

Divine Guidance

by G.H. Lang

The sermon emphasizes the need and advantage of divine guidance, and the conditions of understanding God and His ways, including meekness, faith, and knowledge.

Scripture: Proverbs 3:5

Topics: "Divine Guidance", "Faith And Obedience"

Description

G.H. Lang preaches about the importance and advantage of divine guidance in the affairs of men, emphasizing the near-sightedness of man and the need for God's wisdom to order our steps for a blessed eternity. He uses the example of Israel being led by God as encouragement for individuals to seek divine guidance in their lives. Lang describes the conditions and characteristics necessary for understanding God's ways, highlighting meekness as a chief condition and faith as a working confidence in God. He also discusses the importance of waiting on God's perfect timing and the various supernatural methods God uses to guide His people.

Transcript

"He led them also by a straight way, that they might go to a city of habitation." Psalm 107. 7.

I. THE NEED AND ADVANTAGE.

Guidance by God of the affairs of men is a great fact of history and a great theme of the Bible.

Man is near-sighted and cannot see into even tomorrow; indeed, he does not always see what is going on before his face. Consequently he cannot so wisely order today as that it shall fit into tomorrow, and thus his best laid plans go oft astray. As verse 4 of the above psalm pictures him, he wanders in a wilderness, in a desert way. He who has had occasion to traverse a desert will appreciate, as does the writer, the fatal ease with which the way may be missed, and the great difficulty of finding it again. Such is human life, especially in relation to its goal, eternity. None of the sons of Adam knows of himself the best way to order today in preparation for tomorrow, or the true path to bring him at last to a blessed eternity.

How great then, how urgent, is the need of divine guidance. How rest-giving it is to the mind of the traveller to be in the care of a guide who knows the whole country and each turn of the way ahead. How foolish to muddle on personally ordering affairs, instead of availing oneself of the perfect knowledge and invincible power of God, the Unerring. It was the wisest of all the sons of men who said

Trust in the Lord with all thine heart,
And lean not upon thine own understanding:
In all thy ways acknowledge him,
And he shall direct thy paths.

(Solomon, Prov. 3. 5, 6.)

Guidance is an individual matter. No one can walk securely by light granted to another. These pages will not be as a father confessor giving authoritative directions that the penitent must follow. But the aim is to set forth principles and conditions that attach to the guidance of God, illustrated by incidents from Scripture and experience, such as may help each to gain the guidance that may be needed from time to time.

II. ISRAEL AN EXAMPLE AND ENCOURAGEMENT.

The psalm above quoted, as to its first intention, is a forecast of the last days of the present age of human history. This may be learned from verse 3, which pictures a gathering together of the people of Israel from all points of the compass. Of old, they were led out of Egypt to Canaan, from west to east. After the captivity in Babylon, some of the nation were brought back to Palestine, from east to west. But never yet have they been gathered to their city from east and west, north and south. This will come, as foretold by Isaiah (43. 5/6; 49. 12). They were led by God of old and will be so again, as are all to-day who walk humbly with Him.

From verse 4 onward, the prophet recounts the experiences through which Israel is being led, and is yet to be led, to bring about that joyful regathering. Thus we learn that the guidance of God is already available, and will continue to be so until men of faith have been brought to His goal for them. There is no need to wander aimlessly through life, as lost in a desert. God will guide if we will be led.

III. GUIDANCE DESCRIBED.

The two terse sentences quoted from psalm 107. 7 cover almost the whole topic of divine guidance.

1. "He led ". Who led? None less than Jehovah, the eternal, faithful, all-powerful, unsleeping God. Therefore they who would be led must honour Him as God, with an undivided trust and obedience.
2. "He led ". The Leader goes before; the led follow. This virtually covers all the conditions for being guided. Some of these will be noted in due course.
3. "He led them ". Who? Those who knew they were lost in the desert, who were hungry, thirsty, fainting, troubled, distressed, incapable, and who then cried unto God. (vs. 4-6).
4. "He led . . . by a way ", a road. No other eye than His saw any road ; it was a wilderness, wild, deserted, trackless, an impossible region for men, except to lose themselves and die. But God saw a way through and beyond.
5. "He led them by a straight way ". Not straight in the sense of a straight line, the nearest distance between two points; but direct, as one may say "The nearest way for you is so and so; it is longer but more

direct; keep straight on; do not turn; the shorter way is more difficult to find and is rougher ". God's way is always the only right way, the really straight way. See this word in Ezra 8. 2. The way from Assyria to Canaan was actually a great detour, northwest, west, and south; but it was the straight way under the then conditions of travel.

6. "He led them that they might go." He who will escape from the desert must keep on the go. Lethargy of soul is fatal. He who settles down cannot be led; he does not need a guide. Contentment with this world, satisfaction with the present, precludes guidance. Hence the deadly peril of earthly prosperity and ease. They conduce to slumber in the desert.

7. "He led them . . . to a city." The journey thither demands the pilgrim spirit, unrelenting advance, dogged resistance of the craving for sleep in this enchanted valley; here have we no abiding city, but we seek one to come; let us press on. (Heb. 13. 14; 6. 1). But God is leading the pilgrims to a city - to a place of stability, of permanent safety and peace, to a kingdom which cannot be shaken. He knows the only route thither; faith follows earnestly, restfully.

8. It is a "city of habitation ", of permanent residence; they go out thence no more. The wanderings, the wilderness are past, though not the enriching knowledge of God there learned; the city of God has been gained; where He has His home they who were led find their home:

O happy band of pilgrims,
Look upward to the skies,
Where such a light affliction,
Shall win you such a prize.

(Neale.)

IV. MEEKNESS THE CHIEF CONDITION.

Perverseness precludes guidance; meekness secures it. Here is God's warning to the perverse: "I will instruct thee and teach thee in the way which thou shalt go; I will counsel thee with mine eye upon thee. Be ye not as the horse or as the mule, which have no understanding; whose trappings must be bit and bridle to hold them in, else they will not come near unto thee." Psalm 32. 8, 9.

Here is His promise to the meek: "The meek will he guide in judgment; and the meek will he teach his way." Psalm 25. 9.

Upon this verse Dr. Arthur T. Pierson wrote as follows in "George Muller of Bristol", pp. 185-187:

In this careful weighing of matters many sincere disciples fail, prone to be impatient of delay in making decisions. Impulse too often sways, and self-willed plans betray into false and even disastrous mistakes. Life is too precious to risk one such failure. There is given us a promise of deep meaning:

"The meek will He guide in judgment;
And the meek will He teach His way."

(Psalm 25. 9.)

Here is a double emphasis upon meekness as a condition of such guidance and teaching. Meekness is a real preference for God's will. Where this holy habit of mind exists, the whole being becomes so open to impression that, without any outward sign or token, there is an inward recognition and choice of the will of God. God guides, not by a visible sign, but by swaying the judgment. To wait before Him, weighing candidly in the scales every consideration for or against a proposed course, and in readiness to see which way the preponderance lies, is a frame of mind and heart in which one is fitted to be guided; and God touches the scales and makes the balance to sway as He will. But our hands must be off the scales, otherwise we need expect no interposition of His, in our favour. To return to the figure with which this chapter starts, the meek soul simply and humbly waits, and watches the moving of the Pillar.

GEORGE MULLER

One sure sign of this spirit of meekness is the entire restfulness with which apparent obstacles to any proposed plan or course are regarded. When waiting and wishing only to know and do God's will, hindrances will give no anxiety, but a sort of pleasure, as affording a new opportunity for divine interposition. If it is the Pillar of God we are following, the Red Sea will not dismay us, for it will furnish but another scene for the display of the power of Him who can make the waters to stand up as an heap, and to become a wall about us as we go through the sea on dry ground. Mr. Muller had learned this rare lesson, and in this case he says : "I had a secret satisfaction in the greatness of the difficulties which were in the way. So far from being cast down on account of them, they delighted my soul; for I only desired to do the will of the Lord in this matter."

Here is revealed another secret of holy living. To him who sets the Lord always before him, and to whom the will of God is his delight, there pertains a habit of soul which in advance settles a thousand difficult and perplexing questions.

The case in hand is an illustration of the blessing found in such meek preference for God's pleasure. If it were the will of the Lord that this Continental tour should be undertaken at that time, difficulties need not cast him down ; for the difficulties could not be of God; and, if not of God, they should give him no unrest, for, in answer to prayer, they would all be removed. If, on the other hand, this proposed visit to the Continent were not God's plan at all, but only the fruit of self-will; if some secret, selfish, and perhaps subtle motive were controlling, then indeed hindrances might well be interferences of God, designed to stay his steps. In the latter case, Mr. Muller rightly judged that difficulties in the way would naturally vex and annoy him; that he would not like to look at them, and would seek to remove them by his own efforts. Instead of giving him an inward satisfaction as affording God an opportunity to intervene in his behalf, they would arouse impatience and vexation, as preventing self-will from carrying out its own purposes.

Such discriminations have only to be stated to any spiritual mind, to have their wisdom at once apparent. Any believing child of God may safely gauge the measure of his surrender to the will of God, in any matter, by the measure of impatience he feels at the obstacles in the way; for, in proportion as self-will sways him, whatever seems to oppose or hinder his plans will disturb or annoy; and, instead of quietly leaving all such hindrances and obstacles to the Lord, to deal with them as He pleases, in His own way and time, the wilful disciple will, impatiently and in the energy of the flesh, set himself to remove them by his own scheming and struggling, and he will brook no delay. Whenever Satan acts as a hinderer (1 Thes. 2. 18) the obstacles which he puts in our way need not dismay us; God permits them to delay or deter us for the time, only as a test of our patience and faith, and the satanic hinderer will be met by a divine Helper who will sweep away all his obstacles, as with the breath of His mouth.

An attentive study of George Muller's life yields the impressive lesson that, throughout the over seventy years of his course as a Christian and an active servant of God, he seems never to have missed the way and to have needed to retrace his steps. This indeed should be the normal Christian experience. For the path of the righteous (the man who studies to do always and only what is right before God) is compared to the shining light, rising steadily from dawn to midday (Prov. 4. 18). Now the sun has never been known to hesitate, miss its way, and have to lose time to regain its true course. But such a life can be lived only by ceaseless divine guidance and energy, even as it is God who keeps the sun in its true path.

V. CONDITIONS OF UNDERSTANDING GOD AND HIS WAYS.

1. Knowledge. The greatest leader of men of all time was Moses. He took up the colossal task of leading a vast rabble of lately liberated slaves, and he guided and disciplined them through forty years of life in a desert. Feeling the immensity of his responsibility, he prayed thus to God: "Show me now Thy ways, that I may know Thee" (Ex. 33. 12-16). To understand God's ways of doing things is a chief means of getting to understand God Himself. It is in such acquaintance with God that our eternal life stands (John 17. 3). For that only is living which is in harmony with the Living God; all else is but dead work. So that to walk with God in His ways is as indispensable to our true life as was the guidance of God to Israel in the desert. They of Israel who would not walk in God's ways found the desert a place of death. Whereas they who went on with God got through the desert and lived in the land of promise.

But Moses felt keenly that he needed more than God's guidance, he needed God's presence, God Himself with him. Here again the condition must of necessity be that we walk in His ways, for obviously God cannot and will not walk in any other ways than His own. His thoughts are not our thoughts, nor are our ways His ways; consequently we must forsake our thoughts and our ways and must learn His thoughts and follow His ways (Isa. 55. 7-9).

Here lies a chief reason why so much of the experience of many Christians is confused, darkened, with little benefit to themselves or others. It is fatally easy to bring over into our post-conversion period the thoughts and ways of our prechristian days, even as Israel brought into the wilderness, the ideas, lusts, ways they had followed before redemption. Now life in tents, wandering in a wilderness, a region where no food could be grown, was so essentially different to life in Egypt, one of the most fertile regions of earth, that Israel had to start life over again. And what was true in matters of the body was still more true of the inward man. In questions of right and wrong, good and evil, they had very much more to unlearn and relearn, and they were all too slow to discard their own thoughts and accept the thoughts of God.

The chief lesson they had to learn was to be followers; not to move camp till the Pillar of cloud moved, but to move when it moved, and where (Num. 9. 15-23). To move without the Ark and the Pillar assured defeat (Num. 14. 9-45); but victory was secure when Jehovah went before them. (Num. 10. 35).

And corresponding with this outward guidance, the people were to learn to follow also the moral directions of God's law. Those who did this really benefited by the outward leading; the others died in the desert in spite of it. For material advantages, though real, and even when God given, are only transitory, and may leave him who enjoyed them destitute at last. It is when the heart appropriates and the life displays 'the inward, spiritual guidance and presence of God that permanent blessing accrues and eternal life advances towards its goal. Then the very desert becomes the path of progress to the followers of the Lamb, whereas to others it is Kibrothhattaavah, the grave of them that lusted (Num. 11. 34; 1 Cor. 10. 6).

They who do feel the necessity of the guidance and presence of God will not seek it in vain. It was granted to Moses. But the distinction made in Ps. 103 is searching, "He made known His ways unto Moses, His doings unto the children of Israel". The one understood God's ways of going about matters; the majority saw only what God did, His visible acts. The principles guiding His acts they did not discern, and so they soon forgot His doings (Ps. 78. 11), and turned again to their own ways to their undoing.

Some learn at school the formulae for working sundry problems in geometry or mathematics; but if they do not grasp the reasons governing the working, they shortly forget the process and cannot longer solve the problems. It is so in the spiritual realm. When any one heareth the word of the kingdom and understandeth it not, then cometh the evil one and snatcheth away that which hath been sown in his heart (Matt. 13. 19). Hence the urgency of the prayer, "That I may know Thy ways, and get to know thee Thyself ". Then service rises to be co-operation, and God's co-worker attains to some instinctive sense of what God is about and the ways by which He will work out His purpose. Then is life harmonious, powerful, restful, even in the desert; for when the Lord goes before, it is to seek out a resting place for us (Num. 10. 33). Then the heart ceases to be surprised or stumbled by the hardships of the wilderness, nor is frightened by its foes or perils. "The people that know their God shall be strong, and do" (Dan. 11. 32).

O blessed life! the heart at rest

When all without tumultuous seems--

That trusts a Higher Will, and deems

That Higher Will, not mine, the best.

(Matson).

2. Faith. But such walking with God implies a further condition, a working confidence in God. Without this the soul will fail at the tests God proposes. Israel could not trust God to defeat the giants and so they would not go up and fight; thus they forfeited guidance and failed to inherit (Num. 13. 14). Distrust and disobedience are twins and are inseparables (Heb. 3. 18, 19).

Distrust of God is sadly common even in the express things of God, in the very realms where He is most needed and most entitled to His own way, even in His house, the church, and in the work of spreading His message among men. He made known His ways unto His apostles; they made them known unto others; and the records of these His wishes and ways are given permanently in the New Testament. But, alas how few have ever persevered in God's ways of worship, of service in His house, of gospel efforts. There is a practical distrust of the Holy Spirit and His ways, and a consequent return to human notions and ways in worship and labour.

Yet they who take this backward course often profess to seek the mind of God from His word; but not having faith to follow the ways therein shown they presently declare that no pattern is therein found, and that so they must follow their own best judgment as to how to worship and work.

Thus did Israel's leaders come to Jeremiah professedly to seek the guidance of God; but not having a real trust in God, they could not act upon His direction to stay in God's land and rely on Him to protect and support them, and they declared that God had not given directions through His prophet. Through distrust of God they were determined to take their own course, and they carried the majority with them. Toward Egypt they set their faces, and it seemed to prosper, for in Egypt they duly arrived, and found there quiet

and food. There, to be sure, they even built a synagogue and maintained the form of divine worship. But God was not in it, as Jeremiah forewarned them and as the ultimate issue showed (Jer. 42-44).

Such has been the history of the Christian centuries. In every generation there have been leaders who so acted. Ostensibly they have sought the mind of God as to His church and work, but, with their own plans formed and minds resolved, they have declared and still do declare, that they do not see in the New Testament a pattern to be followed. Therefore they invent methods of their own borrowed from Egypt; they force the worship and work of the Lord to their own devised patterns, and often they seem to prosper; they carry with them the majority; they get large funds, gather great meetings, perhaps make many professed converts; they create vast organizations and make a fair show in the flesh; but at last God writes on it, Ichabod, the heavenly glory is departed. "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear," and take note that to gain divine guidance and to act upon it demands real faith, a present working trust in God. A minister of a great denomination discerned in the New Testament that apostles and evangelists did not receive a fixed salary, but were supported by voluntary gifts. In faith he acted upon this guidance from the Word. Asked by fellow-ministers whether he wished them all to follow his example, he answered, "which the Egyptians assaying to do were drowned" (Heb. 11. 29).

A number of church leaders in eastern Europe were shown the Lord's plan for His churches and that it did not include inter-church organization, with the attendant details, such as central control, a central fund, human regulations, officials, salaries.. They acknowledged that the plan shown to them was Scriptural, but they did not follow it. Asked why, they replied that they agreed that it was the right and best way for such as had faith to take it. They had not such faith. Their own official positions and incomes were involved; they could not trust God without these, and so they chose to regard the ways of the Lord as optional. Only faith can traverse the desert with God; only faith can walk on the waves with Christ; only faith can conquer the giants and inherit the land of promise. Only faith can take God's way; unbelief cannot see His guidance or disobey it. But if any one intends to do he shall know (John 7. 17).

3. Waiting. God's time for action is as perfect as His way of acting. King Saul's position was critical (1 Sam. 13). The Philistines had gathered in overwhelming force and were about to attack. His own men had scattered. God's prophet had not come to offer the sacrifice and entreat the help of God. Saul was unwilling to fight without seeking God but unable to await God's hour. Something had to be done; the last hour for action had arrived; so he forced himself (ver. 12) to do what he knew it was not his province to do, for he was not a priest; and no sooner had he completed his presumptuous and premature sacrifice than God's hour and God's servant arrived. But Saul had disobeyed the God whose aid he professed to desire and had undermined his position and authority. God's last minute is often a little after our last minute. "Blessed are all they that wait for Him" (Isa.30.18). "Who is wise, that he may understand these things, prudent, that he may know them; for the ways of Jehovah are right, and the just shall walk in them; but transgressors shall fall therein" (Hos.14. 9 (A.S.V.)

God's governmental machinery cannot be overdriven or forced. It works smoothly, accurately, to time, His tune. It is dangerous when we force ourselves to take our own course. I had promised to help a young Christian in a difficult affair. That morning I was taken suddenly ill, and fever made it dangerous to leave the house. I was unwilling to disappoint him and unaccustomed to letting my body dictate, so I forced myself against my better judgment and went. Apparently all was well, for we succeeded in getting matters ordered in his favour. But before long I had great reason for regret, because he turned out to be very unsatisfactory, and I was greatly prejudiced by having supported him.

God in His wisdom may not always facilitate, but may frustrate. One of His most faithful servants had to say "He hath walled up my ways with hewn stone" (Lam. 3. 9: cf. Jer. 36. 5). It is folly to try and surmount the wall or break it down. Hindrance may be guidance.

In the impetuosity of manhood's full energy Moses commenced prematurely what was indeed designed of God to be his life-work, the delivering of his people from oppression; but he needed forty years of self-discipline in the desert before he was fitted in spirit. A zealous young man, desirous of serving in the gospel in a tropical and hard sphere, came to stay with me to talk over sundry serious hindrances in his way. Both I and a still more experienced servant of Christ felt him to be not yet so spiritually developed as to be equal to the land and life in view. He was advised to wait, the view being expressed that the difficulties were of God to hinder his going forth until he was equal in spirit to the dangers and labours ahead. But he took other counsel, adopted human measures, put pressure on the circumstances, and in connection with a certain missionary magazine and fund he was soon in the land of his choice. After five years of thwarting, discipline, and deep exercise of soul, he owned that his departure had been in advance of the divine leading. It was only then that the Lord opened to him the sphere of work for which by that time he had, it is hoped, become fit.

But in contrast, the man Jesus had such delicate perception of His heavenly Father's will that He would not yield to His mother's suggestion to supply wine at the feast until the exact hour had come (John 2. 4). Nor could he be taunted into action by His unbelieving brothers (John 7. 2-10). He had waited through 4,000 years of human sorrow and need before coming to earth as Saviour, for He would not come of Himself, but only when sent by His Father in the fulness of time, the fit time, at the consunation, the heading up, the conjunction of the ages (John 8. 42: Heb. 9. 26). He has waited nineteen centuries, and is still waiting, His Father's time for His return to reign and to carry to completion His saving work for the earth (Ps. 110. 1). The passage cited is found four times in the New Testament, as if to impress our minds with this thought of the waiting attitude of the Son of God. Let each ask for himself a fulfilment of the prayer, "The Lord direct your hearts into the love of God and into the patience of Christ" (2 Thess. 3. 5), for only as far as this is our state of heart shall we be able to recognize the leading of God.

VI. METHODS OF GUIDANCE.

As an embroiderer or an illuminator of books shows his skill by variety of design or colour so does God His wisdom. It is greatly variegated (Eph. 3. 10). He reveals the same variety in His guidance.

This variety serves good ends. By it there is a display of what God is, as superior to others, and thereby He receives glory as doing what none other can do. As long as the magicians could do what Moses did who was to say that his God was greater than their gods? But presently they were baffled and were compelled to acknowledge the finger of God (Ex. 8. 19). But not only is God honoured, but the man gains rest-giving assurance, inward peace, by seeing that the great God is acting in His affairs. The soul says, If God be for me what matters who is against me? I will not fear; what shall man do unto me? In this confidence he can wait patiently, act resolutely, be content to know only the next step, be quiet as to the future.

By this process the prayer of Moses is answered; the soul accumulates experience of the ways of God and gains experimental acquaintance with God Himself. Thus is the eternal life in him developed, expanded, enriched; the child of God becomes a man of God, thoroughly equipped unto every good work (2 Tim. 3. 14-17).

One general feature of divine guidance is that it is supernatural. A pillar of cloud is not a common phenomenon. That something so unsubstantial should stand stationary, should not be dispersed by the violent unobstructed winds of the desert, should move hither and thither by evident control - these features indicate that God may be expected to guide by methods beyond the disposal of any one else. Life under His guidance rises above the commonplace; one must expect the unexpected, be prepared for the unlikely, the unforeseen.

What man can do by his natural God-given intelligence he does not need special guidance in doing. He does not need special guidance to eat food, make clothes, mount a horse, or board a train. But in the many and critical matters which transcend natural wisdom man is encouraged to ask wisdom of God, assured that He gives it liberally, nor upbraids us for our lack of it. Only he must ask in faith, in the confident- expectation that the wisdom needed and sought will most certainly be given as promised. If this confidence be not present the asker will either not wait for the guidance, or not see the leading if granted, or will hesitate to follow it; being double-minded he will of necessity be unstable, unreliable. To what purpose should guidance be given to such an one? (Lam. 1. 5-7). Of the various God-employed methods of guiding the following may be considered in detail.

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