

# How God Guides

CHAPTER 20 • KNOWING GOD • J.I. PACKER

**T**O MANY CHRISTIANS, GUIDANCE IS A CHRONIC PROBLEM. Why? Not because they doubt that divine guidance is a fact but because they are sure it is. They know that God can guide, and has promised to guide, every Christian believer. Books, friends and preachers tell them how guidance has worked in the lives of others. Their fear, therefore, is not that no guidance will be available for them, but that they may miss the guidance which God provides through some fault of their own. When they sing:

*Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,  
Pilgrim through this barren land;  
I am weak, but Thou art mighty,  
Hold me with Thy powerful hand:  
Bread of heaven, bread of heaven  
Feed me till I want no more,*

they have no doubt that God is able both to lead and to feed, as they ask. But they remain anxious, because they are not certain of their own receptiveness to the guidance God offers.

Not all Christians, however, are at this point in their discipleship. Today, knowledge of God has been obscured—turned, in effect, into ignorance of God—by the twisting our thoughts about God. Thus, the reality of God's rule, God's speech, God's independence, God's moral goodness, even God's personality, has been questioned not only outside the Church but inside it also. This has made it hard for many to believe that divine guidance can exist at all. How can it, if God is not the sort of being who can, or will, give it?—and that is what, in one way or another, all these doubts and suggestions imply. It is worthwhile, therefore, to consider at this point some of the basic truths which divine guidance presupposes.

## GOD HAS A PLAN

Belief that divine guidance is real rests upon two foundation facts: first, the reality of God's *plan* for us; second, the ability of God to *communicate* with us. On both these facts the Bible has much to say.

Has God a plan for individuals? Indeed he has. He has formed an 'eternal purpose' (literally, a 'plan of the ages'), 'a plan for the fulness of time', in accordance with which he 'accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will' (Ephesians 3:11, 1:10,11 RSV). He had a plan for the redemption of his people from Egyptian bondage, when he guided them through the sea and the desert by means of a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. He had a plan for the return of his people from Babylonian exile, where he guided by setting Cyrus on the throne and stirring up his spirit (Ezra 1:1) to send the Jews home to build their temple. He had a plan for Jesus (see Luke 18:31, 22:22, etc.); Jesus' whole business on earth was to do his Father's will (John 4:34; Hebrews 10:7,9). God had a plan for Paul (see Acts 21:14, 22:14, 26:16-19; 1 Timothy 1:16); in five of his letters Paul announces himself as an apostle 'by the will of God'. God has a plan for each of his children.

But can God communicate his plan to us? Indeed he can. As man is a communicative animal, so his Maker is a communicative God, He made known his will to and through the Old Testament prophets. He guided Jesus and Paul. Acts records several instances of detailed guidance (Philip being sent to the desert to meet the Ethiopian eunuch, 8:26, 29; Peter being told to accept the invitation of Cornelius, 10:19f; the church at Antioch being charged to send Paul and Barnabas as missionaries, 13:2 Paul and Silas being called into Europe, 16:6-10; Paul being instructed to press on with his Corinthian ministry, 18:9f.); and through guidance by dreams, visions, and direct verbal messages must be judged exceptional and not normal, even for the apostles and their contemporaries, yet these events do at least show that God has no difficulty in making his will known to his servants.

Moreover, Scripture contains explicit promises of divine guidance, whereby we may know God's plan for our action. 'I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you,' says God to David (Psalm 32:8 RSV). Isaiah 58:11 contains the assurance that if the people repent and obey 'the Lord will guide you always'. Guidance is a main theme in Psalm 25, where we read, 'Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways. He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way... Who, then, is the man that fears the LORD? He will instruct him in the way chosen for him' (verses 8, 9, 12 NIV). So in Proverbs 3:6, 'in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.'

In the New Testament, the same expectation of guidance appears. Paul's prayer that the Colossians might be filled 'with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding', and Epaphras' prayer that they might 'stand firm... in all the will [*thelema*] of God' (Colossians 1:9, 4:12), clearly assume that God is ready and willing to make his will known. 'Wisdom' in Scripture always means knowledge of the course of action that will please God and secure life, so that the promise of James 1:5—'if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God who gives to all men generously and without reproaching, and it will be given him' (RSV)—is in effect a promise of guidance. 'Let your mind be remade and your whole nature thus transformed,' counsels Paul. 'Then you will be able to discern the will of God, and to know what is good, acceptable and perfect' (Romans 12:2 NEB).

Other lines of biblical truth come in here to confirm this confidence that God will guide. First, Christians are God's sons; and if human parents have a responsibility to give their children guidance in matters where ignorance and incapacity would spell danger, we should not doubt that in the family of God the same applies. 'If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him' (Matthew 7:11 NIV).

Again, Scripture is God's Word, 'profitable' (we read) 'for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work' (2 Timothy 3:16, RSV). 'Teaching' means comprehensive instruction in doctrine and ethics, the work and will of God; 'reproof', 'correction', and 'training in righteousness' signify the applying of this instruction to our disordered lives; 'equipped (ready) for every good work'—that is, a life set to go God's way—is the promised result.

Again, Christians have an indwelling Instructor, the Holy Spirit. 'You have been anointed by the Holy One... the anointing which you received from him abides in you... his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie...' (1 John 2:20, 27 RSV). Doubt as to the availability of guidance would be a slur on the faithfulness of the Holy Spirit to his ministry. It is notable that in Acts 8:29, 10:19, 13:2, 16:6, and most strikingly in the decree of the Jerusalem council—'it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us...' (15:28)—the giving of guidance is specifically ascribed to the Spirit.

Again, God seeks his glory in our lives, and he is glorified in us only when we obey his will. It follows that, as a means to his own end, he must be ready to teach us his way, so that we may walk in it. Confidence in God's readiness to teach those who desire to obey underlies all Psalm 119. In Psalm 13:3, David proclaims the reality of God giving guidance for his own glory—'he guides me in paths of righteousness *for his name's sake*'.

So we might go on; but the point is sufficiently established. It is impossible to doubt that guidance is a reality intended for, and promised to, every child of God. Christians who miss it thereby show only that they did not seek it as they should. It is right, therefore, to be concerned about one's own receptiveness to guidance, and to study how to seek it.

## HOW WE RECEIVE GUIDANCE

Earnest Christians seeking guidance often go wrong about it. Why is this? Often the reason is that their notion of the nature and method of divine guidance is distorted. They look for a will-o'-the-wisp; they overlook the guidance that is ready to hand, and lay themselves open to all sorts of delusions. Their basic mistake is to think of guidance as essentially *inward prompting by the Holy Spirit apart from the written Word*. This idea, which is as old as the false prophets of the Old Testament and as new as the Oxford Group and Moral Re-Armament, is a seed-bed in which all forms of fanaticism and folly can grow.

How do thoughtful Christians come to make this mistake? What seems to happen is this. They hear the word '*guidance*', and think at once of a particular class of guidance problem—on which, perhaps, the books they have read, and the testimonies they have heard tended to harp exclusively. This is the class of problems concerned with what we may call 'vocational choices'—choices, that is, between competing options, all of which in themselves appear lawful and good. Examples are: Should I contemplate marriage or not? Should I marry this person, or not? Should we aim at having another child? Should I join this church, or that one? Should I serve God in the land of my upbringing, or abroad? Which of the professions open to me should I follow? Which of the jobs open to me in my profession should I take? Is my present sphere of work the right one to stay in? What claim has this person, or cause, on my care, energies, and generosity? Which claims on my voluntary service time should have priority?—and so forth. Naturally, because they shape our lives so decisively, and mean so much for joy or sorrow, we think a lot about 'vocational choices', and it is right that we should. But what is not right is to jump to the conclusion that, in the last analysis, all guidance problems are of this one type. Here, as it seems, is the root of the mistake.

Two features about divine guidance in the case of 'vocational choices' are distinctive. Both follow from the nature of the situation itself. *First*, these problems cannot be resolved by a direct application of biblical teaching. All one can do from Scripture is circumscribe the lawful possibilities between which the choice has to be made. (No biblical text, for instance, told the present writer to propose to the lady who is now his wife, or to seek ordination, or to start his ministry in England, or to buy his large old car.)

*Second*, just because Scripture cannot decide one's choice directly, the factor of God-given prompting and inclination, whereby one is drawn to commit oneself to one set of responsibilities rather than another, and finds one's mind settled in peace as one contemplates them, becomes decisive. The basis of the mistake which we are trying to detect is to assume, first, that all guidance problems have these same two characteristics, and, second, that all life should be treated as a field in which this kind of guidance should be sought.

The consequences of this mistake among earnest Christians have been both comic and tragic. The idea of a life in which the inward voice of the Spirit decides and directs everything sounds most attractive, for it seems to exalt the Spirit's ministry and to promise the closest intimacy with God; but in practice this quest for super-spirituality leads only to frantic bewilderment or lunacy.

Hannah Whitall Smith (Mrs. R. Pearsall Smith), that shrewd and common-sensical Quaker lady, saw much of this, and wrote of it instructively in her 'fanaticism papers' (published posthumously by Ray Strachey, first as *Religious Fanaticism* [1928], then as *Group Movements of the Past and Experiments in Guidance* [1934]). There she tells of the 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 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...'

Then there was the invalid who, when her hostess, visiting her, left money by accident on the dressing-table, had 'an impression... that the Lord wanted her to take that money in order to illustrate the truth of the text that "all things are yours"'—which she did, and hid it under her pillow, and prevaricated when her hostess came back for it, and was eventually thrown out as a thief.

Here, too, we meet the 'quiet refined lady rather past middle age' who explained that "there have been times when, in order to help my friends to receive the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, I have felt distinctively led of the Lord to have them get into bed with me and lie back to back without any night-gown between" (*Group Movements*, pp. 184, 198, 245). These pathetic stories are sadly typical of what ensues once the basic mistake about guidance has been made.

What conduct of this sort shows is failure to grasp that the fundamental mode whereby our rational Creator guides his rational creatures is by rational understanding and application of his written Word. This mode of guidance is fundamental, both because it limits the area within which 'vocational' guidance is needed and given, and also because only those who have attuned themselves to it, so that their basic attitude are right, are

likely to be able to recognize ‘vocational’ guidance when it comes. In their uncritical acceptance of non-rational and non-moral impulses as coming from the Holy Spirit, Mrs. Smith’s friends were forgetting that decent modest dress, respect for property, and recognition that sensuality is not spiritual, were already matters of scriptural requirement (1 Timothy 2:9; 1 Peter 4:15; Ephesians 4:19-22). But the true way to honour the Holy Spirit as our guide is to honour the Holy Scriptures through which he guides us. The fundamental guidance which God gives to shape our lives—the instilling, that is, of the basic convictions, attitudes, ideals, and value-judgments, in terms of which we are to live—is not a matter of inward promptings apart from the Word but of the pressure on our consciences of the portrayal of God’s character and will in the Word, which the Spirit enlightens us to understand and apply to ourselves.

The basic form of divine guidance, therefore, is the presentation to us of positive ideals as guidance for all our living. ‘Be the kind of person that Jesus was’; ‘seek this virtue, and this one, and this, and practice them up to the limit’; ‘know your responsibilities—husbands, to your wives; wives, to your husbands; parents, to your children; all of you, to all your fellow-Christians and all your fellow human beings; know them, and seek strength constantly to discharge them’—this is how God guides us through the Bible, as any student of the Psalms, the Proverbs, the prophets, the Sermon on the Mount, and the ethical parts of the epistles will soon discover. ‘Turn from evil and do good’ (Psalms 34:14, 37:27)—this is the highway along which the Bible is concerned to lead us, and all its admonitions are concerned to keep us on it. Be it noted that the reference to being ‘led by the Spirit’ in Romans 8:14 relates, not to inward ‘voices’ or any such experience, but to mortifying known sin, and not living after the flesh!

Only within the limits of *this* guidance does God prompt us inwardly in matters of ‘vocational’ decision. So never expect to be guided to marry an unbeliever, or elope with a married person, as long as 1 Corinthians 7:39 and the seventh commandment stand! The present writer has known divine guidance to be claimed for both courses of action. Inward inclinations were undoubtedly present, but they were quite certainly not from the Spirit of God, for they went against the Word. The Spirit leads within the limits which the Word sets, not beyond them. ‘He guides me *in paths of righteousness*’—but not anywhere else.

## SIX COMMON PITFALLS

Even with right ideas about guidance in general, however, it is still easy to go wrong, particularly in ‘vocational’ choices. No area of life bears clearer witness to the frailty of human nature—even regenerate human nature. The work of God in these cases is to incline first our judgment and then our whole being to the course which, of all the competing alternatives, he has marked out as best suited for us, and for his glory and the good of others through us. But the Spirit can be quenched, and we can all too easily behave in a way which stops this guidance getting through. It is worth listing some of the main pitfalls.

First, unwillingness to *think*. It is false piety, super-super-naturalism of an unhealthy and pernicious sort, that demands inward impressions that have no rational base, and declines to heed the constant biblical summons to ‘*consider*’. God made us thinking beings, and he guides our minds as in his presence we think things out—not otherwise. ‘O that they were *wise*... that they would *consider*...’ (Deuteronomy 32:29).

Second, unwillingness to *think ahead*, and weigh the long-term consequences of alternative courses of action. ‘Think ahead’ is part of the divine rule of life no less than of the human rule of the road. Often we can only see what is wise and right (and what is foolish and wrong) as we dwell on its long-term issues. ‘O that they were *wise*... that they would consider *their latter end*.’

Third, unwillingness to *take advice*. Scripture is emphatic on the need for this. ‘The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice’ (Proverbs 12:15). It is a sign of conceit and immaturity to dispense with taking advice in major decisions. There are always people who know the Bible, human nature, and our own gifts and limitations, better than we do, and even if we cannot finally accept their advice, nothing but good will come to us from carefully weighing what they say.

Fourth, unwillingness to *suspect oneself*. We dislike being realistic with ourselves, and we do not know ourselves at all well; we can recognise rationalisations in others and quite overlook them in ourselves. ‘Feelings’ with an ego-boosting, or escapist, or self-indulging or self-aggrandising base must be detected and discredited, not mistaken for guidance. This is particularly true of sexual, or sexually conditioned, feelings. As a biologist-theologian has written:

The joy and general sense of well-being that often (but not always) goes with being ‘in love’ can easily silence conscience and inhibit critical thinking. How often people say that they ‘feel led’ to get married (and probably they will say ‘the Lord has so clearly guided’), when all they are really describing is a particularly novel state of endocrine balance which makes them feel extremely sanguine and happy (O. R. Barclay, *Guidance*, p. 29 f)

We need to ask ourselves *why* we feel a particular course to be right, and make ourselves give reasons—and we shall be wise to lay the case before someone else whose judgment we trust, to give a verdict on our reasons. We need also to keep praying, ‘Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my thoughts; and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting’ (Psalms 139:23f KJV). We can never distrust ourselves too much.

Fifth, unwillingness to *discount personal magnetism*. Those who have not been made deeply aware of pride and self-deception in themselves cannot always detect these things in others, and this has from time to time made it possible for well-meaning but deluded people with a flair for self-dramatisation to gain an alarming domination over the minds and consciences of others, who fall under their spell and decline to judge them by ordinary standards. And even when a gifted and magnetic person is aware of the danger and tries to avoid it, he is not always able to stop Christian people treating him as an angel, or a prophet, construing his words as guidance for themselves, and blindly following his lead. But this is not the way to be led by God. Outstanding people are not, indeed, necessarily wrong, but they are not necessarily right, either! They, and their views, must be respected, but may not be idolised. ‘Prove (test) everything. Hold fast that which is good’ (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

Sixth, unwillingness to *wait*. ‘Wait on the Lord’ is a constant refrain in the Psalms, and it is a necessary word, for God often keeps us waiting. He is not in such a hurry as we are, and it is not his way to give more light on the future than we need for action in the present, or to guide us more than one step at a time. When in doubt, do nothing, but continue to wait on God. When action is needed, light will come.

## NO SIMPLE ANSWERS

But it does not follow that right guidance will be vindicated as such by a trouble-free course thereafter. Here is another cause of deep perplexity for Christian people. They have sought guidance and believe it has been given. They have set off along the road which God seemed to indicate. And now, as a direct result, they have run into a crop of new problems which otherwise would not have arisen—*isolation, criticism, abandonment by their friends, practical frustrations of all sorts.* At once they grow anxious. They recall the prophet Jonah who, when told to go east and preach at Nineveh, took a ship going north to Tarshish instead, ‘away from the presence of the Lord’ (Jonah 1:3), and was caught in a storm, humiliated before unbelievers, thrown overboard and swallowed by a great fish in order to bring him to his senses. Is their own present experience of the rough side of life (they ask themselves) a sign from God that they are themselves like Jonah, off track, following the path of self-will rather than the way of God?

It may be so, and the wise person will take occasion from his new troubles to check his original guidance very carefully. Trouble should always be treated as a call to consider one’s way, but trouble is not necessarily a sign of being off track at all: for as the Bible declares in general that ‘many are the afflictions of the righteous’ (Psalms 34:19), so it teaches in particular that following God’s guidance regularly leads to upsets and distresses which one would otherwise have escaped. Examples abound. God guided Israel by means of a fiery cloudy pillar that went before them (Exodus 13:21 f.); yet the way by which he led them involved the nerve-shredding cliff-hanger of the Red Sea crossing, long days without water and meat in ‘that vast and dreadful desert’ (Deuteronomy 1:19, cf. 31-33), and bloody battles with Amalek, Sihon, and Og (Exodus 17:8; Numbers 21:21 ff., 32 ff.), and we can understand, if not excuse, Israel’s constant grumbling (see Exodus 14:10ff., 16:3, Numbers 11:4 ff, 14:3 ff., 20:3 ff., 21:5 ff.).

Again, Jesus’ disciples were twice caught by night in bad weather on the Sea of Galilee (Mark 4:37, 6:48), and both times the reason why they were there was the command of Jesus himself (see Mark 4:35, 6:45). Again, the apostle Paul crossed to Greece ‘concluding’ from his dream of the man of Macedonia ‘that God had called us to preach the gospel to them’ (Acts 16:10), and before long he was in jail at Philippi. Later he ‘resolved in the Spirit to... go to Jerusalem’ (19:21 RSV), and told the Ephesians’ elders whom he met on his way, ‘I am going to Jerusalem, bound in the Spirit, not knowing what shall befall me there; except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me’ (20:22 f. RSV). So it proved to be: Paul found trouble on the grand scale through following divine guidance.

Nor is this all. For a final example and proof of the truth that following God’s guidance brings trouble, look at the life of the Lord Jesus himself. No human life has ever been so completely guided by God, and no human being has ever qualified so comprehensively

for the description 'a man of sorrows'. Divine guidance set Jesus at a distance from his family and fellow-townsmen, brought him into conflict with all the nation's leaders, religious and civil, and led finally to betrayal, arrest, and the cross. What more can Christians expect while they abide in the will of God? 'A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master... If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household' (Matthew 10:24 f., RSV).

By every human standard of reckoning, the cross was a waste—the waste of a young life, a prophet's influence, a leader's potential. We know the secret of its meaning and achievement only from God's own statements. Similarly, the Christian's guided life may appear as a waste—as with Paul, spending years in prison because he followed God's guidance to Jerusalem, whereas he might otherwise have been evangelising Europe the whole time. Nor does God always tell us the why and wherefore of the frustrations and losses which are part and parcel of the guided life.

The early experience of Elisabeth Elliot, widow and biographer of a martyred missionary husband, strikingly illustrates this. Confident of God's guidance, she went to an Ecuador tribe to reduce their language to writing so that the Bible might be translated for them. The only person who could or would help her was a Spanish-speaking Christian who lived with the tribe, but within a month he was shot dead in an argument. She struggled on with virtually no help for eight months more. Then she moved to another field, leaving her full file of linguistic material with her colleagues so that they could carry on where she had left off. Within a fortnight she heard that the file had been stolen. No copy existed; all her work was wasted. That, humanly speaking, was the end of the story. She comments:

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... (quoted from *Eternity*, January 1969, p. 18).

This is right. Sooner or later, God's guidance, which brings us out of darkness into light, will also bring us out of light into darkness. It is part of the way of the cross.

### MIDCOURSE CORRECTIONS

If I found I had driven into a bog, I should know I had missed the road. But this knowledge would not be of much comfort if I then had to stand helpless watching the car sink and vanish: the damage would be done, and that would be that. Is it the same when a Christian wakes up to the fact that he has missed God's guidance and taken the wrong way? Is the damage irrevocable? Must he now be put off course for life? Thank God, no.

Our God is a God who not merely restores, but takes up our mistakes and follies into his plan for us and brings good out of them.

This is part of the wonder of his gracious sovereignty. ‘I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten... you will have plenty to eat, until you are full, and you will praise the name of the LORD your God, who has worked wonders for you’ (Joel 2:25 f) The Jesus who restored Peter after his denial, and corrected his course more than once after that (see Acts 10, Galatians 2:14), is our Saviour today and he has not changed. God makes not only the wrath of man to turn to his praise but the misadventures of Christians too.

Recently a letter came from a minister who has felt obliged to leave his congregation and denomination, and who now, like Abraham, goes out not knowing whither. In his letter, he quoted from a hymn by Charles Wesley on the sovereignty and security of God’s guidance. This is the note on which we would close.

Guidance, like all God’s acts of blessing under the covenant of grace, is a sovereign act. Not merely does God will to guide us in the sense of showing us his way, that we may tread it; he wills also to guide us in the more fundamental sense of ensuring that, whatever happens, whatever mistakes we may make, we shall come safe home. Slippings and strayings there will be, no doubt, but the everlasting arms are beneath us; we shall be caught, rescued, restored. This is God’s promise; this is how good he is.

Thus it appears that the right context for discussing guidance is one of confidence in the God who will not let us ruin our souls. Our concern, therefore, in this discussion should be more for his glory than for our security—for that is already taken care of. And our self-distrust, while keeping us humble, must not cloud the joy with which we lean on ‘the Lord Protector’—our faithful covenant God. Here is the verse from Wesley:

*Captain of Israel’s host and Guide  
Of all who seek the land above,  
Beneath thy shadow we abide,  
The cloud of Thy protecting love;  
Our strength, Thy grace; our rule, Thy Word;  
Our end, the glory of the Lord.*

And here is the conclusion of the matter, in the words of Joseph Hart:

*’Tis Jesus, the first and the last,  
Whose Spirit shall guide us safe home;  
We’ll praise Him for all that is past,  
And trust Him for all that’s to come.*