

God Our Guide

In the mid 1960's Benson Ford, Son of Eleanor and Edsel Ford, and grandson of Clara and Henry Ford, was adrift in life, drinking his way from one sad day to the next. Caught between the great powers within the *Ford Motor Company*, he found himself moving through life without feeling, --with no sense of direction. His listlessness was sensed by those around him. When "asked by a friend what he was "doing with his life," with a sad look, Benson replied, "Waiting for the end." ¹ Benson was a man in his forties.

"Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah, Pilgrim through this barren land; I am weak, but Thou art mighty, hold me with Thy powerful hand." It is a hymn that we all feel very deeply. If we could only know what to do. To many of us, guidance is a problem, not because we doubt that divine guidance exists, but because we are afraid we may miss it. We know that God can guide and has promised to guide us; our fear is not that no guidance will be available, but that we may bungle it. We are sure that God is able to lead; we are not sure about our receptiveness to his leading.

The belief that God's guidance is real rests upon two foundational facts. *The first*, is that God has a plan for each of us; we have a purpose in the universe --there is a reason for our existence. The notion of guidance rests, *secondly*, on the premise that God is able to communicate with us.

First, God does have a plan. God had a plan to send his son to earth "in the fullness of time." God has his "eternal purpose" --literally, his "plan for the ages." If it were not for the fact that God has a sure plan, the future of the universe would be in danger, and we could not be sure that "wrong will fail and right prevail." But, he does have a plan and we are part of it. God does, as the apostle wrote, "work all things after the counsel of his own will" --his plan.

But, can God communicate his plan to us? Yes, he can. As people are communicative beings, they came forth from the heart of a communicative God. In olden times, he made his will known through the Old Testament prophets. Later, he guided Peter, Paul and others. Philip was sent to the desert to meet an Ethiopian. Silas and Paul were sent to Europe. The Antioch Church was led to support Paul and Silas. God has no difficulty making his will known to his people. He has spoken to us in these last days, by his Son, Jesus Christ. In the language of our own day, we could say, "God led Ken and Gloria to Washington State, to Austinville, to Covert, and so on.



Moreover, the Bible contains explicit promises of Divine guidance. "I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye" (Psalm 32:8). Guidance is the theme of Psalm 25 "Good and upright is the Lord; therefore he instructs sinners in the way. He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way. Who are they that fear the Lord? He will teach them the way that they should choose." "In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will direct your paths" (Proverbs 3:6).

The New Testament gives the same expectation of guidance. Paul's prayer for the Colossian Christians was that they "might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding." Wisdom in the Bible always means knowing that course of action that will please God and make life better. James wrote, "If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you" (James 1:5). Romans 12:2 says, "Let your mind be remade and your nature transformed, so that you will be able to discern the will of God --what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Other lines of Biblical truth confirm the confidence that God will guide. We are God's children --just as parents are charged with the guidance of children, so the Heavenly Father can be expected to guide his children. Again, according to 2 Timothy 3:16, the Bible itself is given for teaching, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness (goodness)" --all of these are variations of guidance.

Adding to this list, Christians are indwelt by that great teacher, the Holy Spirit, who Jesus promised, would "lead you into all truth." Even more, God seeks his glory in our lives. It follows, then, that as a means to his end, he must be ready to teach us his way, so that we may walk in it and be a credit to him. "He guides me in the paths of righteousness for his names sake" (Psalm 23:3). God intends to help us be a credit to him, and to the heavenly family.

Yet, too often, earnest Christians go about seeking guidance wrongly. Why is this? One reason is that they overlook the obvious, as they search for the "will-o'-the-wisp." Never count-out the guidance that is ready at hand. The Bible, for example, is intended to be a major source of guidance for the Christian --"a light to our path and a lamp for our feet" (Psalm 119:105).

Often, we think of guidance in terms of vocational choices. For example: Should I marry or not? Should I marry this person or that person? Should I serve God here in the United States, or in a foreign country? Which job should I take? What voluntary services should I involve myself in?

Naturally, since our lives are so affected by these choices, we think about them a lot --and that is right. However, what is not right is to think that all guidance problems are of this one type.

Here is the root of the mistake: First, these problems cannot be resolved by a direct application of Biblical teaching. All one can do is set up the lawful and proper possibilities that limit these life choices. For example, "What shall I be?" Well, not a "go-go girl", or a loan-shark, or a publisher of obscene magazines, and so forth. I shouldn't run off with my neighbor's spouse. All one can do, from the Bible, is to limit the choices to what is right. That's easy to figure out!

So, there was no Biblical text that told me to marry Gloria; no text told me that I ought to seek ordination into the ministry; no text told me that I ought to buy a new car. However, commonsense and circumstance (which I believe are controlled by God) had a large say in all of these choices. In addition, in some of these large choices, within the framework of what I knew the Bible taught, I was guided by a conviction placed upon me by the Holy Spirit.

Let me walk you through one of these. Gloria was there. I noticed her the first day I saw her. She was pretty --I mean to say, "She still is." She was not already married. She was a Christian. Therefore, she fell clearly into the realm of thoughtful consideration. Taken together with the fact that being around her kind of made my heart "race." Up until her, "other girls" were more like "pals." She was a good catch. Besides all of that, we both had the same ambitions in life, and she liked antiques. It helped that her Mom and Dad liked me.

The second mistake is to treat life as a thing for which guidance (the special inner guidance of God) is to be sought in every decision. The idea of a life in which the inward voice of the Spirit decides and directs everything, sounds attractive; it seems to exalt the Spirit's ministry and promise a closer intimacy with God. However, in practice this quest for super-spirituality leads to hypocrisy, frantic bewilderment, or fanaticism.

I had a new Christian in my Washington State church who wanted me to go visiting with him every Sunday afternoon between my rest-home service and my evening service. He never knew where we were going, so he just let the "Spirit lead." His method was to start driving down the road, then when he came to a branch or a "T", let the Spirit gently turn the steering wheel (I think the road was tipping, or the car was out of alignment). Then eventually the Spirit would turn the wheel into the driveway of some unsuspecting people who were either on their way to visit friends or family or taking a Sunday afternoon nap. After much knocking (come out, I know you're in there --the Spirit led me here), these people would sneak out of the back bedroom, half dressed, hair awry, pillow marks on their faces, and meekly greet us. Rarely, was anyone happy to see him under such conditions; yet, since he could not seem to read body language, he never knew the difference --so far as he was concerned, the Spirit had supernaturally led him to wake this couple from their Sunday afternoon nap.

Hannah Whitall Smith, a common-sense Quaker woman, made a study of people like this, and published a book on it. She tells of a woman who each morning, having consecrated the day to the Lord as soon as she woke, "would then ask Him whether she was to get up or not, and would not stir until the voice told her she was to dress. As she put on each article, she would ask 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."

I can just see God watching from heaven, saying, "My word, lady, get dressed, you're going to be late for work!" Conduct like this is a failure to grasp and understand that a rational God, who created us in his image as rational beings, expects his children to think! It never made me feel closer to our children if they

asked whether they ought to put their shoes on when we were on our way out the door, and choir practice started three minutes ago --I always wanted to know why they didn't think to put them on before.

In other words, a great deal of our guidance comes from guidelines. Many of these guidelines are set out in the Bible; the rest must come from the Holy Spirit, friends, prayer, circumstances, and our own commonsense. Sometimes, we don't have much choice --that makes it easy. But, the fundamental guidance which God gives to shape our lives, comes in the form of basic convictions, attitudes, ideals, and values; we are to live by them, and make our decisions by what they tell us.

Basic Divine guidance is this: Be the kind of person that Jesus was; seek his virtue and practice it to the limit. Know your responsibilities. There are guidelines given in the Bible; this is how God guides us through the Bible. It is within the limits of this guidance that God prompts vocational decisions.

At this point, it is worth looking at some pitfalls to arriving where we ought to be.

First, an unwillingness to think. It is false-piety that demands inward impressions without rational base, and ignores the Biblical summons to "Consider." God made us thinking beings; he guides our minds as, in his presence, we think things out. Deuteronomy 32:29 says, "They were wise, ...that they would consider."

Secondly, an unwillingness to think ahead and weigh the long-term consequences of a course of action. We need to dwell on the long-term issues of any action. The Bible says, "O that they were wise ...that they would consider their latter end." How will this work out? Will this action hurt anything or anyone? Must they be hurt? Sometimes, they must. But, I think rarely. That is the bases upon which, we as a church, worked our way through a pandemic. Carefully.

Thirdly, an unwillingness to listen to advice. "The way of the foolish is right in his own eyes; but the wise hearkeneth unto counsel" (Proverbs 12:15). It is a sign of conceit and immaturity to dispense with seeking advice in major decisions. There are always people who know the Bible, human nature, and even our own gifts and limitations better than we do --find them! We ought to weigh and consider what they say and incorporate it into our decision. Mostly, they're not the people who volunteer to tell us what to do. They are, rather, the experts in their given field --we need these experts! An epidemiologist knows about disease. A meteorologist knows about climate. A doctor knows about health --and so on.

Fourthly, an unwillingness to wait. "Wait on the Lord" is a constant refrain in the Psalms, and it is a necessary word. He guides us only one step at a time. He does not give us the plan for our entire life in a day; do not expect it.

Yet, it does not follow that right guidance will be qualified, as such, by a trouble-free course thereafter. And here is a cause for perplexity for some Christians. They have sought and received guidance; now as a direct result of that guidance, they have run into problems. For example, when God led us to Washington State, he led us to trouble. He led us to an nearly empty Church. Un-be-known to

us, it had just split off from another Church which had subsequently closed as a result of the split. When we succeeded in winning some of the disenfranchised people back in our efforts to heal the church, it made some people mad. God led us to trouble, but he surely did lead us. Trouble is not necessarily a sign of being off the track at all. The Bible does not teach that following God's guidance will bring us to a carefree existence or a "ready cut trail."

Nor is this all, Jesus was perfectly guided by God and he perfectly followed God's guidance. Yet, Jesus was "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief." Following God's guidance brought him into conflict with leaders --civil and religious; but, mostly the religious. It led to betrayal, arrest, and the cross. Jesus reminded us that a servant cannot expect to be above his or her master, or a disciple above his or her teacher.

By every standard the cross was a waste; yet, by it, Jesus became the healer of the world. The cross was not a waste, nor are the hard and difficult things that God may lead us through.

Elizabeth Elliot, widow and biographer of a martyred missionary husband, went to Ecuador to reduce the language of a remote tribe to writing. She worked a year and a half at the job when the Spanish-speaking Christian who lived with the tribe was shot to death. She left her manuscripts with fellow workers who were to continue the work --they were stolen. She commented on the incident: "I simply had to bow in the knowledge that God was his own interpreter. We must allow God to do what he wants to do. And if you are thinking that you know the will of God for your life and you are anxious to do that, you are probably in for a very rude awakening, because nobody knows the will of God for his entire life."

When we do go off the road, it is this ability of God to make good use of our mistakes that is so encouraging. God not only restores, but he takes our mistakes, and follies, and wanderings into his plans and brings good out of them. So that Joel 2:25 says, "I will restore to you the years that the locust has eaten." The Jesus who restored Peter after his denial, and corrected his course many times has not changed. They who want the guidance of God shall certainly have it!

Prayer: "Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land; I am weak, but Thou art mighty, hold me with Thy powerful hand." Amen.

¹ P., Collier and D., Horowitz. (1987). *Fords: An American Epic*. Summit Books: New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Tokyo. P. 351.