




AN INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Discerning the Will of God

Introduction

On the pulpit in Grace Chapel at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi, a thin, brass plate is prominently mounted as a reminder to every preacher that he is standing there for one purpose only. It reads: "Sir, we would see Jesus." For the past 20 years, it has been my privilege to open God's Word with you, to lift up His name together, and to pray that we might be conformed more and more to His image. Within its holy pages and through the contemplation of His majestic creation, we have encountered the incomparable Lord Jesus Christ in all of His glory and have heard His invitation to receive the free gift of eternal life and to follow Him without reservation. In order to do that, we must know what His will is and learn to obey Him in all things.



“God views us a creatable, because before creation we haven’t been created yet, and because he might have chosen not to create us.”

“God also views us as created, because he has in fact eternally decreed to create us, and because only after the decree of creation is accomplished can anything else happen to us.”

- John M. Frame

Our Starting Point



Blaise Pascal
1623-1662

The Big Questions

“When I consider the brief span of my life absorbed into the eternity which comes before and after – *as the remembrance of a guest that tarrieth but a day* – the small space I occupy and which I see swallowed up in the infinite immensity of spaces of which I know nothing and which know nothing of me, I take fright and am amazed to see myself here rather than there: there is no reason for me to be here rather than there, now rather than then. Who put me here? By whose command and act were this time and place allotted to me?”



God's highest
purpose is to
glorify Himself.

God's plans are
efficacious and
what He purposes
will surely come
to pass.



God's Eternal Purpose

“How can I know God’s will for my life?” is a common question among those who do not adhere to *tychism* (pure chance or indeterminism), a philosophical position unwarranted by the teachings of the Bible, which asserts that God is carrying out **His eternal purpose** through Christ Jesus our Lord (Eph. 3:11). In the O.T., Isaiah specifically addressed this issue: “O Lord, you are my God; I will exalt you and praise your name, for in perfect faithfulness you have done marvelous things, **things planned long ago**” (Is. 25:1). God also spoke through Isaiah to remind the Israelites of His sovereignty: “I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient time, what is still to come. I say, **‘My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please’**” (46:10).



Why Any Event Happens

Princeton theologian Charles Hodge (1797-1878) wisely taught that “the reason why any event occurs, or, that it passes from the category of the possible into that of the actual, is that God has so decreed. The decrees of God, therefore, are not many, but one purpose. They are not successively formed as the emergency arises, but are all parts of one all-comprehending plan....History in all its details, even the most minute, is but the evolution of the eternal purposes of God.”

The language of the Bible is that God has an eternal plan and contends “that His revelation provides the one and only reliable exposition of human meaning and worth.” We are made for God and have been invited to know Him, to do His will, and fulfill His calling on our lives.



Under Whose Authority?

When we consider the eternal existence of the triune God and embrace the truth that He has clearly spoken through Creation, His only-begotten Son, the *imago Dei*, and His inspired, infallible, inerrant, and authoritative Word, it is not difficult to accept the reality that we can actually “think His thoughts after Him” (analogical thinking) and live our lives in ways that are pleasing to Him. Thus, we can accept biblical ethics based on God’s lordship and self-disclosure. Ultimately, **“everyone who rejects divine authority must accept some other authority”** (Frame), whether it be utilitarianism, hedonism, egoism (self-interest), cultural norms, moderation, existentialism, or one of the twenty-six religious books that claim to be from God.



A Concise Definition of Ethics

“Living under God’s law,
in God’s world,
in the presence of God himself.”

- John M. Frame



Dents du Midi
“The Teeth of the South”
Swiss Alps
Seven Distinct Summits
10,868 feet

TEACHING OUTLINE

The Will of God

How to Discern the Will of God

Three Important Texts

What We Learn from These Texts

Submitting to God’s Will

The Will of God

- “Thy kingdom come. **Thy will be done**, on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt. 6:10).
- “Not every one who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven; but **he who does the will of My Father**, who is in heaven” (Mt. 7:21).
- “For **whoever shall do the will of My Father** who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother” (Mt. 12:50; Mk. 3:35).
- “He (Jesus) went away again a second time and prayed, saying, ‘My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, **Thy will be done**’” (Mt. 26:42; cf. Lk. 22:42).

The Will of God

- “For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but **the will of Him who sent Me**” (Jn. 6:38; cf. Jn. 4:34; 5:30; 6:40).
- “I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after My heart, **who will do all My will**” (Acts 13:22).
- “So then, do not be foolish, but **understand what the will of the Lord is**” (Eph. 5:17).
- “For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be **filled with the knowledge of His will** in all spiritual wisdom and understanding” (Col. 1:9).

How to Discern the Will of God

1. **What does the whole Bible say about “X”?** What norms, laws, and principles has God revealed about it?
2. **What are the facts of the situation?** What do I learn by studying God’s world (natural revelation), including His mighty acts of creation, providence, and redemption?
3. **What am I thinking, feeling, believing?** How am I a part of the problem and a part of the solution?
4. **Seek wise counsel from trusted sources.** “In an abundance of counselors there is safety” (Prov. 11:14). “Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed” (Prov. 15:22).

How to Discern the Will of God

5. **We come to know the will of God through ethical discipline** (Rom. 12:1-2), nonconformity to the world, the renewal of our minds, walking as children of light (Eph. 5:8), and abounding in love (Phil. 1:9).
6. **Discern changing circumstances.** “But I shall remain in Ephesus until Pentecost; for a wide door for effective service has opened to me, and there are many adversaries” (I Cor. 16:8-9). However, as Dr. Jay Adams warned, “Some open doors lead to elevator shafts!”
7. **Be led by the Holy Spirit.** Look to “see” moral patterns and analogies in Scripture. “Much of the work of application lies with us, led by the Spirit and by the general principles of Scripture” (Frame).



John Frame: How God Leads Us

“God’s ethical guidance of his people does not add new sentences to the canon of Scripture. But neither is it necessarily an intellectual process. God deals with us personally, even inwardly. His operations within us are mysterious, not to be simply described or categorized. He can work through the subconscious, through dreams, through memory and intuition, as well as through what we usually call the intellect. Reformed theology has always acknowledged the necessity of the Spirit’s illumination in enabling believers to understand the Word. But it is important that we see this illuminating work of God, not only enabling us to formulate doctrines, but also enabling us to apply Scripture to our circumstances, and to see our experiences and inner life in biblical terms.”

Three Relevant Texts: Romans 12:1-2

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, **that by testing you may discern what is the will of God**, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Three Relevant Texts: Philippians 1:9-10

“It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may **approve what is excellent**, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ.”

Three Relevant Texts: Ephesians 5:8-10

“At one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and **try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.**”

What We Learn From These Texts

- In the previous 3 texts, Paul used the same Greek word (*dokimadzo*) which may be translated in the following ways:
 - 1. **Put to the test, examine** (e.g., examine yourself before taking the Lord's Table, I Cor. 11:28; "I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out (examine them), Lk. 14:19).
 - 2. **Prove by testing** (the result of the examination; "that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire..." I Pt. 1:7).
 - 3. **Accept as proved, approve** ("that by testing you may discern what is the will of God," Rom. 12:2; cf. Eph. 5:10; Phil. 1:10).



What We Learn From These Texts

- This word is used 23 times in the New Testament and is defined according to its context.
- Most of us think in terms of our constantly being tested by God, that “the life of the Christian is set under the searching eyes of God” (Kittel). Consider James 1:12. “Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been **approved**, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.” This speaks of **God’s approval** of those who persevere when trials come upon them.
- But this is not our focus at the moment. Rather, we need to understand that God is also the **object of testing**.



What We Learn From These Texts

- In other words, **we test God's will**. "God not only tests us, according to Scripture, but He also gives us the criteria by which to test ourselves, and even to test what His will is in a certain sense – to prove what God's will is" (Bahnsen).
- In Romans 12:1-2, we notice that Paul speaks about our giving our bodies (our whole person, body and soul) as living sacrifices. "Somebody who is a living sacrifice, somebody who is transformed by the renewing of his mind, is thus able to prove what is the will of God, meaning that he both knows what it is and he comes to like it!" (Bahnsen). **Our sanctification gives us a kind of apparatus for perceiving what God wants us to do.**



What We Learn From These Texts

- To the Philippians, Paul writes: “It is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may **approve what is excellent**, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ” (Phil. 1:9-10).
- Loving God brings about an ability to prove the will of God, to have the knowledge and sensitivity to “see” things from God’s perspective and to decide what to do in particular situations.
- “What you have here is an opening of the eyes to see things God’s way. This is the additional factor. You’ve got your knowledge of the situation and your awareness of God’s norms....You need to have this perception and sensitivity which opens your eyes to know” (Bahnsen).

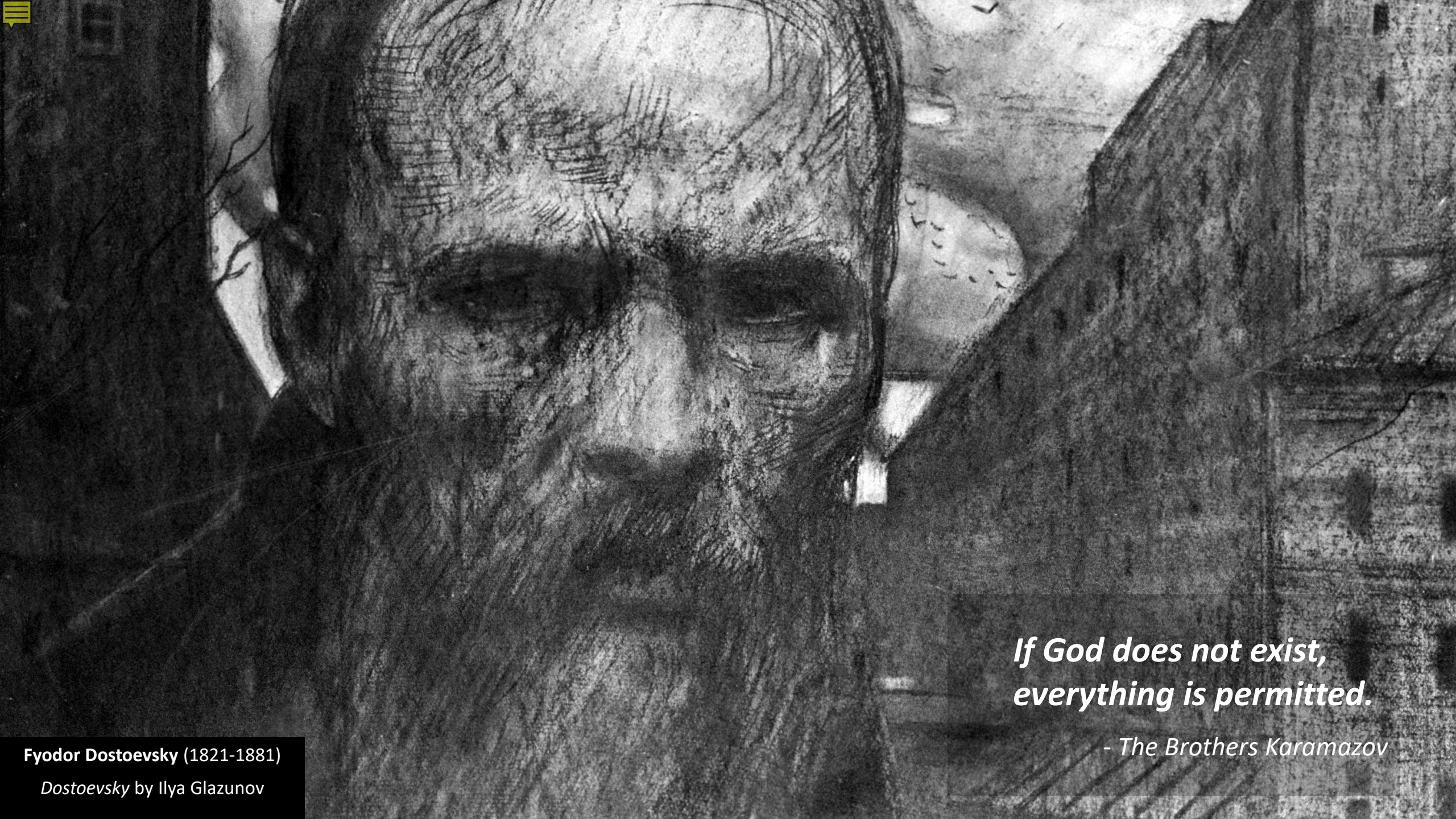
What We Learn From These Texts

- Paul explains to the Ephesians: “At one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), and **try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord**” (Eph. 5:8-10).
- In this passage, it is not the Word of God which is the light; **the believer is the light**. The Word becomes a part of the believer’s nature so that he is now enabled to walk in the light. You come to know, to approve, to like, what He wants you to do. The picture is that **you** are changed. The light of Scripture is now internalized. One’s moral sense is growing. **We come to know the will of God by doing it**. Walking in the light leads us to a knowledge of His will.



Submitting to God's Will

- “Many are the plans in a man’s heart, but it is the Lord’s purpose that prevails” (Prov. 19:21).
- Old Testament scholars Keil and Delitzsch offer this commentary: “The counsel of God (his plan of the world and salvation) is accomplished and comes into actual fact. This counsel is the true reality elevated above the checkered manifoldness of human purposes, aims, and subjectivities, which penetrates and works itself out in history. **The thoughts of a man thus gain unity, substance, endurance, only in so far as he subjects himself to this counsel, and makes his thoughts and actions conformable and subordinate to this counsel.**”



*If God does not exist,
everything is permitted.*

- The Brothers Karamazov

Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881)

Dostoevsky by Ilya Glazunov



Mortimer J. Adler
1902-2001
American Philosopher

Adler on Consequences

American philosopher Mortimer Adler said that “more consequences for thought and action follow from the affirmation or denial of God than from answering any other question.”

Applications to Our Present Concerns

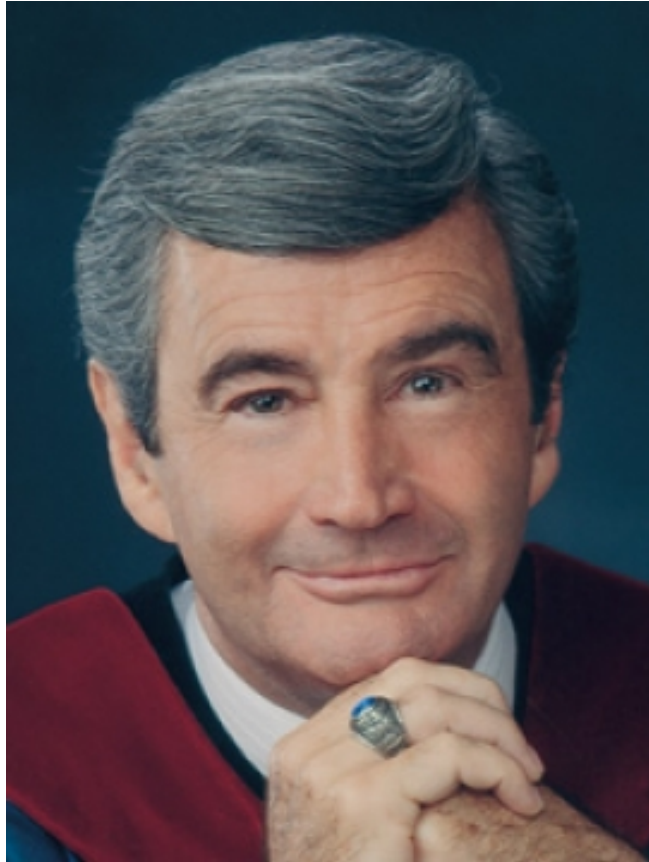
1. God has an eternal plan that He is working out for His own glory.
2. There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan that can succeed against the Lord” (Prov. 21:30). “For the Lord Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him? His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?” (Is. 14:27).
3. Rather than being anxious, worried, or fearful, God calls us to trust in Him with all of our hearts. “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Is. 55:8-9).



Applications to Our Present Concerns

4. The Lord will guide you through every crisis. “You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory” (Ps. 73:24).
5. God will never abandon you: “For He Himself has said, ‘I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you,’ so that we may confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What shall man do to me?’” (Heb. 13:5-6).
6. “My God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19).
7. “All is calm in heaven, however stormy it may be on earth” (Charles Bridges).

God Will Not Let Go



D. James Kennedy

1930-2007

“God makes it clear that whatever event comes upon us, no matter how grim or ghastly in itself, as soon as it touches our lives, the hand of God will reach down and take it captive. And God will not let go until it yields up its treasure to our soul. That is the promise of the Almighty.”