

"Guided By God" (Part 2)

Last week was the first of two sermons on how we can experience God's guidance and direction in our lives. I said that God *wants* to lead His children – that He has a plan and purpose for our life and wants the pieces to fit together. We looked at three ways God guides us – sort of general ways God guides people: through common sense, through our conscience, and through the collective wisdom of the past, what people before us have learned. Let's continue, and look at some specific ways God has to lead and direct His people.

God guides us through the Bible, especially through the life and teachings of Jesus. So many people over the ages have discovered what the Psalm writer said: "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path" (Psalm 119:105). For centuries Christians have found the Bible to be one of the most reliable ways we can get divine direction. God has a way of speaking to us through His Word.

One way people go to the Bible for guidance is to open it at random to a passage, and hope God speaks through it. I just found out there's actually a name for this. It's called "bibliomancy". Maybe you've done this, and the verse you turned to really helped you. But it's a hit or miss proposition. (One person calls it "Bible roulette"). There was this young man who met a girl, and fell in love with her. After dating for a few months, he decided he'd like to marry her. He really didn't know her that well, but he was head over heels in love and was sure she was the one for him! He thought he'd see if the Bible could provide some guidance. He picked it up, closed his eyes, and randomly turned to these words: "Go, marry a promiscuous woman and have children with her." Well, that was a bit upsetting, so he thought he'd try it again. He picked up the Bible and turned to these words: "The mouth of the Lord has spoken!"

The best way to leverage the power of Scripture is to read it daily, to soak it up. That way, when we're faced with a particular decision or looking for guidance, we'll know where to look in the Bible, or God will bring a Scripture to mind that we've learned. Also, has this ever happened to you? You're doing your daily devotions, and the Scripture suggested for *that day* just speaks to your question or situation. I've had this happen a number of times. You probably have too.

The Bible is a reliable guide for us - especially the life and teachings of Jesus. Remember, God will *never lead us to do something that is against Scriptural teaching, or contrary to the spirit or teachings of Jesus.* So, maybe someone has treated us badly or hurt us. To pray, "Lord, show me how to get even with this person" is foolish! God's not going to help us find a way to pay this person back! Jesus said we are to bless those who curse us, do good to those who hate us! Here's a Christian who's tempted to cheat on their husband or wife. You don't need to ask for God's guidance in this matter! God's not going to guide us to commit adultery, when Scripture and the teachings of Jesus are clearly against that. Likewise, we don't have to ask for God's guidance whether or not we should lie to someone, or cheat someone out of something!

We might say, "It's hard to know what God wants me to do." But often it's very plain in Scripture – we just don't want to hear what the Bible has to say! *God guides us through the Bible, His Word to us.*

God guides us through presenting opportunities and needs. Sometimes we feel drawn to a need, a ministry or service, to do something that matters as a Christian. Like someone will say, "The Lord laid a burden on my heart for such and such...". This can be a good clue that God is guiding us! If we have a concern for a particular person or area of need, and we feel a steady pull towards this, it's a pretty good indication that God wants us to follow through with this.

God guides us through the way He has gifted us. We all have natural talents and abilities. Followers of Jesus have been given a gift or gifts of the Spirit (the gifts are listed in 1 Corinthians, chapter 12, Romans chapter 12, and Ephesians 4). Honestly assessing our natural talents and spiritual gifts can help us find guidance and direction for our life, because God wants us to use these to bless people and to make life better!

Sometimes we might look for some extraordinary display of divine guidance, when we could just look in the mirror and ask, "What are my interests?" "What do I like to do?" "What am I good at?" "How can I use what I've been given in the service of the Lord?" *God guides us through the way He has gifted us.*

God guides through changing circumstances, through open and closed doors. Sometimes God *opens* doors of opportunity. In 1 Corinthians 16:9 the Apostle Paul says, "A great door for effective work has opened to me." I've heard people tell how they felt God leading them to do something, and just at that time a door of opportunity opened up (often unexpectedly). But God also leads us by *closing* doors. We thought everything was working out: we were going to get this job or get into this college, then "bam" – the door closed. This can be God's leading too. When I was 30 years of age I felt a need to get out of pastoral ministry. I no longer had any desire to continue my work as a pastor. I applied for a managerial position with Goodwill Industries. I had an interview in Washington, D.C. I waited and waited to hear back on this. Each day I anxiously looked for a letter in the mail. Finally it came. I was rejected. I didn't get the job. It threw me for a loop. I was deeply disappointed. I've often wondered how my life would have unfolded had I gotten that job. As it turns out, that door God closed shaped the rest of my life. I got another job, and within a year was back in pastoral ministry. I've had no regrets that I never did get the Goodwill position.

Sometimes God guides us in a way that we have to wait a while for the next step. This can be hard, those times when we feel like we're in limbo, when we sense no leading of the Lord. It's hard to avoid rushing into something, or going ahead on our own, because God seems to be silent. C. Everett Koop was at one time Surgeon General of the U.S. Soon after he stepped down from that position I heard him speak at Eastern College. Someone asked him if he felt God leading him in any particular direction. I love his refreshingly honest answer: He replied, "I am so confused right now it couldn't possibly be the leading of the Lord." I read about a lady named Mary who discovered that sometimes God guides us to slow down and wait. She sensed God saying to her, "Mary, I have the whole universe to consider, *not just you*" – and how deflating that was to hear! God leads us one step at a time, and sometimes he wants us to wait a while before we take the next step. If we get no sense of guidance or leading from God, then it is wisest to wait!

Then too, God guides through other people. Sometimes *God's* voice comes to us through *other people's* voices. God can guide us through *wise and godly people*. Notice, I said through wise and godly people. Some people mean well, but they're not very wise. Other people may be very smart, but not Christians – they don't see life from the same perspective as a follower of Jesus does. This is where it helps to have a few close friends who are believers, who can counsel us and pray with us, people with whom we can "check it out" when we may feel God is guiding us in a particular direction.

Sometimes God uses professional counselors and advisors to guide us. Proverbs 11:14 says, "In an abundance of counselors there is safety." Several times in my life I've gotten professional counseling, and I believe God has used these people to help guide me in the right paths.

God guides us through meditation and prayer. You figured I was going to say that, didn't you! "Just *pray*, and you'll get guidance." But God *does* have a way of revealing His plans for us if we can just be quiet and listen for His voice. God is honored when we come to Him in prayer and sincerely ask for guidance. The Book of James says, "You do not have because you do not ask" (James 4:2). Taking time daily to be quiet before God can enhance our ability to discern God's leading.

This brings us to my last point: ***God guides us through the Holy Spirit.*** Jesus said, "But when he, the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13). If we've committed our lives to Christ, we have the Holy Spirit inside us. One of the ministries of the Spirit is to guide us into God's will and ways.

We find stunning examples of this in the early church. "While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart from me Barnabus and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off" (Acts 13:2-3). In Acts 16:6 it says, "They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia." The Spirit's leading, or this "inner voice" of the Spirit, may be a quiet, compelling sense that we must do something, or perhaps it is a gentle tug pulling us in a certain direction.

We may ask, "How can I be sure it's the Holy Spirit prompting me? That it's just not myself? Good question! Sometimes we may get it wrong. A few weeks ago, someone posted on our neighborhood news about a dog missing. I was heartbroken. It was near dark. I felt led to go look for the dog. So I got in the car, plugged in the address, and drove around. I didn't find the dog! But there have been other times when I've just sensed that I ought to do something, or that I should call someone or contact someone. And I've done it, and I can see the hand of God in it.

E. Stanley Jones, a famous missionary-evangelist of some generations back, had some helpful things to say about distinguishing the Spirit's voice from our own. He writes, "(1) The Inner Voice (of the Spirit) always tells you to do the Christlike thing; the voice of the subconscious (self) tells you to do the thing you want; (2) The Inner Voice is authoritative, quietly so. It does not argue. Its commands are self-authenticating. The voice of the subconscious (the self)

argues; it tries to convince you, and its voice lacks moral weight." If it's the Holy Spirit, it will be a feeling or conviction that quietly persists and grows

In the north of England they've been digging coal for over a century. Miners go miles from the central shaft. One day two miners lost their way. The light finally went out, and they were in danger of losing their lives. After wandering around in darkness for a while, they sat down, and one of them said, "Let's sit perfectly still and see if we can feel the way in which the air is moving – because it moves from the shaft." They sat there a long time, when suddenly one of them felt a slight touch of air on his cheek. "I felt it!" he cried out. They went in the direction the air was moving and reached the central shaft and daylight.

God has given to followers of Jesus the Holy Spirit to guide us, if we can just be still at times, and wait to feel His gentle breeze.

An Anglican bishop was asked to preach at a Christian conference in England. For many weeks he did not respond to the invitation. Finally, the secretary for the conference wrote this insistent note: "We must know if you are coming. We need to make our plans." The bishop wrote back that he was waiting for the guidance of the Holy Spirit on the matter, and would let them know his decision in four weeks. The exasperated secretary fired back this letter: "Bishop, please don't bother. Cancel the invitation. We are not interested in having anyone speak at our conference who lives four weeks away from the Holy Spirit." In John 10, Jesus said His sheep learn to recognize the Shepherd's voice and follow it

We've looked at some of the ways God guides us. You still might say, "But, Harry, it's hard sometimes to know what God wants me to do!" I know. I struggle too at times.

As I said last week, God wants to guide us, but not override us. He doesn't just give us a set of detailed instructions for every day. There is usually a touch of uncertainty when we're wanting God's marching orders! But that should give a spark to life, a sense of adventure, and hopefully motivate us to mature to the point where more and more we can discern God's Voice among the many voices, as He longs to lead us in His ways.

