


# Guidance

## and the voice of God

God's living word will show you where to go



PHILLIP D. JENSEN AND TONY PAYNE



How do I know what God wants me to do?  
How can I make decisions that are in line with his will?  
If God speaks to me, will I recognize his voice?

These are important questions, and many Christians grapple with them. *Guidance and the Voice of God* charts a way through these often confusing issues, and shows how for those who have ears to hear, God is still speaking loud and clear through his Son.

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SYDNEY • YOUNGSTOWN

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For Helen and Alison

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## Chapter 1

# A first word

Christians have long been fascinated with how God guides. They have battled with questions like: What is God's will for my life? How should I discern his voice and respond?

In one sense, it is little wonder that Christians have been so interested in guidance, because decision-making is one of the constant burdens of our existence. Whenever we 'do' anything, we make a choice. We cannot avoid it. We face decisions at every point of our lives—from whether to walk against the Don't Walk sign, to which car to buy.

Choosing is unavoidable, and so are the consequences of our choices. Every decision we make has repercussions—some of them predictable; others completely unexpected. Every time we make a choice, we also inherit a whole set of consequences, and sometimes these consequences can change our lives. They can affect our families, our friends, and even the whole of society.

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The unfortunate truth is that we aren't very well equipped for making decisions. Unlike God, we aren't all-knowing. We don't have all the information at our disposal, and so we are always unaware of some of the factors affecting our decisions. For example, I don't know everything about my girlfriend—so how can I be sure that she will make a good wife? The things I don't yet know about her may be the very things that will ruin our marriage!

What is more, we can't control the outcomes that flow from our decisions. Unlike God, we aren't all-powerful. We can't even put all our decisions into effect.

Choosing is hard. We blunder through life without all the information that we need to make decisions. We do our best to make good choices, but are sometimes unable to, and are forced to suffer the consequences and to inflict them on our loved ones.

We aren't even capable of picking which decisions are the important ones. I may think, for example, that whether I concentrate on science or humanities in my later years at high school will be very important. It will determine the course of the rest of my life, so I think at the time. I spend weeks, even months, weighing up all the alternatives and labouring over the decision. However, my choice to play football one Saturday morning turns out to be far more significant. A scrum collapses, I suffer brain damage, and my academic career is over.

We never know which of our decisions will turn out to be vital or even significant. Sometimes, the most trivial decision can have the most profound consequences.



It's a depressing scenario. Perhaps you are already regretting the decision to read this book.

## **Is God any help?**

Almost instinctively, Christians know that God should be able to help us in our decision-making. However, few Christians seem able to get that help from God. For them, God only complicates the decision-making process.

They sense that God has a plan for them, and that he wants them to discover that plan and put it into effect. This only makes choosing harder. They not only need to weigh up all the 'earthly' factors, but they also have to try to discern God's will. For most, this leads to uncertainty and anxiety. For some, it leads to bitterness and regret as they live their lives in the belief that they have missed God's will and must be content with his 'second best'.

What is God's plan for us? How do we find it? How does he communicate it to us? How do we hear his voice? Is God concerned with the trivial details of life (such as what sort of car we buy), or is he only interested in the 'big' decisions like marriage and career? What if I should step outside God's will for my life?

In the pages that follow, we have some good news for you. God *does* promise to guide us and, believe it or not, this is meant to reassure us and remove anxiety. He does have a plan, and we have a part to play in it, a part that is clear and easily discernible. If only we understood God's plan, and the part he has given us to play in it, we could

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face decision-making under God's guidance with joy and confidence. If only we could hear his voice with certainty, we could follow his directions with confidence.

Such is the purpose of this book: to outline God's will for our lives, how he guides us in it, and what we are to do in response.

Part I

# The grand design



## Chapter 2

# O thou great Jehovah

For over two hundred years, Christians have been singing:

Guide me, O thou great Jehovah,  
Pilgrim through this barren land:  
I am weak, but thou art mighty,  
Hold me with thy powerful hand...

We look to God to guide us, just as he guided the children of Israel out of Egypt, across the desert and into the Promised Land. The Exodus is a marvellous picture of God guiding his people.

Our hymn writer (the unmistakable Welshman, William Williams) rightly applies the Exodus to us as Christians. God leads us through 'this barren land' until we 'tread the verge of Jordan' and land 'safe on Canaan's side' (that is, in heaven). God's character and plans have not changed. He is still a guiding God.

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The first step towards understanding God's guidance is to understand the guiding God. We need to explore his character and the way he achieves his plans before we can tackle the nitty-gritty issues we are all so interested in. If we understand God—what he's like, what motivates him, and what his plans are—we will be well on the way to understanding his guidance.

### **God, the Sovereign Creator**

The God revealed to us in the Bible is the Sovereign Creator God of all the world. He made it all. He owns it all. He rules it all.

As the Creator, he continues to create and sustain all things, down to the smallest detail:

He makes springs pour water into the ravines;  
it flows between the mountains.  
They give water to all the beasts of the field;  
the wild donkeys quench their thirst.  
The birds of the air nest by the waters;  
they sing among the branches.  
He waters the mountains from his upper chambers;  
the earth is satisfied by the fruit of his work.  
He makes grass grow for the cattle,  
and plants for man to cultivate—  
bringing forth food from the earth:  
wine that gladdens the heart of man,  
oil to make his face shine,  
and bread that sustains his heart. (Ps 104:10-15)

Jesus expresses this all-embracing care of God for his creation in a striking way:

‘Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.’ (Matt 10:29-31)

God rules, sustains and replenishes his world down to the most intimate detail. And this is the God who guides his people.

The guidance given to the Israelites in the Exodus was the guidance of the Sovereign Lord of Creation. The plagues, the Red Sea crossing, the manna, the quail, the water from the rock, the voice from Sinai—the whole story bears the marks of the Creator, ruling over his world in order to achieve his purposes for one particular nation.

This continues to be God’s relationship with his people. When Israel was in captivity in Babylon, God the Creator promised to rescue them in his own powerful and extraordinary way. He decided to use the pagan king Cyrus as his ‘messiah’ to rescue Israel from Exile. And if the Israelites felt that this was a rather unorthodox way to save them, God had a word for them:

‘Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker,  
to him who is but a potsherd among the potsherds on  
the ground.

Does the clay say to the potter,

‘What are you making?’

Does your work say,

‘He has no hands’?

Woe to him who says to his father,

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‘What have you begotten?’  
or to his mother,  
‘What have you brought to birth?’  
This is what the Lord says—  
the Holy One of Israel, and its Maker:  
Concerning things to come,  
do you question me about my children,  
or give me orders about the work of my hands?  
It is I who made the earth  
and created mankind upon it.  
My own hands stretched out the heavens;  
I marshalled their starry hosts.  
I will raise up Cyrus in my righteousness:  
I will make all his ways straight.  
He will rebuild my city  
and set my exiles free,  
but not for a price or reward,  
says the Lord Almighty.’ (Isa 45:9-13)

God, the Creator and Ruler of the universe, can and does use everything to rule and guide his people—donkeys speak, staffs turn to serpents, and bushes burn without being consumed (see Numbers 22, Exodus 3, 7).

All things, including the hearts of men and kings, are in his hand:

A man’s steps are directed by the Lord.  
How then can anyone understand his own way?  
(Prov 20:24)

The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord;  
he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.  
(Prov 21:1)

## God, the Shepherd of his people

One of the most familiar, and yet most extraordinary, ideas in the Bible is that God—the Sovereign, Creator God we have just been considering—should choose to enter into relationship with sinful human beings. It is astounding. It is in some ways like the President of the United States deciding to befriend a cockroach.

The Bible describes this extraordinary relationship between God and his people as being like a shepherd with his sheep. In Psalm 80:1, God is described as the ‘Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock’; and there are numerous references like this (e.g. Ps 77:20; Isa 40:11, 63:11). The most well known, of course, is Psalm 23, which expresses the same idea more personally. God will not only guide the nation, he will also shepherd individuals:

...he leads me beside quiet waters,  
 he restores my soul.  
 He guides me in paths of righteousness  
 for his name's sake. (Ps 23:2-3)

The leaders of Israel were also called ‘shepherds’. Their responsibility was to lead and guide the people under God’s direction. The tragedy was that Israel’s leaders were often derelict in their duty. In Ezekiel 34, we read about their negligence and how, as a result, the people were ‘scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals’ (Ezek 34:5). God promises that he himself will come and tend his people, rounding up the strays,



and caring for the weak and hungry.

In light of this passage, we see the significance of Jesus being the ‘good shepherd’. In John 10, Jesus paints a graphic picture of himself as the good and faithful shepherd who knows his flock by name and leads them to safety: ‘My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me’ (John 10:27). The image is taken up elsewhere in the New Testament, such as in Matthew 9:36, where Jesus has compassion on the crowds because ‘they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd’ (see also Heb 13:20; 1 Pet 2:25, 5:4; Rev 7:17).

God relates to his people as a shepherd to his sheep. And we need to be under no illusions about how shepherds guided their sheep in the ancient world. They had a long staff, the shepherd’s crook—and it wasn’t just for leaning on—it was for whacking their sheep to keep them in line. We tend to have a very sentimental view of shepherding. We think that shepherds used to sidle up to the sheep and gently rub them on the back and ask them if they’d mind stepping this way. Shepherds weren’t like counsellors—they led their sheep; they showed them where to go and gave them a prod in the right direction if they were slow to get moving.

This is the relationship of God with his people. He shows them the way and guides them along it.

### **God, the Planner**

In understanding the God who guides, we also need to realize that he makes plans. The Bible does not see history as a succession of meaningless, random events.

The God of the Bible is the Lord of history, who draws up a plan and then pursues it to completion. God guides according to a plan.

This plan of God is explained in several parts of Scripture. It is foreshadowed in the promise to Eve that her seed will crush the serpent's head (Gen 3:15). It is foretold to Abram when he is called by God (Gen 12:1ff) and reiterated when the sign of circumcision is given (Genesis 17). It is established by the covenant with Moses and the people of Israel (Exodus 19-23). It is further elaborated to David (2 Samuel 7) and through Jeremiah (Jeremiah 31). And it finds its fulfilment in Christ (Matt 5:17-20; 2 Cor 1:20) and his people (1 Pet 1:9-12; Eph 1:3-10).

This plan of God covers centuries of human history. Abraham is told some 400 years in advance that his descendants will be captive in Egypt and then rescued by God and taken to the Promised Land. God declares that all this will happen; and it does, because God's word is as certain and reliable as the rain that waters the earth:

‘...It will not return to me empty,  
but will accomplish what I desire  
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.’ (Isa 55:11)

The New Testament events are likewise under God's control and part of his great plan. Jesus died to redeem us ‘when the time had fully come’ (Gal 4:4). There is a sense of historical necessity about what Jesus came to do. Even though it involved the brutal execution of an innocent man, Jesus' crucifixion was part of the

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grand design. It had to happen. Note the little word ‘must’ as Jesus tells his disciples about what will soon take place:

He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. (Mark 8:31-32)

Peter didn’t understand. How could it possibly be part of God’s plan for the long-awaited Christ to suffer humiliation and death at the hands of Israel’s leaders? It was inconceivable.

However, after Jesus’ death and resurrection, Peter understood that God uses even the inconceivable to achieve his purposes. On the day of Pentecost, he had this to say to the assembled Jews:

‘This man [Jesus] was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.’ (Acts 2:23)

The details of God’s plan need not worry us at the moment. They are very important, but we will pursue them in our next chapter. What is important to note at this point is that God has a plan and he works sovereignly and irresistibly to achieve it.

## Direct statements

Having looked at the character of God as the Sovereign Creator, the way he relates to his people as Shepherd, and the cosmic historical plans he makes, we already have a solid basis for expecting God to guide us. However, it is also worth noting briefly that there are some direct statements in Scripture that God will guide. These statements are few in number, but they are there.

In Psalm 25, for example, David pleads with God to protect him from his enemies. Based on his trust in God as his Saviour, David declares his confidence that God will guide the humble:

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.  
 He will spend his days in prosperity,  
 and his descendants will inherit the land.  
 The Lord confides in those who fear him;  
 he makes his covenant known to them. (Ps 25:8-9, 12-13)

There are similar ideas expressed in Psalm 32:8 and in the well-known passage in Proverbs:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart  
 and lean not on your own understanding;  
 in all your ways acknowledge him,  
 and he will make your paths straight. (Prov 3:5-6)

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God undertakes to lead his people. As the Sovereign Creator, he has the power to do it; as our Shepherd, it is the way he relates to us; and as the Supreme Planner, he knows where he wants to take us.

This last point is crucial. We must understand where God is guiding us. God has a plan, a grand design, that he has been unfolding since before the creation of the world. What is this plan? Where is he taking us? Where does the journey end?

We have already touched on what this plan entails, and our next step is to look at it in more depth.