

The Believer and the Spirit

VI. - The Spirit and Guidance

“Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him and He shall direct thy paths” (Proverbs 3:5,6).

This passage from the Old Testament is nevertheless valid for New Testament believers. There are many sections in the Old Testament that have specific references to circumstances that were under the old covenant. But there are a great many passages that are of universal application and may be used by the New Testament believer. The essential message of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is that the God of the universe is integrally involved in the lives of His creatures. He did not create us and then abandon us to go it alone. It is true that the Old Testament believers did not have the Holy Spirit resident within them, but God had many ways of letting them know His will if they wanted to follow Him.

Finding the will of God is a constant problem for many believers. In fact, it is something that concerned believers often agonize over. Am I doing the right thing? Is this what God really wants? How do I know for sure that the Lord is with me in this? Many believers resort to “tokens.” “If this happens I’ll do this.” “If that happens I’ll do that.” Sometimes the setting up of tokens can become quite elaborate, as with Gideon. Even then, there is little certainty, especially when things go wrong afterward. Gideon was the originator of the famous “fleece” caper. “If the fleece is dry and the ground is wet; if the ground is dry and the fleece is wet.” God responded precisely, and still Gideon was not sure. Putting out a “fleece” can have so many complications as to leave one back at square one. And, of course, one always limits God in terms of human restrictions.

Some people make lists of “pros and cons.” This throws the whole thing into the maze of human reason. Who knows what consequences effect each item? And then, of course, there are those who go by feelings—“This just feels right to me.” This is especially true in terms of selecting a mate. Of course the big problem is the unreliability of human feelings. A popular song gives the warning “How could a love that seemed so right, go wrong?” It is very difficult to tell the difference between human feelings and the promptings of the Spirit. When we are being led by the Holy Spirit, we may have convictions that are contrary to emotions.

In the more mystic realm, there are those who go by dreams and visions. This was more common in the Old Testament, especially among the prophets. The individual did not possess the Holy Spirit within and everything had to come in terms of outward manifestations. It was also true for a time in the early Church where there was no written revelation, but gradually became less prevalent. Once again the problem is reliability. How does a human judge the validity of a given dream or vision? This is certainly a problem if we are trusting someone else’s. Whatever claims a person might make, we have no way to be certain about the validity. One certainly does not question the possibility of dreams or visions, but only the certainty with which we can rely on them.

So then what are we going to do? How are we ever going to really know the will of God?

We must put the problem squarely where it belongs—in the hands of God. Jesus said it—*“If anyone is willing to do His will, he shall know . . .”* (John 7:17). If the Lord knows we want to do His will, He will find a way to let us know in keeping with our own individuality and capacity. The key concept is that the human mind is not capable of knowing ultimately what God wants. It can only come through the Spirit. Therefore, only the Spirit can give us the conviction of what we ought to do. Ultimately, no matter how “spiritual” we think we are, there is always a question—Have we really gotten the right message? It is very difficult to keep the flesh out of it. How do we separate between human feelings and the convictions of the Spirit?

The only way we can come to peace about this matter is to ask the Lord to see to it that we do what He wants in spite of ourselves. In that way we do not put limits on what He can do to give us direction, as with the case of the “fleece.” Many times events happen in our lives that have no obvious reason, and yet have an effect on other events even years down the line. We do not have enough data in our minds even to ask for guidance in such cases. In the author’s experience, events happened in 1955, for example, that had a crucial bearing on the entire ministry twenty years later. In another event, the author was presenting a paper at the American Political Science Association in Washington, D.C. After the presentation, he was sitting in the lobby observing the stream of conferees. Given the common “close-mindedness” of scholars in general, he wondered—“What am I doing here?” The answer came to mind immediately—“I’m here, because I’m here.” For one reason or another, the Lord saw to it that I got to that conference. Years later I expressed this to a colleague of mine with whom I had been there, and he said to me, “I know why you were there.” Significant things had happened, unknown to me, that had made it important for me to be there. It was really a turning point in my own understanding of finding the will of God. We simply do not have enough data, even to make lists of “pros and cons.” We have no idea what the Lord has in mind for us then or years later. That is why it is so important simply to ask the Lord to see to it that we do what He wants, in spite of ourselves. Incidentally, being at that conference depended on running into a certain man in a restaurant some twenty years earlier.

Abraham is a great example of the power of God to see to it that we get where He wants us to go, in spite of ourselves. We have no record of why Abraham was selected or how he came to respond to God. He was brought up in a pagan society by a father who was an idolater. The Lord simply picked him out and brought him to Palestine. Ezekiel experienced the hand of God on him—*“So the Spirit lifted me up and took me away, and I went in bitterness, in the heat of my spirit; but the hand of the Lord was strong upon me”* (Ezekiel 3:14). Ezekiel did not really want to go, but God took him anyway. We are God’s children. Sometimes parents have to do what is best for children in spite of themselves. If it is true when we don’t really like what God does for us, it is especially true when we really want to do what He wants.

There is great peace in being able to put our lives in the Lord’s hands and trust Him to take the role of the Father with us—doing what He thinks is best in spite of our own feelings or desires. We don’t have to struggle with the problem

of “outguessing” God. Nor do we have to “second-guess” our decision—Did we do the right thing? Often when we have made the right decision and everything has seemed to flow, Satan will come along afterward with negative factors that cause us to question the decision. If we have left it with the Lord to see to it that we make the right decision, we don’t have to be concerned about that. Satan’s very name means “deceiver.” He loves to confuse the saints with false appearances. The answer, of course, is that if we have put the matter in the Lord’s hands and we have made our decision, we stay with it.

Job said, *“He knoweth the way that I take. When He hath tried me I shall come forth as gold”* (Job 23:10). The path the Lord leads us on may seem rugged and uncertain, but we can trust Him to know what we need for our refining. Sometimes we have to scale the cliffs—piton over piton; hand over hand. But we don’t look back. We don’t look at the circumstances. We don’t look at the waves. We keep our focus on Christ. He has the rope around us—He will see us through. Let each moment carry its own weight. Neither the past nor the future is ours. Regrets over the past and anxieties over the future will only confuse the issue and rob us of our peace.

This is what it means to walk in the spirit. Fleshly efforts and appearances are deceptive; human emotions are unreliable. Only the power of the Holy Spirit can give us true guidance. Referring to the Holy Spirit, Isaiah said, *“And thine ears shall hear a word behind thee saying, ‘This is the way, walk ye in it, When ye turn to the right hand, and when ye turn to the left’”* (Isaiah 30:21). Give the matter to Christ and be at peace.

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