

# The Spirit Guides

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[0:00] When we talk about following Jesus, it's literal. Being a Christian means stepping into God's plan for your life.

A life that nobody can live and a plan that nobody can fulfil except for you and only you. And when you step into that life and into that plan, then biblically there is an assumption that you will be led and guided by God's Holy Spirit.

As we look at the words from Acts this morning, we see how this plays out in the lives of some of the earliest followers of Jesus. As they seek to spread the gospel throughout the world, we see how the Spirit empowers and leads them into certain places, but actually shuts off, closes other openings.

Opens doors, but also closes them. And we're called to live our lives in such a way that expects the same Holy Spirit to open doors for our lives and to close doors as well.

And I'm not going to suggest for one moment that there's an easy formulaic way of putting that into practice this morning, but we're going to think a bit about what it might mean. I want to begin with a word of caution, because there's always the danger that when we start to think about this and talk about God's Holy Spirit opening doors in our lives and closing doors, that we can over-spiritualise things and effectively come up with our own plan and think, OK, God, now bless it.

[2:08] There were two friends, and one of them said to the other, you know, I'm going to give up doughnuts for Lent.

I believe God's Holy Spirit is telling me to do this. I could do it with shedding a few pounds anyway, and I know they're not good for me. I eat too many doughnuts. I'm giving them up for Lent. And so he did.

About three weeks later, his friend was out in the park and walked past a bench and saw him sat with a most enormous box of doughnuts, and he was stuffing them right into his mouth.

He said, I'm sorry, it is Lent, isn't it? He said, yeah. He said, I'm sure you told me the other day that you sensed that the Holy Spirit was telling you to give up doughnuts during Lent. And he said, yeah, I know, but this morning I felt that the Holy Spirit was telling me something different.

His friend said, what do you mean? He said, well, I just felt this craving. The Holy Spirit's obviously telling me something here. So I wrestled with it before the Lord.

[3:17] I got in the car, and I was driving towards the town centre where that shop that sells these doughnuts is. And I said, Lord, if it is your Spirit that's speaking to me that it's okay today to eat some doughnuts, then when I arrive at that shop, may there be a parking space provided by you right outside.

And on the eighth time driving around the box, the block, there it was. We've got to be so careful how we handle this kind of stuff.

Let's not think for one moment that having this plan is actually basically just our own thinking, and we just tag on some spiritual language alongside it.

That's not what we're talking about. So how might we then genuinely and authentically seek to live a life that is led and guided by the Holy Spirit?

How can we know that it's God's Holy Spirit and not just our own human thinking? Like I say, there is no easy formula to this, but I want to suggest to you that a three-part process that is recommended by Nicky Gumbel is really, really, really helpful.

[4:44] He says this, the first part of the process is commit whatever decision it is you're facing, commit it to God in prayer. And allow God to open the right doors and to close the wrong doors.

One of my favourite passages in Scripture is 1 Peter 5 verse 7, which says, cast all your anxieties on him, or cast all your burdens, or cast all your worries, or cast all your cares on him, depending on which translation you're reading.

Well, I love that image of casting. I've never fished. But I've watched people that have, and not in any detail. But there's the image that you kind of get a casting of, I think I heard somebody once refer to it as loading as you, loading the reel as you kind of, you know, throw it back.

And then as you cast forward, it's unloading. That sense of throwing, unloading, casting your weight. And I think that's probably the sort of dynamic that is intended when we read in that verse. Cast, throw, let go of your burdens before the Lord. So that's the first thing.

[6:07] Commit the decision to God in prayer, and ask him to open doors, and to close them. The second part of the process is thereafter, trust that he is in control.

It's one thing to talk about that. It's an entirely different thing to really live by it, and to believe it, I think. It's really, really challenging.

But it's what we're called to do. But once we have committed it to him in prayer, to really trust that God is in control. There's an old story I love about somebody who was, had a horse and cart, a wagon, going along the road, a dusty track, and he saw somebody who was walking along carrying a really heavy-looking backpack.

So he slowed down, and he said, there is room right next to me here on my cart. Why don't you just climb up, and I'll give you a lift? And this hiker said, oh, I don't really know.

Have you really got, can you really carry me? He said, no, please. He persuaded him eventually to climb on board with this backpack. So up he climbed, and he sat next to this guy, the front seat, this cart behind him, but they pulled off, and he refused to take off this backpack, and they were going along for several miles, and all the while, the guy that picked him up was thinking, why does he not just take that off?

[7:34] So he said, look, you don't have to sit there with that huge backpack on you right now. He said, why don't you just take it off? There's plenty of space. You can just put it in the cart behind. He thought about it for a moment.

He said, oh, I couldn't possibly ask you to do that. It's kind enough for you to carry me. I couldn't possibly ask you to carry my backpack as well. When you're on board, everything goes with you. When you follow Jesus, it's not just an abstract thing. You don't just give him your name, a signature.

Everything you're carrying, every thought, good, bad, and ugly, is part of the whole package. So when you make that prayer, Lord, I commit this to you, be careful what you're praying, because you are casting you and everything that is part of you and that goes with you, past, present, and future, into his hands.

I'm preaching to myself as much as anyone else. This is really challenging stuff. Because it's one thing to make a prayer. It's another thing to live that prayer and to really trust that he's got it.

[9:03] Not just yourself, but everything you're carrying, all your thoughts, all your concerns about the future and what that lies, all the unknowns. There is no easy formula, but we can be clear of that.

The Bible is absolutely clear. He calls us to cast it and to leave it with him. To trust that he is in control.

The third part of this process that Nicky Cumble references is that having committed the decision in prayer, trusting that God's in control, to now to watch in faith for him to act as you continue on your way.

You get on with life. And as you get on with life, as you continue on your way, do so in the expectation that God will act.

I'm glad that God can and will open doors and close doors. This calls for courage and boldness to knock on doors. Can I really do that? Yes, ask him.

[10:15] He may not allow that door to open. But if you don't knock on it, you will never find out. And with that call to courage and boldness comes a call, an invitation, to also be ready to accept pain, frustration and disappointment as doors that we long to be opened are shut.

That hurts. It hurts when something that we long to happen does not pan out. And that what we thought was the plan for our lives, it seems is not.

Because that door has been closed. Sometimes it hurts when God closes that door. But he will never, ever close it in order to harm you.

In fact, the very opposite, and there are some times in our lives where we look back and we think, you know, I longed for that thing to happen in my life back then. I'm so, so relieved that that didn't happen.

I dodged a bullet there. But there are some things we will carry through this side of eternity that we will not know exactly why God didn't open that door.

[11:38] And that's where that is, that call to trust that God knows what he's doing. But just maybe, I put it to you, just maybe, that our perception, our limited human understanding of what we think is going to be right for us actually isn't at all.

There's a song by Giordano Bryant called When God Closes Doors. And there's this one line in that song that I think puts it so well. I might not be knocking if I saw what was on the other side.

So commit the decision to God in prayer, asking him to open the right doors and to close the wrong ones. Thereafter, trust he's in control. And third, watch in faith expectantly that he will open doors and he will close doors.

So let's look at this story now in Acts 16. And let's ask ourselves, what's going on here? It's intriguing, isn't it?

Because it's not really explained, it's just, we're just told from reading from verse 6 that Paul and his companions travel throughout the region of Phrygian, Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia.

[13:05] These guys are given everything to preach the gospel, are kept by the Holy Spirit from doing so. We're not told what or why, we're just told.

And then it continues, and then when they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter, they tried to enter Bethlehem. But the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to.

What happened exactly, we don't know. But there's a possible clue that lies in verse 10 of this story. And it's so subtle that it's easy not to spot. But in verse 10, it simply says that after Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once.

to leave for Macedonia. We got ready at once. In verse 10 of the 16th chapter of Acts, the narrative changes from the third person to the first person.

[14:15] Up to this point, the story is told. Paul went and they did this and he did that and she did that and then they went there and that happened to them and he did this and suddenly it switches.

Now it's we. The teller of the story has now entered the story. Now what's going on there? Well, who is the teller of that story?

Well, traditionally, it's reckoned to be Luke. We cannot know that for certain, but everything points in that direction. When we look at Luke's gospel and we look at the book of Acts, they begin with the same kind of way.

There's a similarity in the language and therefore it has really been accepted over the years that it's Luke that's telling the story. The other thing, again, we cannot know this, we cannot prove it, but it's generally reckoned that Luke was a physician, a doctor of medicine.

Again, how do we know that? We can't demonstrate it categorically, but it's generally reckoned. There are references in the language, the terms that are used that just lend themselves to the suggestion that this is somebody who practiced medicine.

[15:34] And the fact is even made more explicit than that in Colossians chapter 4 when at the end of that letter, Paul refers to our beloved friend Luke, the doctor.

So we can't know for certain, but joining the dots, it seems that at this moment in the story, the moment when Luke, when Paul and his friends were prevented twice from going on what they thought they were going to do, carrying out their intentions, that Luke, the doctor, has joined them. Why? This is speculation, but is it not beyond possibility that maybe this thorn in the flesh that Paul talks about, and we know that there are, there could be dozens of different possibilities there as to

what he might have been referring to, but just maybe the thorn in the flesh, some medical reason, meant that Luke, the doctor, had to be called for.

And therefore, Luke, the doctor, as he tells this story, at this point, says that from there on, we, and so the story's picked up in the first person. It's just a thought, and we don't know.

But what we can know is that as they were prevented from carrying out what they intended from their plans, according to their human thinking, and they were stopped from doing so, whether it was a medical reason or something else, they were clearly must have been frustrated, if not furious.

[17:11] They couldn't enter this place. They couldn't go and do that. They couldn't preach the gospel. That's the whole reason they lived, and yet they were stopped by the Spirit of Jesus. Instead of seeing resentment and anger and bitterness, which I know that I would be expressing at that point, they embrace it and say, the Spirit of God has led us away from here and closed that door and is now leading in that direction.

And what I want to suggest to you is that next time we are facing that frustration and a door is closed and it isn't aligning with our own plans, that we are at least open to the possibility that it may just be the Spirit of God that is caught up within that, as painful and as difficult as it may be.

I'm not suggesting for a moment that we give up the moment we hit a hurdle in something, and I don't think that's what this story is telling here, because as the story continues, we don't see a group of people who just give up.

They carry on, but they carry on in a different direction, all the time open to the ongoing presence and guiding of God's Holy Spirit in the same way that you can know that the same Holy Spirit, if you will trust Him, will guide and allow your life to unfold in the way that only you can allow it to unfold, because only you are you.

And God, in His sovereignty, has that plan for your life. What we can say is that, and though we don't know why, and we can only speculate as to why the Spirit might have stopped them at this point, it was temporary.

[19:06] One thing that we can say is that eventually, later on, Paul did take the Gospel into Asia Minor, and we read of the church in Ephesus being planted along with all seven that are mentioned in the book of Revelation.

So it was only a temporary thing, but what the other thing is that we can say is that through Lydia, we see Europe's first convert, as recorded in Scripture, at least.

And so, whatever may not have happened, what we can say did happen as a consequence is the Gospel came to Europe. When God closes some doors, He will always open others.

We may just see the thump in our face as that door closes. but that closure always represents another opening.

Now, that is painful, and it's painful because we don't understand what those reasons are, and we may carry those things around with us throughout our whole lives, not really knowing, but we're called to trust that that same Spirit is with us.

[20:20] for quite a few years, Tamara and I in our home had stair gates fitted at the top and the bottom of our stairs, while our three children were at the age where it wasn't safe for them to not have those stair gates in place.

It was really frustrating for us every single time we wanted to go up or down, it was click, open, click, close, get to the top, click, open, click, close, and so on.

Eventually, the day came when we could say goodbye to those stair gates. We were delighted and our kids were too. Why were those gates there?

Not to stop them from having fun. In fact, it was a cause of huge frustration to us. But those gates were closed and remained there for their own safety and protection.

And I'm not pretending that this is an easy truth for us to come to terms with, but doors close for a reason. We're not just here by accident, by some cosmic fluke.

[21:40] But the creator of the heavens and the earth, the whole cosmos, has a plan for you even if you don't realise it. And what I want to finish off by saying to you today is that simply don't resist that plan.

You might be sitting here thinking, how could God possibly be interested in me? Whether that's to do with your stage of life or whether it's how you perceive yourself. You know, the gospel challenges that.

You might not believe in you, but God does. And don't ever underestimate what God might be calling you to. He put you on this earth for a reason.

And it's a reason that is you shaped. And nobody else can fulfil it. So don't, don't resist the Holy Spirit when you sense that he may be saying something to you.

Go with it. Don't try to walk against the force of the Holy Spirit. I'm going to tell you one last story and then we're going to pray. I grew up, as so many of you will know, on the Isle of White.

[22:55] And about twice a year, our mum and dad would take me and my brothers over to the mainland, as we called it, shopping. Usually it was Portsmouth, occasionally it was Southampton, but we got really excited about this.

Why? Because the shops were so much bigger on the mainland. And I can remember how excited I was about one particular thing about going to the shops on the mainland.

Escalators. None of the shops on the Isle of White had escalators. They weren't big enough. And I love getting onto these stairs that would carry you up and will carry you down.

And from as long as I can remember these things, I can remember thinking, wouldn't it be so much fun to try running in the other direction? I don't know what you call the one that comes down because it doesn't escalate.

It's a de-escalator? I don't know. But I can remember, wouldn't it be so much fun to try running up one of those things? It became a lifelong ambition. And two years ago, I got to try it out.

[24:09] I was in a big shop and we were all there and I realised that the rest of the family were on another floor. And without really thinking, I just got on board this de-escalator and started to ride down.

Seconds later, I realised I shouldn't be going down, I should be going up from the floor that I had just left. I looked around, I caught a glimpse of a sign that said, under no circumstances do you try to ascend the descending stairs.

But there was no staff there and there were no other customers there and I thought, this is my opportunity.

I spun round and I started to run. And as I did to, so, first realisation yes, this is every bit as fun as I always thought and hoped it would be.

And I ran and I ran and I ran and the second realisation is this is a thousand times harder than I ever thought it would be. But eventually I got to the top whereupon I made the third realisation which my brain had just never ever ever thought about and that is that there's a problem when one foot that is carrying you relatively fast and you're running as hard as you possibly can one foot is on a moving surface and the other one is not.

[25:49] After my 50 year old body had made a rather undignified 360 degree spin and I landed flat on my face I picked myself up and to this day I will be I am so grateful and remain grateful to the staff member of Cardiff City central branch of TK Max for not laughing at me in the way that I would have laughed if I hadn't been me in that situation.

The point of that story don't try running against that which is trying to carry you. He is trying to carry you.

A lot of the time you won't realise that. the very fact that you're sat here listening to this right now is no accident.

God wanted you here today. Or if you're listening online and you've made it this far thank you but I really believe God wants you to know that he's got a plan for you and even though right now you might be feeling frustrated you might be hurting with some sense of deep disappointment or you might sense when is the door going to open you don't know the answer to those questions but God does like Paul like Luke like all the others in that story keep on keeping on we're going to pray now as we pray firstly we're going to pray and then we're going to invite us to join in saying some words that are from one of the psalms on the because I think they speak so powerfully into this situation and I would like to invite us all to join in saying those words as an expression of faith in his guidance and those words they're taken from

Psalm 37 it's not the whole psalm but it's some words from Psalm 37 but first of all before those words come up on the screen let's just take a moment to pause and to pray Holy Spirit we thank you that when we follow Jesus we don't do so alone it's not just a decision we make with our heads with our minds but when we follow Jesus it's a supernatural thing and we move into your zone we step into your plan Lord help us to trust in you Lord as we pray this prayer right now we ask your Holy Spirit to come upon us and to move among us here in this moment and in ahead of our futures whatever those look like and there will be as many different futures as there are people here right now

[29:13] Lord help us to trust in you and give us the courage and the boldness to knock on doors and the readiness to accept when doors are not opened that maybe that's your desire but help us to have that courage not to give up close the wrong doors Lord and open the right ones Holy Spirit touch our lives afresh let's say together do not fret because of those who are evil or envious of those who do wrong like the grass they will soon wither like green plants they will soon die away trust in the

Lord and do good dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture take delight in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart commit your way to the Lord trust in him and he will do this he will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn your vindication like the noonday sun be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him amen