

(Finding God's Will) 4. Guidance Through External Means

by Zac Poonen

God's will can be known through the teaching of the Bible, the witness of circumstances, and the advice of other believers, and we must seek guidance through these means to make decisions that align with His will.

Scripture: 2 Timothy 3:16

Topics: "Seeking God's Will", "Guidance"

Description

Zac Poonen emphasizes that the Holy Spirit guides us through external means such as the teaching of the Bible, the witness of circumstances, and the advice of other believers. He explains that the Bible provides clear instructions on many aspects of life, while circumstances can either confirm or challenge our decisions, and the counsel of fellow believers can offer valuable perspectives. However, Poonen warns against relying solely on any one of these means, as true guidance comes from a personal relationship with God and the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. He encourages believers to seek God's will actively and to be discerning about the influences around them. Ultimately, the voice of the Lord must be the final authority in our lives.

Transcript

The Holy Spirit speaks to our spirits through the following external means also, when we are seeking His guidance:-

- (i) The teaching of the Bible.
- (ii) The witness of circumstances.
- (iii) The advice of other believers.

If we have ascertained the will of God accurately, the witness of the Holy Spirit through these external means will correspond with His inner witness within our spirits.

The teaching of the Bible

The Bible has been given that we might be instructed in correct doctrine and be led in the path of righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16,17). In a number of matters, God's will is already clearly revealed therein.

For example, if you are considering marriage with an unbeliever (even a nominal Christian and a regular church-goer), the Word of God is explicit: "Do not be unequally yoked up (a symbol of marriage) with unbelievers - do not make mismatched alliances with them" (2 Cor. 6:14).

Similarly, if we see a brother in material need, the Bible clearly teaches that we are to help him (James 2:15,16; 1 John 3:17). Or if you have a dispute with a fellow-believer and you want to know whether to go to court or not, the Bible emphatically says, "No" (1 Cor. 6:1-8). The Bible also teaches that lying and theft are always wrong (Eph. 4:25,28). If there has been some estrangement between you and another believer, again the Bible leaves no room for doubt to what you should do. You are to go and be reconciled, taking the initiative yourself, even when it is the other person's fault (Matt. 5:23,24).

If we have signed a contract or a bond with any firm or institution, there is no need to seek God's will on whether we can break the contract or "jump" the bond, where a more attractive vacancy offers itself elsewhere. The Bible tells us that the person who dwells with God "keeps a promise even if it ruins him" (Psa. 5:4-TLB) and also that God delights in those who keep their promises and abhors those who don't" (Prov. 12:22-TLB). It is a shame and a disgrace when a believer does not keep his word.

Similarly, the Bible also teaches that we should not remain in debt to anyone (Rom. 13:8).

Besides specific commands, the Word of God lays down guiding principles too. For example, when contemplating marriage a young man may wonder whether he should ask for dowry as others in his society do. God's Word clearly warns us to beware of covetousness and of the love of money. The overall teaching of Scripture is also that we should learn to give rather than receive - much less demand (cf. Acts 20:33-35). It is clear then that God can never approve of anyone asking (or even hoping) for a dowry.

What about the acquisition of wealth by games of chance? Proverbs 28:22 (TLB) says, "Trying to get rich quick is evil and leads to poverty" (cf. Prov. 13:11; 28:20; and 1 Tim. 6:9-11). From these passages it is clear that God does not approve of a believer taking part in any form of lottery or betting or gambling.

God's Word is indeed "a flashlight to light the path ahead (of us) and keep (us) from stumbling" (Psa. 119:105-TLB).

On rare occasions, God may confirm His guidance to us through some specific passage in our daily Bible reading. But care is needed for we are often likely to read into a passage what is not basically there. Usually such passages are brought to our attention without our looking for them. It is unwise to look for suggestive verses in our daily Bible-reading, for that is not the purpose of the Quiet Time, and we can easily be led astray thereby.

A young believer may be keen on going to the U.S.A. when God wants him to remain in India. The material attractions of the West may, however, have such a strong hold on him that when he finds a verse like, "They shall fly... toward the West" (Isa. 11:14), he will immediately conclude that God is encouraging him to go. Our hearts are deceitful and the Devil is a subtle foe. We need to be on our guard against both.

God may, in his supernatural wisdom, lead us through a verse taken out of context, but this is the exception rather than the rule. And when God employs such a method it will usually be only to confirm guidance that we receive through the normal channels. We should never make such verses the sole basis for guidance in any matter.

The witness of circumstances

God is the God of Providence. He can control our circumstances and thereby indicate His will. He allows certain things to befall us, either to confirm the guidance we have received through the witness of the Spirit, or to stop us from taking a wrong step. As George Muller has said, "The stops of a good man, as well as his steps are ordered by the Lord" (cf. Psa. 37:23).

It must be borne in mind though, that Satan too can order circumstances to some extent, to lead us astray. Many have been deceived in choosing a life-partner through being guided by circumstances ordered of the Devil to trap them! The way to escape deception is by fulfilling the conditions for guidance, mentioned in Chapter two.

Circumstances ordered of God must be submitted to and accepted, whereas those arranged by Satan must be resisted. If we are not sure we can pray something like this, "Lord, I do not know whether this situation is of Thy ordering or from Satan. But I do want Thy perfect will at any cost. Save me from being deceived and thus missing Thy best. If this is from Thee, I accept it joyfully. If it is from Satan, I resist him and bind him in Thy Name." The Lord will preserve our way and make all things work together for our good if we are sincere before Him and live according to His commandments (Prov. 2:8; Rom. 8:28). Satan hindered Paul from going to Thessalonica, but Timothy went instead and God's purposes were still fulfilled (1 Thess. 2:18; 3:1,2).

We find a number of cases of circumstantial guidance in the Acts of the Apostles. God used persecution to scatter the church from Jerusalem for the spread of the gospel (Acts 8:1). Paul and Barnabas moved from one place to another whenever persecution increased to such an extent that there was no point in staying (Acts 13:50,51; 14:5,6,19,20). This was in accordance with the Lord's own precept and example (Matt. 10:23; John 7:1). God used a famine to take Saul and Barnabas to Jerusalem (Acts 11:28-30), where they learnt the power of importunate prayer (Acts 12:5). Coming back to Antioch, they imparted this spirit of prayer to their fellow-workers and this finally resulted in the extension of the work to distant regions (Acts 12:25-13:3).

Adverse circumstances in Philippi were used of God to lead Paul and Silas to preach the gospel to a needy jailor (Acts 16:19-34). The last eight chapters of Acts reveal how God used circumstances to lead Paul to preach the gospel to a number of people whom he would not normally have met (cf. Phil. 1:12).

Some of the world's greatest missionaries were guided to their fields by circumstances. David Livingstone initially felt led to go to China and took medical training in preparation for service in that land. When he was ready to go, China was "closed" because of the opium war. The London Missionary Society suggested the West Indies. He turned it down on the grounds that there were many doctors there already. Finally, through contact with pioneer missionary Robert Moffat, Livingstone went to Africa.

Adoniram Judson felt challenged to serve as a missionary in India and accordingly set sail from America. On arrival, in India he was not permitted to stay. While in Madras, he was told to leave the country by a certain date. He was therefore compelled to board the only boat leaving Madras before that date. The boat was bound for Burma and Judson spent the rest of his life there.

The work that these two men accomplished for God in these lands clearly proves that it was God who had ordered the circumstances that led them there.

God may prevent us from going into paths He has not chosen for us by putting us on a sick bed or by making us miss a train, an appointment or an interview. Disappointments can be His appointments for us,

if we live under His Lordship. When we do not obtain something we greatly longed for and prayed for, we can be sure that God has something better in store for us.

Missing a train and the delayed arrival of a boat once led me to speak to a needy soul who opened his heart to the Lord that very night. Transfer to a ship that I did not like was once God's means of leading me to a young sailor who gave his life to the Lord and was baptized. God makes no mistakes. He is the God of Providence. We can trust Him to order circumstances for His glory and for our good.

We can ask God at times to reveal His will by altering circumstances, when we find an obstacle in our path. When the Lord called me to resign my commission as an officer in the Indian Navy, I applied for resignation and the application was promptly rejected by the Naval Head-quarters. Circumstances were thus contrary to what I felt to be the witness of the Holy Spirit within me. I prayed that the Lord would alter circumstances and release me from the Navy and make that a confirmation of His call. I applied three times for permission to resign my commission. Finally after two years I was released. It was then evident to me that the initial hindrance had been engineered by Satan. Yet God overruled it, to strengthen my faith in His total authority over governments and earthly powers and to teach me more of His ways.

Indeed, He is the One who has the key to every door. When He opens a door, no one can shut it, and when He shuts a door, no one can open it (Rev. 3:7). Even a king's heart can be turned by our God in any direction He chooses (Prov. 21:1; cf. Ezra 6:22).

God may also lead us contrary to circumstances. When the first wave of persecution swept Jerusalem, the apostles did not run away but prayed for boldness. God filled them with His Spirit and made Jerusalem tremble at the manifestation of His power, for His time had not yet come for the disciples to be scattered (Acts 4:29-33; 5:11-14).

When Philip left Samaria for the desert road, it was contrary to circumstances, which called for him to remain in Samaria where he was being greatly used (Acts 8:26).

Circumstances are thus, not always an indication of God's will. They must be considered only in conjunction with, and in subjection to the inner witness of the Holy Spirit within our spirits, and His witness through the Bible. God does not except His children to be pawns moved around by circumstances. He is the Lord of circumstances and He wants His children to share in His mastery over them.

Is it right to ask God to indicate His will by a sign? The Old Testament records some instances of men asking God for a sign to indicate His will. Abraham's servant asked for a sign and thus found the bride God had chosen for Isaac (Gen. 24:10-27). Gideon asked God to confirm His will by a sign. The next night he asked God to reverse the sign. God answered on both occasions and confirmed His will (Judg. 6:36-40). The sailors on the ship carrying Jonah drew lots to find who was the cause of the storm. God answered (Jonah 1:7). The casting of lots was used on a few other occasions too (Josh. 7:14; 1 Sam. 10:20; 14:41-44; cf. Prov. 16:33). In the New Testament, there is only one instance of men asking God for a sign to indicate His will and that too was before the day of Pentecost (Acts 1:23-26). Note that after the advent of the Holy Spirit, there is not a single recorded case in the New Testament of believers seeking to find God's will through a sign. This seems to indicate that it is no longer God's normal method of guidance. It served a purpose in Old Testament times, when the Holy Spirit did not indwell man - but not now.

God may confirm His will or encourage our fainting spirits with an occasional sign. When other methods of guidance are apparently inconclusive, only then dare we ask God for a sign. But we should pray even

about the type of sign to ask for. We should not use signs as a means of getting our own way. For instance, we should not ask God for a miracle as a sign, when our real intention is to get some excuse for not going along the path we know He wants us to take. At the same time, we shouldn't ask God for something so common that it is not really sign at all, just as an excuse for going along our own self-chosen path.

We should also beware of the procedure adopted by some Christians who ask God for a verse as a sign and then shut their eyes, open their Bibles and place their finger on the page that falls open. That method can lead us astray and in any case is foolish. The Bible is not a book of magic! Don't treat it as if it were.

To make a sign the chief, or the only means of guidance is totally un-Scriptural. We should remember too that desiring signs is a mark of spiritual immaturity. We should grow out of that state as soon as possible.

The advice of other believers

The New Testament places great emphasis on the necessity of believers functioning together as members of one body. No member can function independently. Everyone is dependent on others for existence and survival. It is quite reasonable therefore to expect that even in guidance, God would place great value on the fellowship of believers. He has made this provision as a safeguard against our missing His perfect will.

But ourselves we may not be able to see all the advantages and disadvantages of taking a certain step. The advice of other godly men will be invaluable in helping us to look at the decision we are taking from different angles. This is especially necessary when facing a major decision. If, in proud self-sufficiency, we ignore this God-ordained means of guidance, we cannot but suffer loss.

The Bible says, "There is safety in many counselors.....Don't go with your plans without the advice of others....The advice of a wise man refreshes like water from a mountain spring. Those accepting it become aware of the pitfalls on ahead.....A fool thinks he needs no advice, but a wise man listens to others....The good man asks advice from friends; the wicked plunge ahead and fall" (Prov. 24:6; 20:18; 13:14; 12:15,26-TLB).

However, there are two extremes to avoid. One is to be completely independent of the advice of godly men. The other is to be so completely dependent on their advice as to accept it without question as God's perfect will. If we cling to either of these extremes, we shall either go astray or remain spiritually stunted all our lives. Much as God wants us to take counsel from our fellow-believers, He does not expect us to be slavishly subject to their advice - even if they are saintly men.

The Bible presents truth in a perfect balance. Man, unfortunately, has a tendency to swing to an extreme. It is thus that many heresies have been born in Christendom.

In the Old Testament, this balanced view is clearly presented in 1 Kings chapters 12 and 13. In chapter 12, the young king Rehoboam should have taken the advice of the godly elders instead of listening to young men like himself. Because he didn't, he precipitated the division of his kingdom. In chapter 13, the young prophet should not have listened to the advice of the older prophet ("It is not mere age that makes men wise" - Job 32:9-TLB). Because he did, he lost his life.

In the New Testament, we see this balance in the life of the Apostle Paul. In Acts 13:1-3, we find God calling Paul for foreign missionary service. But God revealed His will for Paul to his fellow-workers also at the same time. What God spoke to Paul privately was thus confirmed to him through the others. On the

other hand, in Acts 21:1-15, we find Paul rejecting the advice of every one of his fellow-believers (and even the prophecies of some of them) and going in the direction he felt was God's will for him. God later confirmed that his going to Jerusalem was right. (Acts 23:11).

On yet another occasion, at the beginning of Paul's Christian life he went to Arabia, having found the will of God entirely on his own without consulting anyone at all (Gal. 1:5-17).

These examples from God's Word suggest that there are some occasions when we should pay attention to the advice of godly men, and some occasions when we may have to go against the advice of those same men, and yet other occasions when we do not have to consult anyone at all. In any case whether we accept or reject or do not seek the advice of others, the ultimate decision must always be our own, for we are personally answerable to God for our decisions. The advice of a man of God can be invaluable but is never infallible.

Michael Harper, in his book, 'Prophecy - A Gift for the Body of Christ', writes: "Prophecies which tell other people what they are to do, are to be regarded with great suspicion. 'Guidance' is never indicated as one of the use of prophecy. Paul was told what would happen to him if he went to Jerusalem, but not told either to go or refrain from going. His friends may have advised him concerning this, but the guidance did not come from the prophecy. Agabus foretold a famine, but his prophecy gave no instructions as to what should be done about it. On the whole in the New Testament guidance is given directly to the individual, not through another person, as was common in the Old Testament. For instance, although Cornelius was told by an angel to send for Peter (Acts 10:5), Peter himself was told to go with them through an independent agency, (Acts 10:20)".

In his booklet, Guidance, James McConkey writes, "Flesh and blood could not reveal the Christ to Simon Peter (Matt. 16:17). Neither can it reveal the things of Christ to us. Nor does it matter whether it is our own flesh and blood or that of some other. For the other man's flesh and blood is compassed with the same infirmities and subject to the same errors as ours. Moreover the man who relies upon his friends for his guidance soon finds that the variety of advice they offer only increases the number of his perplexities. Then too it is a Divine principle that God does not reveal to another man His plans for your life. Christ's rebuke of Peter for wanting to know His will for John is the clearest possible proof of this (John 21:22). You may help the little child to walk in its beginnings of the art. But if it is ever to learn to walk alone there comes a time when it must let go of your hand entirely and cease from all dependence upon you. The believer who would learn to walk with God must learn the same lesson. And as a baby learns it at the cost of some tumbles even so must the Christian learn it at the cost of some mistakes. It were better learned that way than not be to learned at all. The price of a few blunders is not too high for such a treasure as a walk alone with God in the place of His own God-given guidance. Does God then have no place for your Christian friends in this matter of guidance? He surely does. Get all the help; all the light upon God's Word; all the experience of others you possibly can. That is, you may get the facts from others. But you must make your decisions yourself. For when we reach the place of decision we cannot evade the personal, patient waiting upon God alone, through which we learn the most precious lessons of His guidance."

Nevertheless, whenever we do have to go against the advice of mature believers, let us check our own guidance repeatedly to make sure it is indeed God who is leading us. This must especially be remembered when making major decisions.

The voice of the Lord

On the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter was rebuked by God for attempting to place the Lord Jesus on the same level as Moses and Elijah. These men were indeed God's spokesmen in Old Testament times, but a new age was dawning and Peter had to recognize that. In this new age there was to be only one Spokesman - "This is My Son, the Beloved One; be constantly listening to and obeying Him" (Mark 9:7). And so, when the disciples looked up again, "they suddenly no longer saw anyone with them except Jesus only." It is the voice of the Lord that we must ultimately hear, whatever external means God may use to speak to us.

In "What Shall This Man Do?", Watchman Nee says, "Christianity always involves a personal knowledge of God through His Spirit, and not merely the knowing of His will through the medium of a man or a book..... Thus in practical terms today, we have the written Scriptures, represented by Moses, and we have the living human messenger, represented by Elijah who never tasted death. These two God-given gifts to every believer are among the most precious factors that contribute to our Christian life: the Book of God in our hand to instruct us, and the friend who lives close to the Lord and who can often make known to us what the Lord has shown him. The Book is always right; the counsel of a friend so often is. We need God's Book and we need God's prophets. He would not have us discard either. But the lesson of this incident on the mount of transfiguration is surely that neither of these can take the place of the living voice of God to our hearts.

"We dare not despise God's messengers. We need again and again the arresting challenge of a truly prophetic spoken word or the calm of mature spiritual instruction. But we do not commit ourselves totally and exclusively to the revelation which comes through holy men of God, however sound it be. We are under duty bound to listen to the voice of the Lord and to follow Him.

"Still less dare we despise God's written Word. The inspired Scriptures of truth are vital to our life and progress, and we would not - we dare not - be without them. Nevertheless there are those of us who may be in danger of looking to the letter of the Word even more than to Jesus Christ Himself as our final authority. What the Bible says we set ourselves to carry out, religiously and in detail, and God may honour us for that. Yet if, in doing so, we go further and exalt the Bible to a position where our use of it challenges even the very Lordship of Christ Himself, we may run the risk of remaining tragically out of touch with Him.....

"(Christianity) demands a personal, first-hand intelligence of the will of God, that embraces these other God-given aids but that does not end with them."

The secret of guidance lies in hearing the voice of the Lord.

Summary

1. The Holy Spirit guides us through the teaching of the Bible, when we are seeking His guidance.

(a) In many areas the Bible has already revealed what God's will is.

(b) God may confirm His guidance through a passage in our daily Bible-reading. But this should never be made the sole basis for guidance in any matter.

2. The Holy Spirit often speaks to us through the witness of circumstances.

(a) God can use circumstances either to confirm the guidance we have received or to prevent our taking a wrong step.

(b) But Satan too can order our circumstances to some extent. So they are not always an indication of God's will.

(c) God may lead us at times contrary to circumstances. We can also ask God to reveal His will by altering circumstances.

(d) God may occasionally confirm His guidance to us by means of a sign. However, asking for signs is a mark of spiritual immaturity and we should grow out of that state as soon as possible.

3. The Holy Spirit may speak to us through the advice of other believers.

(a) God has made this provision as a safeguard against our missing His will.

(b) The advice of godly men will enable us to see other aspects of a particular matter which we may have failed to consider.

(c) There are some occasions when we should pay attention to the advice of godly men, and some occasions when we may have to go against their advice.

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