

How God Guides

by
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*"Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel, and afterward
you will take me into glory."
Psalm 73:23-24*

There are no promises in God's Word more precious to the man who wishes to do His will, and who realizes the goodness of His will, than the promises of God's guidance. What a cheering, gladdening, inspiring thought is that contained in the text, that we may have the guidance of infinite wisdom and love at every turn of life and that we have it to the end of our earthly pilgrimage.

There are few more precious words in the whole Book of Psalms, which is one of the most precious of all the books of the Bible, than these: "You hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory." How the thoughtful and believing and obedient heart burns as it reads these wonderful words of the text! I wish we had time to dwell on the characteristics of God's guidance as they are set forth in so many places in the Word of God, but we must turn at once to consideration of the means God uses in guiding us.

I. God Guides by His Word

First of all, God guides by His Word. We read in Psalm 119:105, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path," and in the 130th verse of this same Psalm we read, "The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple." God's own written Word is the chief instrument that God uses in our guidance. God led the children of Israel by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. The written Word, the Bible, is our pillar of cloud and pillar of fire. As it leads we follow. One of the main purposes of the Bible, the Word of God, is practical guidance in the affairs of everyday life. All other readings must be tested by the Word. Whatever promptings may come to us from any other source, whether it be by human counsel or by the prompting of some invisible spirit, or in whatever way it may come, we must test the promptings, or the guidance or the counsel, by the sure Word of God, "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn" (Isaiah 8:20).

Whatever spirit or impulse may move us, whatever dream or vision may come to us, or whatever apparently providential opening we may have, all must be tested by the Word of God. If the impulse or leading, or prompting, or vision, or providential opening is not according to the Book, it is not of God. "'Let the prophet who has a dream tell his dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully. For what has straw to do with grain?' declares the LORD" (Jeremiah 23:28). If Christians would only study the Word they would not be misled as they so often are by seducing spirits, or by impulses of any kind, that are not of God but of Satan or of their own deceitful hearts. How often people have said to me that the Spirit was leading them to do this or that, when the thing that they were being led to do was in direct contradiction to God's Word.

For example, a man once called on me to consult me about marrying a woman who he said was a beautiful Christian, that they had deep sympathy for the work of God, and that the Spirit of God was leading them to marry one another. "But," I said to the man, "you already have one wife." "Yes," he replied, "but you know we have not gotten along very well together." "Yes," I said, "I know that, and, furthermore, I have had a conversation with her and believe it is your fault more than hers. But, however that may be, if you should put her away and marry this other woman, Jesus Christ says that you would be an adulterer." "Oh, but," he replied, "the Spirit of God is leading us to one another." Now, whatever spirit may have been leading that man, it certainly was not the Spirit of God, for the Spirit of God cannot lead anyone to do that which is in direct contradiction to the Word of God. I replied to this man, "You are a liar and a blasphemer. How dare you attribute to the Spirit of God action that is directly contrary to the teaching of Jesus Christ?"

Many, many times Christian people have promptings from various sources which they attribute to the Holy Spirit, but which are in plain and flat contradiction to the clear and definite teachings of God's Word. The truth is, many so neglect the Word that they are all in a maze regarding the impulses and readings that come to them, as to where they come from; whereas, if they studied the Word they would at once detect the real character of these readings.

But the Word itself must be used in a right way if we are to find the leading of God from it. We have no right to seek guidance from the Word of God by using it in any fantastic way, as some do. For example, there is no warrant whatever in the Word of God for trying to find out God's will by opening the Bible at random and putting a finger on some text without regard to its real meaning as made clear by the context. There is no warrant whatever in the Bible for any such use of it. The Bible is not a talisman, or a fortune-telling book, it is not in any sense a magic book; it is a revelation from an infinitely wise God, made in a reasonable way, to reasonable beings, and we obtain God's guidance from the Bible by taking the verse of Scripture in which the guidance is found, in the connection in

which it is found in the Bible, and interpreting it, led by the Holy Spirit, in its context as found in the Bible. Many have fallen into all kinds of fanaticism by using their Bible in this irrational and fantastic way.

Some years ago a prediction was made by a somewhat prominent woman Bible teacher that on a certain date Oakland and Alameda and some other California cities, and I think also Chicago, were to be swallowed up in an earthquake. The definite date was set and many were in anticipation, and many in great dread. A friend of mine living in Chicago was somewhat disturbed over the matter and sought God's guidance by opening her Bible at random, and this was the passage to which she opened:

The word of the LORD came to me: "Son of man, tremble as you eat your food, and shudder in fear as you drink your water. Say to the people of the land: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says about those living in Jerusalem and in the land of Israel: They will eat their food in anxiety and drink their water in despair, for their land will be stripped of everything in it because of the violence of all who live there. The inhabited towns will be laid waste and the land will be desolate. Then you will know that I am the LORD.'" The word of the LORD came to me: "Son of man, what is this proverb you have in the land of Israel: 'The days go by and every vision comes to nothing'? Say to them, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am going to put an end to this proverb, and they will no longer quote it in Israel.' Say to them, 'The days are near when every vision will be fulfilled. For there will be no more false visions or flattering divinations among the people of Israel. But I the LORD will speak what I will, and it shall be fulfilled without delay. For in your days, you rebellious house, I will fulfill whatever I say, declares the Sovereign LORD.'" The word of the LORD came to me: "Son of man, the house of Israel is saying, 'The vision he sees is for many years from now, and he prophesies about the distant future.'" Therefore say to them, "This is what the Sovereign LORD says: 'None of my words will be delayed any longer; whatever I say will be fulfilled, declares the Sovereign LORD'" (Ezekiel 12:17-28).

Of course, this seemed like a direct answer, and, if it were a direct answer, it clearly meant that the prophecy of the destruction of Oakland, Alameda, and Chicago would be fulfilled at once, on the day predicted. The woman told me of this that very day, but I was not at all disturbed. As we all know, the prophecy was not fulfilled, and this would-be prophetess sank out of sight, and, so far as I know, has not been heard from since. Many years afterward an earthquake did come to San Francisco and work great destruction, but San Francisco was not in this woman's prophecy, and Oakland and Alameda were, and they were left practically untouched by the earthquake, and certainly did not sink out of sight as the woman had predicted. And, furthermore, the earthquake that came to an adjoining city was many years after the prophesied date. This is only one

illustration among many that might be given of how utterly misleading is any guidance that we get in this fantastic and unwarranted way.

Furthermore, the fact that some text of Scripture comes into your mind at some time when you are trying to discover God's will is not by any means proof positive that it is just the Scripture for you at that time. The devil can suggest Scripture. He did this in tempting our Lord (Matthew 4:6), and he does it today. If the text suggested, taken in its real meaning as determined by the language used and by the context, applies to your present position, it is, of course, a message from God for you, but the mere fact that a text of Scripture comes to mind at some time, which by a distortion from its proper meaning might apply to our case, is no evidence whatever that it is the guidance of God. May I repeat once more than in getting guidance from God's Word we must take the words as they are found in their context, and interpret them according to the proper meaning of the words used and apply them to those to whom it is evident from the context that they were intended to apply. But with this word of warning against seeking God's guidance from the Word of God in fantastic and unwarranted ways, let me repeat that God's principal way of guiding us, and the way by which all other methods must be tested, is by His written Word.

II. God Leads by His Spirit

God also leads us by His Spirit, that is, by the direct leading of the Spirit in the individual heart. Beyond question, there is such a thing as an "inner light." We read in Acts 8:29, "The Spirit told Philip, 'Go to that chariot and stay near it.'" In a similar way, we read in Acts 16:6-7, of the Apostle Paul and his companions: "Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to." In one of these passages we see God by His Holy Spirit giving direct personal guidance to Philip as to what he should do, and in the other passage we see the Spirit restraining Paul and his companions from doing something they otherwise would have done. There is no reason why God should not lead us as directly as He led Philip and Paul in their day, and those who walk near God can testify that He does so lead.

I was once walking on South Clark Street, Chicago, near the corner of Adams, a very busy corner. I had passed by hundreds of people as I walked. Suddenly I met a man, a perfect stranger, and it seemed to me as if the Spirit of God said to me, "Speak to that man." I stopped a moment and stepped into a doorway and asked God to show me if the guidance was really from Him. It became instantly clear that it was. I turned around and followed the man, who had reached the corner and was crossing from one side of Clark Street to the other. I caught up to him in the middle of the street. Providentially, for a moment there was no

traffic at that point. Even on that busy street we were alone in the middle of the street. I laid my hand on his shoulder as we crossed to the farther sidewalk, and said to him, "Are you a Christian?" He replied, "That is a strange thing to ask a perfect stranger on the street." I said, "I know it is, and I do not ask every man that I meet on the street that question, but I believe God told me to ask you." He stopped and hung his head. He said, "This is very strange. I am a graduate of Amherst College, but I am a perfect wreck through drink here in Chicago, and only yesterday my cousin, who is a minister in this city, was speaking to me about my soul, and for you, a perfect stranger, to put this question to me here on this busy street" I did not succeed in bringing the man to a decision there on the street, but shortly afterward he was led to a definite acceptance of Christ.

A friend of mine walking the busy streets of Toronto suddenly had a deep impression that he should go to the hospital and speak to someone there. He tried to think of someone he knew at the hospital and he could think of but one man. He took it for granted that he was the man he was to speak to, but when he reached the hospital and came to this man's bedside there was no reason why he should speak to him, and nothing came of the conversation. He was in great perplexity, and standing by his friend's bed he asked God to guide him. He saw a man lying on the bed right across the aisle. This man was a stranger, he had been brought to the hospital for an apparently minor trouble, some difficulty with his knee. His case did not seem at all urgent, but my friend turned and spoke to him and had the joy of leading him to Christ. To everybody's surprise, that man passed into eternity that very night. It was then or never.

So God often guides us today (if we are near Him and listening for His guidance), leading us to do things that otherwise we would not do, and restraining us from doing things we otherwise would do. But these inward readings must be always tested by the Word, and we do well when any prompting comes to look up to God and ask Him to make clear to us if this leading is of Him, otherwise we may be led to do things which are absurd and not at all according to the will of God.

But though it is oftentimes our privilege to be thus led by the Spirit of God, there is no warrant whatever in the Word of God for our refusing to act until we are thus led. Remember, this is not God's only method of guidance. Oftentimes we do not need this particular kind of guidance. Take the cases of Philip and of Paul to which we have referred. God did not guide Philip and Paul in this way in every step they took. Philip had done many things in coming down through Samaria to the desert where he met the treasurer of Queen Candace, and it was not until the chariot of the treasurer appeared that God led Philip directly by His Spirit. And so with Paul, who in the missionary work to which God had called him had followed his own best judgment as God enlightened it until the moment came when he needed the special direct prohibition of the Holy Spirit of his going into a place where God would not have him go at that time.

There is no need for our having the Spirit's direction to do that which the Spirit has already told us to do in the Word. For example, many a man who has fanatical and unscriptural notions about the guidance of the Holy Spirit refuses to work in an after-meeting because, as he says, the Holy Spirit does not lead him to speak to anyone, and he is waiting until the Holy Spirit does. But as the Word of God plainly teaches him to be a fisher of men (Matthew 4:19; 28:19; Acts 8:4), if he is to obey God's word, whenever there is opportunity to work with men he should go to work, and there is no need of the Holy Spirit's special guidance. Paul would have gone into these places to preach the Gospel if the Holy Spirit had not forbidden him. He would not have waited for some direct command of the Spirit to preach, and when we have an opportunity to speak to lost souls we should speak, unless restrained. What we need is not some direct impulse of the Holy Spirit to make us speak, the Word already commands us to do that; what we need, if we are not to speak, is that the Spirit should directly forbid us to speak.

Furthermore, let me repeat again what we should bear in mind about the Spirit's guidance, that He will not lead us to do anything that is contrary to the Word of God. The Word of God is the Holy Spirit's book, and He never contradicts His own teaching. Many people do things that are strictly forbidden in the Word of God, and justify themselves in so doing by saying the Spirit of God guides them to do it; but any spirit that guides us to do something that is contrary to the Holy Spirit's own book cannot by any possibility be the Holy Spirit.

For example, some time ago, in reasoning with one of the leaders of the Tongues Movement about the utterly unscriptural character of their assemblies, I called his attention to the fact that in the 14th chapter of 1st Corinthians we have God's explicit command that not more than two, or, at the most, three, persons should be allowed to speak "in a tongue" in any one meeting, and that the two or three that did speak must not speak at the same time, but "in turn," and if there were no interpreter present, not even one should be allowed to speak in a tongue, that (while he might speak in private with himself in a tongue, even with no interpreter present) he must "keep silent in the church." I called this man's attention to the fact that in their assembly they disobeyed every one of these three things that God commanded. He defended himself and his companions by saying, "But we are led by the Spirit of God to do these things, and therefore are not subject to the Word." I called his attention to the fact that the Word of God in this passage was given by the Holy Spirit for the specific purpose of guiding the assembly in its conduct and that any spirit that led them to disobey these explicit commandments of the Holy Spirit Himself, given through His Apostle Paul and recorded in His Word, could not by any possibility be the Holy Spirit. Here, again, we should always bear in mind that there are spirits other than the Holy Spirit, and we should "test the spirits to see whether they are of God," and we should try them by the Word. One of the gravest

mistakes that anyone can make in his Christian life is that of being so anxious for spirit guidance that he is willing to open his soul to any spirit who may come along and try to lead him.

Furthermore, we should always bear in mind that there is absolutely no warrant in the Word of God for supposing that the Holy Spirit leads into strange and absurd ways, or does strange and absurd things. For example, some have certain signs by which they discern, as they say, the Holy Spirit's guidance. For example, some look for a peculiar twitching of the face, or for some other physical impulse. With some the test is a shudder, or cold sensation down the back. When this comes they take it as clear evidence that the Holy Spirit is present. In a former day, and to a certain extent today, some judge the Spirit's presence by what they call "the jerks," that is, a peculiar jerking that takes possession of a person, which they suppose to be the work of the Holy Spirit. All this is absolutely unwarranted by the Word of God and dishonoring to the Holy Spirit. We are told distinctly and emphatically in 2 Timothy 1:7 that the Holy Spirit is a spirit "of power, of love and of self-discipline." The word translated "self-discipline" really means "sound sense," and, therefore, any spirit that leads us to do ridiculous things, cannot be the Holy Spirit.

There are some who defend the most outrageous improprieties and even indecencies in public assemblies, saying that the Holy Spirit prompts them to these things. By this claim they make flies directly in the face of God's own Word, which teaches us specifically in 1 Corinthians 14:32-33 "The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. For God is not a God of disorder but of peace." And in the 40th verse we are told that "everything" in a Spirit-governed assembly should be "done in a fitting and orderly way." The word translated "fitting" in this passage means "in a becoming [or respectable] way," which certainly does not permit the disorders and immodesties, and confusions and indecencies and absurdities that occur in many assemblies that claim to be Spirit led, but which, tested by the Word of God, certainly are not led by the Holy Spirit.

III. God Guides Us by Enlightening Our Judgment

In the third place, God guides us by enlightening our judgment. We see an illustration of this in the case of the Apostle Paul in Acts 16:10. God had been guiding Paul by a direct impression produced in his heart by the Holy Spirit, keeping him from going to certain places which otherwise he would have gone. Then God gives to Paul in the night a vision, and, having received the vision, Paul, by his own enlightened judgment, concludes from it what God has called him to do. This is God's ordinary method of guidance when His Word does not specifically tell us what to do. We go to God for wisdom, we make sure that our wills are completely surrendered to Him, and that we realize our dependence on

Him for guidance, then God clears up our judgment and makes it clear to us what we should do. Here again we should always bear in mind that "God is light and in him is no darkness at all," and that, therefore, God's guidance is clear guidance, and we should not act until things are made perfectly plain.

Many miss God's guidance by doing things too soon. Had they waited until God had enabled them to see clearly, under the illumination of His Holy Spirit, they would have avoided disastrous mistakes. The principle that "the one who trusts will never be dismayed," (Isaiah 28:16) applies right here. On the other hand, when any duty is made clear we should do it at once. If we hesitate to act when the way is made clear, then we soon get into doubt and perplexity and are all confused as to what God would have us do. Many, many a man has seen the path of duty as clear as day before him, and, instead of stepping out at once, has hesitated even when the will of God has become perfectly clear, and before long was plunged into absolute uncertainty as to what God would have him do.

IV. God May Guide by Visions and Dreams

In Acts 16:9-10, we are told how God guided Paul by a vision, and there are other instances of such guidance, not only before Pentecost, but after. God may so guide people today. However, that was not God's usual method of guiding men, even in Bible times, and it is even less His usual way since the giving of His Word and the giving of the Holy Spirit. We do not need that mode of guidance as the Old Testament saints needed it, for we now have the complete Word and we also have the Spirit in a sense and in a fullness that the Old Testament saints did not have. God does lead by dreams today.

When I was a boy, sleeping in a room in our old home in Geneva, N. Y., I dreamed I was sleeping in that room and that my mother, who I dreamed was dead (though she was really living at the time) came and stood by my bed, with a face like an angel's, and begged me to enter the ministry, and in my sleep I promised her that I would. In a few moments I awoke and found it all a dream, but I never could get away from that promise. I never had rest in my soul until I did give up my plans for life and promise God that I would preach.

But the matter of dreams is one in which we should exercise the utmost care, and we should be very careful and prayerful and Scriptural in deciding that any dream is from God. Only the other day a brilliant and highly educated woman called at my office to tell me some wonderful dreams that she had and what these dreams proved. Her interpretation of the dreams was most extraordinary and fantastic. But while dreams are a very uncertain method of guidance, it will not do for us to say that God never so guides, but it is the height of folly to seek God's guidance in that way, and especially to dictate that God shall guide in that way.

V. God Does Not Guide by Casting Lots in This Dispensation

In Acts 1:24-26 we learn that the apostles sought guidance in choosing by lot one to take the place of Judas. This method of finding God's will was common in the Old Testament times, but it belongs entirely to the old dispensation. This is the last case on record. It was never used after Pentecost. We need today no such crude way of ascertaining the will of God, as we have the Word and the Spirit at our disposal. Neither should we seek signs. That belongs to the imperfect dispensation that is past, and even then it was a sign of unbelief.

VI. God Guides by His Providence

God has still another way of guiding us besides those already mentioned, and that is by His providences, that is, He so shapes the events of our lives that it becomes clear that He would have us go in a certain direction or do a certain thing. For example, God puts an unsaved man directly in our way so that we are alone with him and thus have an opportunity for conversation with him. In such a case we need no vision to tell us, and we need no mighty impulse of the Holy Spirit to tell us, that we ought to speak to this man about his soul. The very fact that we are alone with him and have an opportunity for conversation is of itself all the Divine guidance we need. We do need, however, to look to God to tell us what to say to him and how to say it, but God will not tell us by some supernatural revelation what to say, but by making clear to our own minds what we should say.

In a similar way, if a man needs work to support himself or family, and a position for honest employment opens to him, he needs no inner voice, no direct leading of the Holy Spirit, to tell him to take the work; the opening opportunity is of itself God's guidance by God's providence.

We must, however, be very careful and very prayerful in interpreting "the readings of providence." What some people call "the leading of providence" means no more than the easiest way. When Jonah was fleeing from God and went down to Joppa he found a ship just ready to start for Tarshish (Jonah 1:3). If he had been like many today he would have interpreted that as meaning it was God's will that he should go to Tarshish, as there was a ship just starting for Tarshish, instead of to Nineveh, to which city God had commanded him to go. In point of fact, Jonah did take the ship to Tarshish but he "was under no illusion in the matter, he knew perfectly well that he was not going where God wanted him to go, and he got into trouble for it. Oftentimes people seek guidance by providence by asking God to shut up a certain way that is opening to them, if it is not His will that they should go that way. There is no warrant whatever for doing that. God has given us our judgment and is ready to illuminate our

judgment, and we have no right to act the part of children and to ask Him to shut up the way so we cannot possibly go that way if it is not His will.

Some fancy that the easy way is necessarily God's way, but oftentimes the hard way is God's way. Our Lord Himself said, as recorded in Matthew 16:24, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." That certainly is not the easy way. There are many who advise us to "follow the path of least resistance," but the path of least resistance is not always God's way by any means.

Some ask God to guide them providentially by removing all difficulties from the path in which He would have them go, but we have no right to offer such a prayer. God wishes us to be men and women of character and to surmount difficulties, and oftentimes He will allow difficulties to pile up in the very way in which we ought to go, and the fact that we see that a path is full of difficulties is no reason for deciding it is not the way God would have us go. Nevertheless, God does guide us by His providence, and we have no right to despise His providential guidance. For example, one may desire to go to China or to Africa as a missionary, and God does not give him the health requisite for going to China or to Africa. He should take that as clear providential guidance that he ought not to go, and seek some other opportunity for serving God.

Many people are asking God to open some door of opportunity, and God does open a door of opportunity right away, but it is not the kind of work they would especially like to do, so they decline to see in it a door of opportunity. The whole difficulty is that they are not wholly surrendered to the will of God.

Before we close this subject let us repeat again what cannot be emphasized too much or too often, that all readings, whether they be by the Spirit, by visions, by providences, by our own judgment, or by advice of friends, or in any other way, must be tested by the Word of God.

The main point in the whole matter of guidance is absolute surrender of the will to God, delighting in His will, and willingness to do joyfully the very things we would not like to do naturally, the very things in connection with which there may be many disagreeable circumstances, because, for example, of association with, or even subordination to, those that we do not altogether like, or difficulties of other kinds. It is to do joyfully what we are to do, simply because it is the will of God, and the willingness to let God lead in any way He pleases, whether it be by His Word, or His Spirit, or by the enlightening of our judgment, or by His providence, or by whatever way He will. If only we will completely distrust our own judgment and have absolute confidence in God's judgment and God's willingness to guide us, and are absolutely surrendered to His will, whatever it may be, and are willing to let God choose His way of guidance, and will go on

step by step as He does guide us, and if we are daily studying His Word to know His will, and are listening for the still small voice of the Spirit, going step by step as He leads, He will guide us with His eye; He will guide us with His counsel to the end of our earthly pilgrimage, and afterward receive us into glory.

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