

Finding Our Way

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There's an after church dinner and the whole family is at the table. They're discussing the message, that it was good, that the minister had said God led him to preach this series. The grandmother at the table, a woman of faith for many years said, "I wish God would lead me like that." I know I've thought that. Have you?

Add to this story a guy named Steven wants to know from God if he should move to Miami. Mary Anne wants to know if she should marry George. Sherry has a great desire to major in English Literature and wants to know if this is okay with God. Jack just wants to know how God might be communicating with him. Sarah doesn't want to mess up and miss God's plan for her life. Someone else is asking if they should move to Denver to be near this particular child or to Philadelphia to be near this other child. We're going to talk in this message about being guided by God. We all wonder about it and we all want it. Last week we talked about the Bible and how to be blessed by it. In the Bible we learn some things about how to be guided by what it says.

Prayer.

In the name then of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, these words.

⁶Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. ⁷When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. ⁸So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. ⁹During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." ¹⁰After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth, and from his fullness have we all received, grace upon grace.

Paul was guided ... with a “no” (to Asia) and with a “yes” (to Macedonia) ... and with that something very big happened -- Europe and the west become evangelized and history is altered. It’s worth noting that God guides with both no’s and yes’s.

Still God communicated then and there *with them* but does God communicate here and now *with you, with me*? Will he for you, for me, keep us from going one way and beckon us another? With respect to selling our home or taking job? Will he do so with a no? With a yes?

There are stories in the Bible, in fact you could say the Bible is one story after another, of God communicating with people and guiding them. Adam, Abraham, to Paul. The Bible itself it’s very existence, along with Jesus Christ, and the church, is a means of God communicating and show that he *wants* to communicate with us. He even describes himself as a shepherd who walks us toward certain trails and pastures, as a spirit who resides within and guides.

Think about this -- If God wanted to be uncommunicative, why would he have gone to these lengths (Bible, Son, Church), created these means, described himself in these ways, given us so many enjoiners to pray? Certainly, God *wants to and is able to* communicate with us; yes, with even you and me. So how might God do this?

If we called out some answers on that question, right here, right now, we’d probably talk about open doors or closed doors: that is, having something smoothly work out compared to having the best efforts be foiled. Where everything falls in place versus where nothing falls in place. Several years ago me being available and wanting to come to FPC as a pastor and you all wanting me to come, is a lining up of open doors.

We’d probably talk, in calling out our thoughts about guidance, about reading the Bible and how a verse seemed to leap off the page and met us in a very, very personal way. For example, John Farmer, a friend of mine who worked for Food for the Hungry, found himself pulled into Isaiah 58 (about food and the poor) and then for the next several weeks he kept meeting people in entirely different contexts who were talking about that very same passage. (Then he met with and was offered a job with the organization Food for the Hungry.)

We’d probably talk, in talking about guidance, about the just plain directions of the Bible regardless of any mystical senses of conviction (do not lie, covet, ... love your

neighbor) and about common sense (God guided Solomon with the two women one of which lost the baby during the night and he did this through a thoughtful wisdom). Plain directions and common sense.

There are counselors. Guidance comes through counselors. The book of Proverbs tells us the value of making godly progress through counselors.

There is inner conviction, a deep inner impression affecting the mind and nerves. That's a guidance.

We might cite dreams. There was Joseph's dream in the Old Testament and Joseph's dream in the New. Here's Paul's Macedonian dream.... Samuel Shoemaker, who was a part of the start of AA, had such a great ministry in Pittsburgh. He was led to that city by a dream/vision. And for each of these ways of finding our way with God there is much to be said.¹

I would like to bring up three this morning in this message about how the Bible tells us we might be guided by God. First, thoughts. Those things going on inside of our brains right now. Ideas, pictures, inner speech, impressions ... thoughts. Listen, do you remember the call of Moses? He turns aside to the burning bush and converses with God. Much of that conversation is reluctance. He protests, Moses does, that he isn't very eloquent and God, in a way that sounds like "enough already!" says, "Who gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or mute? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I, the Lord?" (Exodus 4:11-12) And why shouldn't we, I ask, read as a continuation of the verse something like, "Who gave man his mind and his thoughts, gives him not only sight but insight?"

When Jesus tells us about his Holy Spirit indwelling us and communing with our spirit he says that this one will *counsel* us. I find myself asking then, in the light of this, as thoughts come to me and to others, from whence do these thoughts come? Are they (the thoughts) simply manufactured out of my own will and gray matter or are they perhaps co-formed between God and me or even simply injected purely by God? Some come from us alone to be sure, especially the wrong-headed ones, but some, some come from God.

I have had the experience of being dead-sure that I was in the right, say in an argument with one of the children, and the thought comes in my head that I was wrong and needed to apologize. Then tentatively going with that I would come to find

¹ I commend *Hearing God* by Dallas Willard.

that I had misread the situation entirely and I had been very wrong. Where did the thought come from to go apologize?

I have had the experience of speaking to someone about Jesus, like international students, being on the floor before them as a group, fielding their questions about him and finding answers to their questions appearing in my brain. How did that come to me?

I have had the experience like this guy, Ed Pollock, who had to have been a septuagenarian when I first met him and who led mission groups for the denomination all over the world. Ed was an engineer type and he'd say that he'd find himself stymied by some project and he'd simply pray about it before going to sleep and then would wake up in the morning with a thought of how to circumvent the impasse. Where did the thought-solution come from? Has anything like these things happened to you?

As they used to sing on the Beverly Hillbillies, one day old Jed was shooting at some food... and up through the ground came a bubbling crude, oil that is. Up from the subconscious comes something and that territory from which it comes is territory God works in.

Well, if God made the head and gives it thoughts, might he not have made the heart and given it desires? That's the second form of guidance I want to bring out today. First, thoughts and second, desires. "Delight yourself in the Lord and he will grant the desires of your heart." (Ps. 37:4) Or Psalm 103 ... Remember God, who forgives all your sin, heals all your diseases, redeems your life from the pit, who satisfies *your desires* with good things. We can find our way with God by not only attending to our thoughts but to our desires as well.

I have a wonderful little book called *Befriend Your Desires*. That you want to be creative is from God. That want. That you like organizing or being hospitable is from God, a spiritual gift. That desire to know God and be good, desires implanted by God like homing devices for you to do well and his work.

Now Jeremiah 17:9 does say, "The heart is deceitful above all things." Our hearts need to be watched and remade. Our minds need to be renewed (Romans 12:1). So while God works with thoughts and works with heart desires, we must be bringing those thoughts and desires before him. But just

because some thoughts are off or some desires are off, doesn't mean all of them are.²

I remember years ago reading a thin, little book by Catherine Marshall and there was a section that spoke about dreams in the sense of hopes and dreams. She mentioned that some people didn't have any hopes and dreams and then that this may be something some people have to learn to do (and I would add, are called to do, saved to do). See, part of the defectiveness of the fallen heart may be not simply be wanting amiss but not wanting at all? Or wanting weakly?

I have had times of prayer in which I tried to visualize a Bible story taking place, to make it like I was watching a movie of the Bible passage. Once when I was doing that I pictured I was in the crowd watching Jesus. But then, surprising me in my thoughts, Jesus came up to me and said, "Jeff, what do YOU want?" Our wants is a way God works with us.³

Thoughts. Desires. Abilities/Inabilities.

In our text this morning we find that the apostle couldn't go on ... to Asia. Why? It says the Holy Spirit or the Spirit of Jesus prevented him. How did that work? We don't know. It could be that Paul's tuner was super sharp and he just knew. But maybe he was just out of resources, that he had enough money to go one way and not the other. We talk about closed doors and could the closed door not have been that he had run out of stamina, physically, emotionally? Maybe he had contacts in that direction but didn't have any in the other. What if the way that the door was closed to him was that psychologically he just found himself reacting, "I can't bear to go that way"?

I've reflected on being a missionary and how *I could* do that. I have an inheritance and a constitution that could

² Think of a kite. Without a string it doesn't fly. Our lives were meant to fly by being connected to God. Thoughts and desires without can be errant and fall to the earth. But the ones when our lives are in his hand, are good.

³ Take desires as instructions about you and invitations from him. The free life God gives us isn't one free from emotion and desire. The free life is totally human, and sometimes it is a passionate ride. God is free to do cartwheels and salivate with desire. Are we? Look at your deepest desires and discern those that have your name on them and let them be a way God leads you.

make that possible and not everybody does. I grew up in a household that was overseas at points and had international students in the home. I literally have a strong stomach. Many don't have these things. Some don't have the family support. I do and my family would love to visit me in Timbuktu. But I know people who are scared of Timbuktu and their parents would have a tizzy fit if they thought about moving outside the city limits. I have the freedom, the shoulders, the "want to's", the wherewithal, the hope, the confidence here and in other arenas I simply don't. So isn't this a way God leads?

I want to suggest something and it may seem a little crazy. I don't bring it up as a formula for guidance but rather as a reassurance about God's guidance. I find that I have the idea that God leads me when I, as I just said, have the freedom, shoulders, confidence, etcetera. But if I was in the opposite shape ... when I feel uncomfortable, afraid, discombobulated, weak, I am not spiritual and not able to be led. Those are my ideas.

May I point out how much of the time we are in this discombobulated state as human beings? Again, we don't aim to be this way but if we are, when we are, consider this -- if God could only guide us when we were insightful and nimble, that would really limit him. We're under those messy conditions more often than we are under the other. It's like when we blow it and blurt out to him, "Oops, I messed up." Doesn't he, don't you think smile, and remind us that the more appropriate phrase is the occasional, "Oops, I did something right."

For God leading us via our weakness I imagine some Walt Disney movie scene in which Grumpy or Stinky or somebody in the dark, frightening woods becomes alarmed and spooked and runs headlong in panic, first this way and then that, for stretch after stretch until hopelessly disoriented and out of breath they come to a stop. They are, we all suppose, utterly lost but in fact, how does it so often go?, they are before some cottage with a magic well and it is the place they have been needing to be all along. How did they get there? Was it obtained through the manner of them being spiritual green berets? No.

Again, this is not a call for spiritual sloppiness. Deflating the tires on your car doesn't make it particularly easy for anyone to drive. But it is a word of comfort. As we try to find our way with God, don't despair about your times of despair. God can use all things for his and our good.

Do you know that God wants to be a help to you? He won't prescribe every step for you to take any more than a good parent would do that for their child. But he wants to share and to guide and to help. Will you open up to that adventure and take some time to listen to him in your thoughts, desires, abilities and inabilities? He is always the one in the hymn, "Savior, like a shepherd lead us; much we need thy tender care." God bless you.

Ask God how he's been trying to communicate with you lately.

*Do teach us, Lord, that the desire to please you pleases you.
Blessed are you, O God, our maker, our redeemer, our sustainer.
Amen and amen.*

If you would like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or to have someone pray with you, the pastors and elders of the church would welcome your call.

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