

Five Ways God Guides Us Personally

Positioning Ourselves to Hear His Voice

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Five Ways God Guides Us Personally

Session I—Introduction to the series

God intends for us to live in an ongoing two-way conversation with Him. Most believers desperately want to hear from God, because we want to experience Him as real, but at the same time we might be afraid of what He wants to say to us

God's voice will never make sense apart from His kingdom and our part in it

A. Introduction—Numbers 11:29

1. Moses failed to seek God in the beginning

Exodus 18:23–24, NIV—[Jethro said] "If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied." Moses listened to his father-in-law and did everything he said

Who was Jethro? He was the father-in-law, but what were his spiritual credentials? Only that he was a recently converted pagan priest. His administrative plan, outlined in Exodus 18, represents human wisdom. The problem was that Moses listened only to Jethro's advice, and did not seek to see if "God so commands." Look at what Moses comes to:

Numbers 11:14, NIV—"I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me"

2. The Lord intervened with "His way"

The Lord says, in effect, "Now we'll do it my way." Seventy elders became recipients of God's Spirit, God's voice. Eldad and Medad were exceptions, who stayed in the camp instead of going to the place of worship to receive the Spirit (they received the Spirit anyway). Joshua objected, and Moses' reply was significant:

Numbers 11:29, NIV—But Moses replied, "Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!"

This curious story foreshadows our day, when God's Spirit would rest on all God's people, when they would all hear His voice

B. Warnings, encouragements and experiences of Biblical and modern leaders

1. Joshua (Joshua 9:1-27)

- **God had commanded Joshua and the Israelites not to make treaties, because of the danger of their worship influence**
 - The Hivites were part of the people of the land to be destroyed, they came with a sly ruse, they claimed to be from far away, and they asked for a treaty
 - Joshua and his leaders did not investigate deeply enough, and agreed to a treaty
 - More significantly, they did not inquire with the Lord

Joshua 9:14, NIV—The Israelites sampled their provisions but did not inquire of the LORD

➤ **The Israelites were forced to live with the consequences of this action for centuries**

This account serves as a warning to us not to neglect “inquiring of the Lord”

2. Modern Christian Leaders

- **G. Campbell Morgan (19th-20th century well-known conservative British pastor), The Westminster Pulpit, Vol. IV, “*But...*”**

“I can undertake nothing concerning which I have not consulted Him. Discipleship means I cannot choose my own calling, or friends, or place of residence. I must consult. I am compelled to prayer. Everything must be remitted to Christ. Jesus Christ is not asking for that kind of submission to him which means sentimental acquiescence...”

- **Judson Edwards, Regaining Control of Your Life, *Reading the Wrong Directions***

“I have often wished that God would thunder edicts from heaven or, in some other way, directly guide my destiny. I have prayed for signs and put out fleeces. But God has always spoken most eloquently to me through that quiet voice, that voice that can easily be ignored. The truth is, if we miss that quiet voice, we miss God”

- **Roger Barrier, Listening to the Voice of God, *Watering the Garden***

“I am convinced much of my struggle in learning to hear God speak resulted from a fast-paced life in a rapid-fire, imagery-oriented society, which tended to overload my mental circuits and distract me from hearing the voice of God...I had to acquire new skills to focus my listening habits.

C. Preparing to Listen for God’s Voice

1. General Observations

In positioning ourselves to hear God, practical guidelines are appropriate, but legalistic “methods” don’t apply

➤ **God speaks by His Holy Spirit (John 14:26)**

John 14:26, NIV—But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.

➤ **God’s voice is recognizable**

➤ **God is always speaking, but we’re often not listening**

➤ **God breaks into our lives when we least expect it**

➤ **His guidance is usually short-term, so that we continue depending on Him**

2. Readiness to Listen

➤ **Sin and neglect impair our ability to hear God**

Checklist—

- **Do I depend too much on myself?**

Isaiah 31:1, NIV—Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, who rely on horses, who trust in the multitude of their chariots and in the great strength of their horsemen, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel, or seek help from the LORD

- **Am I too busy to spend time with God?**

Isaiah 30:15, NIV—This is what the Sovereign LORD, the Holy One of Israel, says: “In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength”

- **Do I constantly say, “I don’t know what to do?”**

James 1:5, NIV—If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you

- **Is people’s approval sweet to my taste?**

Proverbs 29:25, NIV—Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe

- **Am I content with the gifts, talents, family, home, etc. that God has given me?**

Hebrews 13:5, NIV—Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you”

➤ **God responds to seeking**

Jeremiah 29:13, NIV—You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart

- **Knowing God’s voice grows out of an intimate relationship with Him**
- **God speaks when He has a purpose in mind**
- **When God speaks it is His timing**
- **When God speaks, it is the time to respond**
- **There is risk in listening for God’s voice, but there isn’t risk**

God will speak God-sized things to us, which will humanly result in fear and cause us to shrink back from the risk (from a human viewpoint). But there is never risk in hearing and obeying the voice of the Lord because (and this may be hard to hear), we can even risk death because we know God has us in His hands

Luke 8:18, NIV—Therefore consider carefully how you listen. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what they think they have will be taken from them.”

D. Questions for discussion

What are the practical values of hearing God’s voice personally?

Notes

Session II—God’s Foundational Means of Guidance

It’s important to understand that the combination of Scripture and the working of God’s Spirit in connection with Scripture is His **primary** means of speaking to us in our day. All other forms of God’s guidance must be weighed in connection with the standard of Scripture. Closely connected to this is God’s way of speaking to us through the Body of Christ.

A. Scripture

1. Specific Directives

We’re all familiar with the fact that Scripture contains exhortations for living in a way that pleases God. Many of them are clear, specific directives, which have specific applications to life that cannot really be disputed; these take several different forms—

➤ **Commandments**

Jesus’ teaching is full of specific commandments, especially in the Sermon on the Mount—

Luke 6:27–28, NIV—“But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you”

Paul’s epistles also contain many specific commandments—

Romans 13:7, NIV—Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor

➤ **Statements of God purpose (“so that...,” “in order that”)**

Hebrews 12:3, NIV—Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, **so that** you will not grow weary and lose heart

II Corinthians 1:3–4, NIV—Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, **so that** we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God

2. Discernment/Illumination

Most of the exhortations in Scripture are more general, and require discernment as to how to apply them. This does not refer to the spiritual gift of discernment, which is a word ministry involving the ability to recognize what comes from God’s Spirit, and what comes from human or demonic spirits (I John 4:1)

➤ **Romans 12:1-2**

In the context of offering ourselves to God as holy pleasing sacrifices, Romans 12:2 give us the sense of general discernment we’re to have regarding doing God’s will—

Romans 12:2, NIV—Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will

Discernment in this sense is spiritually sensitive application of biblical truth to our situation, which includes taking circumstances into consideration. The Spirit shapes our mind and heart through the Word and prayer so that we have inclinations toward what would be most glorifying to God and helpful to others

Romans 12:1-2 indicates that this kind of discernment requires general overall surrender to God, as well as a mind that is being renewed

Colossians 1:9, NIV—For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives

Notice here that this does not involve opinion, but rather the 3-way interaction of the Word, the Holy Spirit and our spirit. This is a bit different from the direct promptings and speaking of the Spirit in our spirits that we'll consider next week

➤ Examples

Romans 14:5, NIV—One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord

In our time and culture, it is fully appropriate for some to worship and observe Sabbath rest on a different day than Sunday, due to work schedules, for instance, and there are many churches that provide for this

II Corinthians 9:7–8, NIV—Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work

B. Questions for Discussion

What is wrong in these cases (true situations from Jon's ministry)—

- Someone says they are being led by the Lord to have church services at home with just their own family on Sunday mornings
- Someone says that they plan to sue the church because they have received a reprimand or disciplinary action from church leaders

What forms of discernment must be applied in the case of Paul's commandment to husbands in Ephesians 5?

Ephesians 5:25, NIV—Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her

C. The Community of Faith

The Spirit speaks to us through the community of faith, the Body of Christ. However, this must align with Scripture

1. Corporately

➤ This can take the form of group decisions

Acts 13:2–3, NIV—While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off

Acts 15:28, NIV—"It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements..."

➤ **It happens in the context of group worship and fellowship**

Hebrews 10:24–25, NIV—And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

➤ **It also takes the form of gifted individuals teaching and preaching**

Ephesians 4:10–12, NIV—He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up

2. Privately

The Spirit also uses people with gifts of wisdom and encouragement to guide us on a personal level

James 5:19–20, NIV—My brothers and sisters, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring that person back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins

3. Characteristics of God’s voice

These are the qualities that make messages from God through others unique, in comparison to mere human wisdom

➤ **Quality**

- The quality of God’s voice is “weighty”
- It impacts our consciousness and inclines us toward assent

➤ **Spirit**

- The spirit of God’s voice is peacefulness, joy, reasonableness, goodwill, but also can be convincing and convicting

➤ **Content**

- The content is consistent with Scripture

D. Questions for Discussion

Why is it difficult to receive a word from the Lord through a fellow believer, especially in private?

What should you do if someone gives you what you feel is bad advice?

Notes

Session III—God’s Secondary Means of Guidance, Part I

- **G. Campbell Morgan (The Westminster Pulpit, Vol. I, His Workmanship)**

“When a man settles down at any point and says, ‘Here I am for ever,’ he is in great danger of missing the Divine guidance. When a man says about his work, his business, anything in his life, that it is the final thing, he is in peril. You and I have to say, ‘This is His will for me. What is next I know not. I watch only for His will’”

A. Directly in our Spirits

God frequently uses direct leadings of the Spirit in combination with His other means of guiding us. Most believers experience God’s prompting and act on it without knowing it, since it can be so subtle. This tends to be a bit different from the Spirit’s convicting, convincing ministry when we’re studying Scripture or listening to a sermon

1. When God speaks

➤ When we’re about to face danger

Matthew 2:12, NIV—And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

- **Even in Scripture God spoke directly mainly at crucial times**

➤ When the Holy Spirit wants to change our desires or beliefs

Acts 9:4–6, NIV—He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked. “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

➤ When we need a special provision of God’s love

- Someone is very new to the Christian life
- Someone is chafing under circumstances
- When God wants to give specific directions

➤ When He wants to prompt our specific prayer for someone or some situation

2. What God says

➤ Short term guidance

➤ Incomplete instructions

- Just enough to convince us to stay close to God

➤ Specific implementation of the general principles in His Word

- He will never contradict His Word

➤ Encouragement to simply carry on

- No change in course
- God’s Spirit almost never tells us to simply stop some specific ministry He has led us into; this is usually the voice of self or Satan

3. How God speaks

- **God seems to often speak through sudden thoughts that we know do not come from ourselves**
- **God may speak through images, visions or dreams (we'll cover dreams next week)**

4. Hearing God's voice

- **God's guidance for you fits with your personality**
- **Avoid extremes**
 - **Hearing God's voice all the time, even to the exclusion of His other forms of guidance**
This leads to Hearing God when He doesn't specifically speak, demanding answers from God and a "God told me..." attitude
 - **Never bothering to hear directly from God**
- **Learn to recognize how God speaks to you**
 - **Thoughts and images, through others (Session II)**
God's guidance suits our personality—Introverts need alone time to think and reflect on what God seems to say; Extroverts need to talk it out with others
- **Never act until you know who's speaking**
 - **Self, Satan, or God's Spirit**
- **Ask God specific questions; wait to see how He answers**
- **Keeping a journal of God's leading helps you master the discipline of listening to Him**
- **Direct guidance should be double-checked against other means of guidance**

5. Recognizing God's voice

- **God speaks in our innermost spirit**

- **Satan speaks in our mind**

Hebrews 4:12, NIV—For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

- **God speaks with gentle leadings (I Kings 19:11-13)**

- **Self makes aggressive demands**

I Kings 19:11–13, NIV—Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper....“What are you doing here, Elijah?”

➤ **God's voice produces freedom (Matthew 11:30)**

- Satan produces guilt, bondage

John 8:32, NIV—You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

➤ **God speaks when I am seeking Him in quietness (Jeremiah 29:12-13)**

- The voices of self and Satan cause chaos

Jeremiah 29:12–13, NIV—Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

➤ **God gives specific directions**

- Satan and self produce confusion

➤ **God convicts of specific sins (John 16:8)**

- Satan and self accuse in broad generalities

John 16:8, NIV—When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment:

➤ **God speaks in truth that can be tested in His Word**

- Satan and self traffic in lies and deceit

John 8:44, NIV—You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies

➤ **God's voice brings a deep, abiding sense of peace (Philippians 4:7)**

- Satan and self encourage anxiety

Philippians 4:7, NIV—And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus

We recognize God's voice through experience and with openness and willingness; Satan wants to make a mystery out of God's voice

➤ **The liars are loud**

- If we are impressed by persistent thoughts that don't conform to the weight, spirit and content of God's voice, we may be under Satanic attack
- Even the Bible is used by some as a how-to manual for health, wealth, success

Any voice that promises no suffering or failure is a counterfeit

6. Experiences of Pastors and Christian leaders

➤ **James Dobson (in Hearing God, by Dallas Willard, *A Life More Than Guidance*)**

James Dobson says, “I get down on my knees and say, ‘Lord, I need to know what you want me to do and I am listening. Please speak to me through my friends, books, magazines I pick up and read and through circumstances.’” The simplicity of this should not mislead us. When we are in a proper, well-functioning relationship with God, this is exactly what we are to do. And then we are, as Dobson says, to listen. This means that we should pay a special kind of attention both to what is going on within us and to our surrounding circumstances”

➤ **Dallas Willard, Hearing God, *A Life More Than Guidance***

“After I ask for God to speak to me, I devote the next hour or so to some kind of activity that neither engrosses my attention with other things nor allows me to be intensely focused on the matter in question. Housework, gardening, driving about on errands or paying bills will generally do. Often by the end of an hour or so there has stood forth within my consciousness an idea or thought with that peculiar quality, spirit and content that I have come to associate with God’s voice. If so, I may write it down for further study. I may also decide to discuss the matter with others, usually without informing them that “God has told me....” Or I may decide to reconsider the matter by repeating the same process after a short period of time. If, on the other hand, nothing emerges by the end of an hour or so, I am not alarmed. I set myself to hold the matter before God as I go about my business and confidently get on with my life. Of course I make it a point to keep listening. Very often, within a day something happens through which God’s voice, recognizably distinct, is heard. If this does not happen, I generally cease specifically to seek God’s word on the matter in question. I do not cease my general attitude of listening. But I am neither disappointed nor alarmed nor even concerned”

7. Biblical examples

➤ Philip

Philip was in the middle of a very fruitful revival in Samaria (8:4-8), when the Lord told him to go elsewhere—

Acts 8:26–29, NIV—Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means “queen of the Ethiopians”). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”

The Lord wanted this man to be saved, because he would become an influence for the gospel in the employ of the Queen of Ethiopia

➤ Paul

Another example is Paul. Paul was contending with the Jews in Corinth, and being opposed and abused by them. However, the local synagogue leader and others were saved. Then the Lord came to Paul in a vision to give him a message—

Acts 18:9–11, NIV—One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.” So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God

Our focus today is not so much on how God spoke to Paul (we’ll cover dreams next week), but on what God was doing and saying in Paul’s case

B. Questions for Discussion

What was God saying to Philip (not just in words), and what may God have been overcoming in Philip’s thoughts?

What was God doing for Paul, and why? What need of Paul’s might God have been addressing?

C. Suggested exercise

In your personal prayer time, lay aside your prayer list every once in awhile, and simply tell God you want to wait on His Spirit to prompt you with circumstances or people who need your prayers

Notes

Session IV—God’s Secondary Means of Guidance, Part II

We need to approach the topic of dreams with extreme caution, since there is the potential for this to become someone’s major focus, even obsession, when it should never be that. 99.9999% of all dreaming is simply the meanderings of our subconscious mind as it attempts to sort out and store experiences from the day or even the past week or so. Also factoring in is the effect of prescription medications, and the kinds of extreme visual entertainment we subject ourselves to. In fact, the number of believers to whom God speaks in dreams is likely fairly small

A. Directly in our spirits, continued (dreams)—a Scriptural example (Acts 16:6-10)

1. Background (vss. 6-8)

- The Spirit directed the missionary team when they were already on the road to do ministry
- The Spirit was only revealing small bits of leading at a time, to keep them depending on Him

2. Paul’s dream (vs. 9)

- When the Spirit’s leading came, it was dramatic, unmistakable
- It was visual, compelling (not scary)

3. The involvement of the rest of the team (vs. 10)

- The pronoun changes from third person “they/him” to first person “we/us” because Luke had joined the team
- Paul obviously shared the dream with his companions, and together they interpreted it

The rest of the chapter describes in great detail the salvation of Lydia, the casting out of an evil spirit from a slave girl, and the difficult arrest and imprisonment of Paul and Silas, their miraculous delivery, and the salvation of the prison-keeper

In light of the events that followed, the dramatic leading and prohibition of the Spirit initially, and Paul’s dramatic dream that led them to Philippi can be seen as God’s unusual leading to a place where He was about to do unusual ministry through the missionary team. Also, through their difficulties they could look back on the special leading that had brought them there and be assured that God was with them

B. The Spirituality of Dreams

Psalm 16:7, ESV—I bless the Lord who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me

1. Natural dreams vs. spiritual dreams

➤ Natural dreams and nightmares

- Arise out of your own soul
- Contain symbols and metaphors that come from your life, experience

- **Your heart will often bring to the surface unresolved issues, or troubling circumstances and relationships, as well as hopes and desires**

Dreams that recur many times in a similar way may indicate that something in your past has not had proper closure

- **Sometimes your heart just tells you something about yourself**
- **Nightmares can be caused by something you're allowing your soul to feed on**

Stop feeding on these things

- **Nightmares can be caused by long-term anxiety and fears that have not been released to God**

Ask God to reveal the source, pray for release

➤ **Spiritual dreams**

- **Come from God**
- **Come at unusual times of the night, are vivid, often using visual metaphors**
- **When you wake up you have the sense of "being spoken to"**
- **You usually understand the metaphor and the message**
- **Involve God speaking to us or us crying out to God**
- **Often precede seasons of intense spiritual warfare, great ministry opportunities, or difficulties arising from ministry**
- **Negatively can be a warning from God**

Job 33:15-18, ESV—In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on men, while they slumber on their beds, then he opens the ears of men and terrifies them with warnings, that he may turn man aside from his deed and conceal pride from a man; he keeps back his soul from the pit, his life from perishing by the sword

2. Determining the source of dreams

- **Is the dream consistent with God's Word?**
- **Is your attention awakened in an intense way?**
- **Are you motivated to search your soul, to act more righteously?**

A study of Jacob's experience, documented in Genesis 28:10-22 can be helpful

3. Final observations

- **Dreams are related to spiritual gifts**
Gifts of knowledge, faith, discernment, prophecy and wisdom
- **Dreams are the least reliable form of guidance**

As such, dreams should not be sought

- **G. Campbell Morgan, The Westminster Pulpit, Vol. VII, *The Nearness of God Discovered***

"Even in these days of ours, if we did but understand it, God will ever and anon appear to men in dreams, and through them speak to the souls of men. If you are not of that particular temperament, then God has other ways of speaking to you... God does this in the case of every human being. The trouble is, we do not always recognize that it is God. We treat the illumination as though it had been

some will o' the wisp wild fantasy; yet in the moment, howsoever it came, from whencesoever it came, God was a reality; and God was a reality because He Himself was breaking through upon the consciousness of man"

C. Through Circumstances

- John Piper, Future Grace, **Faith in Future Grace vs. Impatience**

"Impatience is a form of unbelief. It's what we begin to feel when we start to doubt the wisdom of God's timing or the goodness of God's guidance. It springs up in our hearts when our plan is interrupted or shattered. It may be prompted by a long wait in a checkout line or a sudden blow that knocks out half our dreams"

Circumstances are the most difficult to read of all the ways God uses to guide us, and usually must be combined with His other forms of guidance

1. The challenges of being guided by circumstances

➤ Learning from circumstances is seldom black and white, or simple

- An open door doesn't necessarily mean "green light"
- A closed door doesn't necessarily mean a "red light" (Exodus 2:1-10)

Scripture seems to have more examples of times where circumstances would have misled people than shown them God's will

➤ You should not try to read the circumstances, but rather what God is telling you

He may be leading you through difficult circumstances for your growth and His glory

- Ask God what's going on

James 1:5, NIV—If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.

- Seek counsel from a Christian leader, pastor or trusted mentor

2. People who are directed by circumstances—

- Are in a humble, teachable fellowship with God
- Are open to learning new things about God or themselves from their situations
- Are ready to bless God in all circumstances
- Are not blinded by their own notions of the way things should go

They know that God might just as easily require a hard task as show them a smooth path

D. Questions for discussion—

What do these verses indicate about being guided by circumstances?

I Corinthians 16:9, NIV—A great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me

Colossians 4:3, NIV—And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains

II Corinthians 2:12–13, NIV—Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said goodbye to them and went on to Macedonia

Notes

Session V—Our Design

God also speaks to us in a more general way through the way He has designed us. It makes sense that the specific way He forms us fits us out for the specific way He wants us to serve Him. We should be stunned and humbled by this truth—

Psalm 139:13, NIV—For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb

A. Natural talents and personality

Exodus 35:30–35, NIV—Then Moses said to the Israelites, “See, the LORD has chosen Bezalel son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and he has filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills—to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood and to engage in all kinds of artistic crafts. And he has given both him and Oholiab son of Ahisamak, of the tribe of Dan, the ability to teach others. He has filled them with skill to do all kinds of work as engravers, designers, embroiderers in blue, purple and scarlet yarn and fine linen, and weavers—all of them skilled workers and designers

1. Holland's Hierarchy of Personality types

Dr. John L. Holland was an influential psychologist specializing in vocational and personality psychology. His theory states that career satisfaction and success are maximized when a person's personality is congruent with their work environment. His theory also maintains that in choosing a career, people prefer jobs where they can be around others who are like them

Holland theorized that personality can be divided into six broad categories, each of which is related to specific natural talents—

➤ Realistic

- Mechanical aptitude, athletic ability, manual dexterity, organizing, building

➤ Investigative

- Inventing, researching, computer aptitude, theorizing

➤ Artistic

- Acting, writing, language, music, graphic arts of all types, creative design

➤ Social

- Teaching, listening, counseling, serving, working with others

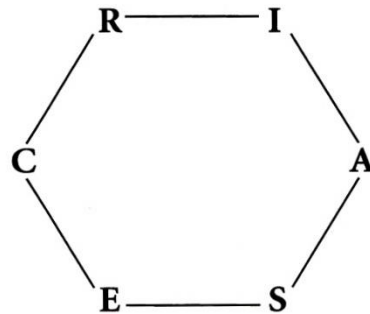
➤ Enterprising

- Selling, leading, managing, taking action/risks, negotiating

➤ Conventional

- Organizing, appraising, calculating, systematizing

2. Holland's Theory of Vocational Personalities and Work Environments



The six personality types can be arranged in a hexagon to show their relationships, with similar types close together and contrasting types opposite each other. For example, a person with Conventional talents will also resonate with, or even have talents in the areas of, Realistic and Enterprising talents, but will have difficulty resonating with talents on the opposite side of the hexagon. Artistic people will not understand the interests of Conventional people. Enterprising people will not understand how anyone could be interested in Investigative pursuits

Many people suffer through their entire vocational careers because of not being a natural fit in their vocation. Most may not understand that this has to do with their natural “bent.” On the flip side, we go through seasons of “doing what we have to do” to get by

3. Other personality models

There are, of course, other theories of personality. Most recognize two common personality opposites—introversion and extroversion

➤ Introversion

Introversion is not an aversion to people. Introverts like people but are energized by personal alone time. They prefer to work alone and spend time in their inner world of thoughts and ideas

➤ Extroversion

Extroversion, on the other hand, refers to the characteristic of being energized by spending time with people. These people prefer to work or spend personal time with others, and define their world in terms of their relationships

B. Spiritual Gifts

The term “spiritual gifts” refers to special spiritual abilities given to different individuals by the Spirit for use in ministry within the Body of Christ

Romans 12:6–8, NIV—We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

Ephesians 4:11–12, NIV—So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up

I Corinthians 12:8–10, 28, NIV—To one there is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues... And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance (administration), and of different kinds of tongues

Peter offers a helpful general categorization of spiritual gifts—

I Peter 4:10–11, NIV—Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.

Spiritual gifts generally fall into the two categories of speaking and hands-on serving. Peter also reminds us that God does not give us spiritual gifts for our own benefit, but for His glory. Paul reminds us that spiritual gifts are for the benefit of the church

A common situation in churches is unhappy people sitting back and criticizing the few who are doing most of the work of ministry. This happens because the few are taking up the slack in areas in which they are not gifted, and those who are unhappy are often gifted in those areas and can see how it should be done “properly”

C. Skills

Skills are the abilities we learn in courses, classes, apprenticeships, and by experience. There are some skills that dovetail with spiritual gifts and natural talents. Teaching, for instance, is a natural talent, a spiritual gift, and can be refined or learned through studying it as a skill. Leading and administration are also a natural talents, a spiritual gifts and skills that can be learned/refined. Many people have the talent/spiritual gift/skill combination

You may have difficulty knowing whether your skill is also a natural talent and/or spiritual gift if you’ve been using a skill for a long time. However, even if you’re really good at something, if you don’t really enjoy it, it’s likely not a talent or spiritual gift, but strictly a skill.

D. Experience

This is different from experience in learning and honing skills. This refers to life-wisdom gained through years of relating to others and living/ministering in the world. It refers to maturity, to understanding interpersonal dynamics, to appropriately applying your talents, spiritual gifts and skills to your circumstances

E. Legacy/mentors/influences

It’s important to also identify the specific legacies and influences of your past, since these are sources God has used to shape you for His purposes. There are several specific types of influences—

1. Birth family/home, parents/legacy

It's important to identify specifically the legacy you have from your parents, both positive and negative. It's extremely important to cast off negative legacy (which, in extreme cases, may require help from others). But it's also important to identify specific good character qualities your parents have passed on to you

2. Mentors

➤ Interpersonal relationships

An excellent exercise is listing all the major influencers who have affected your life from the time you moved away from your birth home to the present. God has a habit of handing us off from one mentor to the next. Being mentored does not necessarily involve formal relationships. Informal but important mentors include youth sponsors, pastors, mature believers we view as examples, and teachers, instructors and professors in learning situations. Of course, you should add to the list any formal mentoring you've had from counselors or life-coaches.

The second step is to describe in writing the major takeaways you've learned from these individuals

➤ Impersonal influences

You should also identify life-lessons you've learned from your reading of various authors

F. Passions/interests/God-given tasks

Passions are the specific directions that God puts in your heart. If you are enthusiastically following it, then you are going with God; you have found the good works God has prepared in advance for you

Ephesians 2:10, NIV—For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do

A Scriptural example is Nehemiah—

Nehemiah 2:12, NIV—I set out during the night with a few others. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem

Satan will attack us in the area of our passions, because this is where “the rubber meets the road;” it is where we bring to bear everything God has designed us to be in order to glorify Him. This was true in Nehemiah's case, for whom the work of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem continually came under attack by his enemies

G. The point

The point in all of the above is that as we consider the convergence of all that God has made us to be, we may experience God's leading into specific avenues of service that fit with our design

On the other hand, we have to be careful not to be totally rigid in rejecting every opportunity that we don't think suits us

H. Questions for discussion—

In the extroverted world we live in, do you think introversion is seen in a negative light? How might both introverted and extroverted people benefit the church?

Why might God indicate through His other means of guidance that we are to serve Him in a certain way, but that avenue of service doesn't fit with how we're designed?

Notes

Session VI—Conclusion

A. General observations about listening for God's voice

1. Human nature

- **We tend to listen for God's voice only when we're in trouble**
- **When we seek God's voice in trouble, we may not find it, or have no assurance of it**

Usually our motivation is just to get out of trouble

- **Ideally we should listen for God's voice when life is uneventful**

Do we sincerely desire God, or simply desire what God can do for us?

2. God's silence

- **God sometimes is silent because He may want us to decide for ourselves**
We might insist on hearing from God so we can feel right with Him or just safe

- **We should not fear being outside "God's perfect will"**

- If we act in faith and according to God's guidelines in Scripture, we are in His will
- Various actions may please God

- **When God is silent, we are to remain faithful**

- Refuse impatience
- Continue in prayer
- Keep on doing the last thing He directed us to do

B. How God breaks into our lives

There are times when God may break into our lives in a dramatic way that changes our direction for the rest of our lives; it may involve a move, or a change in vocation/ministry, or involvement in ministry in a new way

1. Scriptural examples

- **Jonah**

Jonah 1:1–2, NIV—The word of the LORD came to Jonah son of Amittai: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me"

- **Paul**

Acts 9:3–4, NIV—As [Paul] neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

2. The pattern experienced by Jonah and Paul (and other Biblical personalities)

- **God interrupts the flow of our existence in order to bring us to the main thing He wants for us**
- **When God reveals Himself to us, we will become aware of our true condition**
- **Surrendering to the relentless, pursuing God will change us forever**

3. How we become aware of God's in-breaking

- **God is always at work around us**
- **He pursues a continuing love relationship with us that is real and personal**
- **He invites us to become involved with Him in His work**

As we've seen, God speaks by the Holy Spirit through Scripture, prayer, circumstances, and the church to reveal Himself, His purposes and His ways to us, and invite us into His work

- **His invitation is our cue to come alongside what He is doing and join Him in His work**

Jesus exemplified this pattern—

John 5:17, NIV—Jesus said, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working”

John 5:19–20, NIV—“Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does

4. Our response to God's in-breaking

- **The time to obey God is when He breaks into our lives**
- **God's invitation for us to work with Him always leads us to a crisis of belief that requires faith and action**
Recall that Jonah experienced a crisis of faith, and ran away
- **We must make major adjustments in our lives to join God in what He is doing**
- **We come to know God by experience as we obey Him and He accomplishes His work through you**

This is because it is by the enabling of His Spirit that He accomplishes His will through us

The entire picture of really experiencing life with God involves not just hearing Him speak, but responding to Him in faith and ultimately seeing Him glorify Himself through the fruitful ministry He produces through us

C. Objections

How would you answer these objections—

- 1. What we're talking about is OK for pastors and missionaries, but I don't see how it relates to me**
- 2. I've asked God to do this kind of thing in my life, but He never does; my life as a believer is dull and boring**
- 3. Why can't God just leave us alone; isn't it alright to get saved and then just live a normal life?**

Notes