

## Guidance from Scripture . . . p. 1

Last week we looked at four ways in which the Bible gives us direction for our lives. I know you all could list those four and give some examples of each, but I would like to just recap them for those who weren't here last week.

1. In the Bible, God gives us boundaries within which we will be able to live godly, wholesome and fruitful lives. We looked specifically at His guidance to honour our parents, to be kind to the poor and to be faithful to our promises. There are, of course, many more than that.
2. We saw that one of the important purposes that God has for our lives is to form in us the character of the Kingdom, to prepare us for the works of heaven. He is more concerned with what we are becoming than whether we're living at a 6/10 or a 9/10 on the happiness scale.
3. The third thing we looked at was the importance of faith in our response to God's leading in our lives. He will guide us, showing us the way in which He wants us to go, but we have to be able to trust Him as He leads. Scripture makes it clear that we need to believe and act on His direction.
4. The final idea from last week is one that we will be looking at more closely this week and next, the idea of reading our Bibles looking to see how God speaks to some of its leading characters. So let's build on that theme by looking at some Scriptural accounts of God leading people, directing their decisions, guiding them to success.

One of my favourites is the story of David seeking the LORD's direction in dealing with Philistine invaders. It's told in 2 Samuel 5, right after David has been anointed King of Israel and has captured Jerusalem:

*When the Philistines heard that David had been anointed king of Israel ...*

*... they mobilized all their forces to capture him. But David was told they were coming and went into the stronghold. The Philistines arrived and spread out across the valley of Rephaim. So David asked the LORD, "Should I go out to fight the Philistines? Will You hand them over to me?"*

*The LORD replied, "Yes, go ahead. I will certainly give you the victory."*

*So David went to Baal-perazim and defeated the Philistines there. "Yahweh has done it!" David exclaimed. "He burst through my enemies like a raging flood!"*

*So David named that place Baal-perazim (which means, "the Lord who bursts through").*

*After a while the Philistines returned and again spread out across the valley of Rephaim. And once again David asked Yahweh what to do.*

*"Do not attack them straight on," the LORD replied. "Instead, circle around behind them and attack them near the balsam trees. When you hear a sound like marching feet in the tops of the balsam trees, attack! That will be the signal that Yahweh is moving ahead of you to strike down the Philistines." So David did what Yahweh commanded and he struck down the Philistines all the way from Gibeon to Gezer. (2 Sam. 5:17-20, 22-25)*

So this is what it means to be king. Your enemies gather their armies together to attack you and make you their prisoner. It's not quite the same as getting a "congratulations on becoming the new king" card. But notice that David asks for direction on BOTH occasions that the Philistines attack. He doesn't presume that because God directed him to attack straight on the first time, that he'll do the same again.

There's something really important for us to grab hold of in this story. David doesn't assume that God will direct him to do the same thing a second time, even though the circumstances are identical. God may have prompted you in one situation to pick up a hitchhiker and you had a great conversation with the person - but it may not always be the thing He's leading you to do. David recognized that He needed to continually be seeking the LORD's direction and it led him to a great victory over his enemies.

Another story, dramatically different, comes from the life of Abraham - after God has promised to make him into a great nation, but before he has a son:

*Yahweh brought Abram outside beneath the night sky and told him, "Look up into the heavens and count the stars if you can. Your descendants will be like that — too many to count!" (Gen. 15:5)*

But Abram has questions, simple ones like, "How can I be sure?" In those days, one of the ways you made a contract with someone was to sacrifice an animal, divide it into halves, and then walk with that person between the two halves of the sacrifice. In that way you were ensuring that both parties to the contract were in full agreement and both committed to making it happen. But that night, something quite different happened to Abram:

*As the sun went down and it became dark, Abram saw a smoking firepot and a flaming torch pass between the halves of the carcasses. So Yahweh made a covenant with Abram that day and said, "I have given this land to your descendants, all the way from the border of Egypt to the great Euphrates River." (Genesis 15:17,18)*

What happened there? Abram saw the LORD God walking between the two halves of the sacrifices, establishing His covenant with Abram. Abram didn't walk down that path - God alone made the promise and bound Himself to making it a reality. The actual act of guidance seems to have come through a vision, or at least through an understanding of God's action in answering Abram's, "How can I be sure?" In either case, Abram saw something - a smoking firepot and a flaming torch - and he understood that he was seeing God - the seeing and the understand-ing went together.

The Bible gives us examples of some more familiar means of guidance as well. One is the story of Abraham's servant going to find a wife for Isaac among the relatives that lived several days' journey north and east of Canaan. When he arrived there, he did the simple, humble thing; he asked God to give him a sign indicating who God had chosen to be Isaac's wife:

*"O Yahweh God of my master," he prayed. "Give me success and show kindness to my master, Abraham. Help me to accomplish the purpose of my*

*journey. See, here I am, standing beside this spring, and the young women of the village are coming out to draw water. This is my request. I will ask one of them for a drink. If she says, 'Yes, certainly, and I will water your camels, too!' - let her be the one You have appointed as Isaac's wife." (Gen. 24:12-14)*

And that's what happened. Rebekah kept drawing water for the camels until they had finished drinking and the servant watched her and wondered if, indeed, she could be the one. Finally, he was sure, and he gave her a gold ring and bracelets. And the servant bowed to the ground and praised Yahweh, the God of his master Abraham, who had led him straight to the home of Abraham's relatives.

There are some crazy stories in the Book of Judges, one of which concerns Gideon, who is spoken to by an angel who tells him that he is called by God to rescue Israel from the powerful armies of Midian. And Gideon, for some reason, wanted a sign that this was really true. He offered the angel a meal which was placed on a rock. Out of the rock came a flame that burned up the food and Gideon had his sign. He kept asking for signs as the story of his conquest of Midian went on. He asked for a piece of wool fleece to be wet with dew in the morning while the ground around it was dry, and when that happened, he asked that the fleece be dry the next morning and the ground around it wet. When all these signs were fulfilled, Gideon was almost ready to lead the attack against the Midianites.

There is another way of guidance that I think we can probably all relate to, at least to some degree, and it comes from the story of Nehemiah. Nehemiah was an exile in Persia during the reign of Artaxerxes, who was king over Persia from 465 to 424 B.C.

*Hanani, one of my brothers, came to visit me with some other men who had just arrived from Judah. I asked them about the Jews who had survived the captivity and about how things were going in Jerusalem. They said to me, "Things are not going well for those who returned to the province of Judah. They are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem has been torn down and the gates have been burned." When I heard this, I sat down and wept. (Neh. 1:2-4)*

Nehemiah was guided by his heart. After days of grieving, fasting and praying for Jerusalem he had a plan form in his mind that he would go and ask his boss - the king - for some time off so that he could help restore the walls and gates of Jerusalem. And he prayed a specific prayer, asking that God would grant him success as he went to ask the king for a great favour.

*Early the following spring, during the 20th year of King Artaxerxes' reign, I was serving the king his wine. I had never appeared sad in his presence before this time. So the king asked me, "Why are you so sad? You aren't sick, are you? You look like a man with deep troubles."*

*Then I was badly frightened (because it was against the law to be sad in the presence of the king), but I replied, "Long live the king! Why shouldn't I be sad? For the city where my ancestors are buried is in ruins, and the gates have been burned down." The king replied, "Well, how can I help you?" (Nehemiah 2:1-4)*

So, Nehemiah felt the pain of his relatives back home and of the city that his ancestors had known and fought for. But he didn't just respond out of emotion - he spent considerable time in prayer and then in waiting for the right moment to let the king know his intentions. It was months after the visit from his brother and some other Jews from Jerusalem before Nehemiah went to Artaxerxes with the sad face that brought the issue out into the open. And when he asked for God to go before him and grant him success, he still waited for God's go-ahead. And when that came, however it came, he was ready to act.

Does anyone know when the last time rolling dice was used for making a decision in the Bible? It was in the choosing of Matthias to take Judas Iscariot's place as one of the twelve apostles after Judas had betrayed Jesus to His death and committed suicide. Right after that, the Holy Spirit was poured out on the church and the Spirit led them forward. Let me give you one last story:

*Next Paul and Silas traveled through the area of Phrygia and Galatia, because the Holy Spirit had told them not to go into the province of Asia at that time. Then coming to the borders of Mysia, they headed for the province of Bithynia, but again the Spirit of Jesus did not let them go. So instead, they went on through Mysia to the city of Troas.*

*That night Paul had a vision. He saw a man from Macedonia in northern Greece pleading with him, "Come over here and help us." So we decided to leave for Macedonia at once, for we could only conclude that God was calling us to preach the Good News there. (Acts 15:6-10)*

How does God guide in this situation? In two ways: He closes a couple of doors by the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit - "don't go into Asia right now" and "I don't want you in Bithynia", and then He opens a new door through a vision that He gives to Paul. The result was clear: "We could only conclude that God was calling us to preach the Good News there"; in northern Greece. The direction of the Holy Spirit wasn't confusing or uncertain; Paul and Silas knew with clarity, with certainty, that God was leading them over to Philippi, Thessalonika, Berea, Athens and Corinth.

Now, let's take these stories and see what guiding principles we can find in them. What do we learn about how God leads people from David battling the Philistines, from Abram receiving the covenant promises of Yahweh, from the search for a wife for Isaac, from Gideon's encounter with an angel and his request for a sign, from Nehemiah's desire to do something for his people in Jerusalem and from Paul and Silas being guided by the Spirit on their missionary journey?

1. We see that God is creative, that He uses all sorts of means and methods to lead His people in the directions He wants them to go. He uses dreams and visions, signs, our emotions, our thoughts, our relationships.
2. We see that God is more interested in our willingness to be led, to pray the prayer, to ask Him for direction, than in the methodology of guidance. In other words, if we pray, if we want to know His way and we trust Him more than we trust ourselves, He will lead - although we may not know how He will lead ahead of time.

3. God has a plan. This should probably have been number one, because it's so basic. You have an idea of what you want to do, but so does God. He has plans for us. We're not just left to figure it all out on our own, but we are allowed, even encouraged, to seek Him out, to ask for His direction - because He has a direction for each person and it's good, really, really good.
4. The next point is just taking that one further. God wants us to ask and He wants to reveal His will for our lives, but He wants to do so when He says the time is right, not necessarily when we think the time is right. In fact, He is so eager to reveal His plans to us that He will let us ask for signs, ask for confirmations, ask for more confirmations ... and, despite all our fears and doubts, He is still willing to lead us.

Let me close with a number of points about hearing from God in these ways:

1. If you have a dream, or you receive a clear picture and you don't know what it could mean, but you think it's significant, hang onto that. You will know soon what the meaning is and it will help guide you in what you should do. I just heard a powerful story from another pastor about a dream he had - and he usually doesn't remember dreams - but he remembered this one and, even though he couldn't figure out what it meant ahead of time, he knew exactly what it meant when the situation arose that the dream was preparing him for. So, think about it, pray about it, but don't worry if you don't get the understanding about your dream/vision right away.
2. When doors close - and you know that they have closed against you - don't panic and don't think that God doesn't care or isn't involved. Trust that He will still lead you, that He is leading you, and that a closed door is not a sign of His rejection of you or of His purpose for you. Be patient. You will see clearly at some point in the future, so wait.
3. Prayer is obviously key to the process of hearing from God, but don't be afraid in your prayer to ask God for a sign. Gideon did, and God blessed him.
4. Also in prayer, ask for favour from the key person or people involved in your decision and direction, That's what Nehemiah did, asking for God to grant him favour with the king, and it's legitimate to ask for favour from an employer, an official, a person in a decisive role that will affect your course of action.
5. As much as possible, don't try to anticipate what God's direction is going to be. Expect that He will lead, but don't figure out in your head what He will say to you. Sometimes we try to guess what God wants before He speaks and we end up feeling disappointed or even a bit rebellious when He tells us something different than we expected. Notice that David went to God with open hands, even when he was faced with exactly the same situation a second time. "What should I do, should I go up?" "No, circle in behind and wait 'til I give the signal."
6. Finally, the key will be to trust that God has given you direction when the answer comes. We pray, we need an answer, we wait, but it doesn't do any good unless we also trust. We can talk ourselves out of anything, pretty much. To move ahead in God's will requires that we believe that He guides us, that He does answer prayer, that He has answered this prayer, that He wants us to move in this direction. We can ask for confirmation, we can wait until we're sure, but at some point we need to step out in obedience and that point is usually pretty obvious. I think of

Abraham's servant watching this girl water his camels and, even though he prayed for exactly this sign and the sign is happening right in front of him, he's not sure for awhile. He keeps watching, kind of amazed that God might actually have answered his prayer. And then he gets out the jewelry and tells her his story.

I believe that God has tons of stories that He wants us to be able to tell. We'll get those stories by prayer, by listening, by stepping out in faith and by seeing God's answers.