

God's sovereignty and guidance

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[0 : 00] Turn in your Bibles to page 577, where you'll find Psalm 67, which is our first reading.

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations, let the peoples praise you, O God, let all the peoples praise you, let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon earth, let the peoples praise you, O God, let all the peoples praise you. The earth has yielded its increase, God, our God, shall bless us, God shall bless us, let all the ends of the earth fear him.

John 12. And we're at verse 20 to 33.

Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and asked him, Sir, we wish to see Jesus.

[1 : 34] Philip went and told Andrew. Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. And Jesus answered them, The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

If anyone serves me, he must follow me. And where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.

Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour? But for this purpose, I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.

Then a voice came from heaven. I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again. The crowd that stood there and heard it said that it had thundered.

[2 : 44] Others said, An angel has spoken to him. Jesus answered, This voice has come for your sake, not mine. Now is the judgment of this world.

Now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from this earth, will draw all people to myself. He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die.

Good, Jake. Thanks very much indeed for reading. Please will you turn back to Psalm 67. Right, let's pray, shall we?

Let's pray together. In these last days, he has spoken to us by his son, whom he appointed the heir of all things.

Heavenly Father, we praise you very much indeed that you are a speaking God. We thank you that you don't leave us in the dark about your character, your plans and purposes for the world. Thank you that you reveal to us that you are sovereign.

[3 : 51] And we pray today, as we think about this issue of guidance and decision making, please would you help us, by your spirit, to be attentive to your voice, and lead us to put it into practice, we pray.

For Jesus' sake. Amen. Now, a few weeks ago, we went to see *The Go Between* at the Apollo Theatre. It's the latest adaption of E.P. Hartley's classic novel set in a country house in Norfolk at the beginning of the 20th century.

It has the memorable opening line, The past is a foreign country. And if you know the story, or if you don't know the story, it's the story of a 12-year-old boy, Leo, who is staying with some family friends at a country house in Norfolk.

And he finds himself acting as the go-between, carrying love letters between a beautiful, young, aristocratic woman and the local farmer.

Well, over the course of the book, over the course of the play, it all goes wrong. It ends in tragedy. Such that the young 12-year-old Leo is scarred for life.

[5 : 01] In fact, the main character isn't Leo the 12-year-old boy, but Leo the much older man in his 60s, early 70s, who looks back on this one event so many years ago and considers how that one event actually has ruined the whole of his life.

Well, we're continuing this series of talks on the sovereignty of God. Today, God's sovereignty and guidance, how to make decisions. If God is sovereign, do our decisions actually matter?

Perhaps they don't matter. Perhaps our decisions don't count for anything, if God is in control of everything we do. Or perhaps our decisions actually are of supreme importance, almost crippling importance.

What if, like in the go-between, I make a wrong decision at some stage in life? Is that thing going to muck up the rest of my life? Is it going to move me off God's plan, if you like?

Off God's track for my life? Such that for the rest of my life, it can only at best be, well, second best.

Well, I take it that neither of those can be right, because we've seen over the last two weeks that although God is completely sovereign in his world, at the same time we make real decisions, and the decisions we make have real consequences.

[6 : 31] And God's sovereignty is good. God is our loving, heavenly father. So what are the implications for guidance and decision-making?

Well, we're going to start in Psalm 67, and as usual, there's an outline, so you might like to have that to hand as well. First of all, guidance and the glory of God.

And I think here the question is, why does God do what he does in his world? Why does God do anything that he does in his world? Well, it is for his glory.

Let's look at Psalm 67, because although I guess we know in theory that the world we live in, including our lives, of course, revolve around God, in practice, it's so tempting, isn't it, to imagine that the world we live in and everything else revolves around me.

It's just the way our sinful nature works itself out. We think life is all about me. So notice, Willie, the refrain of the psalm. Psalm 67, verse 3, that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations.

[7 : 43] And then, verse 5, let the people praise you, O Lord, let all the people praise you. Sorry, verse 3, I meant to read first, let the peoples praise you, O God, let all the peoples praise you.

And verse 5, let the peoples praise you, O God, let all the peoples praise you. So it is a psalm about the praise of God. In particular, what are people to praise God for? Verse 2, that your way may be known on earth, your saving power among all nations.

And verse 4, let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for you judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations upon the earth. God wants, you see, the nations to know two things.

He wants the nations to know, first of all, that he's a saving God, verse 2, he's the savior. And secondly, verse 4, he wants the nations to know that he's the judge, God is savior and judge.

After all, verse 7, this is what it means, to fear God, verse 7, God shall bless us, let all the ends of the earth fear him. Now this is what it means for God to be glorified, for people to know what he's like.

[8 : 52] Just as when we looked at Exodus a couple of years ago, do you remember how Exodus asked God to reveal his glory? And he reveals himself to Moses, both as savior and as judge.

In that reading, which we then had from John chapter 12, likewise, Jesus declares that his crucifixion is when he is glorified. It's the point when he is glorified, when he is revealed to the world, both as savior and as judge.

And of course, when he returns at the end of history, he is going to be revealed at the end of history, on the final day, both as savior and judge. So why does God do anything that he does in the world?

Well, so the nations come to know that he's savior and judge. What do you say? How is that achieved? Well, through the proclamation of the message of Jesus, and then his people come to trust in Jesus.

So you see, here is the question. Why does God bless his people? Why has God blessed you? I guess if we went away, we spent some time on it, I guess all of us could, if we had a piece of paper and a pen, I guess, I guess we could write down many, many ways in which we had been blessed.

[10 : 03] Why has God done that? Is it so that we can just get on with our own lives and pursue the kind of life which we would have pursued anyway, even if we hadn't been followers of Jesus Christ?

Is it just so we can get on and live the kind of life that everyone around us is living? No. Verse one. May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us.

Why? So I can live the same life that everyone else lives? No. Verse two. That your way may be known on earth. God, your saving power among all nations.

But I guess the objection comes, isn't this rather self-centered of God? That everything revolves, everything in the world happens for his glory. In a few weeks' time, you may know, Team GB will be given a hero's welcome as they parade through the streets of Manchester on an open-top bus.

Well, imagine that I decide to join the fun. I get a train ticket, I hop on a train, and I go up to Manchester. And rather than just sort of being in the crowds and sort of waving at them all as they go past, I decide it'd be rather fun to get on the bus.

[11:15] So I just get on the bus, I'm there on top of the bus. And I guess at some stage, probably sooner rather than later, someone is going to say, what on earth are you doing here? But of course, the fact that I shouldn't be there taking the glory for myself doesn't mean that Team GB shouldn't be there taking the glory for themselves on top of that bus.

Well, in a far greater way, you see, it is only right that God is the one who is to be glorified in his world. After all, he is God. The whole world revolves around God. So you say, what are the implications for guidance?

Well, it's very simple, isn't it? You and I should not be looking to pursue our own agenda in life.

Prosperity, fulfillment, success in the eyes of others, ambition, popularity, all to make me look good and impressive and to do what I want to do with my life.

Can we see, that is to get everything completely the wrong way around. Because the universe we live in does not revolve around me and my plans. The universe we live in revolves around God and his glory and the nations knowing that he is saviour and judge.

That is why he blesses his people. Instead, you see, I need to be asking in life, well, not what is my agenda, but what is God's agenda to bring glory to himself.

[12:51] I'm not just to, I'm not just talking here about those who are in full-time Christian ministry, but all of us. Matthew chapter 6, verse 33, Jesus says, but seek first the kingdom of God.

Don't have the kingdom of God as just one of a number of things you're seeking, but seek first the kingdom of God, Jesus says. Not your own kingdom, not your own project, but God's kingdom and God's great project.

In other words, you see, wherever we are in life, whether we're at school or at home or at work or retired, whatever guidance we seek, whatever decisions that we are making, this is the starting point.

The glory of God is the glory of God rather than my own glory. Secondly, guidance and a glorified people because one day everyone who has put their trust in Jesus will themselves be glorified.

Turn on to Romans chapter 8. We looked at this last week, page 1138. Remember this wonderful chain we looked at last week in Romans chapter 8, verses 29 and 30.

[14:15] Let me read them again. Romans 8, verse 29. For those whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

And those whom he predestined, he also called. And those whom he called, he also justified. And those whom he justified, he also glorified. That is the destination, you see, of those who put their trust in Jesus.

We will be like Jesus. We will be glorified in the new creation, the new heavens, and the new earth. And because God is sovereignty, it's a certainty. If you missed last week's talk, then do listen to it on the website.

Indeed, it's something the whole of creation is looking forward to. Just look back to Romans chapter 8, verse 18. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. In other words, the whole of creation is longing for the day when a renewed humanity will be ruling a renewed creation.

[15:32] That is the destination. And as in the rest of life, the destination you know you're headed to affects the present, doesn't it? So just think of packing to go on holiday.

As you know, the sun always shines in Cornwall. So if you're planning to go to Cornwall for a holiday, you pack your bodyboards and your swimwear and your sun cream and a hat. In Scotland,

of course, it always rains.

So you pack your waterproofs and lots of board games and that kind of thing. What are the implications for guidance and decision making? What matters now, you see, is our godliness. It is our Christ-likeness. Because that is the destination towards which God is at work in us. Or put it this way, you see, if we imagine that God's will for our lives is our total happiness in the here and now, then the prayers that we pray concerning the decisions we make, well, they're all going to be about what makes me feel good about myself, aren't they?

Making me feel happy. Lord, please make me, help me to work out who I should go out with so I can end up with the perfect person who will make me feel happy.

[16:49] Or if we think God is mainly concerned with making us feel fulfilled in life, then again, we'll simply pray accordingly. Lord, please give me that job that's rewarding, stimulating, and makes me feel good about myself.

Or if we think God is chiefly concerned about our material prosperity, we'll say, Lord, please guide me to a good financial advisor who can set me up for retirement.

Let me ask a question. What are the big decisions really that you face at the moment? Just spend a few moments just in your mind's eye just sort of thinking and just gathering those thoughts together. What are the big decisions which you face at the moment? Perhaps one today, perhaps something this week, or perhaps just so you know over the next few months. I think we assume the most important decisions are to do with things like which school should I go to or my children go to, which university, what job should I do, should I marry, who should I marry, where should I live, those kinds of things.

But actually, they are not the most important decisions at all. We think they are. But actually, the most important decision to make today and tomorrow, and indeed every day, is whether you're going to live for Jesus Christ.

[18:19] Are you going to deny yourself and take up your cross and follow him? Mark chapter 8, verse 34, Jesus says, if anyone will come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.

The job you do, the university you go to, where you live, all those things are secondary. Christ-likeness, a life pleasing to the Lord Jesus.

Jesus, that is the most important thing. Because that is what God is doing in you. That's the destination, the new creation.

If the focus is on, in terms of our guidance and decision making, you see, is simply my own happiness, or fulfillment, or material prosperity, then at best, that reflects a spiritual immaturity.

At worst, it is simply worldly. Whereas, of course, once we grasp the destination, then the way we think about guidance and making decisions is going to change completely, isn't it?

[19:30] Will this relationship, will this friendship help me become more like Jesus, or not, or less like Jesus? Will this job opportunity help me to live out the gospel, to speak the gospel with colleagues?

Will it provide me with a schedule, which means I can read my Bible and pray, which means that I can read the Bible to my children, which means I have time to serve at home and at church?

Or in retirement, Lord, give me the right balance between responsible saving, so I'm not a burden to others, and generosity. After all, retirement and downsizing can be wonderful opportunities for generosity.

Guidance and the glorified people. Thirdly, let's think about guidance in practice, because you say, well, hang on a moment, I still need to make these decisions.

I still need to make decisions about schooling for my children, or which university I'm going to go to, or what job I'm going to do, or am I going to marry, who am I going to marry? These are real choices. I've got to make these decisions.

[20:43] So how? Well, I've put three bullet points there on the outline. First of all, ditch the bullseye. In other words, imagine a darts board, okay, and don't think about guidance like the bullseye on the darts board, as if you've got to hit the target in the middle, the bullseye, every time, just like in the go-between.

And if you miss the target on one decision, then from that point on, your whole life could be second best. Or, to change the picture, don't think of guidance like a maze.

You know what it's like when you go into a maze? Every decision counts, doesn't it? There's only one route. You get to this junction, left or right. Get to the next junction, straight on, or left, you see? One wrong decision, and you don't get to the middle. Lots of Christians, I think, think of guidance like that. Perhaps because, yes, God is sovereign.

And perhaps because, yes, God has his plan, he has your life planned out. But Christian decision-making is not about trying to discover what that plan is. Go left here, or right here, or straight on.

[22 : 00] That is a burden which God simply doesn't place upon us, trying to see the route map in advance. If he did, that would be crippling, wouldn't it? Every decision would be a crippling decision.

God, in his great kindness, does not place that burden upon us. In other words, don't live under the burden of thinking, for example, there's only one person in the world you could marry, or there's only one job that you could do at this particular point of time.

Ditch the bullseye. Secondly, ditch wrong-headed thinking, because there are all sorts of ways in which Christians end up looking to God for guide them, many of which are frankly wrong-headed. I love the extended title of Kevin de Young's book. The short title is Just Do Something, A Liberating Approach to Finding God's Will. This is the extended title, or How to Make Decisions Without Dreams, Visions, Fleecees, Impressions, Open Doors, Random Bible Verses, Casting Lots, Liver Shivers, Writing in the Sky, etc.

Okay? It's my recommended book for this talk. It's an excellent book on making decisions and guidance. When you say, what about open doors? As in, God opened that door for me.

[23 : 18] But of course, that could equally easily, couldn't it, be an expression of my laziness? I couldn't be bothered to try any alternatives. Or what about a closed door? As in, the Lord closed that door to me.

Yet, in Romans 1, verse 13, the Apostle Paul says he tried many times to reach Rome, but he is prevented from doing so. He didn't see a closed door as a sign to give up.

Or we say, what about fleecees? For example, if I get the letter by Tuesday offering me that job, I'll take it, but if I don't, I won't. But actually, when Gideon, you see, put out a fleece in the book of Judges, which is where the phrase comes from, actually, it is an act of unbelief on his part.

God has already told him he'll be victorious in battle. He didn't believe him. Or what about listening to God in prayer? But actually, prayer in the Bible is never about listening to God.

Prayer in the Bible is always about speaking to God. We mustn't think that prayer is about listening to God. Or what about having a sense of peace about things? As in, I prayed about it and I really feel a sense of peace about it.

[24 : 29] Often that can simply be an expression, can't it, of my own self-sufficiency. As in, I feel at peace about it, so don't challenge me. As in, my mind is made up.

I'd never have got involved in planting Grace Church if I was making the decision as to whether to do it on how at peace I felt. I was full of anxiety about it.

Think of the Lord Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, full of sorrow and trouble as he contemplated the crucifixion. It's a good job, isn't it? He didn't take his lack of peace about what was coming as a sign that he should change course and go and do something else instead.

So ditch wrong-headed thinking. I'm conscious I've been very brief on those things and I'm also conscious that for some of us our whole thinking about guidance has just completely been thrown up in the air.

Okay? In which case, please will you read the book. Do come and talk to me afterwards but actually I'm conscious I'm throwing things out which I don't have the time to explain everything in the way which might be ideal for some of us.

[25 : 42] Okay? So do come and talk to me afterwards or read the book. Thirdly, positively, listen to the voice of God and turn, if you will, to 2 Timothy chapter 3.

2 Timothy chapter 3, page 1199.

2 Timothy 3, 16. All scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

So here's the question, how is God going to guide me? By talking to me. How will I hear God talking to me? By reading the scriptures.

Do they show me the way I should go? They most certainly do. They teach me how God wants me to live. They rebuke me when I depart from his way.

[26 : 55] They correct me to show the way back. They train me in the right way to go. But someone says, what about the Holy Spirit? Isn't the Holy Spirit involved in giving guidance? Yes, of course.

But to say that God guides by his Holy Spirit is really just another way of saying that God guides by God because the Holy Spirit is God. So how does the Holy Spirit guide? Well, the answer is very simple.

He uses the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God. He takes God's word at the Bible. He applies it to our hearts. He awakens a response in us and he leads us to put it into practice.

Now, I think in practice it's helpful to think of three types of decisions. First of all, there are those decisions which the Bible says to us are right or wrong decisions.

In other words, where God says in the Bible that certain things, certain decisions are always right or always wrong. Simple as that. So, God tells us, for example, not to lie or not to commit adultery, not to deny the Lord Jesus.

[28 : 08] So, for a Christian to take a job where you have to lie or to leave their husband or wife for someone else is always wrong. However many doors are open, however at peace we feel about it, it's always wrong.

Likewise, to marry someone who is not a follower of Jesus Christ, it's always wrong. These are right and wrong decisions. Secondly, there are what we might call wisdom decisions, such as, well, which university should I go to or which job should I do?

That's not a right-wrong decision, it's a wisdom decision, asking questions such as, well, if I go to that university, will there be a good church there which I can get stuck into? What's the Christian union like?

Can I serve there? Is it going to build me up? Or, I guess another wisdom decision would be how many after-school clubs should I do or should my children do?

Well, again, it's a wisdom decision. The Bible doesn't say right or wrong, it's a matter of wisdom. If it means you don't have time to get to jam or to read your Bible, it probably means you're doing too many. Or where to sit in church.

[29 : 21] We all encouraged, weren't we, in the six steps course a couple of weeks ago to pray about and consider where we sit in church. It's not a right, wrong thing. You mustn't sit next to whoever it is or you must sit next to whoever it is.

It's a matter of wisdom. Pray about it, make a decision. It's a matter of wisdom. Or what about moving house? I'm staggered by the number of Christians who make unwise decisions in terms of moving house.

Oh, we just love the area, the schools were great, we needed a bigger garden and give scant thought to whether there's a decent church or whether the church they heard about on the grapevine is actually any good.

And five years later, they're barely Christian at all. So there are right, wrong decisions, there are wisdom decisions, and then there are the frankly, who cares decisions.

they don't matter. I was reading about a Christian woman just this week actually, he really did agonize and pray over which shoes to wear each day.

[30 : 24] Okay? Now you say, well, if it's simply a choice between wearing this shoe and this pair of shoes and that pair of shoes, then obviously it really is a who cares decision.

Don't waste time on it. But you say, it could be a wisdom decision if it means spending money on shoes which actually you could use the money much better. Which washing machine, which mobile phone, which car, we can obsess about all these things.

And yes, we need to remember what we saw in 1 Corinthians 8-11. We don't want to cause other Christians to stumble. But many of these decisions are frankly who cares decisions. Just get on and decide.

And don't waste time on them. Just get that phone. You'll be out of date in three years time. Just get that car. It'll rust away in ten years time. Who cares? We laugh, but actually it's not the way we think, is it?

Because actually these things take up far more, and I speak for myself as much as anyone, they take up far more of our time and energy and efforts than they ought to. But you say, can't God guide in other ways?

[31 : 37] Well, of course God can. God can do whatever he wants to do. He's God. But he hasn't promised to. And so we shouldn't expect him to. If he does, we certainly shouldn't then think that is how God always guides.

Let me finish with this quote on the outline. God's love. Ultimately, our trust is not in a feeling of guidance, an experience of guidance, for that limits God to working through our feelings.

Our trust is in the God who guides, who upholds all things, who sustains the universe, who is accomplishing his good purpose to bring all things under Christ, who calls us to know his will in the gospel, and his will is that we be made holy.

Let's pray together. Those whom he predestined, he also called. And those whom he called, he also justified.

And those whom he justified, he also glorified. Heavenly Father, we praise you very much indeed for this direction, this future destination, which you have called all those who trust in Jesus to, to be glorified, to be holy, to be like the Lord Jesus in the new heavens and the new earth.

[33 : 05] And we're sorry, Heavenly Father, when the things we long for are simply tied up with this world, things that will perish. And we pray, please, you'd give us as we make decisions, as we go through life, a great concern for your glory, and a great concern to be your glorified people in the new creation.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.