

"Guided By God" (Part 1)

Exodus 13:20-14:2 says this: "They set out from Succoth, and camped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. The LORD went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people. Then the LORD said to Moses: Tell the Israelites to turn back and camp in front of Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, in front of Baal-zephon; you shall camp opposite it, by the sea." This is part of the account of God freeing the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt. Notice the instructions God gives! Wouldn't it be great if we got specific guidance from God like that! A pillar of a cloud during the day and fire at night to lead the way. Details about even where to camp!

The Scripture reading for today is from Acts 10. Cornelius, a God-fearing Roman centurion, is visited by an angel, who tells him to send some of his men to Joppa, to Simon Peter. The angel even tells him where Peter is staying. Meanwhile, Peter is praying, and has a vision from God impressing upon him not to call Gentiles "unclean". The two men connect, and the end result is that for the first time, the Holy Spirit comes on a group of Gentiles. Wouldn't we love to have such clear direction from God that results in something significant happening for God's glory?

But, probably for most of us, finding God's guidance is hardly that plain and direct. God doesn't speak in an audible voice. We don't have clear-cut visions telling us what to do. In fact, often God seems to be silent. I don't know about you, but how many times I've wished I could just sit down with Jesus face to face and ask Him, "Lord, what do you want me to do?"

I think most of us would welcome God's clear guidance in life. We'd like God to lead us to the right job, show us where to go to college, whom to marry, whether to move or stay put. Perhaps right now there's some decision you have to make where you'd love for God to just plainly show you what to do!

If so, we're not alone in this. For instance, the Psalmist said, "Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness because of my enemies – make straight your way before me" (Psalm 5:8). In another place the Psalm writer begs, "Show me your ways, O Lord, teach me your paths; guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long" (Psalm 25:4-5).

Now a lot of people can believe God guided people in Bible times, sometimes even in miraculous ways. But does God guide people in similar fashion today?

The truth is: God *wants* to guide and direct His children today! In Psalm 32:8 God says, "I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel and watch over you." In Psalm 48:4 it says, "For this God is our God for ever and ever; he will be our guide even to the end." The prophet Isaiah says, "This is what the Lord says – your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: 'I am the Lord your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go'" (Isaiah 48:17). Exodus 15:13 says of God, "In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed. God has a plan and purpose for your life and mine, and He

wants to guide us so that the pieces of this plan fit together.

Of course, the monster question is: **How? How can I experience the leading of the Lord?** We will look at this today, and in my next message.

Before we begin to look at specific ways God guides us, I want to say some things about *how we can prepare to receive God's guidance*. **First of all, we've got to want God completely in our life.** Many people, in a time of distress or difficulty, would love to have God guide them so they get out of a jam, or get off the hook. But when the crisis passes, they go back to their old way of forgetting God and doing their own thing! We can want God's guidance in *some areas of our life*, but not in *everything*.

Other times, we can ask God to guide us, when all we want is God's stamp of approval on our own decisions! Bruce Larson, in a devotional book, begins one meditation with some humor. He writes, "Bermuda is one of my favorite places in the world. When some dear friends offered us their home there for a week in exchange for babysitting two Labrador retrievers, *I got immediate guidance to go!*" An architect once said how people come and ask him to design a house for them, but he soon discovers that they already have designed it for themselves. What they really want is his approval on their own plans, and to see him draw on paper what they have in their mind! We have to realize that if we're going to be God-guided people, we have to want God's will in every part of our life, and avoid just having Him approve decisions that we have already made.

A second thing we can do to prepare ourselves to receive God's guidance is this: We've got to be humble. Psalm 25:9 says, "He guides the *humble* in what is right, and teaches them his way." Sometimes a person will say this about another, "You know, I want to help so-and-so and steer him in the right direction, but it's hard. He thinks he knows it all." It should make us humble to realize God is so much better at guiding people than we are! He sees the big picture. We don't. He sees all the facets of a situation. We don't. God will guide us, if we are humble enough to see our limitations, and trust His wisdom.

A third thing we can do to prepare ourselves to receive God's guidance is this: When God shows us what to do, we should do it. I've known of a few people who felt God's call when they were young to be a pastor, or to preach, but they put it off. Looking back, they regretted it. Or maybe they answered the call later in life and did this as a second career, but wasted all those years! Perhaps you are engaged to be married, but your partner is not a Christian. You sensed God guiding you to break off the relationship, but you thought things would work out. But they didn't. Perhaps the marriage failed. Or maybe the marriage is still together, but the spiritual intimacy you hoped for is missing. Sometimes we sense God leading us in a certain way, but it's *out of our comfort zone*. And so we back down. When we sense God guiding us, it's important to take action, and not put it off.

One more point before we look at some *specific ways* God guides: **Most of us would be glad if God would just lay everything out clear and plain.** Like every morning just send us a text or

email with directions for the day! Or deliver a set of instructions to our front door. Wouldn't that make it easy! But would this be the best way? Suppose parents did this with their children. They tell them everything they are to do. They give them a list each day with specific instructions: When to get up. What clothes to wear. What to eat for breakfast. How to style their hair. What friends to choose. What activities to be in. What music to listen to. Well, the child would never grow up! Imagine a 16 year old under that kind of parenting!

God's "problem" is to guide us, but not override us! God wants to lead us in right paths, but at the same time, to help us grow – help us develop our character so that we more spontaneously seek His will in each situation, that it becomes second nature to us to make wise and godly choices, and that we learn to discern His voice among many voices. This would never happen if God just dropped a set of instructions from the sky each day, telling us in detail what to do. See, if we have to struggle to discern God's guiding hand, that's not a bad thing, because out of that struggle and uncertainty we can mature as a believer. Also, that little bit of uncertainty helps create a sense of adventure in our life!

OK. Let's begin to list some specific ways God guides us. (We will just start today, and get into it more next week). We'll start with some very *general ways* God built a directional system into us humans.

God guides us through common sense. God's given us a mind to think, and to use common sense. (Although at times it seems like some people weren't there when God was parceling this out!). Taking it slow and using common sense is usually more reliable than acting with quick impulse. However, just a note: Occasionally God guides believers to do something that defies logic or common sense. It may seem foolish at the time. This is true, but we should be careful here. If we feel God leading us to do something that runs against common sense, it's always good to check this out first with other believers – especially wise and mature followers of Jesus. A lot of heartache is created because God's people have done things that are simply foolish and defy common sense.

God also guides through conscience. Conscience is that "little voice within" that helps us distinguish between right and wrong. Many people have gone down the wrong path, even made shipwreck of their lives, because they chose to do what their conscience told them was wrong.

However, conscience is not always a reliable guide, because conscience is determined by our upbringing, or our environment, or the culture in which we live. For example if a child is raised in a home where there is cursing, or where parents hate foreigners, or where lying and cheating are acceptable, that child may grow up to do these things without any pangs of conscience, believing these behaviors are normal and acceptable. In some Eskimo cultures if a hunting friend (a "brother") is a guest, he is allowed to sleep with the host's wife as a sign of respect and appreciation. Also, there is the Himba tribe in Africa where the men offer their wives for a guest to sleep with. Of course, this is not consistent with the sexual ethics taught in the New Testament. So, our conscience *may be* a safe guide for us in some cases, *but not always*.

Another manner in which God guides us is through the "collective wisdom of the past".

We are not the first generation of human beings to set foot on planet earth! We can learn from the successes and failures of individuals and societies that came before us. It's like the common saying, "Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it."

This is certainly true for followers of Jesus! The Church has been around a long time. We are not the first Christians who've tried to learn how to follow in God's paths. When I was in theological seminary we were required to take two semesters of church history. It was a hard course, and I'm not particularly good at history. But it struck me how the basic issues Christians wrestled with in the first centuries seem to crop up again and again in different forms in each new generation.

We can learn from the past. Reading biographies of great Christians of the past, reading Christian classics that have been around a long time, can inform us today.

God guides us through common sense...through conscience...through the collective wisdom of the past. Are there other ways God guides us? Of course! We'll check some out next week!

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