

Finding God's Will for Your Life (2.8.1986)

by Nigel Lee

The Christian life is a guided life, and God's guidance arises from our intimate relationship with Him, requiring us to seek Him and His voice in prayer, circumstances, and the Holy Spirit.

Duration: 52:49

Scripture: Matthew 6:6, Acts 10:44-45, Acts 11:4-18, Acts 13:2, Acts 15:39

Topics: "Direction"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of God's guidance in our lives through circumstances and visions. He shares examples from the Bible, such as Peter's vision and Paul's removal from Philippi, to illustrate how God sovereignly controls our circumstances. The speaker also mentions a personal experience of a Scotsman who was led to leave Sudan due to the secret police. He highlights the need for unity and seeking God's will before making decisions. The sermon concludes by emphasizing that guidance is not a simple process, but requires humility, seeking God's wisdom, and seeking corroborating evidence.

Transcript

May the image of our God be more and more visible in our life and our behavior. Lord, we thank you that you do lead us step by step. Lead us, we pray, as you taught us to pray, not into temptation or test or trial, but deliver us from evil.

We know that all things work together for the good of those that love God and are called according to his purposes. Father, we know nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Yet, Lord, you've given us certain gifts for a purpose.

As we think about our lives and as we find ourselves at a turning point, draw near, speak to us. God, you said in your word that if we draw near to you, you will draw near to us. You've called us not to be like the animal, but to be guided with your eye upon us.

Grant, Lord, that we walk worthily of the high calling of our God in Christ Jesus. For Jesus' sake. We believe, don't we, that the Christian life is a guided life.

The Lord said in John 10 verse 4 that, My sheep, they know my voice and they follow me. That verse that came to my mind as we were praying, Psalm 32 verse 8. Be not like the horse or the mule that must be

guided by the bit and the bridle. We are not to be just animals in our thinking about this aspect of our relationship with God.

God says in the same verse, I will guide you with my eye upon you. Guidance in the Christian life arises from our intimate relationship with our Father. And we are to develop our own judgment and our own thinking as we live the Christian life.

The ideal is not that we become like these little radio-controlled or electronic toys that the kids play with nowadays. You know, you've seen these racing cars that go around that my son always wants. They cost about a hundred pounds, we never buy one.

Or these little people that walk around and there's someone playing with the button, you know. God guides through the cooperation and the operation of our own mind and heart and will and personality. We are children, not toys.

You know, I knew a man who was on OM for a while. He went really overboard on this thing of guidance. He got to the psychologically hopeless situation.

Where he would stand in a supermarket in front of rows and rows of tins of baked beans. Praying about which tin to put in his trolley. That is not mature Christian thinking.

You know, he could stand on the edge of a road just, you know, wondering, praying. At what precise point should he start to cross the road? God says, look, if you want to get to the other side, keep your eyes open, watch the traffic, pick a gap and go. Now, if God wants us to live guided lives and promises guidance again and again and again in scripture.

Why is it so often difficult to know his will? Now, if God wants something, why doesn't he make it just easy? Whenever you have a problem like that in your Christian life, ask yourself, now why is this so? Why has God left me with a difficulty? You see, when you become a Christian, God could start to, every day, just write the guidance for the day in gold letters on the ceiling of your bedroom. You'd wake up and there it is, you know, you got to do this, you got to eat breakfast at that time, you got to see so and so, you got to pay this bill. You write and you go off and do it.

God has enough angels to go around and visit every believer, you know, at night and leave them a little envelope by the bed with the day's instructions for tomorrow. So often we want things easy in the Christian life because we don't understand God's goals, God's benefits in the harder road. My kids play with jigsaws sometimes.

I hate them. What's the simple basic principle for starting off with a jigsaw? The edge, get the straight bits, yeah. You don't start, you know, with all the green grass or the blue sky and every bit looks the same.

You get the corners and the edge. Now when you're thinking about your life, what is the outside edge of the frame? God's ultimate objectives within which he will work everything out. God wants us to go through our life on this planet and finish up like himself.

God can take someone from a Chinese background, a German background, a Finnish background, an Italian background and make them in the end like himself. The Lord says, I'm going to prepare a place for you disciples. When I come again, I will take you to be with myself.

That where I am so there you may be also. Able to have fellowship and communion because of likeness of mind and heart. God isn't planning, spending eternity, having fellowship with mechanistic little toys.

But with people of understanding, people who have sometimes made wrong choices and now learn to make right ones. People who have grown up to be like him, the great chooser. And so this process of trying to discern guidance will actually change our character.

If you just got an envelope by the bed in the morning, you wouldn't really spend very much time seeking God, would you? You'd spend more time thinking about doing what you have to do than in the God who has redeemed you. So God has deliberately left you in a state of uncertainty and some puzzlement and hoping for the best. Some of you here, if I ask you to put up your hands, you would say, yes, I don't really know where I'm going in this coming year.

I'm still unsure. Now I want to say to you this morning, you are, in saying that, precisely in the position where God wants you today. That's not wrong or sub-spiritual or unchristian.

That is exactly where God is going to meet you. Because in that situation you will be drawn to seek him and listen to the shepherd's voice. But of course, in scripture, God does guide his children in some fairly decisive ways.

And I want to look into one or two examples in the Acts of the Apostles. And then I'm going to ask, towards the end, the question, what happens if I make a mistake? And one or two other practical questions. And then if we have time, I'll give even an opportunity for you to ask questions back, if we have time.

I don't know whether we will. Because I can remember so clearly, joining OM and sitting in a meeting like this. And wondering, you know, did all the little indications that I've had so far as to where I should go, did it really add up to enough to base my next year or two years on? And as I read the Bible day after day, you know, wondering if suddenly a verse would sort of jump out and stick me in the eye.

And I thought that India was mentioned somewhere in the Old Testament. I thought maybe Esther. So I avoided reading that book.

I stayed mainly reading in the Old Testament to be safe because, you know, none of the European countries were mentioned in the Old Testament. You can get in all kinds of funny games with yourself on this question. Do you remember when Peter was suddenly told by the Lord to go and take the Gospel to the Gentiles? Acts chapter 10, that is.

It was unusual. It was unexpected. It didn't fit the background thinking of the Jews, even though if they had read the Old Testament closely, they would have seen God promising it long before.

So in chapter 10, Peter, the Jew, goes and has fellowship with Cornelius, the Gentile. And then we come to chapter 11. And Peter has come strolling back into Jerusalem, and he's met by... He's met by a group of, I mean, rather pharisaical-minded believers, and they're worse than them.

And they say, Peter, we understand that you've been eating sweet and sour pork. With unwashed hands. In a Gentile home.

Yep, says Peter. And do you know, says Peter, God told me to do it. What? God guided you? Yep, says Peter.

How did God guide you? Well, says Peter, I will tell you about my experience of guidance to do that unexpected and unusual thing. And at the beginning of Acts chapter 11, you get Peter listing the six ways in which God guided him to do that strange thing. Verse 4, Peter began and explained everything to them, precisely as it had happened.

I was in the city of Joppa, praying, he says. Number one, you've got it. Pray.

Pray. There is no substitute for time spent just seeking God in prayer. The Lord Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, when you pray, go into the secret place.

And the word he actually uses is a word that means a little leaned-up shed at the end of a house, a simple peasant house in Galilee. Go into the garden shed, he said. Now in there they would keep corn drying, sacks of grain, onions hanging up, fish drying out.

It's a perfect place for rats, spiders, the creepy crawlies of every Palestinian sort. And Jesus didn't just say go in there, he said go in there and pull the door shut behind you. In the dark, you'll come out smelling of more than just the fragrance of heaven, you know.

Go somewhere where you can be alone with God and the roof can come off as your father in heaven sees you in secret. The earliest crucial decision you have to make at an OM conference is where are you going to regularly meet the Lord in prayer. It's not always easy in your own room.

Better go out for a walk somewhere. Or have a little chair round behind some country display or somewhere where that's your spot. A place where you can be reasonably alone to seek God.

Sifting through your motives, really listening to the shepherd. Peter apparently used to pray three times a day, like Daniel in the Old Testament. And Peter said, God began to guide me in this strange way as I was praying.

And then secondly, he says, I had a vision. Now, I tell you, I have never had a vision like is recorded here in Acts 11 in my life. I know believers who have had, but God has never given that to me yet.

A vision where you see very clearly something that is not actually materially, physically happening. It's out of the normal. It's something that happens quite a lot in scripture.

Is not given to the majority of Christians. Is at the moment, it seems to me, one of the key ways in which God is himself intervening in the lives of Muslims right now. And was not unknown in the New Testament.

Paul had some visions. He had a lot of guidance that was not to do with visions. But I want you to notice this from scripture.

Because of its very abnormality and unusualness, Peter at first didn't believe it. He asked for repetition. And then a third time.

There are some believers today who the more unusual the guidance seems to be, the more they want to believe it. The more odd seems to be the spiritual communication, that the more passionate they are that this is definitely of God. That is not the apostolic way.

This vision is repeated three times. But then notice in verse 11. We've had prayer and a vision in verse 5. And then 11, we read right then.

Three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. The circumstances opened up just exactly at the right time. Peter and Paul and the other apostles often allow themselves to be guided just by circumstances.

Paul is removed from Philippi by the circumstance of the magistrates kicking him out of the city. I was having fellowship this morning with a Scotsman who's just done two years with O.M. in the Sudan. And the circumstance of the secret police in the Sudan have combined to remove him from that country for the time being.

He's not, you know, determined to stay and banging on the door and fighting the secret police. He's now looking for his next field. God is in control sovereignly of your circumstances.

And just when that vision was completed the third time and Peter was beginning to understand there was a knock at the door. I mean they didn't come ten days late or two days too early. The circumstances were just right.

And then we read in verse 12. After prayer and a vision and the circumstances. Number four.

The spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. This is also very important. Because sometimes circumstances can open up for you but it's still not right to go through that open door.

And we must have that sense in our hearts. God is saying you have my permission, my blessing, you go, my leading, I'm with you. Colossians 3.15 says let the peace of God reign or control like a referee in your heart.

Now you will have during these days many challenges put to you. Give sufficient time to the Lord himself. So that his peace which he promises to give can be your birthright experience as you move forward.

But then notice number five also in verse 12. Six brothers were willing to go with him. Peter didn't say I'm an apostle.

Whatever God gives me to do I'm going to do. Doesn't matter about the rest of you. I'm off.

Bye. Peter the apostle discusses it with six other men over breakfast or supper or whatever. I believe he says God is leading me to go with these gentiles for a moment.

Will you come with me? And they also had to have peace in their hearts that this was the right way to go. We in OM are not just a bunch of fanatical individualists. There are people here who maybe know us quite well.

People to whom God will give knowledge and insight and wisdom. And we can accept advice. And even Peter the apostle discusses it with others and they come to a unity before they move ahead.

Ten years ago this summer I resigned the job I used to have in England. When my wife and I got married before the law we had just come back from three years in India. We decided we had seen so much that we couldn't just settle down to middle class comfortable life as a school teacher in England.

So we committed ourselves for three years teaching and then we would seek the Lord about going somewhere else. And when I began to pray about a teaching job in Nepal, another teaching job in Singapore, another one in India. One after another God closed the doors and I could hear him locking the

key on the other side.

It was definite. And we were praying Lord we want to serve you in a way that has to do with world missions somehow. And Lord I really would like to teach.

I like Lord helping people to understand things. Now what are you doing Lord? Phone rang. Hi this is George Burrow here.

I just had a vision in my quiet time this morning. Well not a vision exactly but you know what I mean you see. Can I come over and talk to you? I said sure come Saturday.

I'll be there. Don't decide anything until I get there. And he then said would we consider coming back into fellowship with OM to do preaching and Bible teaching and so on.

We thought about that for seven months. We didn't just jump quickly. My wife had been in OM since she was 14.

Her parents had come in and she was you know just dragged along as one of the suitcases. And then she'd been five years in OM in her own right as an independent person you know like all of us. So she'd been in as a kid.

She'd then been in as a single. Now she was being invited to come back in as a wife and a mother. She wasn't too sure about you know.

There's only the grandmother stage to go at the moment. But what we did was we picked out I forget now four or five friends who knew both of us over a long period. And we took their advice.

Now we were not going to say look whatever they tell us to do we will do. We have to stand before the judgment seat of Christ and answer for our own decisions. Some of you come perhaps from very authoritarian church backgrounds or cultures.

But biblically you have to be sure that what you're doing is right before the Lord. But at the same time as you're praying and as you're seeking God and listening to the Spirit advice is helpful. And every single one of those friends that we consulted clearly said yes you must do this.

This is the Lord's way for you we believe. So Peter sets off. He preaches to the Gentiles.

The Holy Spirit falls on them. And then he says verse 16. Then I remembered the word of the Lord.

The final step of certainty is from the word of God according to Peter in this experience. One of the things that we did during that seven month period of just thinking and praying was search through the scriptures. And I can take you to the verses in Isaiah, in 1 Corinthians and in 2 Timothy through which God led us at that time.

These days are important in laying spiritual foundations. Because most of you in this coming year are going to be in a situation of difficulty at some stage or other. It could be relationships.

It could be health. It could be some unexpected thing you just don't know what will happen. And when you get into that situation your foundations are going to be examined.

And we need to know that the Lord led us in there. Otherwise you start to panic and look over your shoulder and think I should be somewhere else and you cannot withstand the pressure that is being brought on you. Prayer.

Sometimes a supernatural intervention from the Lord. Circumstances. The Holy Spirit in your heart.

The advice of friends. The word of God. All these things converge.

In the second world war the big cities used to have searchlights around them to try and pinpoint the enemy bombers that would be coming. Nowadays the planes move so fast and the rockets and so on. The whole system has changed.

It's radaring. If a light picked up a plane. If there was just one light the plane could often twist and duck out of it.

But then other lights would lock onto that plane. Then the guns would open up and that plane would be locked in a blaze of light and be much more easy to bring down. In the same way in guidance we are made more sure as we have more and more lines of guidance.

And I want to say to you that guidance is not a simple, easy, mechanistic thing. It's a matter of humility before God and seeking your Father. And not reading too much into one thing and us looking for corroborating, supporting evidence.

Actually as you read through the rest of the Acts of the Apostles. You can see that the Apostles were guided in many different ways. Can I just run through quickly one or two? Give you an idea? Because I'm sure as you're reading scripture you'll be thinking about these things in these days.

You remember the first two verses of Acts 13? A group of prophets and teachers ministering to the Lord and fasting. And the Holy Spirit said, separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. That was the Holy Spirit speaking through the leadership of a church.

It wasn't just Barnabas and Saul announcing one day, we're off, bye bye. But it was the whole church through the Lord working amongst the leaders being very, very content that that was the way to go. But in Acts chapter 15 you remember the quarrel between Paul and Barnabas.

Barnabas took John Mark off with him. And Paul went with Silas. Now we don't read that again the prophets and teachers got together and again the Holy Spirit spoke through them and said separate me Paul and Silas.

Paul went up to Silas one day and said, are you doing anything for the next couple of years? And Silas said, I feel it would be really helpful if you could come with me and your gift as a prophet could be used in the establishing and building up of the church around Asia Minor. So in that case it was the suggestion, the humble suggestion of an older Christian leader that made Silas move out. In Acts chapter 16 we read very interestingly that Paul and his team tried to go into one area, door shut, tried another area, door shut and then a vision.

Later in chapter 16 we find them leaving Philippi as I said because they were kicked out by the town officials. Later in chapter 16 we can read how they left the town because they were kicked out. Vision in one case, circumstances in another.

In chapter 17 we find twice it's the advice of the other believers, even younger believers that is causing Paul and Barnabas or Paul and Silas to move out. Once in Thessalonica, once again in Berea. We see the brothers immediately sent Paul to the coast and Silas and Timothy stayed.

Verse 14, in chapter 17 Paul makes his way down to Athens. I had a fascinating time this summer, I was asked to go down to Greece to speak at a conference of the Free Evangelical Church of Greece. And I walked around the old Greek market place in Athens where Paul was provoked into preaching.

And then they invited him from these street corners in the Agora, the sort of community market place, up, half way up the Acropolis hill to where Mars hill, the sort of debating place was. We read in Acts 17 that the spirit was provoked within Paul, he was on his own. But just the pressure from the Holy Spirit inside him caused him to start preaching out.

So the same kind of principles that work in Peter's experience as in Paul's in different places. Now let me end with just one or two things and then perhaps have a few questions. Can I say that obedience to the Lord's call and the Lord's will does not automatically lead us away from suffering.

We sometimes assume that if God guides us then life will be easier. But you read in 1 Peter chapter 4 of suffering according to the will of God. You read that Jesus was led by the spirit into the wilderness in order to be tested and proved and tempted by the devil.

You read of God's people, the Israelites being led out of Egypt into the wilderness. There they were going to run out of water. They were going to be attacked by enemies.

They were going to have problems with the food supply. And every single day they were led by the pillar of cloud and the pillar of fire. So the Lord's leading does not always mean that life is going to be sweeter and happier and you know big cheesy grin.

So don't, you know if things get tough in a year, don't therefore say well I must have mistaken what God was leading me to back in the conference. And the other thing I want to say is this. What happens if I make a mistake? Now again I want to ask you about your philosophy of guidance.

Let's take the example of marriage. Because I am presuming that you are all committed to the idea of you know when you promise to love someone unconditionally and forever you mean it. Is it possible to marry the wrong person? Are you then in a permanently you know damaged, hopeless state, second class Christian, married the wrong one, doom, change of ember light, prisoner.

Or supposing you get what you think later is the wrong job. Or supposing you go on the doulou and after two months you think you really ought to be on the logos. Why don't you get on the doulou and have fun all the time? The logos is in America and the people need to be the mosquitos being in Africa.

And then I ask you, at the bit of the logos I want to ask you a question. Am I then finished you know? No longer really usable by God. Do you ever get those kind of thoughts? That I've missed it, I've blown it.

Maybe I married the wrong one. Maybe my children shouldn't even exist. Maybe my parents shouldn't have got married.

Maybe I'm not even supposed to be on this planet. And grandparents, I mean by now the whole world is just a complete mess of people who ought not to be here. That kind of thinking can get you into crazy

mess can't it? You know you think that the law just shows you the one person that you have to marry just momentarily, a few seconds, she passes on the bus and you miss her.

And... God does not behave like that. And I'm not even sure that you ought to be thinking in these terms about places. Tell me, are there any teams this year where God has promised not to go? He's not going to be a member of that team.

He's going to be on each one is he? And if you made a mistake in all sincerity and finished up in the Sudan when you should have been in Pakistan, are you going to be the Jonah on that team and completely destroy the blessing for that team? God is able to meet you and use you fruitfully wherever you go. But it doesn't mean today it doesn't matter what you think. But basically on whatever team you go the Lord is going to meet you, help you, you're going to grow, wherever.

We are all failures. Programmed if you like since the fall of man to make mistakes. And all the mighty men in Hebrews 11 made extraordinary mistakes.

Noah got drunk, Abraham prostituted his wife, David was a murderer, Samson had horrendous problems with his girlfriends. And if the resurrection proves one thing it is that God is the God of a second chance. He is a God of grace.

And so we make our choices in sincerity and humility and honesty knowing that as children of God we can rely on him wherever we go. That takes a little bit of a pressure off doesn't it? And God doesn't always require us to go to the place we least want to go. You know you come from a background of years some of you before your conversion of Satan drip feeding in wrong ideas about God.

And sometimes we come to a conference like this and we think you know I'd really like to go to this place. Therefore that cannot be possible. You know if I really want to go there that's the one place God I'm sure won't allow me to go.

What does that say about God? You've got a real problem with your attitude to God if that's the way you subconsciously think. God may well say you want to go there? Right let's go together. Can I? Oh thank you.

You see? Or he may keep you. But make sure that your attitude to him and your thinking about him are worthy of him. Let me summarize.

Put your life completely in his hands. No regrets, no reserve. You want to do whatever is his will.

You trust him to give you the gifts and the grace if the job seems a bit difficult. Number one you passionately want to grow with him and do his will. Secondly you're going to have a consistent prayer life and seek his face.

He wants to be more important to you himself than any question of geography. And the Lord promises then to lead. He doesn't play funny games with us.

If he promises to lead he knows the complications that we have in understanding and trusting. Some of you have much more difficulty in making commitments of yourself than others because of background and upbringing. That's no problem.

And the Lord understands that. And so he deals with us differently. He says I will guide you.

You will hear my voice. You will know me. And I will go with you.

Should we put out fleeces? The one example in scripture of a man putting out a fleece it wasn't because of faith it was because of doubt that wouldn't go away. If I catch any of you leaving coats and jumpers out around here overnight. I have a special squad that goes out with buckets of water and just... If you leave them in another place I can have them dried for you in the morning, whatever you want, you know.

Let's stop. Any questions before lunch? Otherwise if there's no questions we go straight to lunch. Yes.

The question is how can we have the council of friends here when we don't really know each other very well? Obviously the council that you would get here would be of less value than someone who has known you for years and prayed with you. But we are much in prayer about this question. As I'm sure you are.

That the Lord will give wisdom and insight quickly. And you sometimes get situations in interviews where the leader or the person seeking the interview get a sense, you know, the Lord is saying something here. I'm not quite sure what it is but I don't yet have permission to go forward through this door.

Sometimes the interviewer, I've known this, they can just have a sense, I want to put my finger on this issue in somebody's life and it's the Lord doing it. We are looking to the Lord to be very active in our thinking and discernment. But we admit that it's not a local church situation where you've perhaps grown up with people who've prayed for you for years.

Last one. I think the Lord is leading us to have lunch. Because it's 12.30. Father, we thank you that we can have joy in your presence.

In your right hand are pleasures forevermore. We look forward to that day when you will say, well done, good and faithful servant. And we will take our crown and just cast it before you.

Because we don't deserve it. It's your guidance and it's your goodness and it's your grace that have kept us going. Lord, we want to enjoy this experience of making humble decisions before you.

And of accepting advice and of sensing the peace of God flooding our hearts. Grant wisdom and discernment to everybody day by day who needs it. In Jesus name, Amen.

Amen.

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