men came from the East. I told you... if you remember... that I believe these men were from Babylon... where Daniel (of the Old Testament) had been a leader of such men... and left them... no doubt... with his own prophecy and other Jewish writings and Scripture. That's why they came. They knew what to look for... and Daniel had also given them a timeline... for when the Messiah King would be born.

After calling some Scribes together... King Herod learned that Bethlehem was the prophesied place where the Messiah would be born. So he sent the wise men there... and asked them to come back and report to him...

once they found him. ... Herod... of course didn't want to worship Jesus... like the wise men did. ... He was jealously protective of his throne... and he wanted to kill the baby. ... You know... isn't it interesting... and I hope that you have found this to be true... Men may think they can conceal their evil... but God knows all... and can broadcast the most secret of evil conduct to the whole world... if He so desires. ... And God did just that.

The wise men found Jesus and presented Him with very expensive gifts. Then they were warned by God – not to report back to Herod. So they went home a different way.

Now... in today's passage... we will see God communicate his will to Joseph three times... through a dream. We already saw God do this once... a few weeks ago... when we were studying chapter one.

First, Joseph was given a dream to inform him about Mary's pregnancy (Matthew 1:20-22); **second**, we will see today that Joseph was given a dream to move to Egypt with the Christ-child; **third**, Joseph was given a dream in Egypt to move back to Palestine (Matthew 2:19); and **fourth**, Joseph was given a dream to go to Galilee because of Archelaus evil reign (Matthew 2:22).

God does not use dreams as His primary method for speaking to people today. ... Today we have the Scriptures... which are a much better revelation to us than any dream. Don't seek after dreams and visions. Seek His leading by studying His Word... the Bible. Wanting dreams today reveals ignorance of the greatness of the revelation in Scripture.

Matthew 2:13

Imagine if this were you or I... God sends His messenger... and we are told that we have to flee to another country. Wouldn't you want more information...? *"Lord... I'm not leaving until you give me some more details... Egypt...? O.K. ... Fine... But where in Egypt... and what am I supposed to do... while I'm there. My relatives might be worried. One day I'm here... and the next day we're gone. Just like that! ... How will I send word that we're alright...? Would You at least tell me how long I'll be down there...?"*

God simply tells Joseph... *"Go... your baby's life is in danger... and stay until I give you the next step that you are to take..."*

Whenever God leads us... He rarely lays out before us the entire plan. It is usually ONLY the initial step. Then once we obey... He provides further information - as it is needed. ... *"Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you..."* This is one of the reasons why I said earlier... God is primarily interested in the process... of our being led through full dependence on Him... This is what we see here.

If you are in the process of trying to figure out God's will – don't reject it... if it is only an initial step. You are wrong if you simply sit back and say... *"I'm not moving until I see the complete picture for how it will all work out... The only way I can know if it is God's will is for me to have every question answered."* You'll probably be sitting for a long time... and miss out on God's will. This church would not have a youth pastor... and Colombia Grace Foundation would never have been started. 1 Cor. 5:7 – "For we walk by faith and not by sight." ... It is most uncomfortable to follow God without having all the information that allows me to walk by sight... but

Scripture declares that this inconvenient... unsettling... “nerve-wracking way” is the way we please God.

And along these same lines... speaking of inconvenient... another concept we must reject in determining God’s will... is that it must be convenient for us. ... How inconvenient it must have been to pull-up shop and move baby... mother... and career to a foreign culture with a foreign language and a different way of life... for an undetermined amount of time.

Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum writes that there were perhaps one million Jews living in the region around Alexandria at the time. Perhaps Joseph and Mary had some relatives among them. It certainly would not be unlike God to have located some family down there ahead of time... before this happened. But the move of a family with a very young child... to a foreign culture... would be an inconvenient hardship.

We sometimes think... don’t we... *“Well, God... this can’t be from You. You wouldn’t have me take such a cut in pay... or lower my living standards... or have me endure such ridicule and adversity. This certainly can’t be Your will for me... This has too much difficulty.”* But we know that it was God’s will for Mary and Joseph and Baby Jesus to inconveniently travel all the way to Egypt.

And why Egypt...? ... Because it was just outside the jurisdiction of Herod (the ruler they were getting away from.) It was the closest place they could go to be away from him. It was about a 60-100 mile walk (depending on where in Egypt they ended up) from Bethlehem.

Matthew 2:14

Going by night not only showed promptness but it also showed precaution. Traveling in the dark helped conceal their escape. By leaving “at night,” Joseph’s family made their route of departure impossible to trace; the language might also evoke Jewish readers’ memory of the Passover Exodus...

Exodus 12:31 (ESV)

Then he summoned Moses and Aaron by night and said, “Up, go out from among my people, both you and the people of Israel; and go, serve the LORD, as you have said.

Now here is another general insight we learn about God’s leading. God does not protect us supernaturally when we can protect ourselves by wise conduct. In determining what God might have you do... He may be expecting you to exercise some wisdom or common sense... that He has given you... in order to avert disaster.

But also... please observe their immediate obedience. I think that the way Matthew 2:14 is worded... shows abrupt action. “*And he rose up and took the mother and child by night...*”

How long do we often wait... wanting to make sure we understood correctly. ... Now I am not suggesting that we act on impulse... the instant we have an inkling of what God’s will might be. Sometimes we need to wait and pray. ... But this was a clear understanding of what God wanted. Once we know God’s first step... we need to move.

Matthew 2:15

Now we come to an interesting situation with this quote that Matthew uses from Scripture. Earlier I indicated that reading and studying Scripture

prepares our heart and cultivates the proper environment for God to speak to us about His will. ... But you and I are not free to make Scripture say whatever we want it to say. We need to allow Scripture to speak in the manner that it was intended.

We need to be careful (for example) when we read in the Old Testament about God making a promise to an Israelite a King (like David)... that God is making the same promise to us. Despite what the old Sunday School song says... Every promise in the book – is NOT mine. God dealt with Israel's kings differently than He does with us. God was establishing world redemption and much of the Old Testament is showing us what He did to bring Christ into the world. Their stories and circumstances are different than ours. ... What God promised the Israelites – may... or may not be... a promise to you and I. The context will tell us. We must not ignore it.

But at first glance it looks as though Matthew ignored the Old Testament context... and took this forbidden freedom... It seems like he thrust his own interpretation (from out of nowhere)... onto the clear meaning that the original author of Scripture intended. Matthew quotes Hosea 11:1... In that particular context... Hosea is talking about God's deliverance of His people from slavery in Egypt.

Hosea 11:1 (ESV)

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.

The Jews came out of Egypt during the time of the Exodus... and this is what Hosea wrote about. ... Matthew however applies this to Joseph and Mary's flight to Egypt with Jesus as a baby. ... How can he do this...?

My answer is that Jesus is all over the pages of the Old Testament. The stories that you and I learned as Sunday School children... all point to Christ... and some are more direct than others. Matthew is not really abusing an Old Testament text to point to Christ. Just as Moses was the deliverer of God's people... Jesus is the second deliverer. There are so many parallels!

In Exodus God used ten miraculous plagues to deliver Israel (Exod 7-10). The first nine plagues—water-to-blood, frogs, gnats, flies, livestock, boils, hail, locusts, and darkness—all led to the tenth and final plague, what we know as the Passover, when the Lord struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt (Exod 12:29). However, for His people, God prescribed a way to escape this plague of death. The Israelites were to put the blood of an unblemished lamb on their doorposts and on their lintels (Exod 12:7), for when the Lord saw this blood He would withhold judgment from that household. The Passover was a picture of God's gracious deliverance. This deliverance then climaxed in Exodus 14 when God fully and finally saved His people from the hands of the Egyptians at the Red Sea.

In light of this background, when Jesus and His family flee to Egypt and then later return from Egypt, Matthew helps us see that **Jesus inaugurates the new exodus**. The flight to Egypt for Jesus and His family was about much more than simply running away from Herod; this was about painting a picture, so don't miss the parallels:

- **The mercy of God in the Old Testament: He saved His people by bringing miraculous deliverance from Egypt.** God's people recounted the exodus events every year, telling them over and over

to their children. God mercifully delivered His people, and this deliverance became a picture of what was to come in the New Testament.

- **The mercy of God in the New Testament: He saves His people by bringing the Messianic Deliverer from Egypt.** Matthew 2:15 speaks of a new deliverance, a new exodus. Recall that Matthew 1:21 says that Jesus will "save His people from their sins." Just as God delivered His people from the Egyptians in the Old Testament, so now He was delivering His people from sin in the New Testament. Just as Israel was God's son, brought out of Egypt (Exod 4:22; Hos 11:1), so now Jesus as God's Son was brought out of Egypt.

Here are some more parallels...

Matthew 2:13-14 (ESV)

¹³ Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." ¹⁴ And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt

Exodus 2:15 (ESV)

¹⁵ When Pharaoh heard of it, he sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from Pharaoh and stayed in the land of Midian. And he sat down by a well.

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Matthew 2:16 (ESV)

¹⁶ Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men.

Exodus 1:22 (ESV)

²² Then Pharaoh commanded all his people, “Every son that is born to the Hebrews you shall cast into the Nile, but you shall let every daughter live.”

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Matthew 2:19-20 (ESV)

*¹⁹ But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt,
²⁰ saying, “Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child’s life are dead.”*

Exodus 4:19 (ESV)

¹⁹ And the LORD said to Moses in Midian, “Go back to Egypt, for all the men who were seeking your life are dead.”

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Matthew 2:21 (ESV)

²¹ And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel.

Exodus 4:20 (ESV)

²⁰ So Moses took his wife and his sons and had them ride on a donkey, and went back to the land of Egypt. And Moses took the staff of God in his hand.

Jesus is the second deliverer... and Jesus inaugurates a new exodus. So Matthew did allow Scripture to speak in the manner that it was intended... and so must we... when we study and apply Scripture. Be careful that you don't claim a promise that isn't yours... or ignore the plain meaning of Scripture in its context. ... People will do that sometimes when they are searching for God's will.

The trip to Egypt and back was no surprise to God... nor did it frustrate any of His plans. Rather, it helped confirm His Word.

The fulfillment of these prophecies emphasizes the great reliability of the Word of God. You can depend on the Word of God unlike any other word. What God says will happen, will indeed happen. Circumstances may seem so adverse that fulfillment will appear impossible, but never discount the power of God's Word to overcome any circumstance in the fulfillment of its prophecies and promises.

The next concept to understand... when we are trying to discern God's will... is that God will not forget about us. "*Where are You God...? I need to hear from you!*" Sometimes our circumstances will even cause us to mourn... very deeply. But God will not forget about us.

Matthew 2: 16-18

Herod was known for acts like the massacre described here. A young but popular competitor... a high priest... had a "drowning accident" in a pool that was only a few feet deep. ... Enraged at his favorite wife... Herod had her strangled. He was deceived into having two innocent sons executed... because he saw them as his competitors. Even on his own deathbed... Herod had another son executed. Several sources reveal that the emperor of Rome once commented: Better to be one of Herod's pigs than his son. Josephus reports that Herod ordered nobles executed at his death... (now get this...) - to ensure mourning when he died. ... Those very nobles were instead released at his death... producing celebration. - He went by the title "Herod the Great"... but perhaps we should call him "Herod the Insane"!

In verse 17-18... Matthew... once again appropriately quotes Scripture. This time it is Jeremiah 31:15. Here... the prophet is talking about the time when the people of God were taken into exile. The Babylonians came and attacked Jerusalem... razing people's homes and destroying the entire city... and then they took all the people to Ramah... a place just north of Jerusalem. ... At Ramah the people were put into caravans and scattered apart from one another. This was a scene of unimaginable anguish.

Consider your reaction if you were taken to a place where you were separated from your family and your friends with the prospect that you might not ever see them again. Imagine the weeping and crying—the loud lamentation—that would take place in a scene like that as families were torn apart. This is the kind of scene that Matthew refers to when he describes the weeping and crying over children who had died in Bethlehem. But there's a deeper significance here as well, for the prophet Jeremiah says ***right after this*** in verses 16-17,

*This is what the Lord says:
Keep your voice from weeping
and your eyes from tears,
for the reward for your work will come—
this is the Lord's declaration—
and your children will return from the enemy's land.
There is hope for your future—
this is the Lord's declaration—
and your children will return to their own territory.*

Jeremiah tells the people that God has not forgotten them, and that He will initiate a new relationship, a new covenant with them (31:31-34). God was going to unite His people together around that covenant.

So when Matthew quotes from Jeremiah, it's as if he's saying amidst the bitter tragedy of Bethlehem, "Yes, the pain is real, but there is hope for your future, and that hope is here. Jesus has come!" **Jesus ends the mournful exile.** Notice the contrast in Matthew 2. On the one hand, there is horrible news—children dying and mothers mourning and weeping. On the other hand, **there is hope in the midst of hurt. There is life in the midst of death.** And what is that hope? Where is this life? Matthew tells us: A new King is born—a King who will conquer death, a King who will heal our hurts, a new King who will reconcile us to God.

When we seek to know God's will... often it feels like God has forgotten us. But He hasn't. There is life in the midst of death.

Matthew 2:19-22

Though Joseph had obeyed the command of God to move from Egypt... yet he ran into a severe trial when he got to Israel. The path of obedience is not exempt trials. Hardship and struggle are not the tell-tale signs that you mis-understood the will of God. In fact, you can count on them; for *"many are the afflictions of the righteous"* (Psalm 34:19) and *"all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution"* (2 Timothy 3:12).

Also what we find in the verses we just read in Matthew 2... is another punctuation of the point that the will of God is often learned a step at a time. Seeking to know the will of God (as Joseph did) and obeying what you already know is the will of God (as Joseph did) are both vital to learning more about the will of God. Joseph was told to return to Israel... and as he was obeying... while he was returning... God warned him not to

go to Judea. He went instead to Nazareth. The will of God is often communicated one step at a time – and often in the act of our obedience to what we already know.

Matthew 2:23

If you have trouble tracking down that Old Testament reference, it's because Matthew is not quoting from any particular prophet. In fact, none of the prophets ever say precisely, "He will be called a Nazarene." For that matter, the prophets never even talk about Nazareth as a place at all. So why does Matthew say this?

Because the prophets did declare that the Messiah would be despised and rejected by His fellow Jews. Joseph and Mary raised Jesus in Nazareth... and He was called a Nazarene... which brought Him a lot of derision... and that derision fulfilled what was spoken by the prophets. That is what Matthew I saying. The prophets said He would be despised. It was perfectly fulfilled... because Jesus was called a Nazarene... and therefore despised.

Nazareth was in the region of Galilee. Those who were from the high society of Jerusalem looked down on anyone who was from Galilee. But even those who were from Galilee looked down on anyone who was from Nazareth. Arnold Fruchtenbaum says that Nazareth was a city of ill-repute. A Roman garrison was located there and the city was known for immorality and vices. ... Recall from John's Gospel that when Nathanael heard that Jesus was from Nazareth, he responded by saying, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46).

So this final quotation in verse 23... brings the story of Christ's birth to a fitting conclusion. The King of the universe has come to save sinners, and from the start He is defied and derided by the very sinners He came to save. Whether it's Herod, the chief priests, or the scribes, they are all setting themselves up against Jesus as His enemies.

It might be just as fitting for me to point out that God's leading of you and I... when we finally discover what His will for our life is... it might include such humility. ... Maybe it involves serving while being defied and derided by the very ones God sends us to serve. Don't seek God's will so that you will receive the praise of man.