

DIRECTION, INDIRECTION, AND REDIRECTION: Praying for and Receiving God's Guidance

Scriptures: Romans 15:17-29; Galatians 1:13-17; 2:1-2, 9-10

Several years ago I went with my son Keith to the 4-A state high school basketball tournament in Tacoma. Ferris High School was playing Lincoln of Tacoma for the state championship. Ferris was behind late in the fourth quarter, but they rallied to tie it with less than a minute to play. At that point one of the parents in front of me turned to his wife and said, "The Lord showed me that Ferris is going to win." Unfortunately, the Lord forgot to inform the players. After a time out, Lincoln went on to win, and the parent in front of me was devastated.

I never use the expression: "The Lord showed me something," not because the Lord never communicates to people but because I'm never sure of getting the message right. And I suspect I am not alone. This summer when I invited people to submit questions of faith, several asked how to pray for and receive God's guidance. If the Lord was showing them something, they weren't getting it, and they wondered if they were praying in the wrong way.

How do you pray for and receive God's guidance? To answer that question I want to use the apostle Paul as a case study. How did Paul know that God wanted him to be a missionary to the Gentiles? The first answer to that question is that the Lord spoke to his heart. In our first scripture lesson, Galatians 1:15-16, the apostle Paul says, "God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles."

This sounds a little like the parent sitting in front of me at the basketball game. "The Lord showed me I would become an apostle." But if you notice, the Lord did not reveal to Paul that he would become an apostle, let alone an apostle to the Gentiles. The Lord revealed to Paul the grace of his Son Jesus Christ. And when Paul experienced that grace, he wanted to share it with others, including the Gentiles, the non-Jews who were considered outsiders to God's family.

Notice what Paul did next. In Galatians 1:17 Paul says, "I went away at once into Arabia." We don't know what Paul did in Arabia, but the chances are he spent time alone with God praying. By the way, there is no special way to pray for God's guidance. You don't get style points for prayer. It is good enough to say, "Lord, guide me."

But the minute you pray you must also be prepared to listen, and one of the ways we listen to God is through reading the Bible. As a devout Jew, Paul was already familiar with the Old Testament, but when he met the risen Jesus, he went back to reading the Old Testament and discovered things he had not noticed before, verses like Psalm 18:49—"Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles and sing praises to your name," or Isaiah 11:10—"The root of Jesse shall come ("the root of Jesse" refers to the promised Messiah), the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope." From reading the Bible Paul realized that Jesus came not just to be the Savior of the Jews but to be the hope of the Gentiles, the Savior of the world, and that confirmed his sense of call to be a missionary to the Gentiles.

When the parent sitting in front of me at the basketball game said, “The Lord showed me that Ferris is going to win,” I remember thinking, “I’ll bet that’s not in the Bible.” If you think God is revealing something to you, you need to check it out to see if it is consistent with what we know about God and Jesus in the Bible. That is what the apostle Paul did.

But there is something else Paul did to discern God’s will. He not only prayed and studied the Bible, he talked to respected people in the church. In Galatians, chapter 2, Paul tells about going to Jerusalem to visit the leaders of the church. He says, “Then I laid before them (though only in a private meeting with the acknowledged leaders) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain.” Not only does Paul re-read his Bible, he asks for help from people in the church to make sure he understands the Bible correctly.

These are some of the ways that God leads by direction: 1) by giving us an inner sense of purpose, 2) by guiding us through the scriptures, and 3) by using other people in the church to clarify our thinking and keep us honest. That is how God’s will was shown to the apostle Paul, and that is how it is shown to us.

But that is not the whole story. Sometimes God does not lead us by direction. Sometimes God leads us by indirection or redirection, taking us into circumstances or situations that we had not anticipated. We see this in our second scripture lesson. In Romans, chapter 15, Paul explains to the Christians in Rome that he has been hindered from coming to them because he was so busy starting churches in places that did not already have a one, preaching the gospel where it had not already been proclaimed. But in verse 23 he says, “But now, with no further place for me in these regions, I desire, as I have for many years, to come to you when I go to Spain.” We do not know for sure what Paul meant when he said, “I have no further place in these regions.” He probably means he has done as much as he can in that area. So now he is looking for a new place to go where the gospel has never been preached, namely in Spain. And on the way to Spain he plans to visit Rome.

But in verses 25-26 Paul says, “At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints; for Macedonia and Achaia (regions in present day Greece) have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem.” If Paul was in Greece at the time he wrote this letter to the Romans, he will have to go east over 1000 miles to get back to Jerusalem. Then he will have to turn around and travel west over 1500 miles to get to Rome before he can even think about going to Spain, which is another 1000 miles further west. Why would Paul make such inefficient use of his travel budget?

The answer is found in our first scripture lesson. When the church leaders in Jerusalem gave their blessing to Paul’s mission to the Gentiles, they asked him to remember the poor. It is fine to be a great preacher or teacher, but if we do not remember the poor, we are not being faithful to Jesus. At that time the poorest Christians in the Mediterranean were the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, who were struggling under severe persecution. So Paul takes time out from his missionary plans to travel over 1000 miles east, away from his intended destination of Spain, in order to deliver a special offering for the poor Christians in Jerusalem.

Sometimes following God's will takes you on a detour. You may have a clear sense of what God wants you to do, but you have to take care of some other responsibility first. Sometimes obeying God takes you back before it takes you forward.

In Paul's case there is a special ironic twist to the story. When Paul gets to Jerusalem, he is arrested and taken to Rome as a prisoner, which meant he did not have to pay for his return ticket. Unfortunately, as a prisoner Paul was no longer free to travel, and as far as we know he never got to Spain. But while he was in prison he wrote numerous letters to churches, some of which we have in our New Testament, and I suspect Paul had more impact on the world from the letters he wrote in prison than he would have if he had been free to travel to Spain.

Sometimes our plans are not God plans, like Ferris winning the basketball game. Sometimes God redirects us into unexpected situations. When that happens, if we continue serving God faithfully wherever we are, God may use us in those new situations in ways we did not expect.

There is an interesting book by Jerry Sittser, a religion professor at Whitworth College, called *The Will of God as a Way of Life*. Early in the book he writes,

As I look back on my 49 years, I see a pattern emerge. At various points along the way I thought I knew the pathway I was supposed to take, but I ended up doing something different. This different "something" turned out to be the will of God. At twenty, I was sure that God wanted me to pursue a career in medicine; I became a minister instead. At thirty, I was planning to stay the course in pastoral ministry; now I am a college professor. At forty, I didn't aspire to be an avid writer; now I am finishing this, my fifth book. At every step along the way I thought I knew God's will for my life. I thought I had it all figured out. But it did not turn out as I had planned (p. 14).

Further on he says,

We do not, therefore, need to fret when we have to make big decisions about the future, worrying about the terrifying possibility that we might miss God's will for our lives. We simply need to do what we already know in the present. God has been clear where clarity is most needed. The choices we make every day—to love a spouse after an argument, to treat an unkind coworker with respect, to serve food at a soup kitchen, to pray for God's help when we do not feel much need for it—determine whether or not we are doing the will of God. ... Who we choose to become and how we choose to live every day creates a trajectory for everything else. Perhaps that is why the Bible says so little about God's will for tomorrow and so much about what we should do to fulfill his will today" (19-20).

Sometimes God does not show you directly what you should do in a specific situation. But if you keep on praying, reading the scripture, listening to one another in the church, caring for your families and community, serving God wherever you happen to be, you may one day discover you have been guided by God's will all along.

- Ken Onstot