They don't Always Listen

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[0:00] you may be read in your newspapers this week that Meghan Markle's former friend and agent advised her before she got married don't marry Harry the reason for it was according to Meghan's friend was you marry him your life will be wrecked by the British media I think we already see some early signs of that and clearly Meghan like Rehoboam chose to ignore the advice and went ahead and married Harry and life looks a little tough for them right now but I want you just to think about this this morning and that is how well do you handle advice I'm pretty sure that most of you could think of a moment in your life when somebody you know somebody you might even love somebody you trust offers you a word of advice but you go with Frank Sinatra and do it your way

I want to talk to you this morning about listening and it's very difficult to kind of teach people how to listen but I'm going to embark on what might be an unwise exercise because this session today they don't listen is built around a course which is about wisdom and growing older so I'm assuming that the idea of being wise is today at least wise people listen to the right kind of advice to godly advice and I think that's a problem for us immediately because I sense that in our culture we're only likely to take advice that we feel comfortable with advice that kind of generally agrees with the direction of travel that we want to take

I wonder how many parents of teenage children have had that debate where you advise your child you should go to university first and get the security of a degree behind you only to discover that your kid would much rather go to Thailand for three months or how many of you have had something that's a kind of minor concern medically and somebody you love says you know what you should go and get that check medically but you know better and then suddenly you are really ill I want to talk to you about three things this morning the first is I want to talk to you about listening to God I want to talk to you about listening for godly advice and I want to talk to you about once you've listened to God and once you've sought godly advice I want to give you a word of advice and that is go do it so when I say is that alright

I recognise you have no choice at all so first of all let's just think for a moment about listening to God the background to our reading is Rehoboam who was the son of Solomon who of course within Judaism today and Judaism then was regarded as the wisest person who ever inhabited the planet one of the commentators on this passage makes this comment Solomon was very young when he became king of Israel but he was very wise from the get go Rehoboam took it on at age 40 and was without wisdom whatsoever and the example that we have here is it's interesting that some of you again have seen on your television screens the dreadful rioting in Iraq where the people are saying this government is dysfunctional it's too hard we're paying too many taxes there are no jobs we've got no earnings it's horrible so they're out on the streets demonstrating and unfortunately the government is repressive and thinks that if people complain about their lot they should be shot well in Rehoboam's time it was a bit like that

Solomon had governed the united kingdom of Israel it was subsequently breaking apart and Rehoboam became the king of Judah and Rehoboam did what most wise kings would do to start with he went to the elders of the tribe and he said to them listen there's problems here and the people are very dissatisfied and the advice of the elders was lighten their yoke make life easier for them Rehoboam really didn't want to hear that advice it probably would have affected the treasury and would have affected his lifestyle so he goes to his mates the young people the kind of equivalent of the entitled of that time and says to them what do you say I should do they say you go and tell them your yoke is going to get heavier and heavier and the rest of the story is what follows from that you see put your hand up if you think

[5:56] Rehoboam was wise to take the advice of the youngsters you're brighter than you look of course it was a foolish thing that he did and so I want to talk to you about listening to God first and

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foremost simply because one of the most chilling verses in the New Testament you'll find in Matthew 7 where Jesus says not everyone who calls me Lord Lord will enter the kingdom of heaven but only those who do the will of my father see there's a problem immediately isn't there and that is how do I separate out God's will for my life from my will for my life how is it that I might be able to find my true north in life find out exactly what it is that God wants me to do with my life or do I just follow my own urges and instincts well I want to suggest to you before I talk about the five ways that you can listen to God

I want to say this that in the Bible Bible Sunday of course I'd give it a mention in the Bible there are basically two kinds of advice and one kind of advice predominates and it's this what God wants all his people to know so in the Bible saying don't be a fornicator don't be a liar don't use you know don't behave like a moron I'm obviously praising it's not like some of us can be morons and some of us can't or some of us can be fornicated and said no that's advice for all God's people for our well-being the God who created you knows what's best for you and the Bible reveals to us in part what is best for us the Bible also I think can guide us individually you may have examples I'm not suggesting that you know the best way to seek God's advice is to kind of just flick through the pages open at random and then read a verse read about a man who did that and it said
Judas went and hanged himself so he thought I'll give us another shot he did exactly the same thing it said go thou and do likewise but the Bible if you read it regularly you will be surprised how often it speaks straight into your situation the other day I really lost perspective over an issue in my life I was so stressed out by what was happening to me and so kind of out of control of what was happening to me I'm like I don't get this I'm depressed you know maybe I should go and see a doctor whatever and then I read my daily reading online and it reminded me that whatever I'm feeling God is still suffering and whatever happens to me God has my best interest at heart and I was able just in that simple reading of scripture to recover some perspective so five ways that you can discern the will of God the first is the Bible
I've talked about that but I want to encourage you and this fits well with Bible Sunday which incidentally I didn't even know it was Bible Sunday when I walked in here Bible Sunday used to be the second Sunday in Advent according to us old codgers remember that famous collect read mark learn and inwardly digest that's the collect for the second Sunday in Advent not the Sunday in the middle of nowhere that's not my point my point is that if you read the scriptures read the scriptures regularly you will find that when you're facing an issue in life very often your reading for the day will speak straight into that situation is that magic no it's not it's because our God wants to communicate with you and one of the primary ways that God communicates with us is through his word the second thing is and this is obvious
God guides us through prayer through earnestly seeking his will of course he does and there's a problem with that in our culture that we tend to move at too high speed to ever sit down and pray and listen to God we seem to think that fast moving microwaved existence is a good way to live but actually if you live like that in the end it very likely will make you ill Isaiah the prophet said race around and know that I am God actually he never said that he said be still be still and know that I am God and unless we can build some stillness into our lives unless we can turn off the microwave that drives us we will find it harder to hear God the third thing is and this is tricky the third way that God guides us is through Christian friends a burden shed is a burden halved is a well-known proverb that actually comes from Galatians chapter 6 where the great apostle writes these words he says share your burdens with one another and so fulfill the law of
[12:14] Christ you've got an issue go talk to somebody but we've all got Christian friends I have many friends like this they're friends but they're also keen to please me so when I ask for advice they will always tell me what they think I want to hear you know what I mean when I say people pleasers they're people pleasers and actually I don't need that kind of advice I don't need people just to agree with me although my wife thinks I do I need people who will challenge you I used to constantly say to my senior management team when I was in Bristol just because I think something doesn't mean it's right but show me I'm wrong so you need a very particular kind of Christian friend and it's the kind of friend who loves you enough to tell you the truth and they don't grow on trees in my opinion and we can be a little frustrated by them because they don't tell us what we want to hear and I will say this I remember I mentioned it once I won't tell you it's in entirety but when Jackie

Pullinger told her mum and dad before she went to university God's told me to get on a boat they thought the parents thought the best way to bring this to an end is to get her to go and see the local

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vicar he's bound to Scotch it so they sent him to see old Colin Ford in West Croydon Colin Ford is a great guy he's all a bit cool blimey and so she goes in to see him and she says God's told me to get on a boat well sweetheart he said if God's told you to get on a boat you better blooming well get on one parents left the church stopped their tithe see sometimes God's word to us is not what we want to hear in fact I would encourage you when somebody speaks to you it's somebody you trust and somebody who loves you enough to tell you the truth speaks to you in a way that you don't want to hear

I would double check treble check whether or not this is the right thing rather than reject it straight away because it's not what I want to hear I think Rehoboam's a pretty good example of what I'm talking about do you the elders say to him lighten the yoke of these poor people you're killing them so he goes to the youngsters the ones whose lifestyle probably will be undermined if they lighten the yoke and lower the taxation etc etc and he says you know that terrible thing I'm not going to go down Russ's line and explain to you the particular part of the anatomy the Hebrew refers to but let's just say it's rude what he says English Bibles say his finger is thicker than you know

Solomon's waist work it out look we need people who will give us wise advice and if we're going to grow older and grow wiser then we need to really be in touch with these people and some of you inhabit this congregation some of you are wise people and I hope that those people have been you know if you've been a Christian for a while and you have a residue wisdom in your life you are a resource you know you need to encourage those of us who are struggling with decisions those of us who are younger incidentally I've said this to you before but don't forget growing older in itself doesn't make you wiser okay some of the most childish people I know are my age just the act of growing older doesn't make you grow wiser you can become more foolish like you know you can go and cash in your pension or something to go and buy a Range Rover whatever the fourth way is what I call closed doors and open doors in Acts chapter 16 and I'm not quite sure what

St. Paul meant here but he refers to a situation where he says we wanted to go to Bithynia but the Holy Spirit wouldn't allow us I call that a closed door and in my life I've tried to let me say I have got guidance wrong you know I'm not speaking to you as some kind of expert I've got it wrong I think on reflection I should never have said yes to becoming a bishop right I think I may have been seduced by the very thought that somebody who is such a regenerate sinner as I was should take up that role I loved being an archdeacon I know weird but I never thought I was the right material to be a bishop I didn't take enough advice I didn't take enough counsel but I'd always worked on the basis if the door opens walk through it if it shuts

[18:08] God will open another door for you I think that's a good way to think it stops you getting depressed when something doesn't work out in your life I think it's a viable way you know if there's an opportunity push on the door see what happens and maybe you will find your true north if you walk through that door if it shuts God will open another door of opportunity for you and the fifth thing is what I call close encounters of a weird kind that is and a wise preacher once told me that God uses weird stuff to guide you when you've been deaf to the other four areas so what's weird stuff it could be God speaks to you clearly in a dream you know the fact that Gentiles in the early church were included in the church came off the back of a dream that Peter had where he had this weird vision of every kind of animal in a sheet

I mean you know obviously he needs a therapist but Peter was convicted God had said to him this new gospel is not just for Jewish people it's for Gentiles it's for people like you someone say amen oh right so let me recap for a moment five ways the Bible one two praying three Christian friends who love us enough to tell us the truth four closed doors open doors five weird stuff and then somebody told me that if you're the pilot of a ship in the Mediterranean and you want to get into the harbour at Naples if you're the pilot what you have to do is you have to line up five lights in front of you fix your position and you can sail straight ahead into the harbour and nobody's ever said to me so line up all five aspects of this verse but what they did say was don't just go on one line up more than one of those five in order to proceed and hopefully discover

God's will and you can still make mistakes I've just admitted to one it's not the only one you know I could keep you here till lunchtime it's not the easiest assignment knowing what God's will is for you but and to close what I want to say is on this front is that when you do make a mistake I think God can kind of re you know accommodate that and you can get beyond it I'll come back to that the second thing is and I've talked enough about it so I'm not going to talk to you too much more but we listen to God we listen to the wise advice of godly friends choose some friends who love you

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enough to tell you the truth and look for the man woman of God and consult with them see when I got the offer of becoming an archdeacon out of the blue
I didn't even know what the job was to be honest so I went to see a man I know to be godly and who would speak the truth lovingly to me I went to see him in London he was the archdeacon of London at the time I went to see him I said I got this letter out of the blue first thing that happened is he had a horrific nosebleed all over my job description I'm like is this from you Lord what does that mean the second thing is this is what he said he said I feel constrained to say to you Mike unless you can think of a great reason for not doing this you better go and do it that was it I thought he's right I tried to think of a great reason and I couldn't and do you know what I felt I made far more of a difference in that role than I ever did as a mission so you can still get it wrong but if you're a healthy Christian your earnest desire will be to do what
God wants for you in your life and of course if you have discerned what God wants then you better go and do it there can't be anything more messing up in your spiritual life that when you discern something and you decide to just not go ahead with it men came to see me who was retiring as a man who said an amazing life at the centre of kind of civic society in Bristol and he came to me and he said oh you know what I said what he said I've worked for 40 years of my life he said the people who you know I talked to tell me I've made a difference he said I have never ever felt fulfilled because when
[23:44] I was 25 I felt God call me to ordination and I turned my back on that he said people say to me you would have never had as much influence as that as a vicar it would probably be my experience actually but it's interesting he sat there saying that I sat there saying you know what I said yes to being ordained and I wonder whether I ever should have like you're wondering now God God kind of weaves you know your mistakes into a pattern so let me just tell you the most wonderful story to close of a thing that went horrendously wrong and God did an amazing thing through it so the vicar of Loudwater in Buckinghamshire decided under God that he and his church would circulate the Jesus video to the 4,000 households in the parish they raised the money to buy them they got the people to volunteer to go and stick them through letter boxes in the parish 24 hours after the first deliveries there was a phone call in the vicarage the vicar picked up the phone he said yes he said is that the vicar he said yes the vicar he said you know that video he said

I don't think it's about Jesus he said what do you mean he said well I've got a Jesus video in a Jesus packet he said but it's a movie called when Harry met Sally and I don't know how this happened but it got kind of circulating and a local paper the bucks free press ran this thing was like vicar circulates porn to every house in the parish how about this the very fact that that was in the paper men everybody watched it and only one of the DVDs they circulated was Harry met Sally the rest were the Jesus videos and I spoke at the opening night of the alpha group in the church there were 360 people at it remember what God said in Romans 8 and verse 28 all things work together for good to them that love
God see I'm telling you how you might listen to God how you might listen to your Christian friends how you might get wise advice that may make you a little wiser but I'm saying to you for crying out loud don't go through your life with a lily livid spirit terrified that you might make a mistake because when you do make a mistake if you make it honestly God will weave it back into the pattern of your life I was once in Turkey and we were on a tour it was like the six churches seven churches in the book of Revelation and we were visiting every site in Turkey here's my advice never do that I mean it's a bit disappointing to find out that the church in Smyrna is now a multi storey car park that's not my point my point was like often happens on these tours it's prearranged that you will be taken to various places that produce knick knacks and local kind of stuff so we went to a carpet place and there's all these ladies hand doing these carpets and somebody said so what happens when you make a mistake because they're doing it from the back of the carpet so they can't see the front they said oh well when we look at it we just redo it and where we redo it the carpet stronger where there was a mistake and well you know
I'll take that because I've made mistakes and you've made mistakes and we'll probably continue to make mistakes but please God never let our mistakes be that we refuse to listen to God that we refuse to take godly advice or we did both and then stayed home let's pray let's pray let's pray let's pray

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