

Discerning God's Guidance

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[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on 29th of November 1998.

The preacher is Phil Millman. His sermon is entitled Discerning God's Guidance and is from Romans chapter 12 verses 1 and 2.

And we discovered that the Bible has quite a bit to tell us about this important issue that we as Christians all need to be seeking.

Warwick spoke about the fact that God is still interested in this world and is actively involved within it. And he showed us from the Bible, from Scripture, how nothing can thwart God's purposes and also that God can do what he wants to guide us.

Thus relaying the story of Balaam and the talking donkey, quite an amazing story from thousands of years ago, isn't it? He then told us the story of how Philip, the evangelist, Philip that's in Acts, was guided by the Holy Spirit nearly 2,000 years ago.

[1 : 16] Well, I think that it's great that the Bible tells us about God's guidance for his people in the past. And there are some pretty extraordinary ways that God has gone about guiding people out there.

But the question that I think is on many of our lips today is how do we know God's guidance in 1998 and in the future?

Now that my exams are over God, how are you going to guide me? How are you going to guide me out there in this world? How, God, are you going to tell me what my career should be?

It doesn't seem to be written anywhere in the Bible. It doesn't seem to be written anywhere in the Bible that I should be an engineer, that I should be a clergy person, that I should be a lawyer, that I should be a builder, that I should be a teacher.

I should be a teacher. I'm a bachelor. For this evening, I want to address the subject that I've been given the topic to address, concerning God's guidance.

[2 : 30] Now all Christians need and desire guidance. It's implicit in the existence of a personal God who cares, leads, and enters into personal relationships with his people so that they will accomplish his purpose on earth.

And with such a God, Christians then should be amongst the most decisive people on this earth. But the reality is that Christians are among the most indecisive, partly because of some, I think, mistaken ideas about guidance.

So tonight, I want to do three things. Firstly, I want to explore some common myths and misunderstandings about guidance.

Secondly, I want to look at two scriptural images of the guide being God and the guided being us. And thirdly, I'd like to offer some practical steps for discerning God's guidance. So let's just pray for a moment.

[3 : 48] And I'm going to use the words from Psalm 148, verses 8 to 10, this verse in summary words. Show me the way I should go. Teach me to do your will.

For you are my God. May your good spirit lead me on level ground. Amen. Well, let me begin by turning on an overhead and looking at the myths and misunderstandings about guidance.

And I want to outline eight obstacles to gaining a truly biblical approach to discovering and doing the will of God. So Hayley is going to turn on the overhead projector and I'm just going to go, boom. There you go. The first, can you see that? The first point is looking at God's wonderful plan. It is a myth and misunderstanding to say that God has one specific and distinct plan for each of our lives. Now, while it is true that God has plans for his people, I think, and I've been doing a lot of thinking about this over the week, I think that it is more helpful to say that God has a purpose for his people.

[5 : 11] Now, I want to read to you from Ephesians chapter 1 and looking at verse 9. Now, I'm doing something which we shouldn't be doing. I'm reading from another Bible. I'm reading from the NIV Bible because I think it actually brings it out clearer.

And he, God, this is Paul's prayer, and he, God, made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure which he purposed in Christ to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

God's purpose for those who follow him is that we should live to the praise of his glory, as you read on in verses 12 and 14 say, and to participate in his, God's grand purpose of renewing everything under the headship of the Lord Jesus Christ, in verse 10 says.

Now, the difference here between a plan and a purpose is like the difference between a blueprint, for example, a detailed plan of a building that is going to be built.

You know, you have a map and a detailed plan of what's going to go into that building. The difference between a plan and a purpose is like the difference between this blueprint of a building and a stream that carries people along even though they may make adjustments along the way.

[6 : 40] You see, when we become Christians, we enter, if you like, into God's stream and we flow along within that stream. Now, there may be some times within that stream where there are rapids, you know, a lot of wild water and we move along very fast, getting tossed about and so on.

And there will be times within that same stream when we seem to be drifting along. It's quiet and it's not rough and so on.

And we don't seem to be doing much at all. But as we stay in that stream, God's stream, we are fulfilling the purpose God has for us.

The plans within that stream are not detailed to the letter. As you travel along that stream, they unfold as you go. That's my first point.

My second point is your decisions and God's. Can you maybe have an example of this? It's a myth and misunderstanding that God wants to make the decisions for you.

[7 : 58] People think that God's going to make all the decisions. Sometimes people cry out, God, please take control of my life. And if God wanted to take control of our lives, He would have done so from the very outset.

But in reality, God does not want to make robots out of us. And I think that the prayer of that sort of nature normally does not answer prayers positively in that sort of experience.

Now the Bible doesn't set apart passivity. That is, always waiting and wanting to be acted upon.

Now the third point is thinking about God's one way.

People say there's only one way. There's only this way to do things and so on. I think it's a myth and a misunderstanding that there is only one way to do the will of God. Sometimes this is called, I've heard it called, this is the centre of His will syndrome.

It's got to get to the centre of what, the very centre of what's going to happen. And it is promoted by popular Christianity, this sort of thing, but I don't think it's found in Scripture.

[9 : 13] There are many ways of doing God's will within His purpose. The purpose being that we are under the headship of Christ and bringing glory and praise to His name.

Now the fourth point is knowing God's will. It's a myth and a misunderstanding that God's will is difficult to discover.

The pagan world says this and pagan religions therefore make much of guidance and seeking guidance through priestly divination if you like.

Occult and magic practices follow the same, a similar sort of path. And people look for signs and portents. But followers of Jesus are given in the Bible both wisdom and the spirit to guide.

Let me read to you Psalm 25 verse 9 which was read out last week. He, speaking about God, guides the humble in what is right.

[10 : 24] And Psalm 48 verse 14 For this God is our God forever and ever. He will be our guide to the end. God guides.

The fifth point is signs and wonders. It's a myth and misunderstanding that God's guidance is normally associated with supernatural signs and messages through prophecy such as fleeces. Warwick talked about Phidians fleece and we saw a great drama on it last week. It's a myth and misunderstanding that God's guidance is normally associated with those sort of supernatural signs.

Now if you were to look in the book of Acts and the epistles we see Christians constantly using their redeemed judgment. For example in Acts chapter 6 there's the story and I preached on it earlier this year of choosing the apostles having to choose seven other people to distribute the food amongst the widows and the poor in Jerusalem.

Now in that story there we read in Acts chapter 6 verse 3 we read that they say brothers choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the spirit and wisdom.

[11 : 59] We will turn this responsibility over to them and we'll give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word. Don't wait for the signs and wonders to tell them what to do.

They use their common sense to do. Now the majority of cases of supernatural leading in the Bible were unsought.

Sometimes unfortunately I think people wait for supernatural things to happen when they should be practicing what they already know of God's will.

My sixth point is open doors. It's a myth and misunderstanding that God normally calls through open doors.

Now this is a problem which I go through all the time that God will open a door for me as we go along. Christians and believers are encouraged not only to go through open doors of opportunity but to break down closed doors as well for God.

[13 : 04] sometimes relying on open doors sort of opening the door and walking through it I think amounts to being guided only by circumstances. Sure God can be involved in that place but I've got no plans about that at all.

But if we just look to the open doors we can miss out on God's guidance and some other opportunities. The seventh point there is guidance people say it's not natural.

It is a myth and misunderstanding that what is natural for you including the way you are made and what you think in your own mind is probably not the will of God.

It's just the reverse. God has written his will into the very fibers of our personality and has given us spiritual gifts and we fulfill God's will by doing what he created us to do.

And friends our very best thoughts are from God. In Christ as Gillian read out to us we have a renewed mind as that passage from Romans talks about.

[14 : 21] And my eighth point here is called beginning again. It's a myth and misunderstanding that when you make a mistake you have to go back to the start again.

You've stuffed it up and you've got to go right back to the start if you can. Well grace means the exact opposite I think. God's grace his undeserved favor shown toward us in Christ Jesus enables us to live fully in the present free from the past and looking forward to a glorious future that is with God with Jesus Christ.

In God's sovereignty our mistakes and the mistakes that others have committed against us are incorporated into God's great purpose for our lives and for creation.

well there are eight myths and misunderstandings. So now having looked at some of these myths and misunderstandings that people have about God's guidance I now want to turn to scripture and look at two empowering images of the guide, God the guide and the guided his people.

And as we look at these two images in just a few moments the message that I want us to understand from them is simple it's this it is more important to be in relationship to the guide to God than to have an experience of guidance.

[16 : 06] it is more important to be shown God's ways as Psalm 25 says than to find out the perfect way for ourselves.

In other words be in relationship with the guide with God the guide and one will be guided. Seek guidance and one may miss the best thing of all.

So the first image that I want to look at is the image of the sheep and the shepherd. A universal picture that we see in the Bible is the picture of God as the shepherd and we his people as the sheep.

The psalmist speaks of the Lord as the shepherd and his people as being the sheep of his pasture. And Jesus picks up this same image in the Gospel of John.

He says in John chapter 10 I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. Now Jesus is the good shepherd.

[17 : 17] Jesus calls and Jesus leads and the sheep what do they do? They listen to his voice.

they know his voice and his sheep follow him. It's John chapter 10 We haven't got time to go through all these tonight and it's such a big subject this area of guidance.

We're just touching on some of these issues. John chapter 10 verses 3 to 4 it's a great passage and it picks up that image of the sheep and the shepherd. The second image is that of friend with friend. Now John chapter 15 is one of my favourite passages in the Bible and a few people have heard me speak on John chapter 15 in the past week and in verses 13 through to 16 we read of the relationship that Jesus has between himself and his followers.

Let me read to you. I'm reading from the NIV again. I'm sorry. It says this. Jesus says to his disciples greater love has no one than this that he lay down his life for his friends.

[18 : 35] You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead I have called you friends for everything that I learned from my father I have made known to you.

The relationship here that Jesus has with his followers has both an active doing dimension as verses 13 and 14 say as well as a confiding intimacy dimension to it.

Verse 15 says I do not call you servants any longer. I call you friends. As a friend Jesus tells us his father's business plan.

And so as friends of Jesus and not merely his servants we make our own decisions doing what he commands based on the revealed mind of the father.

Knowing this sort of intimate relationship that we can have with the creator transforms us and renews our minds. God's will is his good pleasing and perfect will.

[20 : 00] so far I've offered some myths and common misunderstandings that Christians have about concerning God's guidance and very briefly have looked at two images which speak about the benefits of being in a relationship with God.

God's from this relationship that we have with the father then guidance springs from it. And in the remaining time that I have let me offer you six practical steps that we as Christians can take in seeking and discerning God's guidance.

God's general will for all people in all places in all circumstances is revealed in scripture.

We find it in scripture. We want to be guided we look to scripture. I can't emphasize it enough. In the Bible God has told us what he thinks about a whole range of issues.

From the Bible we know that certain things are wrong. Therefore we can be quite sure that God will not guide us to do those things. So for example if a married person says that they have fallen in love with another person and they feel sure that God is leading them to leave their spouse for this person to start a new life then I think scripture has something to teach that person.

[21 : 53] God has already made his will clear within scripture. He has said you shall not commit adultery in Exodus 20 verse 14. Just one point.

And we can be quite sure that God will not guide us to commit adultery. Now when we read scripture it's equally important that we read it in context and not just open the Bible and take the verse we read as God's guidance.

I think that would be foolish. The story is told of the person who was seeking God's guidance in his life and he chose to open the Bible and read from a place where his finger lands to the end of that phrase.

So he opens the Bible and he places his finger, he places his finger, he opens the Bible and goes boom like that and he reads it and says Judas went out and hung himself.

Well that's not right. So he opens it again and he looks forward and his finger lands on the finger and says this is my command. And he goes goodness me.

[23 : 02] And he opens it again and boom goes like this and he lands on John chapter 13 and it says what you're about to do, do quickly. That's foolishness.

To help us discern God's guidance we need to read scripture in context and we need to read it regularly to hear God speaking to us.

That's to my second point. We need to read scripture scripture. And the second point is compelling scripture, compelling spirit that we as Christians can take in seeking and discerning God's guidance.

When we become Christians, God's Holy Spirit comes to live within and dwell within each of us. And when he does so, he begins to communicate with us.

And we need to learn to hear his voice. We all recognize a good friend's voice when they ring us on the telephone, don't we? I know when my mate rings me from Sydney, who is my best man, exactly who he is without him having to say anything else.

[24 : 13] He just says, Hi, Philby. Hi, Grant. How are you going? It's that sort of thing. But if you don't know that person so well, it may be harder and it may take time for us to get to know that person.

Well, it's easier to hear God's Spirit speaking to us as we get to know Jesus through the reading of Scriptures. The Holy Spirit, if you like, takes God's Word and applies it to our hearts.

He awakens a response within us and leads us to put it into practice. So to hear God's Spirit speaking to us, we need to be reading Scripture and discerning the Spirit's leading by testing what we think he is saying to us against Scripture.

Now, God's Spirit often speaks to us as we pray. And prayer is not meant to be a monologue where we bring all our needs before God.

It's a two-way conversation. So as we pray and reflect on Scripture discerning God's guidance in a matter, often God's Spirit will speak to us.

[25 : 35] Some years ago, while I was studying theology at Ridley and discerning God's guidance for the future, I was spending, I'd spent some time praying on the train.

And I had this overwhelming sense of God's Spirit convicting me about ministries for men, and more than that, to be involved in that within Melbourne.

Now, that didn't come about just as a win, but it came about after reflecting and reading the Bible, being involved in some ministry and so on, praying and listening to what God was saying.

It came about just as a win. It came about from reading and reflecting on Scripture. God's Spirit speaks to us as we read Scripture and subsequently gives us guidance.

The third point is common sense. In discerning God's guidance, we need to use our common sense. The Bible tells us right at the very beginning that we are made in God's image.

[26 : 56] And that means that we have minds which are able to think and are able to decide rationally and in a mature fashion. Now, because of sin, our rational minds are fractured and our decisions can be too.

However, as Christians who read Scripture and pray to God, we can make rational decisions by using our common sense.

We saw that in Acts chapter 6 when the apostles chose the seven to look out for the food and so on for the widows in Jerusalem.

they used their common sense and they prayed and chose these seven people to go and do this particular job so that the apostles could get on with the important work that they had to do of the ministry of the word and prayer.

We too need to be prayerful about the big decisions in life. But we need to use common sense in everyday situations. If we abandon common sense, then we get ourselves into all sorts of absurd situations.

[28 : 18] Jim Packer in his book here, Knowing God, quotes an example of a woman who each morning, having consecrated to the Lord as soon as she waked, would then ask him whether she was to get up or not, and would not stir till the voice told her to dress.

As she put on each article, she asked the Lord whether she was to put it on. And very often the Lord would tell her to put on the right shoe and leave off the other.

Sometimes she was to put on both stockings and no shoes. And sometimes both shoes and no stockings. It was the same with all the articles of dress.

Well, that's good, silly, isn't it? We need to use our common sense. The fourth point in discerning God's will is that we need to consult the saints.

Because Hayley's going to move the overhead down. And we need to consult the saints. Now, the Bible is full of references to seek the advice of the wise.

[29 : 32] In fact, it is wise to listen to advice. Proverbs 12 verse 15 says. Proverbs 20 verse 18 says, Make plans by seeking advice.

Now, one of the greatest tragedies of our culture today is the lack of respect that we young Turks have for those godly people and wise Christians is in our midst.

Take note of that. We don't pay enough respect to godly and wise Christians in our midst. There are many people in this parish who have many years of wisdom and experience to offer you.

Yet we are too proud, we are too embarrassed to seek their wisdom. people in the world. Before I entered into ministry, I was confused and I didn't really know what I was wanting to do. And it was with advice from some wise Christians that convinced me to go the way I headed. God's guidance in vocational matters and relational matters as well, then we need to seek godly counsel from the wise Christians in our midst.

[31 : 03] Now, while seeking advice is very important, we also need to remember that ultimately our decisions are between us and God.

And they are our responsibility. So we cannot shift the blame or the responsibility onto others if things go wrong.

But you young guys out there, just listen to me just for a moment. If you only take one thing away tonight, it's that point, it's to come consult and assess. Really important if you're wanting guidance. Because I have so many years of wisdom, and godly thinking to impart upon us. And I can't express it enough. Don't be afraid to talk to godly and wise people.

My fifth point is the confirmation supernatural. Now, I couldn't think of another CS. I've made this one up myself. So let me explain it.

[32 : 06] As Christians, we need to be open to the possibility of supernatural confirmation of guidance. Now, I personally have never had a deep supernatural confirmation of guidance, but I know people for him it has happened.

What is important though, is that we stay focused on seeking the Lord, not waiting for signed posts or lightning bolts to come from the Lord.

God? Those sorts of things happen, but if we wait around for those things to happen, if we wait around for those signposts or those lightning bolts, then what we already know of God's revealed will may be missed by us if we wait.

Lastly, I couldn't think of a CS at all for this one. This all needs to be undergirded with prayer, in seeking and discerning God's guidance.

The most important fruit of prayer is not so much the guidance obtained, but a deeper relationship with the guide, with God, is obtained through prayer.

[33 : 28] And persons, people who live lives of unceasing prayer, will normally find making decisions within God's will easy. And such persons become God's will.

Not just because they are prayers, but because they have a deep relationship with God through the Lord Jesus Christ. So there are six practical pieces of advice that I leave you with as you discern God's guidance in matters.

Let me conclude by this, by saying that when you have made a decision, do not keep looking back. I think that creates problems.

Trust God's sovereignty. Trust God's sovereignty in your life as a Christian. Doing God's will or discerning God's guidance requires walking by faith, not by sight.

And we find our acceptance and approval in eternity by our relationship with God, not by the things that we do.

[34 : 49] Well, next week we're going to be looking at the issue of being guided down a wrong path. And that's, we're going to be looking at Acts chapter 16. I encourage you over the week to read through that chapter and pray for me as I think about that passage and think about the sorts of things that, in areas in your life where perhaps guidance has been thwarted by something.

Let's just pray as I finish. Father, we thank you that you have revealed yourself to us in your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And we thank you that when we turn to him, we have purpose in our lives, even though there may be lots of things mucking around in our lives and so on. Lord, we pray that we would see that purpose and that we would desire to follow and obey you.

Please help us to read scripture, to discern what it has to say to us about guidance. Please help us to be prayerful in those matters. Please help us to overcome our embarrassment or our cocky attitudes to life and to consult people when we are wanting advice on matters.

And most of all, Lord, may we learn to walk by faith and trust in your sovereignty within our lives. We ask this in Jesus' name and for his sake.

[36 : 29] Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen.
[41 : 11] Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen.