

# How God Guides

*... he will be our guide even to the end. Psalm 48:14*

## A Preface

### **My stories and yours...**

Along with what I've found in the Bible about how God guides, I'm going to share a lot of my own stories. This topic isn't theoretical for me. I've been trying to follow his lead since I met him on August 20, 1972. I've seen the Lord do some very cool things as I've tried to hear his voice and have made tons of mistakes in the process. It's been quite a wild ride, and I'll share what I've learned along the way. I hope that my stories are an encouragement to you (both my successes and failures). I'm not implying that my experiences are necessarily a precedent for anyone else. You'll have your own stories, some of which you might not have thought about as "divine guidance."

If I can get you thinking about this, you might discover that God has been more involved in your life than you might have previously thought. One of my goals is to alert you recognize your "God sightings." (If you've ever watched any Alfred Hitchcock movies you've actually seen Hitchcock without knowing it. He used to make incognito cameo appearances in each of his films – on a bus, in a restaurant, on a crowded sidewalk. I don't know that he ever had any lines; he just sort of appears and then disappears. I call them "Hitchcock sightings." Maybe God has appeared in your life to lead you toward his will more often than you were aware. One of things I aspire to do is help you identify your "God sightings.")

### **Not an exhaustive list...**

Please know that I know that what I'm saying here is not all there is to know about knowing God's will. (I just wanted to see how many "knows" I could put in one sentence!) You won't find an exhaustive list of principles of divine guidance here. I'm pretty sure that such a list doesn't exist anyway. Once I think I've got God all figured out, he changes the rules on me. He's much more slippery than to be captured by even the wiliest of us!

I wrote the original edition of this paper in 1985. It's now 2012, and I've had 27 more years of reading the Bible, personal experiences, and stories to tell. If in another three decades I write another edition of this, I expect I'd have a bunch more to say (and might even have to "un-say" some things that have been amended in my thinking). So, while this isn't an exhaustive study on how God guides, it does represent many years of reflection, study, and trial and error.

### **Nervous about making a mistake...**

This paper is not meant to make you – as my dad used to say – *"nervous in the service."* *"Did God say this or was it that? I think he might want me to do such and such, but I'm just not sure. How can I know what he wants? What if I make a mistake about his leading?"* Join the club of many members if you've ever had such thoughts. If I personally had a nickel for every time I thought something was God's will, later to find it probably was not, I'd be filthy in nickels

today! Knowing what God wants is not an exact science. You'll miss it sometimes – maybe lots of times. There will also be times where you aren't sure whether or not you "heard right." As the *"sheep of his pasture,"* we're not the brightest of beings. I'm pretty sure he knows that already, and is entirely capable of getting us where he wants us even if we don't *"hear right."*

Even the first Christians made mistakes identifying God's will. I can't prove it, but it's my opinion that the first apostles were in too much of a hurry to fill the spot vacated by Judas. They cast lots (not necessarily something that is prescribed in the New Testament) and came up with a guy (Matthias) about whom we never again hear in the Bible (read it for yourself in Acts 1). If they had waited a little longer for God to do his thing, I think they'd have seen that Paul was God's choice for the twelfth apostle. I see another example of the early Christians making a mistake about God's plan in Acts 21. They devised a plan to keep Paul out of jail and reaped the opposite of what they were looking for. Paul himself went along with their ill-devised idea and as a result was imprisoned for the first time. I've learned to say to the Lord, *"I know I'm going to make mistakes, but may my mistakes be seldom and small!"*

If I personally had a nickel for every time  
I thought something was God's will,  
later to find it probably was not,  
I'd be filthy in nickels today!

I don't think that our honest errors in judgment irritate God at all. I'm talking about times when we thought he was leading us to do something and later found out that he wasn't. He's a patient Father, a tender Shepherd. It's when we try to manipulate the circumstances and put God's seal on it that probably serves to tick him off! I don't think he likes his name being used as an excuse for our stupid behavior.

I'd like to thank my good friend Dan Wagner for editing this writing. He's been an amazing help to me in this way. Dan has edited many of my papers, this being one of the lengthiest. Thanks, Dan!

We've made it so if you prefer one topic over another you can click on a particular chapter in the Table of Contents. But I will warn you that I intended a bit of a progression in the order of the material here, and you might find it best for you to get the whole train of thought so that you don't become a "One Tool Christian." I also advise you to begin with the rather lengthy introduction. It sort of sets the tone for my take on this topic of "How God Guides."

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August, 2012



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## Some introductory thoughts...

### Looking for formulas...

If it's formulas you're looking for, you might be more satisfied reading something else on divine guidance. I don't think it's a good idea to try to box him in with methods and formulas. I don't find him to be that predictable. He's "predictably good," but how he chooses to express his goodness is often surprising (to me, anyway). His "*ways are beyond tracing out*," meaning that sometimes we can't even know which way he went, let alone where he'll go next – unless, of course, he wants us to know.

In the last few years I've sworn off what I call "Preacher Talk," which includes phrases like, "God always," or "God never." Like I said, I just don't think he's as predictable as all that. I don't know that we can say with confidence that God *always* or *never* does anything in particular. Sure he never lies or sins, and he always loves. But as for specific things, I'm not sure that we can with confidence say that God will do this or that; or that God would never do something like such and such. Don't misunderstand me – God is most definitely *faithful*. But preacher talk seems to turn *faithful* into *predictable*. That is, because we can count on him, it follows that we can always count on him to do things the same way he always does them. I've come to believe that he's *faithful* in his character, but not the least bit *predictable* in how he chooses to express that character.

Knowing God's will and doing it is a matter of *faith*. And faith doesn't mean that we have God all figured out, it means that we can live with him without having him figured out. His paths are

“beyond tracing out,” so my advice is that you try to keep your eye on him and follow him the best you can.

*I know, O Lord, that a man's life is not his own; it is not for a man to direct his steps. **Jeremiah 10:23***

*A man's steps are directed by the Lord. How then can anyone understand his own way? **Proverbs 20:24***

*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***

*He wakens me morning by morning, wakens my ear to listen like one being taught. **Isaiah 50:4***

*I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you. Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you. **Psalms 32:8-9***

So, this paper is not so much a study of “methods.” I won’t be giving you anything like “*Ten Easy Steps To Knowing the Will of God For Your Life.*” To my mind, knowing his will has more to do with living with him in intimate friendship, humble dependence, and obedient respect. He doesn’t seem to prefer to direct us from afar. I think he’d rather we be near enough to him so that he can take us by the hand and whisper in our ear.

*This is what the LORD says: "Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight," declares the LORD." **Jeremiah 9:23-24***

On the other hand, could it be true that God sometimes plays kind of “hard-to-get,” so we’ll want him all the more? Somehow it’s more rewarding to get something we’ve searched for than what was handed to us on a platter. I’m saying that even though God is near, his guidance isn’t always easy to decipher. Of course, part of the reason for that is our own spiritual dullness. We couldn’t find him if he shone like the sun right in our face! But I also wonder if God makes his leading a bit perplexing at times because he’s trying to develop in us a singleness of heart and a depth of desire.

### **Way too many choices...**

Some people seem sort of panicky about making decisions and choosing between options, and a lot of these people are followers of Jesus. I think this panic is spawned and exacerbated by the glut of options in our modern culture (in our Western middle-class reality anyway). Previous generations didn’t struggle as much as we do trying to discover God’s will because they didn’t have as many alternatives from which to choose. Also, our impoverished contemporaries living on \$2 a day just don’t have that many choices to make (almost half the

world – 3 billion people – live on less than that, and I’m talking about today in 2012!). “*Whip or no whip on your mocha latte?*” is not something they hear a lot in a Bangkok slum. They’re not asked very often, “*Is that a tall, grande, or venti?*” (I digress, but does it bother anyone else that the smallest of those is called, “Tall” while the medium sized one is “Grande”)? Furthermore, why is “Tall” not in Italian like the other two? I didn’t take Italian in High School!

Could it be true that God sometimes plays kind of “hard-to-get,” so we’ll want him all the more?

There’s a nerve-wracking glut of choices in our culture. “*Should I go to college in Los Angeles, Las Vegas, or London?*” “*Who, when, and why should I marry?*” “*What career should I pursue?*” The young man raised in a tiny remote pueblo in a Southern Mexican mountain region that’s only accessible during the non-rainy season has only 3 women within a day’s drive (during the rainy season he can’t drive anywhere) who are eligible for marriage. He’s not nearly as stressed out about his matrimonial decision. In some places people suffer for too many choices, in others – too few. Either way, we need God to guide us – and he will, if we’ll ask him to.

### **Some presuppositions...**

There are three things about God’s will that I’d like to propose to you. I think you have to begin with these simple presuppositions.

**1. God has a will.** You might wonder if God even has a “will” for your life. Yeah, he does. I hope that after reading this, you’ll come to the conclusion that he does have a will, a preference, a purpose for you, and that he wants to show it to you so that you can do it. Paul said to the Corinthians, “*I will come back later, God willing*” (Acts 18:21). In the same spirit, in their writings the old Puritans would use the abbreviation: “DV” to denote “Divine Volition” (“God willing”). Yes, he has a will. There are things that he wants you to do and other things that he doesn’t want you to do.

Maybe we should distinguish between the universal will of God for all of us and the specific will of God for us as individuals. He wants all of us to trust him, to be obedient to his commands, to love him for who he is, to love our neighbors, etc... These are things that all God-followers should do all the time. The specific will of God has more to do with particular plans he has in his mind for each of us individually. To my mind when we’re doing his universal will (obeying, etc.) we’re more likely to discover his specific will for our lives, the things that he’s leading us to do in particular. The most important decision we face is the daily decision to live as lovers of Jesus. Then in the context of this intimate relationship with him, he’ll let us know what he wants for us personally.

*They gave themselves first of all to the Lord, and then by the will of God also to us. **2 Corinthians 8:5***

*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God... **2 Timothy 1:1***

*I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you. **Romans 1:10***

*Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. **Romans 12:2***

*For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.*

**1 Peter 3:17**

*Paul said, "I will come back if it is God's will." **Acts 18:21***

*Instead you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will we will live and do this or that." **James 4:15***

*If we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. **1 John 5:14***

**2. God's will is best.** Jesus said to the Father, "*Not my will but yours be done...*" I've come to trust that God is interested in my highest eventual good (please note the use of the word: "eventual"). People often say that we should "surrender to God's will." It's true, but the word "surrender" makes it sound like we're struggling and kicking until we finally say, "I give up!" But the will of God, though it often includes much difficulty, is not always the most torturous of options. His will is actually *the best*. Don't be afraid of it! Don't just *resign* to his will - *embrace* it!

*As he (Paul) left, he said, "I will come back later, God willing." **Acts 18:21***

*He made known his ways to Moses... **Psalms 103:7***

**3. God really does want us to know his will (at least some of it).** He's not a tease. It's not like him to keep us totally out of the loop just to torture us. He wants us to know him and have a pretty good idea of what he's up to. He doesn't stash his will like Easter Eggs or hide up in heaven and say, "You're getting warmer!" If we'll get close and friendly with him (in a respectful way of course), one way or another he'll let us know what he wants so that we can do it.

**A few disclaimers...**

***You don't wait for some supernatural revelation before you can get out of bed in the morning.*** I knew a pastor who prayed about what clothes to wear on Sundays. I can't judge him for it, because it might be that God wanted to be consulted about this particular man's Sunday attire. God does what God does, and wants what he wants for his own reasons. But in general, I don't want to give the impression that as Christians we can't decide what to have for dinner without a word from God.

***Sometimes the need is all you need.*** If you see an injured person on the side of road, you don't need three angel visitations in order to do something about it! The priest and the Levite that preceded the Good Samaritan might've thought as they walked away from the waylaid man, "*I'd have stopped but God didn't lead me to.*" And I doubt that the one who did stop prayed, "*Oh Lord God Almighty, I beseech thee through the wonderful Name of Jesus, lead me in Thy righteousness and holiness. Is it Thy will...?*" (You get the point.) He saw a need and stepped in to do his part to meet it. The need is often all the leading you need in order to know what God's will is and do it.

Don't get me wrong; I said the need is often what you need. It might be that you're confronted with a need and you're not the one that the Lord is calling to chip in. He might even speak a clear "No, *that's not for you to do. I'm sending someone else.*" You'll see this unfold as you read on, but suffice it to say, sometimes what we call *leading* is just doing what's right. You don't need God to speak to you out of the clouds to know whether or not to help someone in need if it's in your power to do so.

## Don't just *resign* to his will - *embrace* it!

***Don't over-spiritualize every decision.*** God leaves some things (lots of things) up to us, don't you think? But it is up to us (as people of the Bible) to filter our decisions through what we know about God and the way he does things. We'll talk more about that later...

I remember attending an Easter Sunrise Service where the preacher stood up when it was time for him to give the message and said, "*I really don't have any leading about what to say, so let's sing another song and go home.*" I sat there dumbfounded! "*Are you serious?! We got out of bed before the angels and hiked all the way out here. At least read to us out of the Bible!*" On the other hand, I think I know where he might have been coming from. He probably didn't want to just talk to us out of his own head, but wanted to speak prophetically (he was known, as I recall, as sort of a "prophet"). So I can't fault him for trying to be faithful to a personal conviction that the Holy Spirit had put on his heart. I'm just trying to make the point that unless otherwise instructed by the Spirit, you don't really have to wait for an *angel visitation* before choosing what to have for breakfast!

***Be careful not to let your desire to know God's will for the future make you irresponsible about the present.*** I hope you won't become so enamored about what God *will* want you to do tomorrow that you neglect what he's *already* told you to do today!

Okay, that's enough introducing. Let's move on...



## The "God Positioning System"

Allow me to be a bit silly and compare God's way of guiding us (the "God Positioning System") with the Global Positioning System device in your car or on your smart phone. (My friend calls hers "Garmin" after the brand name on the front of her GPS, so I'll use that name from now on as we talk about the satellite-operated system. And since hers has a woman's voice, we'll refer to Garmin as a "she," okay?) Garmin and God have similarities and dissimilarities.



You tell Garmin where you want to go and she tells you how to get there in the most direct way possible. But with the *God Positioning System*, rather than try to program him to get you where *you* want to go and how *you* want to get there, you should begin with the premise that you're not the one in charge. You're the led and he's the Leader. You might tell Garmin where you want to go, but for God-followers he reserves the right to determine our destination. He isn't the least bit "programmable," and won't perform for you like some satellite-driven device. With him, you'll do best to start your daily journey with a couple of questions: "*Where do you want me today, Lord; and what can I do which would bring you the most glory?*"

I think of his guidance in terms of a *Place*, a *Path*, and a *Pace*. He chooses the place (the destination), the path (our route to the destination, which is usually more circuitous than direct), and the pace of the journey (the rate at which we should travel on the path toward the place).

Regarding the *place*, I'm not necessarily talking about a geographical location (although he does sometimes lead us to specific locales), instead I'm speaking of a goal of some sort that he wants us to shoot for. Maybe it's a quality of character that he wants us to work on, a career path to begin, a place of service to pursue, or a task of some sort to accomplish. It could be something small like deciding between classes to take in college or something big like choosing a mate. Either way, the *God Positioning System* often prompts us to head a certain direction, and if we're true "Whatever Followers" of Jesus – we go! ("Whatever Followers" are those who can honestly and do bravely say to him, "*Whatever you want, Lord, I'm in!*" This kind of follower doesn't balk at "whatever, wherever, or whenever" he might direct.)

I've noticed that the *path* and the *pace* are sometimes at least as important to him, if not more important, than the *place* we're going. His priority often seems to have more to do with what he's doing *in and around us* while on the way to *the place*. I've seen over and over that when I "arrive" at *the place*, that it's not as impressive as the trip itself. I'm sure you've heard all the old sayings about enjoying the journey, and stopping to smell the flowers yada, yada, yada? He's just as interested in the race as he is in the finish line.

Though Garmin will get you there in the least amount of time, God sometimes takes the long way. He has his reasons (which our reason can't usually fathom), but if he were in a hurry, he probably wouldn't have told us over and over to "wait" for him! Don't expect his way to be the most expeditious. His idea of time doesn't seem, in any way, shape, or form to approximate ours. So, relax and enjoy the ride!

Garmin tells you how long your journey will be and the best route to take for that particular trip. But *God's* system – at least the way I've experienced it most times – doesn't provide an ETA (estimated time of arrival) or an exact route that would get me there with the least amount of effort and in the least amount time. He doesn't seem to be as interested to lay it all out for me as I am in having it so. There are times when I've anticipated a route and ETA, but found the journey much more circuitous than I'd envisioned. The path he led me to travel actually turned out to be much more difficult and time-consuming than I'd imagined.

Speaking of "circuitous," I heard recently that the phrase from the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, "*he leads me in paths of righteousness*" is sometimes translated "*circles of righteousness*." In a trip to Israel I noticed that one can see circular paths winding up to the tops of many of the hills and

mountains. Our guide told us that these are the paths that shepherds have for centuries led their sheep up the steep prominences of the land. Then we began to discuss how our Good Shepherd similarly doesn't usually weary us by driving us directly up to the top, but more gently leads us on a more manageable, circuitous – and even circular – route to our destination. It seems he'd rather not rush us to the terminus, but takes his time to entice us to his purposes. I'll try to remember this next time I feel like I'm going in "circles"!

A lot of times his way seems to be more of a moment-by-moment thing. My first car was a VW bug that had a 6-volt battery. In order to get the headlights to glow at full strength the engine had to be running at full R.P.M.s! I had to rev the engine in order to get the beam to reach more than about 10 feet in front of the car (even on high beams) and the horn to blow at more than a muffled squeak! God leads me in this way – almost inch-by-inch! His non-Garmin approach makes me slow down in order to enjoy the scenery and avoid unnecessary collisions.

With Garmin I program in my intended destination, but with the *God Positioning System* my part is to just plug in the "Whatever," try to live responsibly, and see how the day unfolds. Other times he prescribes the ultimate destination and then leaves the route to me. He gives me clues about what sort of choices that I might make that'll make the trip the most achievable and enjoyable, but he trusts me to live responsibly and make wise (biblically informed) choices along the way.

What happens then, if after I've done all I know to do to pray and obey; and still the journey is arduous and the destination unpleasant? My default reflex is to second-guess the accuracy of my original perception of his guidance. *Did I read the screen wrong?* Sometimes I question his wisdom or goodness (maybe he's wrong or doesn't care about me after all... you know probably know the drill). At the end of the day I have to remember that he never guaranteed that I would like where or how he leads me. He didn't promise "easy." In fact, he warned us that it wouldn't be, but urged us to go nevertheless – *and endure. "Whatever, Lord!"*

Garmin isn't supposed to tell you to break the law when prescribing your course. She won't (usually) lead you the wrong way on a one way street or tell you to break the speed limit in order to get somewhere on time. If she does, she's broken and you should take her back to the store and get another one (or just buy a map)! Garmin is supposed to respect the laws of the road as she leads us along that road. In the same way, God won't direct us in a way that would contradict the laws and ways that he instituted in his Word. *"Divorce your wife so that you can marry this other woman... Lie about this, it's only a little lie..."* These are things you won't hear from our Heavenly Guide. If you think you hear otherwise; be advised that you're certainly not hearing it from him. It's somebody else's voice you're listening to!

Other times... he trusts me  
to live responsibly and make  
wise (biblically informed) choices  
along the way.

I think it's a pretty cool feature that you can program your Garmin (at least the higher end ones) to speak in a voice to your liking (male or female, British accent, etc.). And of course she speaks in a wide variety of languages. Similarly, God knows your language and can make himself "heard" and understood when he has something to say. He knows how you learn, how you perceive, and how to get through to you personally. His communication is not "one-size-fits-all." He's your friend and wants you to know whatever it is that he wants you to know.

Let me be clear, unlike Garmin, there are directions (multitudes of them) that God doesn't share with us. He purposely leaves most things unsaid and clouded in mystery for his own purposes. Our adventure is still pretty chilling, and if it doesn't frighten you, you might check with him and see if you're still on track!

Garmin works by her connection with high-in-the-sky surveillance satellites, whose altitudes give them a global viewpoint. These man-made objects were launched into orbit around our planet in order to relay communications and transmit data from their astronomical vantage point. But God is neither made nor set in motion by humans and you should know that he is the "Most High God," higher than any satellite! He sees what we can never see, and leads where we would never think to go. "*When my heart is overwhelmed lead me to the rock that is higher than I.*" (Psalm 68)

Garmin (like *Google Maps*) lets you "zoom out" to get the bigger picture of the trip you're on. And though God will once in a while give us a glimpse of the perspective from a higher vantage point, he usually gives us just enough information to make the next turn. For his own reasons his directional system sometimes seems stuck on the more *moment-by-moment view*, and at such times we're best advised to trust his wisdom.

Garmin will "talk" to you as long as you have her "on." She'll calmly advise you of the next turn, the distance to it, and which way to go when you arrive there. Though the Lord is more *reliable* (to say nothing of his personal interest in the success of your journey), he isn't nearly so *predictable*. Sometimes, when he chooses to, he seems to stop speaking altogether. For whatever reason he remains silent, even when we plead with him to communicate with us and give us some sign that he's still there – high in the sky. I suppose it has something to do with building our faith. He has his own motives for doing what he does, and I've found it best in those times to try to remember the last directive he gave me, and then stay on that road until he decides to speak again.

Based on a mistaken turn or a self-determined detour Garmin has the capability of recalculating her directions. Though her bossiness can be irritating, with my awful sense of direction, I appreciate her persistence. "*Turn left here... turn left again here... turn left here...*" and I'm back in business. If not for her, I'd never have gotten where I thought I was going! But given this feature of recalculation, I have been known to take some sort of freakish pleasure in trying to confuse her by going into a parking lot and driving in circles. I just like hearing her say, "*Turn left, (no) turn right, (no) make a U-turn...*" God doesn't get confused, but instead, makes adjustments according to our ill-advised decisions and poor judgment. He's had lots of practice – ever since we *lost* our way in the Garden – at working with "Plan B" (or C or D and beyond)!



## The Bible is your first stop

*The statutes of the Lord... are my counselors... a lamp to my feet and light to my path.” Psalm 119:24,105*

Lamps don't ordinarily light up whole city blocks; they're more like a flashlight that helps you see your next step or two. God's guidance doesn't usually shine very far ahead, just far enough to keep us out of trouble and dependent on him for help!

Most people bemoan not knowing God's voice very well, but don't take the time to know what he's already said in his Word – the Bible. His Word is like a ruler by which we test our experiences. We're not wise to measure our lives only by subjective experience when we have a more objective statement of what's true in our Bible. A lot of God's followers *live by feelings* and *experience faith*, when it would be wiser to *live by faith* and *experience feelings*. God will give us whatever subjective experiences he deems best, and we're advised to interpret them through the filter his objective Word.

I was 25-years old and beginning to sense that the Lord was calling me to plant a church in Santa Cruz, California. He gave me a number of subjective indications to this effect along with several Scriptural ones. One of the most memorable passages is the parable in which Jesus said that the servants were to go to the *“highways and byways”* to invite the public to the King's banquet. By this, God was showing me that this was supposed to be a church built, not by transfer from other churches, but by going to the streets and *“compelling them to come in.”*

### **Principles more than particulars...**

From the Bible we're more apt to learn principles of God's working than to glean particular directions to follow. Of course, there are many specific commands contained in the Bible, which God expects us to obey. The Ten Commandments for example are clear and specific precepts to follow. Don't make idols, lie, or kill people – pretty clear. But in general, the Bible is more of a *compass* than a *map*. It points us in a direction, warns us of hazards to avoid, but doesn't always fill in all the details on how to make the trip.

I might coin the phrases: *“The All-Purpose Will of God”* versus his *“Particular-Purpose Will.”* By *“All-Purpose,”* I refer to things that are *always* his will for *everyone* at *all* times (i.e. love God, love others, don't steal or lie, serve the poor...). You get the picture. His more *“Particular-Purpose”* would be more about how those things get worked out in our individual lives (such as, *“I think he wants me to show love for that precise person in this particular way...”* or *“I feel led to be a part of that local ministry that gives food to the poor.”*)

We find his *All-Purpose Will* in what I call the *“Bible's Big Verses.”* (I'm not implying that the Bible has any *“little verses”* or unimportant ones. I'm just saying that there are some passages (the *“big”* ones), which summarize God's will for all of his friends for all time; and then there are

others (the “small” ones, more accurately, “specific” ones), which lead us in a more precise and specific way to do his will. Here’s a brief sample of what I might call “Big Verses” which guide us in a “Big Picture” way.

*Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” **Matthew 22:37-40***

(Since Jesus said these two commands sum up God’s requirements, this is kind of the *biggest of all the big verses*. “Love God and love people – any questions?!”)

*Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” **Matthew 28:19-20***

(This is what people do who love God and people. They make disciples. Above is the *Great Commandment* and this is the *Great Commission*.)

*Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. 2 Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. **Romans 12:1-2***

(I include this one because of how it transitions from God’s general will to his more particular will. Do you see it? *Give yourself totally to God; don’t let your culture define you – big picture principle. And when you do that, you’ll be able to know God’s will – small picture particulars.)*

**God will give us whatever subjective experiences  
he deems best, and we’re advised to interpret  
them through the filter his objective Word.**

### **He doesn’t break his own rules...**

Remember what I said above about *Garmin* not contradicting the rules of the road and sending you up the wrong way on a one-way street? Well, in a similar way, God doesn’t tell us to do things that are in direct conflict with what he’s already told us in his Word. That’s why I say that the Bible is your “first stop,” and maybe *your last* one too. It may not tell you exactly what to do in every circumstance, but it will most definitely give you the universal parameters within which to search for his specific will.

Out of all the principles that I talk about in this paper, this first one is the most important. That’s because your vision or dream or advice or circumstance might seem to point you a

certain way, yet if the Bible prohibits it, you'd be well advised to decline. One man prayed for \$100.00. Soon after that he found a wallet with that exact amount! Should he assume God provided? The circumstances say, "Yes," but the Word says "No."

The Bible is your "level" – you know the tool that determines whether or not your picture is straight or your table is level. Make sure that what you feel is God's will for you lines up with God's Word.

### **Don't use the "Lucky Dip Method" (at least not very often)...**

When I recommend going to the Bible for direction I'm not suggesting that you flip through its pages, and with eyes shut, place your finger on a verse at random. Though God in His mercy has used this method mostly with new disciples from time to time, this "Crystal Ball Approach," or "Lucky Dip Method" is treating the Bible more like a horoscope or a deck of tarot cards than the *love letter* it was meant to be. You can get some pretty funny guidance from the Bible this way. One man, for instance, was convinced he should marry this girl named "Grace," because he "landed" on the verse: "*My grace is sufficient for you!*" Another guy happened upon the passage that speaks of someone "*purchasing to himself a good degree,*" and decided that God was leading him to attend an expensive university!

It's really better to read the Bible more systematically and thoroughly. When you have a good grasp of its contents, he has something to work with in order to lead you long range and short as he chooses. "*Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*"



## Use your "Sanctified Common Sense"

*Don't be like the horse or mule, which have no understanding...*

**Psalm 32:9**

*Be very careful, then, how you live - not as unwise, but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.* **Ephesians 5:15-17**

*"God gave you a lot of leading when he gave you a brain."* **Dawson Trotman**

If you're following Jesus, he came into your *head* as well as your *heart*. And when he did, he began to teach you how to think the way he thinks. What I'm talking about has more to do with something called "wisdom" than IQ. My definition of biblical wisdom is, "*The discernment to know how to live and the discipline to live that way.*" "*If you want knowledge,*" they say, "*go to college.*" Wisdom isn't learned in a classroom, but in the school of hardship and adversity.

Some people think “common sense” is the totality of how God has been guiding people since the Bible days concluded. They say that he no longer actually gets personally involved with guiding us, but has given us brains and his Word; and that’s all we need in order to know his will for our lives. Essentially they’re claiming that God doesn’t really care what we do as long as it’s not evil or out of line with his Word. Though I can’t agree that this is always the case, I can’t deny that sometimes this may be more true than not.

Over the years as I’ve been involved in decision-making situations, there have been many times when it seemed as though God was allowing me to make the choice between options based on what seemed best to me in light of my biblically informed conscience. In other words, sometimes he leads his sheep in a more general way, and doesn’t always express an opinion or exert his specific will into every little situation. That’s why I call him the “*Sometimes God*,” since *sometimes* he leads us one way and sometimes another. Sometimes he requires a specific course, and other times he leaves the choice to our “sanctified common sense.”

By “common sense” I mean good sound judgment and an attention to the obvious.

“Should I go to college?”

*Well, if there’s no great reason not to, yeah – I think it’s a good idea.*

“Which college should I go to?”

*I don’t know, which one can you afford, which one has a good program for the field you want to go into, and which one has a good football team?*

“What should I cook for dinner tonight?”

*Maybe something healthy, but not so “healthy” that you hate it!*

“Should I become a doctor?”

*Not if you can’t stand the sight of blood!*

In my day-to-day experience I tend to consult the Lord about most things, put them all in his hands, use my God-given “good sense,” and then put one foot in front of the other. Speaking of good sense, though it’s not just Christians who tend to lack it (remember I was a pastor for 30 years), it does seem that we might have less stock in that company than others. The saying, “*So heavenly minded they’re no earthly good*” comes to mind. The tendency to “spiritualize” things that are more *natural* might be part of the problem. I’ve heard it simplistically stated, “*Everything is spiritual.*” Well – yeah – everything that exists was created by God (who is “spirit”) and in that sense we could say that it’s all spiritual. But look at it this way: God (a spirit) made the physical, the psychological, and the sociological realms; and he expects us to manage ourselves within each of these under the auspices of his Lordship, and within the framework of his Word. In that sense then, I think he’s asking us to consult him for wisdom on how to conduct ourselves in this world made up of each of those aspects of life.

But notice I call it – “*Sanctified Common Sense.*” That’s because, as followers of Jesus, there exists a criteria for the way we think about things. We have a *worldview* that has the *World-Maker* in the middle of it, and we do our best to think and conduct ourselves here in all ways “Christianly.” In a way, and at certain times, there is nothing more “uncommon” (to the world we live in) than common sense. The kind of “common” sense that we want to employ is the kind that’s Spirit-filled and Bible taught.

*They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world... We are from God... 1 John 4:5*

*We speak a message of wisdom... but not the wisdom of this age... we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden... but God revealed it to us by his Spirit... 1 Corinthians 2:6-10*

So it's a *higher* common sense, a *Christian* common sense that we need for discerning God's will for our lives. As humans, made in God's image, we all have a reasoning capacity (not that we all use it to its maximum capacity!), but when God's life enters, we're given a greater ability, an enlightened reason. In other words, God's friends have a sense that's more than "*common*."

Sometimes the Lord leads us in some of the most counterintuitive directions. If we were entirely dependent on him guiding us to do things that most people would consider to be "sensible," we might very well miss his will altogether. I mean, think about when Jesus told Peter to get the money for their taxes out of a fish! How about when he instructed the disciples to have the five thousand sit down on the grass and to feed them from a little boy's lunch? God led Moses to pick up a snake, and later to take that snake-turned-staff and hit the Red Sea with it – and this was his proposed solution to them being chased by Egyptians! Elisha suggested that Naaman dunk himself in the Jordan River in order to be healed of leprosy and Jesus made mud with spit, put it on the blind man's eyes, and told him to wash in the Pool of Siloam so that he could see again! None of this makes sense unless we include in our thinking how God may challenge us outside the box of merely "human wisdom."

Let me give you a couple of examples from the life of Paul.

*"After I returned to Jerusalem, I was praying in the Temple and fell into a trance. I saw a vision of Jesus saying to me, 'Hurry! Leave Jerusalem, for the people here won't accept your testimony about me.' "But Lord,' I argued, 'they certainly know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. And I was in complete agreement when your witness Stephen was killed. I stood by and kept the coats they took off when they stoned him.' "But the Lord said to me, 'Go, for I will send you far away to the Gentiles!"* **Acts 22:17-21**

This is an account of Paul giving a testimony about an event, which was early in his Christian life. Apparently, though led by the Spirit to get out of Jerusalem, Paul thought he was better suited to stay and preach there. I guess, in his immaturity he thought his idea was better than God's. He ultimately came to his "senses" (his spiritual ones) though.

Though there might have been more of a conversation about it, the account of it that we have includes Jesus winning the "argument" with a command – "Go!" That's how he wins arguments – with commands. He doesn't necessarily give reasons, just orders. He might decide from time to time to have some back and forth with us, but at the end of the day he quits explaining and goes to commanding!



Here's another incident later in Paul's life that shows he put his spiritual sense above even his natural sense of self-preservation.

*And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. I don't know what awaits me, except that the Holy Spirit tells me in city after city that jail and suffering lie ahead. **Acts 20:22***

The example above showed God ordering him *out of* Jerusalem, while this one reveals God ordering him to go *into* the city. Knowing that the most dangerous place for Paul to go at that time was Jerusalem, his friends tried to talk him out of his plans to go there. It was simply "common sense" to avoid the place of his greatest potential peril. But the Spirit "compelled" him there; and his guidance trumps anything we'd think of as "common"! Paul (like Jesus and his other apostles) refused to trade the clear will of God for his own personal safety!

God's friends have a sense  
that's more than "*common*."

*(We're) asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding... **Colossians 1:9***

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart and don't lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him and he will direct your paths. **Proverbs 3:5-6***

So "sanctified common sense" is when we use all our God-given reasoning abilities along with our God-imparted spiritual capabilities. We weigh the pros and cons, because God can't guide us on the basis of facts we don't know. But after we've made our list of positives and negatives, we lay the list before God and ask him for direction in light of the data. Don't "*lean (completely) on your own understanding,*" but, for God's sake, do use it!



## He speaks; can you hear him?

*The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. **John 3:29***

As I started my arduous climb out of a time that I call my "hell of mercy," I began feeling compassion in my heart for a certain needy neighborhood in San Francisco. I wasn't nearly well enough to make a move into such a depressed inner-city neighborhood; nevertheless I was sensing some sort of inkling toward it. The fact that I had any impetus at all at that

particular season of my life gave me hope that God was still talking to me at all. I found myself driving the half hour to the community doing what I call, “reconnaissance.” I wasn’t convinced yet that God was indeed asking me to relocate there in order to find some simple ways to serve him and help people. But it makes sense to me when I’m looking for the will of God I should pray “onsite” with as much “insight” as possible. I went to the Mission District located the pockets of various cultures there, found prospective places to hang out with people (mostly coffee shops with a good tea selection), and researched the apartment rental scene (an abysmal scene to be sure). As I did so, my compassion for people there began to grow (sometimes an extraordinary compassion is an indicator of some possible leading from him). Over time my *compassion* became an *inclination* (to do something about it), which eventually turned to an increasing *conviction* to move to the City. When I began telling others about my thoughts I realized it had graduated to a door that I was knocking on. I was beginning to ask God to send me there. My desire was giving way to a sense of direction that it was indeed God’s will for me to move there as soon as he opened a door for a place for me to live. This progression from compassion to desire to direction has been a frequent cue to me that God might be “speaking” to me.

Speaking of him “speaking” to me, I want you to know that I’m pretty selective about the times I come to that conclusion and am willing to use that sort of terminology. “*God said such and such... The Lord told me...*” is not a common thing for me to say. I reserve these bold (almost arrogant) descriptions for unusually certain moments. And even then, I usually say something like, “*I think the Lord is speaking to me thus and so...*” I’ve been wrong enough times to be sure to walk and talk humbly about such things. I try to keep my words soft and tender so they’ll go down easily if I have to eat them!

### **More of an impression...**

When I say, “God speaks to me,” I’m not claiming to have ever heard his audible voice with my physical ears. It’s my observation that he seldom converses with people in that way, but communicates more often by what I’d call *impression* to the born-again heart. Nehemiah, a man to whom God gave many specific marching orders explained it this way, “*So my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles...*” **Nehemiah 7:5**. I can’t claim to be able to describe how he does it or how it “sounds” to me when he puts something in my heart, but I usually know it when I “hear” it, and recognize it when I find it there inside me somewhere.

*The watchmen opens the gate for the shepherd, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out... he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow them because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger, in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger’s voice... I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me. **John 10:3-5, 16***

Each shepherd has his unique call to his own flock, so that the right sheep go with the right shepherd. So it is with our Shepherd’s voice. I’ve found that the better I know him the better I recognize his voice.

Just as you know your best friend's voice over the phone without them having to identify themselves, as you cultivate an intimate friendship with God you'll know his voice. You'll learn to hear and speak his language (*so to speak*).

Know Him  
and you'll  
recognize  
His voice!

*"Father, glorify your name!" Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and will glorify it again." 29 The crowd that was there and heard it said it had thundered; others said an angel had spoken to him. Jesus said, "This voice was for your benefit, not mine." **John 12:28-30***

*The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. **Acts 9:7***

*I, Daniel, was the only one who saw the vision; those who were with me did not see it, but such terror overwhelmed them that they fled and hid themselves. **Daniel 10:7***

It seems that in order to hear his voice clearly, one has to be listening for it. I guess otherwise you might hear just a *rumble*. You might see a "light," but miss the words that he speaks out of the light. Maybe you're content to have an exciting spiritual experience (lightning, thunder, or an angel visitation), but along with it, I want to know what he says to me, what he wants me to know or to do.

He spoke to Elijah in a "*still small voice*," and not in the cataclysmic wind, earthquake, or fire (I Kings 19:11-12). The mode in which he spoke to young Samuel was so "human-sounding" that he thought it was his mentor Eli (I Samuel 3:2-10). We might miss what God is saying to us because we expect him to sound *like God*, but instead his voice might be more like that of our closest human friend!

### **At his beck and call...**

If you know me, you know that I like acrostics and acronyms (I've never quite understood the difference between the two). For example, I've used **ABC** for years to summarize how a person might come to a saving relationship with Jesus (**A**dmit, **B**elieve, **C**ommit). But I have devised another **ABC** for the one who has already come to believe in Jesus. It's a second **ABC** for someone who wants to know how to proceed in his/her friendship with him – **A**t his **B**eck and **C**all.

I like to think that I'm *at God's beck and call*. If I am, I'll be willing to do what he calls me to do, and it shouldn't take more than his "*beck*" to get my attention. ("*Beck*" is an old English word – the shortened form of *beckon* – that means a subtle gesture or mute signal like a nod or a slight motion of the hand.) I want to know him so well that he should only need to nod or glance my way in order to get my attention and direct me to do whatever he has in mind.

*"Consider carefully how you listen..." **Luke 8:18***

I had an interesting experience when I was a young Jesus follower. I was working in Southern California at UPS while going to college and doing my level best to learn how to hear his voice

and do what he says. I was living in the school dorm at the time, and because of my work schedule I missed the dinner they served in the college cafeteria (which, if you know dorm food, you know what kind of blessing that was!). Starving from unloading trucks all afternoon, I ate at some fast food place every night after work. When you're young your metabolism can burn out just about anything – even Big Macs and Fries! Anyway, I was at Mickey D's just about to devour my fast "food" when I distinctly sensed a whisper (not in my ear, but inside somewhere): *"Fast tonight."* Before I could talk myself out of it, I put my burger, fries and chocolate shake back in the bag, went to the dorm lobby, and said out loud, *"Who wants McDonalds?"* I didn't have to ask a second time; within about 5 seconds I was standing there empty-handed, with dorm-mates beginning their post-burger burping!

Then I went to the prayer room on the first floor (about the size of a walk-in closet) and said, *"OK, what was that about? Did I hear you right? Is there something on your mind?"* I can't say that I got any sort of revelation that night, except that it occurred to me that he might just have wanted to test my ability to hear and willingness to obey what I heard. (It's certainly possible that I was mistaken all along, and that it was only my own thoughts I was hearing. I can't say for certain. But I did what I *thought* he wanted me to do at the time.) It was like a "sound check" like one does with a microphone – *"Testing... One, two, three... Uno, dos, tres... This is only a test of the Emergency Broadcasting System..."* I think the Lord does these sound checks from time to time, not for his sake, but for ours; so we'll be sure we're hearing right.

During that same season of my life, one day I was conversing with the Lord in our southern California apartment. As I recall, I wasn't even praying about direction for the next season of my life. I had another year and half until graduation, was really enjoying my time there in school, and was planning on finishing the degree I'd set out to accomplish. It was out of the blue that I "heard" God say to me, *"You're going back to Chico (my hometown)."* I didn't hear a voice with my ears, but the words ricocheted in my insides as clearly as if I had. This was not at all what I was planning to do next, so I think I returned with something like, *"In order to do what exactly?"* The impression, served back into my court, was something along the lines of, *"You'll see. Just go."* It seemed clear that I was to cut short my four-year course, not finish the degree, and take my new family back to northern California for reasons yet unknown. And we were to go as soon as possible. Seriously, I didn't know the Lord very well yet, but I just didn't doubt from that point on that this was what he wanted. So we packed up and went.



## Sometimes he's silent...

This may not be the most upbeat thing to say when talking about God and how he leads us. But I have to be honest; at least in my experience, there are times when he doesn't seem to communicate to me at all. He stands aloof. My *God Positioning System* won't seem to turn on. For whatever reason, our Guide is sometimes silent, and not guiding at all. I don't know, maybe he wants me to figure it out with my sanctified imagination, maybe he's trying to get through to me about a moral/spiritual issue and won't speak until that's resolved, maybe he's testing my resolve or building my faith. It might even be that there is some devilish spiritual power impeding the lines of communication. Whatever his reason – remember that he's under

no obligation to tell me anything – I’m just not getting any message from him. What do I do then?

As I said above, “Sometimes you just have to wait” – you know, “*Wait on the Lord.*” I am not the most patient guy, and though my impatience is all on me; my culture hasn’t helped me much by meeting most of my needs instantly! Much of our 21<sup>st</sup> Century technology is designed to speed everything up, and conversely, much of what God does seems to be devised to slow things down again! To the question, “*What should I do?*” he often answers, “*Wait!*” *Don’t just do something; stand there!* Sometimes he’s silent.

Several times in the Psalms the poet prays, “*Don’t stay silent, Lord.*” He wouldn’t have needed to say this if God hadn’t been silent with him for some time. I don’t know about you, but I want *what I want when I want it*; and God seldom complies with my agenda or to my schedule. It’s supposed to be me at his beck and call, not him at mine! His guidance isn’t *leading on demand*. He’s the one who gets to make demands on us, not the other way around. So when he’s silent, I’ve found that it’s best to take the position of the servant who “waits” on his master.

I suppose he could turn off the volume for any number of reasons, but I wonder if sometimes he’s just trying to increase our intimacy. He’s not so much looking for acquaintances, as much as close friends. So, if he’s silent, maybe we’ll be inspired to know him better.

I suppose he could turn off the volume  
for any number of reasons,  
but I wonder if sometimes  
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our intimacy.

“*He made his ways known to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel.*” (Psalm 103:7) Some people can only look back and see what God *did* (his deeds), but others, like Moses, become so familiar with him that they learn his *ways*, the way he does things. When you’re married to someone for many decades, you might not need to ask them what they want for their birthday, you just know, because you’ve been so close for so long. It’s my aspiration to know God that well, so that I often know what he would want me to do – sometimes without asking.



## Find out what he’s doing and do it with him...

*The Son can nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees the Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. **John 5:19***

Before leaving the states, Larry told us to pack some old shoes for our soggy hike through Hezekiah's Tunnel in Jerusalem. (Google it for info and photos of the ancient tunnel. Pay particular attention to how narrow and dark it looks in the pictures!) King Hezekiah ordered the tunnel to be dug underneath Jerusalem almost 3000 years ago to get water into the City incognito, so that their enemies wouldn't be able to cut off their supply. In addition to Google and Wikipedia, you can read about it in 2 Chronicles 32 and 2 Kings 20. It's about 6 football fields long, sometimes just a few feet wide, and often no more than 6 ½ feet high. Having been through the tunnel several times before, Larry assured us it was "relatively safe" for the non-claustrophobic. (If you suffer from a fear of small, dark, and wet spaces you might opt to do some shopping in the Old City on the day your tour group heads for the tunnel.)

Our guide was a diminutive Palestinian man named, Ahmed, who collected the usual number of shekels from each of us, and led us into the dark, chilling shaft in the rock below Jerusalem. It's not that there are lots of ways to get lost. As I recall, since Hezekiah's "engineers" were working with surveying equipment, which was decidedly non-electronic, there was only one offshoot in the tunnel, which leads to a dead end. But I wasn't taking any chances; I stayed as close as I could to Ahmed, non-English-speaking or not; especially since he was the guy with the flashlight! Sometimes he would get a bit ahead of us, and I could feel the person (we were single file) behind me pushing me along to get closer to the only one who knew where we were going. The depth of the water and the width of the tunnel fluctuate, again due to the primitive tools of its original diggers. It's quite an eerie feeling wading in water that you can't see, sometimes ankle, and sometimes thigh deep. The water, I was told later, could, at a moment's notice, rise to overhead in a flash flood! I'm glad I didn't know that at the time!

We did eventually emerge jubilantly into the sunlight at the Pool of Siloam, not at all worse for wear, and anxious to tell the tale to our friends at home of the adventure that no man had embarked on for thousands of years (except for the hundreds of thousands of other tourists in the last century or two). I felt like giving Ahmed, Larry, and pretty much everyone in Jerusalem a hug and a high-five when triumphantly we conquered the millenniums-old underground channel!

There's pretty much no way in the whole world that I would have ever done it without Ahmed. He knew how to *get in*, how to *get through*, and most importantly how to *get out* of the tunnel. He had the necessary knowledge of the way to go, the water-flow patterns, and where to speed and slow the pace of his shivering followers. In short, for that day this little man was our *Holy Spirit*. We stepped where he stepped right after he stepped there and avoided the places he avoided. His flashlight was our single ray of hope that our guide was still there, and hadn't abandoned us in the darkness under the Holy City. When we couldn't actually see the beam itself, we were encouraged to see a faint glimmer of it on the stone walls ahead; and we forged in that direction.

I think that walking with God is kind of like this; it's a moment-by-moment thing. He sometimes walks in the shadows and bids us there with him. His light, though brilliant within him, is often obscured and dim to us. The places he takes us are nothing less than an "adventure." Following in his footsteps is often an "Extreme Sport" (an activity which has a high level of inherent danger).

Just in case they hadn't heard the first couple of dozen times, just before leaving for his return trip to heaven, Jesus told his disciples, "*You must follow me!*" (John 21:22) He modeled it by

going where the Father told him to go and then he challenged his followers to go on similar journeys.

He said he could only do *“what he sees the Father doing,”* and to my mind this means at least four things:

**First**, that God is *active*; he’s doing things. Two verses earlier he said, *“My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.”* God is not static – waiting for something to happen before he springs to action. He’s “always” doing what he is compelled from within himself to do.

**Secondly**, when Jesus says that he can only do what he sees the Father doing, it means to me not only that God is busy, but that Jesus could see what he was busy doing. God is active and his actions were somehow “visible” to his Son. Maybe he said this in order to suggest that God’s activities are also “visible” *to us* as we try to stay in tune with him and with his Spirit. Then if we can “see” some of what the Father is doing, it’s not just to satisfy our curiosity, but so that we can do with him whatever he’s doing.

**Thirdly**, when he says, *“I can only do what I see him doing,”* he’s suggesting that if God isn’t doing a particular thing, he can’t do it either. He couldn’t just forge ahead on his own and make stuff up. He wasn’t capable of doing anything that he wanted. He did only what the Father was doing – nothing more and nothing less. If that’s the case with *Jesus*, how much more are you and I incapable of doing even good things without God’s help? If he can only do what he sees his Father already doing, then we certainly can do no more than that!

**Fourth**, it seems pretty clear that God is looking for people to join him in what he’s doing. It’s a partnership. He wants us to see what he’s doing and do it with him. We’re supposed to work together in collaboration with him. He doesn’t join us in our endeavors so much as we join him in his; and when we do, we’re doing the things for which we were crafted.

Because of this, when I encounter a human need, a problem, an opportunity; the question I often ask is, *“What are you up to here? What is it that you’re doing? Am I supposed to join you in this, and if so, what does joining you in this particular case look like?”*

Following in his footsteps is  
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high level of inherent  
danger).

Obviously, God is not asking me to join him in all of his endeavors. He’s doing stuff all around the world, and he’s got friends everywhere seeing him work and seeking how they can work with him. Even Jesus (when he was on earth as a man) couldn’t get personally involved in every one of his Father’s causes. He had to limit his efforts to what he saw the Father doing *in front of him* (so to speak). He had to distinguish between what the Father was doing in general and those things he was asking Jesus to do with him. We have to do the same sort of differentiating between all the things that God cares about and what he’s asking us to do along with him in partnership. Because I see God active somewhere or in some way, it doesn’t

necessarily mean that I am supposed to pack up and go there. I still need to determine whether or not he's asking me to have some part in this particular "project" of his.



## Observe "the burden"

Above I talked about seeing what God is doing and doing it with him. I didn't really say anything about *how* to see what he's doing, or more specifically what he's doing "*in front you.*" Hopefully, the following will clarify.

Though sort of a funny term, a "burden" is when you have a compelling desire to serve God and / or people in some way. It's a compassion, a pain deep inside of you for something that God wants you to attend to. It's usually something more than sympathy or even empathy for the hurting people of the world. I think of a burden as something that you feel a call from God to do something about. Sometimes God puts something on our heart so that we'll partner with him through intercessory prayer. He might put a burden on one person to pray and then a burden on a second individual to act in the power of the Spirit activated through the prayers of the first.

A theoretical situation... We know that God's heart aches for the poor in Calcutta, so he puts a "burden" in the hearts of a number of people to pray. As they pray, he begins to give a burden to other people to give money to help the poor there. Now he has people *praying* and others *giving*, and then he calls other individuals from various places to go to Calcutta and *serve*. All of these people had "a burden" for the poor of Calcutta, but they weren't all led by the Holy Spirit to do the same thing with their burden.

An actual situation... We had planted a church in Santa Cruz in 1980, and by 1990 I was sensing the early signs of a call from the Lord (a "burden") to do something similar in Pacifica just up the coast. I was talking with Mark, one of the church's elders about it. I was thinking of relocating my family and doing the church plant myself, and I was about to feel Mark out for how he felt about leading our church in Santa Cruz. But Mark thought I was going to ask him to go lead the charge to start the new church, and before I had a chance to clarify my thinking Mark said, "*I'm certainly willing to go if God wants me to.*" I asked him the operative question, "*Oh, that's not what I had in my mind, but do you have a burden to do that?*"

*"Umm, no, not really. I just thought that's what you were going to propose to me, and I wanted to express my willingness to do whatever the Lord would want us to do. But now that you mention it. Umm, 'The Burden!' I forgot about the burden! No, I don't think I do have the burden!"*

It turned out that I was the one with the burden to go and he was the one with the burden to stay and lead the existing church in Santa Cruz. We came to that conclusion after many other



discussions, prayer times, and meetings with the other church leaders. But ever since then, Mark and I have kidded with each other, *“Oh yeah, the burden! I forgot about the burden!”*

It occurs to me that the word itself has a negative ring to it. It sounds like something that weighs you down, makes life hard, and slows you up. But I take it to mean that though it does connote a *weightiness*, it's a positive thing like ballast in a ship to keep it from overturning in a storm. When I say, “I have a burden” for something, I mean that I feel a sense of God's concern for something, I have a heaviness inside me for someone or something. To me, a burden is that inkling that God may be putting something from his heart into mine. He seems to want me to at least pray for something or maybe take action on it in some way.

When I found myself 10 years prior with a growing conviction to move to Santa Cruz to plant the church, I'd only been there a few times and knew very little about the area. It had a beach, a boardwalk, and a bunch of old hippies; that's about all I knew. But there was a weight in my heart that continued to increase, and so I decided to go there for a few days to fast and pray about it. I went to a campground on Deer Creek that I'd visited before, set up camp, and spent a bunch of time asking God in a bunch of different ways if he wanted us to go to Santa Cruz and start a church. The “burden” increased, but I wasn't yet quite convinced. We decided to take the Fourth of July weekend, camp in the Santa Cruz area, and do some “reconnaissance.” Our naiveté about how to start a church was only trumped by our cluelessness about how full all of the campgrounds and motels would be on that weekend in this beach town (I thought it would be adequate to begin calling the week before)! One of the managers actually laughed when I told him I was looking for a place for the 4<sup>th</sup>! Just in case, I decided to try one more, and the lady at the KOA Campground said over the phone, “There's always room for one more!” When we arrived, she'd put us between two tents, which were already between another two tents. We were literally a foot or two from the people next to us on either side. The first night I heard a constant stream of visitors going in and out of the tent to our right. I did my best not to, but I couldn't help but hear most of their conversations. They were obviously believers in Jesus. I went over the next morning to meet them. This man and wife had just stepped down from the main counter-culture church in town, a ministry that they had planted a decade or so before. In an hour, they chronicled the history of the church culture there over the past 15 years or so! The Lord had put us right next to them, and I mean, “right next to them!”

So, there you have some pretty cool confirmations (and I think they came from the Lord) of “the burden.” For me, it's often the case that God gives me a burden for something and then, if necessary, he confirms it with other means (like getting a camp spot right next to the right person).

### **“Do you have faith for it?”**

If someone says to me that they have a “burden” for something, I'll often ask them, *“Do you have faith for this? Can you see it coming to pass? Is this something that you feel a confidence in you that God intends to accomplish this thing and use you to make it happen?”*

The terminology isn't important. You might not say it just this way, but the bottom-line is, if God wants something to happen, and wants it to happen *in* or *to* or *through* us, it's almost always going to entail *faith* on our part. It's been my experience that when the Lord puts the faith in my

heart for something it might well be that he's leading me in some way. I don't want to make this mystical or anything, but when I have faith for something, it's because I can almost "see" it, which gives me hope for it to happen, and then a desire to do what I can (if anything) to partner with God to bring it to pass.

*Faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things unseen.*

**Hebrews 11:1**

*Without faith it's impossible to please Him.* **Hebrews 11:6**

*"According to your faith let it be done to you..."* **Matthew 9:29**

*Let him prophesy in proportion to his faith...* **Romans 12:6**

*Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.*

*In all your ways acknowledge him and he will direct your paths.* **Proverbs 3:5**

Among other spiritual gifts, Paul referred to the "gift of faith." (1 Corinthians 12) My quirky personal definition of this gift is, "The sudden surge of supernatural certainty for a certain situation." (It's much more fun when you say it out loud!) I've experienced it for someone's healing, or another's supernatural provision, or as part of my own inclination to partner with God in some endeavor of his (like giving money, delivering a prophecy to someone, or embarking on a kingdom adventure of some sort). Sometimes I can tell what God wants me to do by *the faith* I have for something. It's easier to discern his leading when you detect the faith in your heart for a certain course.

*"The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it."* **1 Thessalonians 5:24**

Most things that God wants us to do are way over our heads – outside the realm of human potential. With human capability alone we can't do the will of God, so we have to trust him to do it *in us* and *through us*. So, when he leads us to do something he often gives us the ability to trust his power to do what we can't. I often figure that if I can by faith "see it," it might well be something for which he is dropping that faith into my heart because he's wanting me to participate in this particular thing with him. Faith in my heart could be an indicator of his guidance.



## Listen to your friends (especially your good ones)

A few years ago the bottom fell out of my life. I lost my marriage, my ministry, my home, my income, and my health all in about three months. Needless to say I was in pretty bad shape emotionally. I had very little objectivity left about pretty much anything. I needed the help of my friends like never before. During the early days of that season I had the very same conversation with two different people in two different cities – people I deeply love and respect – Mike in Santa Cruz and Jean in Pacifica. I said to both of them...

*"I'm going to get on a bus, go to Mexico, and stay as long as I want."*

*"No you're really not."*

*"I'm not? Why not?"*

*"Because, it's stupid and you're in no condition to be alone for long periods of time right now. You're too messed up to decide for yourself right now. You need people around you."*

I didn't go to Mexico or mess up what was left of my then miserable life any more than it already was. Instead, my son and I jumped in the car and drove to Arizona for Spring Training (Major League Baseball's preseason) and then, on a lark, we visited the Grand Canyon. We cried and laughed and talked all the way there and back. It was extremely therapeutic for both of us, and a much better option than isolating myself indefinitely in a foreign country. My friends knew better than I did about what was best for me at that time. They told me what I *needed* to hear, not necessarily what I *wanted* to hear, because that's what friends do.

*As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.*

**Proverbs 27:17**

*A fool thinks he needs no advice, but a wise man listens to others.*

**Proverbs 12:15**

*Pride leads to arguments; be humble, take advice and become wise.*

**Proverbs 13:10**

*Plans go wrong with too few counselors; many counselors bring success.*

**Proverbs 15:22**

*Don't go ahead with your plans without the advice of others...*

**Proverbs 20:18**

*Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked.*

**Psalms 1:1**

I do fewer dumb things when I talk to friends first. It's like God says, *"Get to know each other well. Get some advice from one another, and you might just hear my voice while talking to them!"*

Other people stand outside the emotion of our circumstances and will usually be more objective than we are about ourselves. They say, *"What you see depends on where you're standing,"* and our friends sometimes stand in a better place than we do (a place outside of us) to hear God's voice. I can't eliminate bad choices altogether, but I can limit the number of them if I'll just humble myself a little bit and confer with a friend before proceeding into some new territory.

**I do fewer dumb things  
when I talk to friends first.**

During that same season that I mentioned above, I made a repeated request of the Lord, *"I'm messed up in my mind and heart, and I know I'm going to make some mistakes during this process. But may my mistakes be small and seldom (i.e. not huge hairy ones, and not a lot of them)."* As far as I can tell, he answered that prayer; and one of the keys to reducing my

stupidity quotient to a minimum was that I regularly asked my godly friends for advice before proceeding.

*Apollos had been thinking about going to Achaia, and the brothers and sisters in Ephesus encouraged him to go. Acts 18:27 NLT*

I think there are good ideas and then there are God ideas. Our godly friends might be able to help us decipher the difference.

It is usually only pride that keeps us from going to others for advice. I'm sure you're familiar with the rap that men have – that we will drive in circles for hours on the way to our own wedding before we'll stop and ask for directions. I know that I personally prefer to project an air of self-sufficiency. I don't like being needy or appearing so. But the fact is that I only know so many things and my physical, emotional, and spiritual condition is sometimes pretty tenuous; so I have to humble myself and glean from people wiser, smarter, and more experienced than I.

One of my favorite passages is, “Jonathan helped David find strength in God...” (1 Samuel 23:16). Jonathan couldn't be David's strength, because only God can *be our strength*. But he could help him find it; he could point David to where it could be found in God. In the same way, we can't guide each other or lead each other. We can only point one another toward the Lord in order to find the leading he alone can give.

### **A couple of disclaimers...**

Some people are just too lazy to seek God for themselves, and so they go around asking everyone else what they think they ought to do. Getting godly counsel from others is no substitute for seeking God's counsel for yourself. But some seem to be so insecure about making a wrong move, and so look to others to do it for them even with simple life choices. If someone comes to me for guidance, I ask them if they've prayed about it. I won't be anybody's *first stop*. They have to go to him first, foremost, and finally. I might be able to help them sort things out as they're seeking him, but I can't do it *for* them.

Other people tend to be “counsel-junkies.” They run from friend to pastor to counselor gathering up opinions on what they should do with their lives. I don't know if it's because they have a serious mistrust of their own ability to make a good decision (even with God's help) or because they want someone to blame if the plan goes awry.

Some people go to as many people as it takes to get the advice they wanted to hear. I guess they expect counsel to stand-alone as the first and last word on a matter for which they're seeking guidance. None of the principles I've included in this writing serve as the “Silver Bullet of Divine Guidance,” and least of all this one. I mean, come on, just because someone you respect tells you such and such, it doesn't mean you should run off and do it! I've already shared at least a half dozen ways God guides and, as you can see, have quite a few to go. Getting good people's opinions is just one thing that we include in the mix. We don't ask people to tell us what to do, but to think and pray with us, and possibly share their objective advice with us.



## There's usually a "peace" when it's right

*It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.* **Acts 15:28**

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him...*  
**Romans 15:13**

*Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule.* **Galatians 6:16**

*Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way* **2 Thessalonians 3:16**

Paul tells us to "*Let the peace of God be an umpire in our hearts*" (Colossians 3:15). God's peace applied to our heart at a given moment is one of his ways of letting us know if we're on track or not. Like an "umpire," God's peace will call us safe or out! It helps us decide which course is the right course and which is wrong.

I know that this is a pretty subjective means of guidance. What does "peace" feel like anyway? Could the peace I'm feeling at the moment be the result of something other than the Holy Spirit confirming a certain marching order? Could a "good day at the office," a nice meal, or a warm fire give me a similar feeling of peacefulness? So watch it! I think the more mature we are in our faith, the more accurate our "peace-detector" might be. Nevertheless, especially with large decisions, this is no stand-alone guide.

I can only speak for myself on what this peace "feels like" to me. At its basest level, peace means "a lack of conflict." When I'm feeling peace about something, I'm feeling no clash or struggle inside my mind or emotions. This guidance indicator of peace is nothing if it's not the opposite of an *inner turmoil*. If I'm asking Jesus for direction about something, and I feel more conflicted about it than at peace, I get the distinct impression that he might not be into it. But if when praying about something, confusion or turbulence subsides (instead of increases), I might be on to something.

Since none of these guidelines stands alone, let's go back to earlier ones for some checks and balances. For instance, take notice of the next part of the verse to which we just referred, "*Let the peace of God be an umpire...*" Right after that he wrote, "*...to which you were called into one Body...*" I think he's reminding us that a sense of the peace of God is not a substitute for checking with our mature Jesus-following friends (other parts of the "Body of Christ"). Since it's all too easy to "get a peace" about what *we want* to do, especially in big issues we should remember to check with someone who knows us and knows the Lord well. Of course, remember that our first stop is in the Bible and that "Garmin" doesn't send us on an illegal route (so you can eliminate anything that God prohibits from the list of possibilities). So, if you

“feel a peace” about some particular direction in your life, be certain that you don’t have to ignore the clear Word of God (the rules of the road) in order to take that route.



## Sometimes it takes some serious seeking...

*They fasted that day until evening... and inquired of the Lord... They asked, “Shall we go up to battle with our brother Benjamin or not?” The Lord responded, “Go, for tomorrow I will give them into your hands.”* **Judges 20:26-28**

*One day as these men were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Dedicate Barnabas and Saul for the special work to which I have called them.”* **Acts 13:2**

*Being in anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. When he rose from prayer he went back to the disciples and found them asleep, exhausted from sorrow. “Why are you sleeping?” he asked them. “Get up and pray so that you’ll not fall into temptation.”* **Luke 22:45-46**

It only makes sense that when we’re looking for God’s will about serious life situations that we’d take extraordinary measures to seek him. I’m not saying that in those circumstances that he always requires such seeking, because sometimes he just drops the revelation on us without us making any effort at all. But I’ve found that he does sometimes require some more serious seeking than usual in order to dispense his guidance. It’s certainly not because he needs me to pray harder or longer or at an earlier hour in order to be able to give me his leading. It’s most likely because I’m supposed to get closer to him, and he’s using my crossroads to pull me in. So for me, in times of significant transition, in addition to praying about it, asking my friends to pray and advise me, being particularly attentive to anything God might want to speak to me in the Word – I’ll often spend an unusual amount of time conversing with him and might do some fasting, which is often part of *serious seeking*.

For instance, when I was beginning to feel a stirring in my heart while serving as Youth Pastor in Chico about our first church plant in Santa Cruz I went to a campground in the foothills on Deer Creek called, “Potato Patch” (I don’t know where they came up with that name since I didn’t see any patches of potatoes there). One benefit of fasting during such a retreat is that you don’t have to pack any food! Camping is a lot easier if you eliminate the food planning, preparing, and cleaning up after. For several days I took prayer walks and spent lots of time by the campfire at night worshipping and conversing with the Lord (during which time I did my best to be quiet in order to listen). It was the first time I’d done something of this sort, and found it sublimely pleasant as well as effective. I went home, spoke with my wife about what I was feeling, and we began to make plans to make a move of faith.

It only makes sense that when we're looking for God's will about serious life situations that we'd take extraordinary measures to seek him.

At another time of transition for us I went to Mount Hermon (a Christian conference center in the Santa Cruz mountains) for a few days of fasting and prayer. We'd planted churches in three communities by that time and it seemed that God had something for us to do elsewhere, so I reserved a cabin at the center and spent time seeking his face for many hours during those days. I'll tell the rest of this story a little later when talking about how he sometimes uses dreams to communicate to us, but again, the leading I was seeking came; albeit in an entirely surprising fashion and with an unexpected outcome.

*My heart says of you, "Seek his face!" Your face, LORD, I will seek. **Psalm 27:8***

*Look to the LORD and his strength; seek his face always. **Psalm 105:4***

My most recent significant move that required this kind serious seeking was the preparation to move to San Francisco to live a *simple single life of service*. It was about a two-year process, which included several forms of God's guidance and required a number of actions on my part in order to make the transition with the confidence that I was launching out in God's will. But the six-week retreat to my friends' (Bob and Jean) cabin in the Sierras was the most pivotal. These temporary withdrawals from the normal course of life have been invaluable for me over the years, as I've sought marching orders from the General.

Though fasting is not at all the only way to make our seeking serious, it is an important one. Let me give you a tiny primer on fasting and its particular application to tuning our spiritual receivers to God for leading. Fasting is where we forego eating food for some period of time in order to focus on the Lord and on his purposes in prayer. It's one way to renounce the *natural* in order to invoke the *spiritual*.

The Bible is full of references to this spiritual discipline of fasting:

- *All Israel fasted as a sign of repentance in the days of the Judges...*
- *David fasted before being crowned king, when his child was sick, when his people sinned ...*
- *Nineveh fasted when turning to God...*
- *Esther called a fast when the Jews were facing extinction in Persia...*
- *Daniel fasted 3 weeks (with what we might call a "Partial Fast," Elijah fasted 40 days, Jesus fasted 40 days, Moses fasted 80 days...*
- *Paul was "in fastings often"...*
- *The early Christians fasted as part of their worship and when they ordained and sent out leaders ...*
- *To his followers, Jesus said, "When you fast..."*

Here are a few thoughts on why we should fast:

**We fast NOT to get God's attention, but to give him ours...**

When I fast I'm not trying to twist God's arm until he does something for me. It's not like a "hunger strike" until God speaks to me. I'm just trying to set myself apart from earthly distractions in order to give God my undivided attention.

**We fast NOT to make him more apt to act, but make us more receptive to being acted upon...**

I think of myself as a vessel into which God aspires to pour his riches so that he can pour them *through* me into others. Fasting (as well as all of the other disciplines like prayer, reading the Bible, fellowshiping, etc.) widens the mouth of the vessel so that he can invest more of his treasures into me and through me.

**We fast NOT to remind God of our seriousness, but to remind ourselves that we are praying ...**

When you're fasting it's pretty hard to forget that you're praying. If you do forget, your empty stomach will remind you! I'm especially inclined to fast when I have serious things to pray for. Fasting helps me to *stay serious* while I pray *seriously* for *serious* things at *serious* crossroads!

**We fast and pray if we want an answer or direction from God bad enough...**

David wrote, "*I afflicted my soul with fasting ...*" Fasting has the tendency of getting the soul in gear. It helps us put things in perspective and to hear from God more readily – to tune into his frequency. When I'm stuck in a spiritual rut, and my reception is fuzzy, it's probably time to fast in order to clean out the lines of communication. If I want this greater receptivity I might have to be willing to pay the price to achieve it!



## Open and closed doors...

*A great door for effective work has opened to me. I Corinthians 16:9*

*I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you. Romans 1:10*

Sometimes God uses circumstances like traffic lights, which say either stop or go. In such times God tells us his will by opening or closing a *door of opportunity* in front of us. We apply for a job or a college, and if it's his will, God will see that the "door is open" for us to walk through. On the other hand, he might "close a door" by having them reject our application.

Three caveats ("don'ts") about this open-or-closed-door principle:



**First** - don't assume that because everything is going smoothly that you're **in** the will of God. Doors might be open and your path smooth, but that might not be saying that God is telling you to go a certain way. Actually, if you haven't had a trial in a while it's no time necessarily to smile! You might want to look behind you to see if you have taken a wrong fork in the road. The path of Jesus isn't always the easiest one.

**Second** - don't fear that because circumstances are difficult (even terrible) that you're **out** of the will of God. Joseph suffered at the hands of his brothers and others all the while being part of a providential plan of God to save the nation (Genesis 50:20). Paul and Silas had specific orders from heaven to go to Macedonia when the first place they visited there was a Philippian prison (Acts 16:16-34). Their difficulties might have given them the idea that God was closing a door, but in actuality, he had opened a door to a way of suffering, which eventually led to the advancement of his kingdom.

**Third** - don't presume that because "coincidental" circumstances occur that God is necessarily speaking to you. It may just be the way things worked out, and not God trying to tell you something. Everything that's available to you is not necessarily a green light from God. Sometimes things are what they are, and God might not have personally made them that way.

For instance, when I was a pastor, I often had 20-somethings tell me that they're praying about going to a certain missions organization for a period of time. The main way they would assess whether or not it was God's will for them to go was if they accepted their application. I didn't want to discourage them, but I felt I had to say, *"Since they pretty much accept any warm body with enough money to go, I don't know that this should be your only indication of God's will."*

I think it's true to say that God more often uses a closed door *to deter us* than an open door *to direct us*. For instance, you may think it's God's will for you to be a dentist, but you can't get into any dentistry schools. That's a fairly clear sign from God, at least for now. On the other hand, acceptance into four different schools doesn't necessarily mean it's God's will for you to go to any of them. You don't know for sure that it was God who opened the door. Saul thought the Lord was leading him to kill David when he said, *"God has handed him over to me for David has imprisoned himself with gates and bars"* (1 Samuel 23:7). Another time David's men thought that God was "opening a door" for David to kill Saul because he was in the same cave that they were in (1 Samuel 24:1-7).

God more often uses a "closed door" to deter us than an "open door" to direct us...

Another thing about the "closed door" – sometimes we're supposed to kick it down or at least knock on it until it opens! Twice Paul wrote about being *"hindered"* and *"prevented"* from visiting the Roman Church (Romans 1:13; 15:22). He doesn't specifically identify the *hindrance* in this case, but he implies that it wasn't the Lord who hindered him. In another of his letters he refers to a hindrance, the identity of which he spells out clearly as the devil himself. He claims that it was the adversary who got in the way of the will of God – *"We wanted to come to you again and again, but Satan stopped us"* (1 Thessalonians 2:18). The point I'm making is that sometimes when a door closes we're not to give up on that door. We might be wise to ask the Lord if we're to do some spiritual warfare in order for this particular door to be

opened by his strong arm! Just because a door is closed doesn't mean that God necessarily closed it or that we're to passively assume that everything will just work out. There are times to assert the authority that Jesus gives us against the will of our spiritual foe. *"I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it!"* (Matthew 16)

But, in order to press the issue when the circumstances are against it, you should probably be pretty sure that God does want you to do this certain thing. But once you're sure, forge ahead with faith and courage! I love the faith-filled tenacity of the four guys who, when there was no room left in the house to get their disabled friend close enough to Jesus for healing they dug a hole in the roof and let him down with a rope. Talk about not being afraid to kick a closed door down!



## You gotta live right to hear right

*He leads me in paths of righteousness...* **Psalm 23:3**

*They didn't understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him.*  
**Mark 9:32**

This "getting direction from God" requires a lifestyle of obedience. It won't work to get on the "path of righteousness" at the last minute (after living on the path of unrighteousness) and expect to be led by the Spirit just because all of a sudden you're desperate for God's guidance. God wants us to *live* on that path, not just *visit* it when we need something from him! *Godliness* is one necessary precondition for *guidance*.

*The integrity of the upright guides them... The righteousness of the blameless makes a straight way for them....* **Proverbs 11:3, 5**

*The Lord will guide you always ... if you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger, and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed...*  
**Isaiah 58:9-11**

*Whoever has my commands and obeys them.... I will love and show myself to him.* **John 14:21**

*He takes the upright man into his confidence.* **Proverbs 3:32**

*In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your path.* **Proverbs 3:6**

*You consult a wooden idol and are answered by a stick of wood. A spirit of prostitution leads them astray; they are unfaithful to their God. Hosea 4:12*

When you live out of harmony with God and then ask for him for guidance, you're liable, under the guise of God, to be led by *someone else*. Satan is *"the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient"* (Ephesians 2:2). If you're living in a rebellious way, the seducer is already deceiving you, so, it's pretty easy for him to deceive you about the will of God. On the other hand, if you try to follow him in everything you do, you can have more assurance that it's him – and not Satan – who is leading you.

In other words, the Lord tends to talk to people who listen and do what he says. Jesus said, *"If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own."* (John 7:17) He guides those who will do his will once they know what his will is for them. He doesn't seem to want to waste his time showing his plan to those who aren't going to follow it!

He doesn't seem to want to waste His time showing His plan to those who aren't going to follow it.

It's not a matter of doing your own thing and then trying to get God to bless your plans! We don't get to write out all that we want to do on a piece of paper, and then send it up to him for his signature. It's better if we put our signature at the bottom of a blank sheet and then send it to him (metaphorically speaking) to fill in the blanks with his plans for us!

Sometimes I want to know God's will so I can choose whether or not to do it! ("Show me your will so I can see if it fits into my plans!") But, that's not really the way it works. I need to be willing to consent to God's will *in advance*. When Samuel prayed, *"Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening,"* he implied, *"Tell me what to do, because I'm already ready to obey!"* (1 Samuel 3:10)

Even Paul had a brief disagreement with the direction he got from the Lord in a vision. *"After I returned to Jerusalem, I was praying in the Temple and fell into a trance. I saw a vision of Jesus saying to me, 'Hurry! Leave Jerusalem, for the people here won't accept your testimony about me.' 'But Lord,' I argued, 'they certainly know that in every synagogue I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you. And I was in complete agreement when your witness Stephen was killed. I stood by and kept the coats they took off when they stoned him.' ... 'Then the Lord said to me, 'Go. I will send you far away to the Gentiles!'"* (Acts 22:17-20)

I think he was admitting that at the time he thought that he might've had a better idea than Jesus did. In his opinion, he was better suited to stay and preach in Jerusalem. This was pretty ironic since he was speaking directly to the Lord in a vision! Cool how Jesus won the argument with a command, "Go!" That pretty much settles it every time.

Then there are those who just want God's will in their lives because they assume that it's going to be safer. They figure, mistakenly so, that God always provides safety and security for those who follow him. While that may be true in the long-run (as in getting to heaven and all), it's often the other way around in the short-run. That is, the life he requires us to live is not

necessarily safer or more secure. He might just as well lead us *into* danger as *away* from it. If you're not convinced of this, read your Bible again and make note of the scary moments and sufferings of those who decided to follow him!

*I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you. Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you. Psalm 32:8-9*

He doesn't want to have to *drag* us, but *direct* us! He doesn't like having to use a "bit and bridle" on us in order to control us. He wants us to walk with him voluntarily and gladly. His guidance comes from *friendship*, not from *force*.

*Offer yourselves to him as a living sacrifice, dedicated and fit for His acceptance, the worship offered by mind and heart. Adapt yourselves no longer to the pattern of this present world, but let your minds be remade and your whole nature thus transformed. Then [and only "then"] you will be able to discern the will of God, and to know what is good, acceptable and perfect.*

**Romans 12:1-2**

In other words, submit yourself to God and you'll find out what he wants you to do. Do what he shows you to do, and you'll find that it is "*good, acceptable and perfect*"!



## How's your "whatever"?

I was in the darkest season of my life and I didn't know that I had lost my "whatever" until I was having a conversation with the Lord, when I must've switched into auto-pilot for a moment. I began to recite what I'd been saying to the Lord for over 35 years: "*I'll do whatever you want me to.*" But the sentence didn't come out. I stopped it from escaping, and my perfunctory prayer got truncated. I said, "*I'll do what...*" and then, as I recall, I almost put my hand over my mouth like a dam in front of a river. I realized that I wasn't willing to make this grandiose promise anymore. I remember saying something like:

*"Wait! That's not true. I'm not going to say that. I used to say I'd do whatever – I've said it hundreds, maybe thousands of times over the years, and I meant it every time (as far as I can recall) – but not today. I used to pray the "Whatever Prayer" to you, but it turns out that you didn't have my back. I've always been willing to do whatever you wanted me to, but it seems to me that you didn't make the same commitment to me. It appears that while I was willing to do whatever it took to do the things that I thought were important to you, you weren't willing to do for me whatever it took to keep me from losing the things that were important to me. For now, I'm just letting you know that I'm*

*just not willing to do “whatever” anymore. At least for now, “whatever” is not part of my prayer vocabulary, and from now on I’m going to be more careful about the promises I make to you.”*

I think the core issue of my lost “whatever” was really a loss of trust. I simply didn’t trust God like I had before. He’d let me down (at least from my vantage point at the time) and I wasn’t willing to expose myself unreservedly to him again. “*Whatever you want, Lord*” was not going to proceed out of my mouth again until at least we got some things straightened out between us.

Over time, many thanks to the God who is willing to suffer long with me, I noticed that my “whatever” began to make a comeback. My losses weren’t exactly reversed, I was starting to learn to live joyfully in spite of them, and my “truster” was beginning to heal. I could tell I was rehabbing when I heard myself pray the “Whatever Prayer” once in a while without balking or stuttering. In the beginning, my prayers had a shelf life and a limited scope. They went something like, “Lord, I’ll do whatever you want me to at this event...” – or – “I’ll say whatever you want me to in that conversation with that particular person...” I was putting my toe in the water before jumping in. I wasn’t ready to run up any banners or sign any long-term contracts; but I was making headway back to more of an all-encompassing recovery of the “whatever mentality.” Though I can’t recall the day or the method by which I progressed from one stage to another toward a healthier attitude of trust, it dawned on me one day that I was nearing the kind of abandoned confidence in God to which I had been accustomed in the past. Eventually the shelf life increased and the scope broadened of my *whatever*, until one day I realized I had gotten it back entirely, with maybe even a greater conviction than before.

I think one key to knowing what to do is being willing to do “whatever” he wants us to do. He seems to like it when we don’t have caveats on what we’re willing to do. He said to one of his prophets, “*You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you.*” *Jeremiah 1:7* “Whatever” he commands is what he expects, and to my excuses for anything less he offers nothing but irresistible rebuttals. “I’m too young, too old, too weak, too...” He doesn’t seem to care. Whatever!



## Divine appointments...

It’s only recently that I began to think of “Divine Appointments” (DA’s) as being a method of divine guidance. A “Divine appointment” is when God sets up an unexpected and fortuitous encounter for you, usually without consulting you or warning you. You run into the perfect person at the precise moment, who can hook you up with the job you are about to apply for. You sit next to a person on the bus who is wondering about God, and a conversation ensues. In a crowded mall a person you haven’t seen in many years, but have been praying for, walks

right by you. Some people call them “God sightings” or instead of “coincidences” – “Coinci-Gods.”

Examples from the Bible abound... Ruth had a fortuitous meeting with her close relative Boaz (Ruth 2:3). Abraham’s servant, who was looking for a wife for Isaac had a “chance meeting” with Rebekah (Genesis 24:15). Philip the Evangelist had an amazing divinely concocted appointment with the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:27). The Ethiopian just “happened” to be reading the Old Testament’s clearest predictive prophecy of the cross when Philip intersected with him on a remote section of the road to Gaza!

I think one key to knowing  
what to do is being willing  
to do “whatever” he  
wants us to do.

The other day I went for a walk on the beach. Prayer walking on the beach is one of my favorite activities in life. It was a beach on which I’ve walked maybe two or three hundred times and have only run into people that I know maybe a dozen times. On this day I ran into two different old friends of mine with whom I had significant, even pivotal conversations. When I started out, I had on my mind my usual prayer agenda, and wasn’t looking for interaction with anyone but Jesus. But it was obvious to me that these were appointments that had been arranged by him. Rather than talking to God about people, that day I got to talk to people about God!

The first of these was with a struggling brother whom I hadn’t seen in over 15 years. I think I was able to encourage him, and then we parted after an hour or so with joyful tears in our eyes. The likelihood of us running into each other that day, at that place, at such a strategic moment was way beyond the boundaries of coincidence. When I look back at these, it’s obvious to me that these kinds of unplanned “engagements” happen to me quite often. For years now I’ve been in the habit of praying for these and trying to be prepared for them when they occur.

When I was in the middle of what I call a “Hell of Mercy,” I had dozens and dozens of perfectly timed phone calls from friends at moments of my greatest agony, just when I needed someone to talk to. Someone would write a card and it came in the mail on the very day that I needed what he or she wrote to this broken brother. Another friend or family member would come to my house and visit just when I was at my wit’s end. God knew my needs and sent his willing friends just in the nick of time!

Are there such things as “coincidences”? Many Christians say no. I can’t agree with that. As I said above, God is *in control*, but not he’s *controlling*. He doesn’t control everything in his universe, especially in light of the free will experiment that we’re engaged in. He doesn’t control every flip of the coin or every chance meeting between people. But there are times he does insert himself into the affairs of people in astonishing ways.

*We are God’s workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works which God prepared in advance for us to do. **Ephesians 2:10***

I call these “good works,” which are pre-planned by God, **“Eternally Ordained Opportunities”** (EOO’s for short). I see them as providentially placed opportunities to help someone or glorify God in some way. From eternity he plants them in time. Since I’m confident that God has left these EOO’s in strategic places for me to simply run into, I’m not nervous about finding good works to do. I’m convinced that I’m going to find them on the path I’m already on (as long as I’m on the path of submission to his will). I’m on a treasure hunt of sorts, and when I find the gems he’s left in strategic places for me, I do my best to cooperate with him in doing whatever he ordained in eternity for me to do with that gem.

*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. **1 Peter 3:15***

*Be prepared in season and out of season. **2 Timothy 4:2***

### **How to miss your divine appointments...**

Can we miss the “appointments” that God sets up for us? Yes we can, and unfortunately I have quite a bit of experience in the *art* of missing them. Here’s how you can miss them too...

#### ***You can miss your DA’s by living a wayward lifestyle.***

When we’re off track with God, instead of encountering the kingdom prospects that he eternally ordained, we tend to miss them. One of the common terms in the Bible for sin is “trespasses.” When you *trespass* on someone else’s property you’re someplace you shouldn’t be, and conversely, you’re not where you should be. You’re *off the path* where you were supposed to run into those opportunities to partner with God and do a “good work.” Until you get back on the road of obedience, you’re likely to miss any number of DA’s and EOO’s.

A train will take you through certain stations at prearranged times. But if you board the wrong train (one that’s going the wrong direction), you’ll miss all the stations that you were intended to reach. If you had a person waiting at one of those originally intended stations, and you planned to intersect with them at a certain time at that location, you’re both going to be disappointed! You have to be on the *right train* in order to make the *right stops* at the *right times*. If you’re not “on track” with the Lord, there’s no doubt that you’ll miss some “appointments.” On the other hand, if you’ll get on the right train, it puts you in a position to make those appointments so that you can partner with God for good!

#### ***You can miss your DA’s when you fail to do the thing for which God set the meeting up to begin with.***

You can be at the God-appointed place and time, but still miss the appointment by being preoccupied, timid, or just too lazy to do the thing God was hoping you’d do. This has happened to me more times than I wish to recall. For instance, when our mother died, my sister and I got together to plan her funeral and other next steps. We were sitting in a restaurant reminiscing, and she said to me, *“You’re always so strong.”* Later, when I looked back at that moment, I realized that this was a pitch I should have hit over the fence! It was right over the plate, and I let it go by. “Strike one!” I said something innocuous like, *“No I’m not.”* And that was it. I should’ve said, *“I’m absolutely not strong all the time, but if I appear to be, it’s because Someone is propping me up!”* I’m under no condemnation about my “called strike one,” because I asked the Lord to forgive me, and have had many other DA’s to

converse with my sister about Jesus since. But this and all the other times I've been called out on strikes have served to remind me to keep a keener eye out for my DA's and EOO's and not wimp out when I get one!

### **A perfectly timed appointment...**

I had just come back from the dentist who told me I needed to replace a crown on one of my molars. It would cost \$950, definitely a stretch for me at the time. I went directly home and saw that the mail had been delivered, which was odd because it was several hours earlier than usual. I noticed that the postmark dates were from a week prior. I deduced that these pieces had been mistakenly delivered to the wrong house, and a neighbor had, after a several day delay, come over and put the letters in my mailbox. The first piece I opened was from a very dear old friend who, out of the blue, sent me \$1000 check, which covered the looming dental bill with \$50 to spare! Not only was the amount an absolute miracle, but equally shocking was the timing of it. Had I gotten the mail when it was originally sent I would've had the money in hand – an amazing *God sighting* in itself. But by putting it in my hand 10 minutes after getting the news of the need, was to me an indisputable love note from my Father, reminding me he's with me all of the time and taking care of me no matter what!

Talk about God's leading! He put it in my friend's heart to send me that particular amount of money at that particular time, just when I needed it! My neighbor, albeit unaware of the part he played, was also involved in the supernatural set up! My part was easy – just open the mail, get the crown, pay the bill, and give the other \$50 away to someone else!



## Being led without realizing it (until later)...

*"You don't realize now what I'm doing, but later you will understand."* **John 13:7**

*"Guidance doesn't demand continual interference from heaven; it's based on a quiet surrender and trust in the constant care of our Father, with a carefulness to walk in the light of all that we know to be His will, and a leaving of the remainder with Him."* **Donald Gee**

Maybe we could call this an *inadvertent leading*, the kind of leading where you don't know you're being led until after you've been led there. We've probably all experienced looking back at our path and realizing that Someone from behind the scenes was cutting the trail just ahead of us without us being aware of it.

Sometimes he sets up divine appointments that we didn't recognize as such until afterwards. No doubt there are dozens of incidents in each of our lives every day where God orchestrates events around us to get us to do *what* he wants, *where* he wants, and *when* he wants. Some people call it "providence."



*In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.*

**Ephesians 1:11**

*And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.*

**Romans 8:28**

I guess that most of the time God leads us without us actually knowing it (at least not until we look back). *Sometimes* he *somehow* gets us *somewhere* to experience *something*, learn *something*, or do *something* good for *someone*, without us having any idea that he's the one doing it!

My friend Dan was in the Navy Reserves riding in a van with a half dozen other reservists on a peace-time mission of some kind. Dan is a pretty fearless guy and loves to share his faith with others. He asked the entire vanload of men, *"What do you guys think about death? Where do we go when we die?"* A conversation ensued, and he had an opportunity to tell them about how Jesus rescued believers from eternal death. They finished their mission, and the next day one of the men from the van suddenly died of a heart attack. When I heard the story, my first thought was about God's mercy, and how he was clearly reaching out to this man on the eve of his death! I asked Dan if he had felt a "leading from the Holy Spirit" to open that discussion. He said he hadn't had any such leading, but that he just "thought" it would be a good idea, and it might lead to a good conversation about God. To my mind, the Spirit put this in Dan's mind in such a subtle way that he wasn't even aware of being led in order to give that man (as well as all the other men in the van) a chance to know Jesus before he died.

*To humans belong the plans of the heart, but from the LORD comes the proper answer of the tongue.* **Proverbs 16:1**

*In their hearts, humans plan their course, but the LORD establishes their steps.* **Proverbs 16:9**

*Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails.* **Proverbs 19:21**

Sometimes it's not a matter of *knowing His will*, but of just *being in it*. He's our Shepherd, and as such, he often gets us where he wants us to be when we're open to doing his will. We're his sheep; and when we lack understanding (which is pretty much all the time), I think he simply arranges our circumstances in such a way that we end up doing his will. He's too big to allow our ignorance to keep him from leading us in paths of righteousness for his name's sake!

Be encouraged. When you're sure you're on the right train, you can rest easy and leave the rest up to the engineer. If you sincerely and unreservedly want God's will, rest assured, you'll have it!

*When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away. The eunuch never saw him again but went on his way rejoicing. Meanwhile, Philip found himself farther north at the town of Azotus. He preached the Good News there and in every town along the way until he came to Caesarea. **Acts 8:39***

This is one of those *way-out-of-the-box* supernatural incidents recorded in the Bible. One moment Philip was on the road to Gaza and the next moment was in Azotus! He didn't walk there or take a camel cab. He was "translated" by supernatural transport to the place where God needed him next (apparently he needed him there right away)! We see stuff like this in the movies all the time, but here it is right in the Bible. Even in Bible times this is not at all common, but sometimes God does what he does without precedent (or with any plans to do it again). I brought this up, not so much to encourage an expectation for translations, but to give an example of how God just took the initiative to transport someone to a location where he was needed. I'm not saying that we should expect such radical occurrences, but we might take courage from this that he can lead us without us having anything to do with it.

By the way, all indications about this man are that he was the kind of person to whom God could give such an outlandish ride. He's the only person in the Bible called an "evangelist," and he appears to have lived his life as a perpetual missions trip. He was available to do God's will whatever it was, so God gave him a supersonic ride to his next assignment!

*Sometimes he somehow gets us somewhere  
to experience something, learn something,  
or do something good for someone,  
without us having any idea that  
he's the one doing it!*

Of course this gives us no excuse to neglect doing our part to seek God's will for our lives. Based on his providential involvement, I've heard people say, "*Whatever God wants me to do, he'll get me there – one way or another.*" While this might have some truth to it, based on all we've said so far, he appears to want the kind of friendship with us wherein we seek his will and he reveals pieces of it to us in any number of ways. And then he gives us a choice whether or not to do what he shows us.



Enjoy Jesus everyday

*Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart*

**Psalm 37:4**

A lot of mileage has been gotten from this verse. I don't know about you, but I want it to mean that if I love Jesus a lot he will see to it that I get what I want. Unfortunately, it doesn't quite work that way. The first thing that we might've overlooked is *the condition* that we have to meet in order to be able to expect the promise to come to pass. I'm talking about the "delight yourself in the Lord" part. As far as I can tell, it means to have a delightful friendship with him, one that both you and he enjoy, where you're both delighted to be friends! And honestly, the longer we're friends, at least from my side, I'm more and more delighted with him.

Then there's the thing about the promise to give you what you desire. So, does that mean you can have anything you want? I don't think so. Though I do believe that he's committed to my best, I've come to believe that my best is often something other than what I wanted (at least at first). It seems to me that the desires he's talking about are the desires that our hearts *ought to have*. If we delight ourselves in our friendship with him then he's committed to putting the best desires inside us. I'll bet you've experienced your *desires* changing as you get to know and love Jesus more and more; I know I have. I think the verse is saying, "*Enjoy your friendship with Jesus and gradually his desires will become your desires. He'll insert into your heart what he wants your wants to be!*"

Of course there's an exception to this rule, and that's when he leads you to do something that you *don't want to do* (at least at first). Jesus told Peter that when he got old he'd have to go "*where he didn't want to go*" (John 21:18). Sometimes God leads us *into*, instead of *out of* a place of suffering.

*Those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good* **1 Peter 4:19**

My experience is that often when God's will puts me in an undesirable circumstance, later I enjoy the fruit of the circumstance in my life. "*No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it*" (Hebrews 12:11).

Nevertheless, it is still true that one of the ways God leads his good friends is by our *desires*. When we're close to him, our desires (at least the ones that reside in our inner-man) can be a reliable source of information about the will of God. In other words, if you want to know his will, one indicator might be *what you want*. Do you sometimes think that because you want something that it can't possibly be what God wants? Sometimes it might actually be just the opposite. It may even be that you have this particular desire for something because He gave you that desire. If your delight is in him, you'll be more apt to be able to follow your desires (like a trail of breadcrumbs) all the way into God's will. (**Warning:** Don't take this to an unhealthy extreme and suppose that all your desires come from God. Remember that you still have selfish and sinful desires conflicting with your selfless and spiritual ones.)

*I have found him (David) a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.* **Acts 13:22**

David yearned for the contents of God's heart so that those things that filled God's heart also filled his.

If we delight ourselves in our friendship with him  
then he's committed to putting the best desires inside us.

*One day as these men were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Dedicate Barnabas and Saul for the special work to which I have called them." So after more fasting and prayer, the men laid their hands on them and sent them on their way. **Acts 13:2***

I imagine a connection between their delight-filled worship and the Holy Spirit's leading. It's possible that the church was already engaged in seeking God's will for Paul and Barnabas' future, nevertheless as they were delighting in him through worship, he spoke a word of direction to them. (They also fasted. See above on what I call, "serious seeking.") Their worship wasn't mere ritual or song-singing. If you'll forgive the terminology, it was more like spiritual love-making. When they worshipped Jesus, it was the practice of intimacy. It's to that kind of heart that the Lord reveals his heart.

*He confides in those who fear him... **Psalm 25:14***

*He takes the upright man into his confidence... **Proverbs 3:32***



## When you pray...

*And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites... But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. **Matthew 6:5-7***

*Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. **Ephesians 6:18***

I really enjoy my conversations with the Lord. Call it *prayer*; call it *devotions*, *quiet time* or anything else that suits you. I'm partial to the term, "*conversation*" since it depicts a back-and-forth, an *exchange*, an *interchange* between God and me. In my opinion, the best prayers are more of a dialogue than a monologue. It's not just us talking, and him listening. When we pray, something comes from him (he's the Great Initiator), and then something goes back up to him from us. Then sometimes he sends something back to us in the form of a response to our

prayer. This could only be true if what we have with God is a relationship, a fellowship with him that makes the “conversation” possible.

My favorite places to have conversations with the Lord have all been outdoor places. I like walking while I’m talking to Jesus. I think it began when I was a new Christian trying to figure out if God wanted me to go to Bible College or not. I had a dog named, “8-Ball” (as in, “Eight ball in the side pocket”). 8-Ball was all white, and people would comment, “*But an 8-ball is black!*” to which I would usually reply, “*Hmmm.*” Anyway, I found myself talking to the Lord more and more while on walks with my canine buddy. Our walks became longer and more frequent over time as I increasingly took pleasure in our talks (not with 8-Ball, but with Jesus). Later, when 8-Ball was no longer with me, I continued the walks and talks with Jesus. I guess it’s always felt like I’m on a walk with him and we’re both chatting about whatever comes to mind. I enjoy it most when it seems like what’s “coming to my mind” is being delivered from *his* mind to mine!

Everywhere I’ve lived since then I’ve developed favorite prayer walking places. I love the beach, having lived by it for most of my life, and many of these special places are on or near the seashore. The woods have a huge attraction for me, and so many of my beloved prayer spots are among the trees as well. I also love prayer hikes in the hills or mountains – the vistas inspire in me a divine perspective. Somehow mixing the all-essential conversation time with what I call, an “aesthetic (or creation) fix” has been significantly restorative for me over these many years. I’ll often stop on such a walk and thank him for sharing his beauty with me in the magnificence of his created world. Though I love to worship Jesus with friends, when I need renewal, I’d choose to take a walk with him any day – just me alone with him.

Until recently, my walking conversations with Jesus had almost always been during the daytime. But somewhere along the line I began taking night walks as well. There’s something about the night – the quiet and anonymity I guess – that I’ve learned to love as another venue for Jesus-time.

If I had to guess, I’d say that more times than not when God has definitively led me over the years it has come during my “Prayer Walks.” I want it to be clear that it’s not that I make a conscious decision to use a certain method or posture or vocabulary for my times of prayer. I just do whatever has, for me, facilitated my conversational interaction with the Lord. My times of prayer are usually more like “chats” with him; and out of the context of many of those chats, he’s gently, and “naturally” led me.

I carry a small digital recorder with me whenever I go on a prayer walk. (In the old days I used a piece of paper and a pen in my pocket to write things down that came to mind.) I’ll tend to put anywhere between one and even a dozen or two recordings on any given walk. Sometimes the promptings I receive from the Spirit turn out to be sort of a “To Do List.” (You know, “Call this person, write that letter, pray for this particular thing, etc.”) Other times I record things that are more like revelations, insights that he gives me while we’re chatting. Sometimes what seems more like thoughts from my own head have turned out to be Holy Spirit generated ideas. His voice can sound pretty much like my own thoughts at times.

Sometimes it’s immediately clear to me what he wants me to do, and at other times the clarity comes much later, after many more conversations. Sometimes the leading from the Spirit comes when I’m seeking him for direction, but may also arrive as a surprise. I remember many

years ago pacing back and forth (that's what I'll do when for some reason an outdoor walk is not feasible) in my apartment in southern California talking to Jesus, when out of the blue (so to speak) the words, "You're going back to Chico," came to my mind. It was the last thing that I expected to "hear" on that day, since, as I recall, I wasn't even praying for leading about what to do when I finished college, and even if I were, my home town of Chico wasn't even on my radar for potential places to go to next. It was a shock to me, but a clear word, one that I couldn't shake or deny. It would require cutting my studies short, leaving Los Angeles earlier than I had planned (no sacrifice there!), and going "home" for no apparent reason (I didn't get any "why" attached to it), but I was certain of it nonetheless, and began making plans to uproot.

It's not as though I'm always (or even usually) *right* in what I think God is saying to me. But even when in hindsight I determine that I was mistaken, I don't let it discourage me from trusting to be more accurate next time. I just keep going for walks, having my chats with God, and asking him to share his heart with me.



## Keep moving...

Acts 16 is my favorite chapter on divine direction where God did some amazing things to guide Paul and his friends throughout Turkey and Greece. Though there's some overlap of some of the lessons that we've seen earlier in the study, I'll insert the whole narrative here and cite some clues about how God guides.

**Acts 16:6** *Paul and Silas traveled through the area of Phrygia and Galatia, because the Holy Spirit had prevented them from preaching the word in the province of Asia at that time.*

### **Not now, but later...**

It sounds to me like they actually went to Asia Minor (modern Turkey), but the Holy Spirit said or did something to keep them from preaching there – he “*prevented them from preaching.*” If you're familiar with Paul's story or anything about the Holy Spirit, you know this is not at all common. The Spirit was usually telling Paul to “Go and preach,” but this time it was “Don't preach!” I don't know if he told Paul not to preach or just closed a door. I can't be sure, but one way or the other he made it clear to them that though they were in place and poised to tell people about Jesus (which is usually the right thing to do, especially when that's what you're gifted to do), they weren't to do it *this time*. Maybe they were in God's will being in Asia Minor, but instead of preaching there, their assignment was simply to pray, as it's usually a good thing to precede your preaching with praying!

I call this the “***not-now-but-later-principle,***” and here's why. God didn't want them to preach in Asia Minor at this time, possibly calling them to plow the soil with intercessory prayer. But a couple of years later Paul went back to the region (specifically Ephesus), remained longer there than in any other place of his entire ministry (three years), and we're told that through

Paul's mission there that "*all of Asia heard the word of the Lord.*" (Acts 19) Apparently, it's not that God didn't want him to go and preach in Asia Minor; he just wanted him to do it later when the time was ripe (I guess).

**Acts 16:7** *Then coming to the borders of Mysia, they headed north for the province of Bithynia, but again the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them to go there.*

### **Not you, but someone else...**

This time, as they started north, the Holy Spirit wouldn't even allow them to travel there. So far, all they were learning was *what wasn't God's will!* But sometimes that can be quite valuable, at least so that you can narrow down the options. By process of elimination you'll eventually figure out what he wants you to do!

I can't say for sure how the Spirit got through to them to sidestep Bithynia – it may have been by some form of personal or prophetic leading, or maybe he just closed the door in front of them (their donkey broke a leg, their guide got sick...). I don't know, but my guess is that the Spirit inspired them to at least pray for the people of Bithynia. Though we have no record of Paul ever travelling there in the future, the Apostle Peter mentions that some of the recipients of his first Epistle were "*those scattered in Bithynia*" (1 Peter 1:1). My guess is that Peter went there as a result of Paul and Silas' intercessions. In this case, Paul prayed and Peter preached. I call this the "**not-you-but-someone-else**" principle. Paul and Silas weren't supposed to plant, but to plow in advance of Peter, who would sow his seed on prepared soil.

Remember earlier when I spoke about "the burden"? What we might glean from this story in Acts is that a *burden for someone or something is not necessarily a leading from God to actually take some kind of action.* It might not be your responsibility to do anything about something for which you have a burden except to pray. Your burden may only be lifted as you *pray* for the ministry to be performed by someone (else). God may have given you the burden just so that you would pray, not necessarily that you would go. I think of every burden as a "*Prayer Cue*" (a cue to pray). Here's how it works. I feel a sense of compassion or concern for *someone* (like my friend in the hospital) or *something* (such as human trafficking). What do I do? The first thing I should do is pray. I ask God to heal my friend or free the children trafficked in Africa. As I do, sometimes I'll get a sense that I am supposed to be the answer to my own prayers. I realize that God is putting this in my heart for something more than for prayer. So then I begin to ask him to lead me as to what I should do about the thing for which I have a burden. Other times I might not sense his calling to act, but to simply intercede for the one(s) in need for him to send someone to be his hand extended. [**Rule of thumb:** When you see a need, always pray. And sometimes become the answer to your own prayer.]

**Acts 16:8** *So instead, they went on through Mysia to the seaport of Troas.*

### **Keep moving...**

You've got to love their tenacity, when after being denied twice, they kept going forward! They didn't get cynical about the delays that they experienced or become discouraged about not getting to do what they had done before with such great success. Lesser men would've given up or given in to apathy. But they kept moving. "*God must have something for us to do; we just need to find it and do it!*"

Have you ever tried to turn the steering wheel of a large truck while it's still parked? You have to get it going, even just a little, in order to be able to steer it. In the same way, I think God has a difficult time steering *parked people* (ones that are waiting around for lightning to strike to get them off their couch)! It's much easier for him to steer us in the right direction if we'll get moving at least a little.

**When you see a need, always pray.  
And sometimes become the answer  
to your own prayer.**

Sometimes finding out what God wants you to do is like winding through a "House of Mirrors." You can give up and just stand in one spot, because you're tired of bumping into your own reflection, but you don't make much progress that way. You need to *keep moving!* (By the way, in case you're wondering if there could be a method to this madness, I'd guess yes! What with the ambiguity of his leading, the frustration of having to wait, and the annoyance of trial and error – he's most likely after something in us!)

**Acts 16:9** *That night Paul had a vision: A man from Macedonia in northern Greece was standing there, pleading with him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us!"*

**Hear the "help us"...**

I've always been fascinated by this "*man from Macedonia.*" Was he an actual man who was translated across the Aegean Sea (like Phillip in Acts 8), a holographic virtual man that God projected in front of Paul, an angel from heaven, or simply a picture of a man in Paul's mind? I don't know, but whoever he was, he got the job done. They were so sure of God's leading that they let go of any previous plans and found the first ship sailing for Greece. Let's call this one the "**Hear-the-'help-us'**" principle.

*"Lord, help us to hear the 'Help us!' Help us to know where we're needed most, where you want us, and where they're crying, 'Help us!'"*

**Acts 16:10** *So we decided to leave for Macedonia at once having concluded that God was calling us to preach the Good News there.*

**Don't expect a smooth ride...**

I like the phrase, "*at once...*" Prior to this, God seemed to be slowing everything down with delays and deferments. But when it was time to go, they went "*at once.*" It was as if the Spirit had been "*downshifting*" just before he finally hit the gas and got them on the road again!

Fast-forwarding the next part of the story --- they grab the fastest thing sailing to Macedonia, start preaching to people, and cast a demon out of a fortune-telling slave girl. Since the girl was making a lot of money for her masters, they got angry and had Paul and Silas stripped, beaten, and thrown in jail. The how-God-guides principle I derive from this is – **Don't expect that God will always lead you to pleasant and pain-free circumstances.** Sometimes he leads us straight *into* the storm instead of *away* from it. Their response to what must've seemed like a setback was surprising – they prayed and worshipped God while in their stocks!



They weren't *dissuaded*, but rather even more *persuaded* to advance to whatever adventure God might lead them into next. Difficulty and trial are not necessarily an indication that we've missed God's will. It might even be a symptom that we're right in the middle of it! Though to be honest, if I were Silas, I might've wondered if the Macedonian man had been more of a *hallucination* than a *vision*!

Their praises were interrupted by an earthquake that shook open the prison doors, the jailer and his family decided to follow Jesus, and the missionaries went on to the next town leaving behind a band of impassioned new believers to form the church of Philippi. Whereas earlier on the journey, God seemed to say "No" a lot, when he finally said "Yes," he led them right into the lion's mouth of suffering. When all seemed lost, the Lord showed up, shook the place, and made converts of their persecutors. I'm sure that it wasn't what Paul had expected when he first set out to help the Macedonian man, but God had a plan, which involved both setbacks and surprises (as do most of his plans)!



## My problem with the strategic plan...

*Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins. **James 4:13-17***

I have an issue with our modern obsession with the "Strategic Plan." I'm all for having goals and I get why most businesses have a five-year plan where they set certain goals and develop strategies for how to achieve them. But on a more personal level, I wonder if much of our strategizing has *hurt*, rather than *helped* our efforts to serve in the adventure of God (the Spirit of God as our "Adventure Guide.") Some Bible scholars say that Paul had a "Major-City-Strategy" (a pre-conceived tactic to spread the good news in the economic and social centers of his day). But I just don't see him doing demographic analyses or consulting the sociologists of his day about how to best market his spiritual product. I'm more inclined to think he was on a mission to find out what God was doing and to try his best to do it with him.

I'm not saying that the Spirit had no wise scheme for reaching the most people in the best possible way. I'm just not so sure that he let Paul and his colleagues in on the scheme. I think the bulk of the strategizing went on *above* them – *apart* from them! "Someone else" was planning, pointing, and leading them; but not necessarily laying out any strategic blueprint for them to follow. It's in vogue these days for ministry leaders to sit in conference rooms with white boards and markers to identify the most likely places to go and the most potentially

receptive people to go to. They pray about it, but their prayers are usually only to get the Lord to bless their ingenious strategic plans.

I love that when God called Abraham, he *“went out not knowing where he was going”* (Hebrews 11). I remember when this was one of the key passages for us as we went to plant churches in communities with which we weren’t particularly familiar. This was before you could read any number of books on the subject of church planting, go to conferences, boot camps, and seminars to learn how to do it strategically and systematically. We really had no idea what we were doing; and frankly, those were the best years of our lives in God’s service. He used us in spite of our ignorance – maybe even *because* of it! We didn’t know where we were going, but we knew who would go with us!

In the passage above James described a man overly self-assured about **when** he’s going (*“today or tomorrow”*), **where** he’s going (*“to this or that city”*), **how long** he’ll stay (*“a year”*), **what** he’ll do when he gets there (*“carry on business”*), and **what** the results will be (*“make money”*). James derided the arrogant attitude, but wasn’t saying we shouldn’t make plans. He’s just saying that we shouldn’t leave God out of them!



## You might have to wait a while

I had been praying for two years or so about moving to San Francisco to find simple ways of serving God and people. My friend Dennis knew what I was praying about, and he asked me if I had a “green light” to make the move yet. He knew I had been at our friends’ cabin in the Sierras for a month and a half seeking the Lord for direction about what to do next, and he wondered if I felt the “OK” to go. This cabin in the little town of Twain Harte (named after Mark Twain and Brett Harte) is one of my favorite places in all the world to go and hang out with the Lord. I already had a strong sense that he was asking me to embark on an adventure in “The City,” but I wasn’t absolutely sure, especially since he hadn’t yet opened a door for housing. I had already waited quite a while, but now I was trying to spend a concerted and extended amount of time seeking him in hopes that he would “say” something to me about it.

I paused a second and then replied to Dennis, *“I’m pretty sure I do have a ‘green light,’ but it’s like there’s a hand over the bottom light. I can’t actually see that the green light is illuminated, but I can see that the red and yellow lights are not shining. So, unless it’s broken, I assume that God is saying, “Yes – go! But don’t go right now! You’ll have to wait a little longer.”*

It was almost exactly a year after that conversation that I finally made the move. So, from the time that I first sensed a subtle nudge to go live in San Francisco, to the actual move, was well over 2 years! When I was still in waiting mode I wrote in my journal:

*“I’m willing to wait longer, Lord, but I’d really rather not if you don’t mind. But please know that I don’t want to rush anything and miss something I need to know or to do... You know best...”*

*Yeah, I came back from TH on June 1<sup>st</sup> with a sense of your hand on the green light, but since the yellow or red weren’t illuminated, I guessed that you were saying yes... That was 8 months ago... I know that time is not a big deal to you, but you seem to work within it and sometimes require a certain expenditure of it for some things to happen. You don’t seem nearly as nervous as I am about things going a certain way or on a certain schedule.”*

*Be still before the Lord and **wait patiently** for Him... I **wait** for the Lord more than watchmen **wait** for the morning, more than watchmen **wait** for the morning. **Psalm 37:7***

When I say you’ll have to “wait” I’m not suggesting that you do nothing while you wait. You may be waiting for direction on a particular thing because you don’t know yet what God wants, but you do know what he wants you to do in the more *general* sense (remember what we called, the “Big Verses”). You know that he wants you to love him, love others, serve the poor, worship, stay away from unhealthy stuff, etc. So keep doing all the stuff you know to do while you’re waiting!

## **We didn’t know where we were going, but we knew who would go with us!**

I heard someone say *“To hurry God is to find fault with Him!”* He doesn’t get his time off our watch, so if he isn’t leading you as quickly as you like – learn to wait! His will isn’t like a package we open all at once, but more like a scroll that we unroll a little at a time.

God doesn’t usually lead us very far ahead of time. If he did, we might get the mistaken idea that now that we know where we are going we don’t need him any longer. Also, if we knew all that was ahead of us, including the difficulties, we might opt out in fear. He unfolds it like a flower to keep us humble and focused on him.

*I go on not knowing  
I would not, if I might;  
I’d rather walk in the dark with God  
Than go alone in the light;  
I’d rather walk by faith in Him  
Than go alone with sight.  
(David Brainerd)*



# Signs & Fleeces

Gideon doubted God's promise to bring victory to him and his fellow Jews in their impending battle with their enemies, so he made a deal with him that he'd proceed to do his part if the Lord would prove his intent (and his ability) to do his (Judges 6). One night Gideon put some fleece on the ground and proposed that if in the morning the fleece was wet, and the surrounding area dry, he would do what God was asking him to do. The next morning it was evident that God had complied and made the fleece damp while leaving the ground dry. But still Gideon doubted, so he requested the reverse of the sign. Low and behold, the next morning the fleece was dry and the ground around it was wet!

When you hear someone say, "*I put a fleece before the Lord,*" it's this story that inspired that idea. I've never heard of anyone who actually used a piece of wool, but it's usually some sort of test to ascertain God's will about something. But, I don't generally recommend this practice per se. First of all, the Bible records activities (like Gideon's fleece) without actually endorsing them as normative, and it's not a good idea to make an *exception* into a *rule*. Plus, Gideon didn't do this because he doubted *that it was God* who had spoken to him, but he doubted *what God had said*. He wasn't struggling with whether or not God was talking to him or whether or not he wanted to deliver Israel, but with whether or not he could deliver them (particularly by Gideon's hand). In the technical sense, Gideon wasn't so much looking for God's *direction*, but a *confirmation* of his ability to keep his Word.

I don't blame him for his lack of faith; when challenged to trust God for much smaller miracles I'm pretty skittish myself. But as a means of accessing divine guidance, to my mind, the "fleecing method" is generally inadvisable. It seems sort of like asking God to do tricks to prove his ability. If that's true, then why did God comply with Gideon's request? I don't think it was because of *Gideon's method*, but because of *God's mercy* that he went along with his proposal. Plus, the fact was that the Jews needed help to defeat their enemy (they couldn't do it alone), and God was inclined to give it, so he condescended to cooperate with Gideon's test.

God *can* use anything he wants at any time to guide us (fleeces included), but that doesn't mean he endorses this particular means as legitimate or that he'll use it next time. A young seminary student told his professor that he knew he was called to be a preacher because he saw a cloud formation that looked like the letters "PC" written in the sky. He had been asking God for a sign of his intent to use him in this way, and he convinced himself that it stood for "*Preach Christ.*" After the professor heard the young man give a sermon (decidedly unimpressed) he suggested that the clouds might actually be telling him to "*Plant Corn!*" If you slip on a banana peel and land on a map of China, it doesn't necessarily mean that God has called you to be a missionary there!

But I have to say that I think there's quite a difference between *fleeces* and *signs* (i.e. Genesis 24:4 and I Samuel 14:8-10). Fleeces don't seem to have any relevance to the decision on which you're deliberating. It's like basing a decision about your career or marriage partner on the quacking of ducks in a certain lake a certain number of times or lightning striking a particular place. To my mind these are pretty weak means of determining God's will. On the

other hand, it might be legitimate to ask him for a sign when making a decision. *“If you want me to sell my house, I’ll give it six months at such and such a price.”* Or, *“If I should pursue a career in this area, then please open doors to the college classes I need.”*

God *can* use anything he wants at anytime to guide us (fleeces included), but that doesn’t mean he endorses this particular means as legitimate or that he’ll use it next time.

Sometimes God may give us a sign when we aren’t seeking one. (I wonder if he prefers it that way.) I had a couple of peculiar things happen when I was a young aspiring preacher. (I’ve since learned that there are only two kinds of preachers – *aspiring and perspiring!*) I was to give my very first “sermon” when I was 18 years old to the congregation among whom I had become a Christian. My plan was to speak about John the Baptist and how we need to emulate his mission to *“prepare the way of the Lord.”* Anyway, I was going to speak at the Sunday night service. (That was the one where the rookies would try out our wings, it being safer to loose us on a smaller percentage of the congregation. Also, those attendees tended to be more mature and gracious with the blunders and inaccuracies of the neophyte sermonizers.) I was sitting in my pew during the morning worship gathering thinking about my topic for the evening, and as I looked down, at my feet was a personal check laying on the floor. When I bent to pick it up and read it – and I’m not making this up – it was made out to *“Saint John the Baptist!”* Now you might chalk this up to coincidence, but that’s all this young preacher-in-training needed as a confidence boost!

The very next time I was loosed on a congregation while in college my topic was the life of Moses. A few days before the service, I had gone to the beach to prepare for my message. I was lying out on the warm Southern California sand reading about Moses, when I heard a faint cry from down the beach, *“Moses... Moses!”* Right then a cat ran across my bare back (when was the last time you saw a cat at the beach?), and a woman, chasing close behind calling out, *“Moses, you bad cat. Come here!”* Come on – a cat named “Moses”?! I kid you not; it began to feel like I would never preach again without receiving some bizarre sign from God confirming my topic! I think he just wanted to prop me up in my frailty and make it clear to me (in admittedly wacky ways) that this preaching/teaching thing was something he was going to lead me in for many years to come (and he has)!

These were both signs from the Lord *of the unsolicited type*. I don’t recall asking God for any particular confirmation or signpost; I suppose he just gave them to me so I’d know I was on the right track – and probably so I’d have a story to tell. But he does seem to be more inclined to use such things at his own discretion rather than at our request and whim. My point is that he uses what he chooses to point us in the right direction, and is not above using signs, and sometimes, even fleeces to do just that!



# Dreams, visions, and angels...

*Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions.* **Joel 2:28**

*An angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road..."* **Acts 8:26**

*Now there was a believer in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord spoke to him in a vision calling, "Ananias!" "Yes, Lord!" he replied.* **Acts 9:10**

*About noon...Peter...fell into a trance and saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down...* **Acts 10:9-11**

*That night Paul had a vision: A man from Macedonia in northern Greece was standing there, pleading with him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us!"* **Acts 16:9**

*One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision and told him, "Don't be afraid! Speak out! Don't be silent! For I am with you, and no one will attack and harm you, for many people in this city belong to me."* **Acts 18:9**

*I saw a vision of Jesus saying to me, "Hurry! Leave Jerusalem, for the people here won't accept your testimony about me."* **Acts 22:18**

As far as I know I've never seen an angel, though it is hard to say since sometimes they show up undercover. But I have had a number of visions and several dreams that I would call, "prophetic dreams."

## ***The-Flappy-Shirt-and-Swimming-for-Two-Dream...***

Some years ago I had a dream that I believe was given me by the Lord. In the dream I was swimming in a public pool, and an overweight teenage boy playfully jumped on my back, expecting me to carry him across to the other side. I'm a very good swimmer (in the non-dream world, that is), and took him up on the challenge. But he proved too big a test, even for my aquatic ability, and we began to sink. I swam frantically, gasping for air, until we finally arrived at the pool wall. I got the boy off my back and anxiously caught my breath. We had been way too close to drowning, and I was exhausted and terrified!

The boy, not nearly as traumatized as I, sprang up and said, "Let's do it again!" At that, he jumped on my back again and we were repeating the former insanity! It was nuts, but for some reason I complied, and I was fighting for oxygen again while swimming with all my might. This time there was another factor that made it even more stupid. While struggling to stay afloat with this heavy teenage boy on my back, I was wearing a short sleeved, button-down shirt. If that weren't enough, the shirt was unbuttoned and un-tucked! It was flapping in the water, tangling itself around my flailing arms, making the crazy trek even crazier. Half way across the pool I woke up in a sweaty terror. The dream was over, but unfinished. I was hugely relieved to

be awake in the real world, but was left hanging about the outcome of the foolish swim. I think that was God's way of saying to me that I had a choice whether or not to engage in such irrational activity.

Through it the Lord made two distinct spiritual lessons clear to me. The "flappy shirt" represented compromise with sinful activity. It was a warning from the Lord about getting tangled up with unhealthy and impure habits. Tucking the shirt in and buttoning it was an option, but the obvious need was to shed myself of it altogether. You can try, I felt the Lord speaking to me, to minimize your sin's impediment, but discarding it altogether is the obvious call. It's a no-brainer that I can't swim in a flappy shirt, especially when trying to swim for two. In the same way I can't do spiritual leadership while tangled up in sin. If I try, I'll fail in my assignment and drown along with them!

Then there's the lesson of "swimming for two." The Lord made it clear to me that I shouldn't be carrying people on my back, doing their swimming for them. I'm not able, not for very long anyway, to swim for two. I'm no "*Cruise Ship for Christians*," doing for them what they should be doing for themselves. Not only is it unscriptural, it's untenable and dangerous!

It was clear to me that the Lord was saying, "*Your shoulders are not broad enough, and your strength not great enough to carry the church. I'm not asking you to bear this people. Quit doing for them what they should be doing for themselves. Just shed your own entangling sinfulness, rescue the drowning, and teach people how to swim for themselves. Not only will they be kept from drowning, but they'll enjoy the swimming experience as much as you do.*"

### **Face on the floor vision...**

I've also had quite a few, what I would call, "visions" over the years. One of the most pivotal and life-changing ones occurred in my early 20's. I had brought some teenagers from our church to the Bay Area for some training and experience in evangelism. We were worshipping Jesus during one of our training sessions and I had a profound picture arrive in my mind. My "visions" have all been more like mental scenes of varying degrees of clarity and detail, and not in a trance state. This one was like a video without sound. I saw myself worshipping the Lord (he was an indistinct image of glorious and attractive light in front of me) on my knees with my face on the floor. I saw another young man behind me who saw the Lord and how I was responding to him in abandoned worship. He then followed suit by kneeling beside me, putting his face on the floor and began to worship too. Another young man saw the both of us, what we were doing and why, and knelt beside us to do the same – then another and another. [End of vision.]

The speaker at the meeting came to the microphone right at that point and read the passage from Isaiah 6, "*I saw the Lord, high and lifted up, and his train (entourage) filled the temple.*" Before I had a chance to wonder about what it might mean, I instinctively knew that God was giving me marching orders for my life – that I was to make disciples of other young men by modeling to them a lifestyle of humble love and passionate worship of Jesus. It's been a constant reminder to me of an essential part of who I am and how I am supposed to invest the rest of my life in others.

### **She dreamt that I died...**

One of my most bizarre experiences with what might have been a prophetic dream was back in the 1980's the day before I was to go on a Missions trip to Mexico City. One of the young

women in the church had a dream the night before and brought it to me. Michelle dreamt that I died while in Mexico, and when the church in Santa Cruz gathered to mourn my passing everyone was devastated except one of my closest friends and confidants, “Sean” (not his real name). In the dream, he was apparently not at all affected by my death, about which Michelle assumed that he had great faith, and had thoroughly put it in God’s hands. After I had her share the dream with the church’s elders we prayed and consulted about what might be the most accurate interpretation. Was this a warning from God for me not to go, a cue for us to pray against any attack from the enemy, a caution to take no unnecessary risks on the trip, or was this not a dream from God at all? We mused also that it might mean something other than physical death, something spiritual that I needed to discern. I decided to go and trust God to protect me and lead me. Well, I didn’t die on the trip and, as far as I know, there was no threat of bodily harm to me. It’s possible that there was a satanic “hit” planned for me and our prayers abated it. I’ll never know. But more than 20 years later my relationship with “Sean” imploded to the extent that he was heard to say that he wished I were dead! “Coincidentally” it was at that point that I was diagnosed with bone marrow cancer. When I recalled Michelle’s dream, a thought came to me that maybe she was seeing into the future when “Sean” wouldn’t grieve at my funeral after all! Weird, huh?

God uses dreams, visions and angels to guide us, but I don’t recommend that we expect him to *always* lead us with such extravagant means. I’m afraid that some people want the *miracle* of a prophetic dream, a vision, or an angel visitation more than they want the *marching orders* that come from them! They’re more interested in the *medium* than the *message*.

I think that sometimes God utilizes such radical means of communication in order to burn his message into our memories. He might be saying, “*This is something you’re never to forget or ignore!*” The visions and dreams he’s given me are certainly memorable. Could it also be true that he uses these means because we’ve missed what he’s been saying to us through other methods? I don’t think because the Lord gives you a vision or dispatches one of his angels to bring a message to you that you’re necessarily more “spiritual” than other people. It may mean that he couldn’t get your attention in any other way. We had a neighbor who could sleep through a tsunami! When his wife was at work and was trying to call him, he’d usually sleep right through the ringing phone, so she’d call us and ask us to go next door and wake him up. He couldn’t hear the phone, so we’d go and bang even louder on the door! When one means of leading doesn’t work, God may use a louder one.

[You’re probably tired of hearing me say this, but as is the case with each of our principles, I advise you to avoid depending on this one by itself. Dreams can be the result of too much pizza for dinner, visions may be conjured by an overactive imagination, and angels – well – I suppose you might mistake a friendly stranger for one. I’m just saying that you’ll want to be sure that any leading you think you receive from these supernatural sources doesn’t directly contradict the Bible’s teaching and/or other principles we’ve studied so far.]





## Sometimes he sends a prophet...

*Among the prophets and teachers of the church at Antioch of Syria were Barnabas, Simeon (called “the black man”), Lucius (from Cyrene), Manaen (the childhood companion of King Herod Antipas), and Saul. One day as these men were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Dedicate Barnabas and Saul for the special work to which I have called them.”* **Acts 13:1**

*Timothy, my son, I am giving you this command in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by recalling them you may fight the battle well.* **1 Timothy 1:18**

### **A few prophecies given to me...**

These stand out because of their similarities. They were both pictorial (those prophesying to me saw a picture in their minds), the images that they saw were similar, and the messages were almost a mirror of the other. I received these two words at least 15 years apart, in two different cities, by two different men (one older and the other young), who weren't remotely acquainted with each other. The first one was from Jeff, who told me that when he was praying for me he got an image in his mind of me on a swing, simply enjoying it with child-like abandon. He said that he felt this was an encouragement to me to let my hair down (so to speak) and enjoy the journey (of life and ministry) more. The other one (over a decade later) came to a young friend of mine, Joel. When praying for me, he had a vision of me on a Tom Sawyer-type raft, floating calmly down a lazy river, again, enjoying the ride. He went on to tell me that I wasn't to try so hard to make things happen with the ministries in which I was involving myself, but to let them come to me while taking joy in the journey. I obviously need to be reminded of this from time to time!

A couple years ago, a man with whom I wasn't at all acquainted gave me a prophecy. He came from across the country to speak to a group of pastors of which I was a part. He went around the room and prophesied over each and every one of us. I tend to be a little leery of “prophets,” so I did what I always do. I prayed something like, “*Lord, speak to me, and help me eat the meat and spit out the bones. Help him to be on target and not go off on some weird tangent.*” When he came to me, he paused a good long while, looking me in the eye, and then proceeded to – what we call – “read my mail.” It was pretty cool. Among the right-on exhortations and encouragements that he gave me, he said something like, “*You are an apostolic teacher through your writing... You will spend 2 months sequestering yourself to write a book (and I'm jealous of this) that will make a difference in people's lives...*” He didn't know (nor did anyone else in the room) that I was just back from 8 weeks in a mountain cabin writing my memoirs! I was blown away, and inspired all the more to write and teach apostolically.

**Dreams can be the result of too much pizza**

for dinner, visions may be conjured by an overactive imagination, and angels – well – I suppose you might mistake a friendly stranger for one.

### **One more story...**

Recently I met with a young woman named Susan who had asked me if I could answer some questions she had about the Holy Spirit. She grew up in a church where the Gifts of the Spirit were strongly discouraged. But she had just gotten filled with the Spirit, and started to speak in tongues while praying with someone on the phone! (I wonder if God can fill people on Facebook too?!) She was pretty taken aback, but loved it at the same time. Knowing that they would heartily disapprove she hadn't even told her parents yet. Shortly thereafter, while she was praying with a friend, she got a picture in her mind of an hourglass and a banner which had words on it (I can't remember the words). She asked her friend if the two things meant anything to him, to which he exclaimed, "Oh, my gosh! Yeah!" It totally hit home with him and had some very specific application to him. Susan asked me, "Is this normal? Since then I've been having pictures in my mind when I pray for people!" What I love about this is that she wasn't conditioned by anyone else. She'd never even heard of anything like what she was experiencing!

*Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines. 1*

### **Corinthians 12:7-11**

Of these gifts, several pertain most directly to God's guidance. The Word of Knowledge is when he imparts to us a piece of his knowledge, something we were never taught or told. When he inserts in us a piece of wise counsel for ourselves or for someone else it's called the Word of Wisdom. As I understand it, Prophecy is when we speak out a piece of God's heart and will for a specific person or group of people for a specific time. Sometimes prophecies are *predictive* (foretelling something in the future) and other times they're *prescriptive* (more of a forth-telling of God's will to someone).

*Then Samuel took a flask of olive oil and poured it on Saul's head and kissed him, saying, "Has not the LORD anointed you ruler over his inheritance? When you leave me today, you will meet two men near Rachel's tomb, at Zelzah on the border of Benjamin. They will say to you, 'The donkeys you set out to look for have been found. And now your father has stopped thinking about them and is worried about you. He is asking, "What shall I do about my son?"'"*

*"Then you will go on from there until you reach the great tree of Tabor. Three men going up to worship God at Bethel will meet you there. One will be carrying three young goats, another three loaves of bread, and another a skin*

of wine. They will greet you and offer you two loaves of bread, which you will accept from them.

“After that you will go to Gibeah of God, where there is a Philistine outpost. As you approach the town, you will meet a procession of prophets coming down from the high place with lyres, timbrels, pipes and harps being played before them, and they will be prophesying. The Spirit of the LORD will come powerfully upon you, and you will prophesy with them; and you will be changed into a different person. Once these signs are fulfilled, do whatever your hand finds to do, for God is with you.” **1 Samuel 10:1-7**

“Go to the village ahead of you, and just as you enter it, you will find a colt tied there, which no one has ever ridden. Untie it and bring it here. **Mark 11:2**

So he sent two of his disciples, telling them, “Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him. **Mark 14:13**

But if an unbeliever or an inquirer comes in while everyone is prophesying, they are convicted of sin and are brought under judgment by all, as the secrets of their hearts are laid bare. So they will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, “God is really among you!” **1 Corinthians 12:24**

### **A word of caution...**

Someone’s prophecy might not be from God at all, or it might be entirely correct. People are just people, and can make honest (or even dishonest) mistakes when prophesying. “*The spirit of the prophet is subject to the control of the prophets.*” 1 Corinthians 14:32

Don’t just pack up and to go China because someone prophesied over you! Prophecy is not his sole means of guiding us. My experience is that God intends prophecies to confirm what he’s already shown us through other means.



## Notice the repeated notices...

Peter had a series of things happen to him in three’s. He denied the Lord three times, Jesus asked him three times if he loved him, the sheet-like object containing un-kosher animals came to him in a vision three times, and it was three men sent by Cornelius who came to the door. When Pharaoh dreamt about the seven years of plenty and seven years of famine, he had the same dream twice, only with different characters (Genesis 41). When Joseph interpreted the dreams he said, “*The reason the dream was given to Pharaoh in two forms is that the matter has been firmly decided by God, and God will do it soon*” (Genesis 41:32). Jesus’ life is recorded in four Gospels. The last of Moses’ books is called, Deuteronomy, which means

“Second Law.” The key word of the book is “remember,” because it’s basically the repetition of what was already recorded in Exodus and Leviticus. God knows our tendency to forget what he says – so he says it again!

When he’s speaking to us, sometimes he repeats himself until we get the message. Don’t you think that’s nice of him? When you keep hearing, or reading, or seeing, or dreaming the same thought or theme over and over; take notice – maybe God is trying to tell you something!

When he’s speaking to us,  
sometimes he repeats himself  
until we get the message.

*Timothy, my son, I am giving you this command in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by recalling them you may fight the battle well. 1 Timothy 1:18*

Young Timothy was a bit timid, and needed assurance that he was actually called by God to be a spiritual leader. Not only did the Lord confirm it with one prophetic word, but more than one – and *maybe even many* (“in keeping with the prophecies”)! I can relate to this, since my own calling to live a life of service has, over the years, been quite dramatic and relentlessly recurring. By confirming my orders over and over God has made it hard for me to desert my post!



## Oops, I missed it...

Let’s be honest and admit that we’re not always going to get it right. We’re going to be mistaken sometimes about what we think God is saying to us. I said before that if I had a nickel for every time I missed the cues that God was sending my way, I’d be a rich man!

*“How would I know if I ‘missed it’ or not? I felt like the Lord wanted me to do such and such, and when I did it, the result wasn’t what I’d hoped, there was a closed door instead of an open one, or I was hindered from even proceeding as planned.”* Honestly, to me it’s not always easy to know whether or not I’ve heard God’s voice right. There are quite a few variables to consider. Let me propose a few...

### **Satan blocked our way...**

*For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, did, again and again—but Satan blocked our way. 1 Thessalonians 2:18*

Like Paul, you might've heard his voice accurately but were hindered in the outcome because of the Adversary's evil influence. Though our enemy has been legally defeated at the cross he still has the ability to thwart (at least temporarily) the accomplishment of assignments given to even the best of disciples. We certainly can't blame every hindered adventure on the devil (like some people do), but his insidious involvement should be taken into account when we're assessing a failed – and supposedly divinely concocted – mission.

### **I added my two cents...**

Another thing to consider is that God led you to do something, gave you a glimpse of his intended consequence, but then, you inadvertently added something to his original leading. I confess that many times I've unconsciously "improved on" the picture he gave me for a certain assignment. It's as though he showed me one partial (and very limited) visual perspective of something he wanted me to do, and in my zeal, I inadvertently concocted an image more fully orb'd than the one he showed me. I imagined something quite different than he probably had planned, I imposed my own preferred time frame for it to materialize, or I drew a more direct route to the destination than he intended. I might have originally "heard" him correctly, but then I inadvertently tried to improve on what he said. When it didn't turn out as I'd imagined, I was disappointed.

### **He doesn't always lead us to "success"...**

In our culture we're obsessed with success, smooth sailing, and bigger-is-always-better. Just a casual glance at the Bible will show you that this is the "American Dream," and not God's dream.

## **I've unconsciously "improved on" the picture he gave me for a certain assignment.**

Ezekiel was led by God to confront Israel with their sin. He wanted his people to turn back to him and told the prophet to be his mouthpiece to deliver the message that was on his heart. Then, just before releasing the blazing seer, he informed him that his people would not be receptive to the word of the Lord that he was about to deliver. His prophecy wouldn't be received and they would utterly reject him as a prophet. The bad news, of course, was that they weren't going to repent and get fixed up with God again. God knew this ahead of time (being omniscient and all), and yet he still wanted the prophet to deliver the message. (I suppose we could speculate that his motive was to extinguish any excuse that they weren't adequately warned.) The good news was that the seer didn't expect to be welcomed with open arms, so when he and his message were rejected he wasn't dejected (at least not too much).

I think sometimes the Father sends us on missions that are "doomed to fail" (so to speak) – at least in our eyes. The problem is he doesn't often give us the heads up about it ahead of time, like he did for Ezekiel, and tell us that the operation is not going to have a "successful" conclusion (at least from our human vantage point).

*"So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'"* **Luke 17:10**

*The LORD our God has secrets known to no one. We are not accountable for them, but we and our children are accountable forever for all that he has revealed to us, so that we may obey all the terms of these instructions.*

**Deuteronomy 29:29**

Why would God lead us to do something that is not going to “succeed?” I assume he has his reasons for doing what he does and doesn’t do. Our job is to follow his orders (as best we understand them) and let him take care of the results.

**I got off track...**

It’s also possible that I “heard right,” embarked on God’s mission, the result wasn’t what I’d hoped, and found that I had gotten off track somewhere along the way in the choices I made while on the mission. For example, I am positive that it was God’s will for me to marry my high school sweetheart. She was my best friend and led me to a friendship with Jesus. After we had been married for over 30 years and had two beautiful children, our marriage ended suddenly. I see now as I look back on it, our relationship suffered from many of our mistakes (mostly mine) and failure to maintain our relationship over the years. God wanted us to be married and stay that way “till death should part us,” but we got off track and didn’t persist in his will. So, sometimes it’s not that we were mistaken about what he wanted us to do; we just didn’t do our part faithfully.

**I mistook my will for his...**

And then there’s the strong possibility that what I thought God was directing me to do was simply not *God* at all. I’m pretty sure that there have been hundreds, maybe thousands, of times when I was simply wrong in my assessment of his will. It might be that I got what I wanted mixed up with what he wanted. Being still very much a mixture of the *human-me* and the *divine-within-me*, I’ve made this mistake a lot. While I used to be embarrassed when this happened, I’ve learned that I still only see a “*poor reflection*” of him and am thus limited in my ability to hear his voice and know his will perfectly – let alone do it – all the time!

*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***

*And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so **that you may be able to discern what is best** and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ. **Philippians 1:9-10***

It’s my best guess that Peter thought he was doing *the best thing* by cutting off Malchus’ ear in an attempt to protect Jesus in the Garden, but he came to find out that *the best thing* was about to unfold on a bloody cross. Moses thought he was doing the right thing when he killed the Egyptian for abusing his Jewish brothers. But God had a much better plan than Moses killing Egyptians one at a time. The death angel and the Red Sea proved to be much more efficient means to that end.

*Several days later a man named Agabus, who also had the gift of prophecy, arrived from Judea. He came over, took Paul’s belt, and bound his own feet*

*and hands with it. Then he said, “The Holy Spirit declares, ‘So shall the owner of this belt be bound by the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem and turned over to the Gentiles.’” When we heard this, we and the local believers all begged Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. But he said, “Why all this weeping? You are breaking my heart! I am ready not only to be jailed at Jerusalem but even to die for the sake of the Lord Jesus.” When it was clear that we couldn’t persuade him, we gave up and said, “The Lord’s will be done.”*

### **Acts 21:10-14**

Prophets were predicting that if he went to Jerusalem Paul was going to be jailed. So his friends (including Luke) begged him not to go. Friends don’t let their friends go to jail (if they can help it)! They thought the warning meant that God was trying to protect him from suffering. Paul didn’t see it quite that way. Apparently, he thought the prophecies meant that he should count the cost of proceeding, which he did, and off he embarked into the fire of persecution. His friends heard the right word, but based on their own preference for Paul’s safety, arrived at the wrong application to the word. (By the way, though we might’ve heard so in Sunday School, *safety* isn’t always God’s best for us. Sometimes he leads us right into danger.) They gave up and said, “*The Lord’s will be done.*” Good plan. Give up on your will so that his will can be done!



## In conclusion

Unless you’ve skipped a bunch of the material above, it means you’ve trudged through a fair amount of my ideas about how God guides. I commend you (even if you did skip most of the foregoing) for evidently wanting to know and do God’s will. I said at the beginning that you have your own stories as I have mine. How God guides you might be quite different than how he typically guides me (if “typically” even applies here since God loves to keep us on our toes by switching things up on us). I’ve been using the term “principles” to describe what I think is *more typical* than not about how he guides. I’ve highlighted for your consideration some of these, which seem to me to be fairly constant in God’s ways of doing things, but as I said, he always reserves the right to do what he wants in his own time and way. I’ve tried to give biblical examples for each principle throughout; aware that though he led Moses a certain way doesn’t necessarily mean that he’ll use the same exact method with us. Nevertheless, there does seem to be a lesson to be learned and maybe principle to be gleaned from how he dealt with Moses or Abraham or Paul. I hope I’ve made it clear that these *principles* are not *formulas*, but are more like *clues* into how God guides (usually). Like me, you’ll undoubtedly make some mistakes along the way, but if I know anything about our Father, he gets a kick out of teaching his children how to walk!

*They follow the Lamb wherever he goes...* **Revelation 14:4**