

The Complete Sinners Guide to Guidance

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[0 : 00] Folks, let's pray. Father, would you open our hearts to hear your word this morning? In Christ's name, Amen. You can be seated.

Didn't you just love it that in the creed when it said, what did it say? It came down from heaven and there was this massive thunderclap. Wasn't that cool?

That was so cool. I'm hoping for that at various profound points in the sermon. My name's Aaron, if you don't know me.

I'm a minister here at St. John's. And I recently finished reading English translations of this Scandinavian set of novels, which I really enjoyed.

And I wanted to get some more. And so knowing that David Short, who's the rector of St. John's, knowing that he's a little bit geeky in a good way when it comes to books, I asked him for a recommendation.

[1 : 05] And he said, well, of course, Aaron, you've got to try the Icelandic crime thrillers. Have we already repented in the sermon?

I'm just trying to, in the liturgy. I think I'm okay. I don't know about you guys. So he said, you've got to try the Icelandic crime thrillers.

And he said, but in David Short's way, he goes, yeah, read the Icelandic crime thrillers, but don't, of course, read, you know, Ingrid, Sturken, Bergenberger. Like all these people I've never heard of.

And I had no idea where to go with the crime thriller thing.

So he lent me one of his books. And who knew? Icelandic crime thrillers. It's like a thing. It's like a genre. So anyways, I'm reading this book, and it's really, really good.

It's called The Silence of the Grave, which I was happy to realize was the winner of the Gold Dagger Award. It's got a sticker on the front.

[2 : 07] So it must be good, right? Now, the book starts with a discovery of bones, human bones. And one of the bones, the hand is like sticking, just sticking out of the ground in this remote area.

And the detectives come there, and they're trying to solve the crime. And so they're reading as much as possible into every little clue. For example, they find near where the bones are, there's these three bushes in a row, and they're red current bushes.

And the detective goes, that's unusual. What does that mean? Does that mean that's not natural to this area? It looks like a hedge. Maybe there was a house here, perhaps. So that leads to quite a breakthrough, you'll be happy to know, in the book.

Now, I want you to hold that thought. Okay? Press pause on Icelandic crime thrillers. The major concern of our psalm today is guidance.

And you can see it. David says, Show me your way. Teach me. Instruct me in the way I should go. Seven times it talks about the path, the way, guiding, etc.

[3 : 18] So, that's amazing, isn't it? I love it. I love it. So, it's a very relevant psalm for us, because we make millions of decisions in our life, and we make, and stop.

And we make millions of decisions, and we make, you know, a fair number of incredibly important decisions in our life. And if we're Christians, we want to be guided by God.

We want to be guided in our decisions about marriage, about our finances, about our children, about our education, where we live, how to handle this or that crisis. I think, the reason I brought up the crime thriller book that I'm reading, is that because sometimes I think Christians treat large decisions as a mystery, that needs to be solved.

You know, like this book, they find this crime scene, and they're trying to, you know, look at all the clues, and looking for kind of little pointers, and obscure little things. So, I think sometimes we treat decision making as, oh, it's this mystery, and we need to solve it by looking at the signs, and the

clues.

For example, you could be thinking, shall I, God, shall I become an accountant? And then you go on a bus, and you see an ad on the bus for an accounting degree, and you think, oh, God's speaking to me. Or the extreme version is you go, God, what should I do about my job?

[4 : 51] Should I, shall I get a new job? And so, you know, you kind of close your eyes, and you flick through the Bible, and you point down, and it goes, forget me, declares the Lord. That is exactly what I pointed to. Forget me, declares the Lord.

Obviously, that's not a great way to make decisions, is it? That's not a godly way to make decisions. These practices work on the assumption that God is trying to hide something from you.

And the way to get into his head is by trying to solve a puzzle he puts before you. Folks, that is not Christian guidance. That's divination. That's what the ancient pagan religions did.

That's the sort of thing that Christ has saved us out of. Old Testament theologian Bruce Waltke wrote a very helpful book on guidance. And the gist of it is this. He says, we follow God.

We get God's guidance by developing our relationship with him, not by looking for signs. Now, there are, of course, special circumstances. There's some examples in Scripture.

[5 : 47] And you might be able to think in your life of a couple of times where, well, like a sign did come through for you, where it did work to guide you. But they cannot be made the norm for us today.

Certainly, as New Testament Christians, with the Spirit of God working in our heart, we can't look to those as just the way that God guides us all the time. When you heard Psalm 25 read, what did you notice about David's approach to guidance?

It's personal, isn't it? It's personal. And it's mature. Unlike what are basically sort of, you know, like a pagan search for omens or something. So let's have a closer look at this Psalm and try and get our heads around what is the biblical, what is the biblical idea of guidance?

What does that look like? First, let's have a look at one to four here. To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. O my God, in you I trust. Let me not be put to shame.

And let not my enemies exult over me. Indeed, none of you who wait for you will be put to shame.

They shall be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous. Make me know your ways, O Lord.

[6 : 53] Teach me your paths. So David's in some kind of crisis. We don't know what. But before he prays for guidance in verse four, teach me your paths, he predicates it all by saying this, God, I trust you.

God, I trust you. It's very interesting to me that at the end of this passage, at the end of Psalm 25, there is no resolution to the problem.

Folks, trust has got to be, trust has got to be foundational when we're thinking about God's guidance, right? David's problem doesn't resolve in this Psalm.

At the end of it, what does he say? He doesn't say, oh, thank you, thank you, God, that you showed me in a vision, the flying V attack strategy will defeat my enemies or something like that.

Now, at the end of it, verse 21, what's he say? He says, I wait for you. I wait for you. I'm still waiting. I'm waiting for you. In the end, David doesn't know what to do, but he trusts.

[7 : 56] Now, trusting, waiting, that can be tough, which is why at the beginning of verse 21, he prays this, he says, may integrity and uprightness preserve me.

Whilst I'm waiting for God, God, help me not to do anything stupid, because in the vacuum of direction, there are great temptations, but also wonderful opportunities for us to grow our faith as well.

And that's because, you know, on one hand, in this waiting time, we can abandon ourselves to God, which is wonderful, or we can allow our crafty hearts to look for security elsewhere.

And we can even look for security in good things. Good things, but not things that are meant to be ultimate things, not things that can replace the person of God, let me give you an example.

So John Kavanagh was a, he's dead now, but he's a Catholic ethicist, Jesuit priest, academic. So he went to work for three months in the house of the dying in Calcutta, and on his first morning, he met Mother Teresa, and Mother Teresa asked him, lovely, asked him, she said, you know, what can I do for you?

[9 : 09] And Kavanagh, he wanted to know how to spend the rest of his life, and he said, pray that I would have clarity. And Mother Teresa responded firmly, no, I will not do that.

And Kavanagh was taken back, and she continued, she said this, she goes, clarity is the last thing you are clinging to, and you must let it go. And when Kavanagh commented that, you know, she seemed to have quite a bit of clarity in her life.

She knew what she was doing. She laughed and said, I don't always have clarity, but I always have trust. So I will pray for you, John Kavanagh, that you will have trust.

This is a great example, because it shows us that even the good thing we want, clarity, can be a substitute for trusting in the person of God. And that is not good.

So folks, in summary so far, when making decisions, when you don't know what to do, let me ask you a question. Is your gut reaction to trust in him, or to look elsewhere?

[10:12] If you're looking elsewhere, can I ask you, are you looking for a sign? Something magical? Folks, if you're doing that, if that's the immediate direction that you go, I want to tell you, you will become neurotically dependent on those.

And you'll become neurotically dependent on God, when the goal is actually to be willingly trustful in him. I said at the start that we're trying to come up with some principles for guidance.

Well, we've actually come up with two so far. Here they are. One, guidance is about relationship, not divining, obscure signs. Two, you must trust, whilst waiting for direction, whilst you're in the middle of a tough time.

So those are two principles. There's more in this psalm. Let's have a look. Let's have a look at verse five there. Here, lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation. For you, I wait all day long.

Here, David prays that God would guide him in how to apply God's principles in a specific situation. God, what do I do in a specific situation? Now, the principle is here.

[11:27] Let me read the first bit of it again. Lead me in your truth and teach me. Lead me in your truth. Teach me. The principle is this. Guidance comes when we think things through with God.

When we think things through with God. That's exactly what I was looking for, because that is a really important point. Now, to think things through with God means it's a robust engagement with His Word.

It's prayer. It's through the wise counsel of our friends. Now, going back to something I said at the start, you know, Father, just give me a sign. Tell me what I should do.

Just give me a sign. That is not worthy of the good minds that God has given us. Does God do that every now and then? Yes. But it's not the norm.

So when decision making, do weigh up the pros and the cons and do this in the light of biblical priorities. Don't just depend on like a hunch. John Stott says this. He says, God's promises of guidance were not given to stop us from thinking.

[12:34] You have a mind. Expect that God will use that when making decisions. Now, there is a but. Big but here. David makes it very clear, though, that we need to have the right attitudes in order to receive God's guidance, in order to think things through well with God.

He says, there is a certain spiritual posture we must take to think things through with God. Now, those postures are found in 6, 7, 11, and 18.

Well, the first one is in anyway. Let me read those to you, just snippets of them. Remember your mercy, O Lord. Remember not the sins of my youth. Pardon my guilt.

It is great. Consider my affliction, my trouble, and forgive all my sins. God looks for a repentant heart. So if you want to be guided, folks, be repentant.

And it's logical, isn't it? Isn't that just completely logical? Since sin is rebellion against God, how can we say, God, guide me, but I'm just going to treasure sin in my heart.

[13:43] It's doing this to God. Come close. Go away. Come here, go away. Come here, go away. That's what it's doing to God, isn't it? Now, don't misunderstand what I'm saying here.

God is not looking for perfection. Look at verse 8. Good and upright is the Lord. Now, who does God instruct? He instructs sinners in the way.

So it's not about being sinless. It's about being penitent and repentant, being determined to obey God. So God delights in instructing forgiven sinners. Now, to be a forgiven sinner, you must be a repentant sinner.

Now, thinking this through some more, just digging deeper here, that means that a major obstacle to receiving God's guidance are the idols of our hearts. Now, the big idols, the classic idols, money, sex, and power can deafen you to God's guidance, to God's call, to God's direction.

And it makes sense, doesn't it? If your idol is money, you resist God's call to work for a non-for-profit, for example. If your idol is sex, or pleasure, you resist God's call to walk away from an unhealthy relationship.

[14:55] If your idol is power, you'll resist God's call to serve. Now, how do you know what these idols are? How would you discover them? You know, a good way is asking just the right questions.

A good question to ask is, what do I really value in this world? Because, you see, idolatry is not, idolatry is, sin in general, but idolatry specifically is not doing something naughty.

Idolatry is when you, you set your heart, and your value, and your meaning, on something that is other than God, something other than God.

Now, to help you think that through, I'm going to make a number of statements, about ten, to help you think through the question, do I have idols in my heart?

And I'll be pinpointing specific idols. So the statement is this, my life only has meaning and worth if, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, okay?

[15:54] Let me throw out a number of these statements. Let's see how they, where they land in your hearts, okay? How they land in my heart. My life only has meaning if I have power and influence over others.

I mean, that's a power idolatry, isn't it? My life only has meaning if I am loved and respected by a certain person. Maybe that's a boss, a relative.

That's an approval idolatry. My life only has meaning if people are dependent on me and need me.

That's a helping idolatry. My life only has meaning if someone is there to protect me and keep me safe.

That's a dependence thing. My life only has meaning if I'm completely free from responsibilities and obligation. It's like an interdependence, independence idolatry.

My life only has meaning if I'm highly productive and getting a lot done. It's a work idolatry. My life only has meaning if I'm being recognized from my accomplishments. My life only has meaning if I have a certain level of wealth or freedom and nice possessions.

[16:53] It's materialism. My life only has meaning if I am adhering to my religion's moral code and am accomplished in its activities.

That's like a religious idolatry. My life has meaning only if a particular social group or professional group lets me in.

My life only has meaning if my political cause is making headway. My life only has meaning if I have a particular look or body image. It's image idolatry.

Those questions are taken from a great book called Counterfeit Gods. Folks, you will find the guidance issue in your life very difficult while these kind of idols remain in your heart which is why David spends a lot of time in this psalm talking about repentance.

Bring these idols to the cross. They've got to go. Okay. So what we're talking about here is attitudes in this psalm that we need in order to experience God's guidance, in order to think things through with God.

[18:01] We've talked about a penitent heart, a heart being free from idols. The other attitude we need, the last one here, if you want God's direction in life, is we need to be humble. He leads the humble in what is right and teaches the humble his way.

Verse 9. He leads the humble in what is right. He teaches the humble his way. Does that not make sense? If God's going to guide us, we need to be prepared to do what he tells us.

Let me read something. I officiated a wedding yesterday for a couple in the evening service and here's the passage I preach from. 7. Matthew 7.

24 to 27. This is the build your house on a rock passage. You know this, right? There's two guys that build the house. One guy builds his house on a rock. One guy builds his house on the sand. The wind comes.

The storms come. The house on the sand is blown over. The house on the rock stands. Now you hear that little story and you go, yep, I know. You've got to have a good foundation in your life and I know what that foundation is.

[19:04] It's Jesus. No, it's not. You think, okay, it's Jesus' words. No, it's not. Let me read the passage to you. You hear the difference here. Everyone who hears these words of mine and does them is like a wise man who built his house on a rock.

Now, the guy who built it on the sand. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his hand on the sand. What's the difference between those two guys? What's the difference?

They both were in the vicinity of Christ. They both heard Christ. One did the words of Christ. One did not. Doing the words of Christ is the foundation.

Are we prepared to be taught, to be guided, to be directed? One more quote from John Stott. He says this very well. An unsundered will is the most serious of all obstacles to the discovery of God's will.

If God does not reveal his truth to those who are not willing to believe it, neither does he reveal his will to those unwilling to do it. If we're not humble, what are we?

[20 : 12] We're self-righteous. We're self-sufficient. And of course, the self-sufficient person knows best. They want their way, not God's way. Look at the humility of David, verse 4.

Make me know your ways. Teach me your paths. Vancouver is a beautiful city and we enjoy a lot of abundance and prosperity here.

Folks, what a blessing that is. But there is a danger in that. And the danger is that it will make the prosperity and abundance that we enjoy will make us self-righteous and self-sufficient.

In Deuteronomy 8, it talks about this. Now God has brought his people into the promised land and the promised land sounds incredible. Let me describe it from a couple of verses in Deuteronomy. It's a good land, a land of brooks and water and fountains and springs and flowing out of the valleys and the hills, a land of wheat and barley and vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a land in which you can eat bread without scarcity, in which you lack nothing, a land whose stones are iron and out of whose hills you can dig copper.

So God describes the land and then he says, and then he gives them a warning. He says, don't let that fool your hearts though. Deuteronomy 8, 17, beware lest you say in your heart, my power and the might of my hand has gotten me this well.

[21 : 36] You shall remember the Lord your God for it is he who gives you power to get wealth and he who may confirm his covenant with you that he swore to his fathers as is this day. And if you forget the Lord your God and go after other gods and serve them and worship them, I solemnly warn you today, you shall surely perish.

If we ever receive God's guidance, we must work continually at removing ourselves from the center of our lives and placing God there. Otherwise, our slippery hearts, they deceive us into thinking, we've accomplished what we've done so far in our life.

I made this. I know best. Proverbs 16 is very helpful in helping us understand the great theme here of Psalm 25.

And I'll sort of finish with these few thoughts. Let me read out Proverbs 16, 3 to you. Commit your work to the Lord and your plans will be established. Perhaps it's a strategy you've used in the past for guidance.

This is what most people think it says and they think it wrongly. They think it says, I will make a decision and I'll ask God to bless it.

[22 : 47] I'll kind of do what I want and I'll just ask God to rubber stamp it and everything will go well for me. See, that makes you the center of the equation, doesn't it? What the proverb actually says is this. If we commit ourselves to the Lord, God will make us the kind of people who make wise decisions.

See, that puts God at the center. So let me say it again. It's not, Lord, bless this plan I've come up with. It's if we commit ourselves to the Lord, God will make us the kind of people who make wise decisions.

Folks, there is so much more to say about guidance, but I need to wrap up. This psalm is a wonderful complement to Psalm 1.

As you heard it, you hear me talking about guidance. You may have thought about Psalm 1. You know it talks about two paths, two ways. You can go this way, you can go that way. You can sort of read Psalm 1 and sort of go, okay, all I've got to do is just pick the right path and everything will be okay.

Well, Psalm 25 makes us realize it's not quite that simple. It picks up the language of the way and is clearly referring to it, but expanding on this idea and it wants you to know that, you know what, the right way that God calls you to walk.

[24 : 05] It's not always the easy way. And so you do need God's guidance and His comfort. So look to Him when you have decisions to make.

Don't look to hunches. Look to God. Be patient. Trust. Think things through with God. And then you probably can't miss His guidance. Make your decisions. Move forward in confidence. But in the meantime, may integrity and uprightness preserve you.
Amen.