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## Guidance from God - #1 Am I really supposed to have a personal relationship with God? 8.9.9

### **God told me.**

These are three of the most powerful and dangerous words in human language. They promise great blessing or great damage. If God told me, who are you to argue, and how can I rest until it is accomplished? God told me!

**God told me** brought down the World Trade Center.

**God told me** causes people to get married or buy houses or to move to another state.

**God told me** causes people to shoot abortion doctors or to beat up homosexuals.

**God told me** causes people to go to Bible college and become preachers and to go to Papua New Guinea and to live a life of service to others. **God told me** causes people to invest in stocks or gold or to bury their money in the back yard. **God told me!**

So obviously, one of the most important questions we can answer is: "What exactly HAS God told us?" What are we sure of, and what is just our opinion, and what is it that he definitely hasn't told us? And let's not leave that in the past tense. What, if anything, is God telling us NOW?

Today I'm being a series on Guidance From God. Why am I preaching on this? Because **God told me**? Actually, yes! But how, exactly? What does it mean that God speaks to us? I don't want to be lumped in with every kook on the planet who says he hears from God. And yet I'm sure that we're all here today and every Sunday because we believe that there is something to the notion that God does speak to us, even if we haven't quite figured it out.

I'm convinced that there is no subject that we talk about more and understand less than God's guidance. If someone says that God is leading them in some way, we generally accept it without challenge as long as it doesn't directly affect us or as long as it doesn't seem too dangerous or unbiblical. "God is leading you to join the circus? Great! Go and do likewise. Be ye warm and filled." But if your son or your husband is saying that God wants them to sell everything and give to the poor, well, wait just a minute! How do you KNOW it was God, and not your blood-pressure meds?

It's an incredibly important subject, and I'm really looking forward to studying it with you in the coming weeks. It's a subject I have been studying for awhile now, because I need clarity as much as you do (or more). In fact, I'm still studying, so I'm not sure about all of the places we're going to go in this series. But I hope it will be fun and challenging for us all.

One thing I do know is that I want to start with Three Questions, one of which we'll deal with today. Each of these questions builds on the one before. The three questions are these:

- **Am I really supposed to have a personal relationship with God?**
- **Does God actually have a specific plan for my life?** If so, just how specific is it, and what are the consequences if I fail to find it?
- **How does God guide me?** Is there a method, or at least some best practices that put me in touch with God? Or is it way simpler than that? I.e., should I expect to hear a voice? Is it all in the Bible? In circumstances? In the counsel of friends? Just how does this work?

Here are two important reasons for this study: 1) We need to be equipped against charlatans and hucksters who would manipulate us by falsely saying “God told me” (and that includes the huckster within us all, the part of us that wants to justify our own plan by saying “God told me”, and it includes me too, as I speak to you and say “God told me” or “God is leading me”, etc. 2) I believe God does lead us and wants to lead us, but if we have no idea what that means or how it works, how can he do it? My observation is that most Christians look entirely to circumstances when they look for God’s leading, and therefore they conclude that whatever is happening must be God’s will. That is unfortunate, and it causes us to misunderstand God and cut ourselves off from his leading.

Today, let’s start with: **Am I really supposed to have a personal relationship with God?**

In the video we watched two Sunday nights ago about *Why Men Hate Church*, David Murrow said something that I’ve taught before – that the term “a personal relationship with Jesus Christ” is not Biblical; that is, you won’t find that specific term in the Bible. He then talked about the dangers in using that term wrongly, and he illustrated that by talking about two different kinds of movies. He said that when he rents a movie, it’s about a strong hero saving the world against impossible odds. And when his wife rents a movie, it’s about a woman finding a personal relationship with a wonderful man. Action and adventure v. romantic comedy. *Braveheart* v. *Sleepless in Seattle*. Murrow then said that in the church, in the songs we sing, and in the way we talk about Jesus and the Christian life, we have moved from talking about Jesus as a strong hero who saves the world against impossible odds, to seeing him as a wonderful man with whom we can develop a personal relationship. We’ve gone from **“We’re Marching to Zion”** to **“You are Beautiful, My Sweet, Sweet Song”**. He finished that topic by saying that we have to be careful about how we use this unbiblical term, a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, that men don’t think it sounds like good news to have to enter a relationship with someone who will never leave you alone!

In the discussion after the video, I was a little surprised that no one raised a question about this. That personal relationship with God in all three persons is something that we all probably take for granted, and even if we feel like we don’t have it, we know we should. If someone asks you “How is your walk with God?” that’s a question we think is quite appropriate. Or if they ask us, during a time when we’re making some bad choices, if we’ve neglected our relationship with God, that makes sense. But is it Biblical? Is the personal relationship implied in Scripture even if those words aren’t there? Is this something we should be pursuing?



Consider a popular alternative, another way of relating to God that may accurately describe your relationship to him: The Fan. In this way of thinking, God is the celebrity and I’m his fan, maybe one of his biggest fans, and I relate to God like a fan relates to a celebrity.

Here’s a picture of a guy who is a big fan, to say the least, of the Dave Matthews Band. He positioned himself at the main entrance to one of the big parking lots at a DMB concert so that, when the concert was over, almost everyone leaving the show would see him standing there on top of his car holding this sign. It’s something close to an act of worship, what he’s doing, and not just because his sign says “DMB is God”, but

also because he felt so strongly this need to express his devotion for everyone to see. He went to the concert too, and now he's saying, "Rejoice with me! I have just seen the greatest thing the world has to offer".

But he has no personal relationship with Dave Matthews, nor any member of the band. I actually got to hear this guy's story. He and a friend are from Mobile, Alabama. Three nights before, they had driven to New Orleans to catch the band at a Jazz Festival there. Then they went back to Mobile for one night, and then on to Atlanta for two shows on two consecutive nights. These two guys are in their early 20s and are new fans of DMB, and they hope to see 100, 200 or 300 shows in the coming years (they actually measure their devotion by how many times they see DMB live). They have no visible means of financial support, but you know that somewhere in Mobile, there are some proud parents!

This guy is a fan, but he has never met anyone from the band, and he probably never will. He buys the music and goes to the shows and follows them on Twitter...and that's it. If ever he did meet Dave, the most he could expect is a handshake and a "Thanks for coming", and that's it. No personal relationship.

And that's exactly how we often relate to God. Even if we believe in a personal relationship, we don't necessarily expect it or pursue it. If someone else speaks about their personal relationship, we nod and make a note to get busy on that someday, but it probably doesn't happen. So it's important to answer this question, "Am I really supposed to have a personal relationship with God?" or it is OK just to count myself among his fans, especially the fans who try to obey his word?

**Well, here's a fact** that is often cited to show that, yes indeed, it IS possible to have a personal relationship with God: In the Bible, God speaks to people, and not just in a "to whom it may concern" kind of way. To Adam and Eve, he said: **"Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it" (Genesis 1:28)**. Later he told them, **"You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (2:16-17)**. Then one day, God came walking through the garden, and said: **"Where are you?" (Genesis 2:9)** and **"Who told you that you were naked?" (2:11)** and this seems to be a point where a personal relationship became more distant.

But God didn't stop talking to people. Later, he said to Abram: **"Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you" (Genesis 12:1)**. Much later, he said to Moses: **"Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground" (Exodus 3:5)**. Much later, God said to Samuel: **"How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king" (1 Samuel 16:1)**. Much later, God said to Jeremiah: **"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 1:5)**.

Much later he said (through one of his messengers) to Joseph: **"Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20-21)**. Some time later, God (in the person of the risen Jesus) knocked down poor Saul when he said: **"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4)**. And then right after, he said to a believer named Ananias: **"Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying" (Acts 9:11)**. And that actually turned into a short conversation, as Ananias said, "Are

you kidding me? This is a dangerous man” and the Lord told him to go anyway, that this Saul was his chosen instrument to preach the good news to the Gentiles.

God does a lot of direct talking to people in the Bible, and I’m not even counting the fact that the Bible itself is God’s Word of communication to us. People who don’t believe in the Bible will say that all of this communication is fiction – it didn’t really happen – but if you and I accept the Scripture as God’s Word, we can’t escape the fact that God talked to people throughout the book. He talked to people in good times and bad, and he spoke messages of judgment and comfort. He is a communicator.

But I have to tell you that those conversations between God and people in the Bible don’t say much to me one way or another about whether God wants a personal relationship with me. Why not? Because the Bible traces the history of salvation and how God brought it about, so naturally it deals with the few people God DID talk to, and it ignores the millions that weren’t central to the story. If I read a book about the life of Peyton Manning, it would tell about Peyton talking to his parents and his brothers and his coaches and his agent and other players and maybe even some fans, but it would be crazy for me to infer from it that Peyton wanted to have a talk with me or you. I could say, “Hey, look, the book says that Peyton talks to people all the time, so let’s go up and knock on his front door and have a personal relationship with him!” but that would merely result in an impersonal but direct relationship with a security guard! Now all I’m saying is that these examples from Scripture of God speaking to prophets and kings and apostles don’t really tell us anything one way or another about how God deals with most of us day to day.

This might be a good time to point out that many folks who heard from God weren’t seeking him at all. Saul wasn’t asking God to guide him as he marched along the road to Damascus to persecute the Christians there, and then when Jesus spoke to him, Saul didn’t need to be taught to hear the voice of the Lord. He heard, and it knocked him down.

Or, do you remember those guys in **Daniel 5** who suddenly, in the midst of their drunken party, saw the hand of God writing judgment on the wall? They weren’t looking for God to speak (which was part of the problem, in their case) and when they got the message, they didn’t want it because it said they were going down!

Even Samuel, when he was a boy, heard the voice of the Lord while he was lying in bed (**1 Samuel 3**), and not only was he not seeking it, he didn’t recognize it. He thought his master, Eli, had called him, so twice he ran and asked what he wanted, until Eli finally realized that the boy was hearing the voice of God.

All of this raises another issue about the times when God speaks to people in the Bible. When it happens, people hear. It’s not mysterious. They don’t have to tune in or learn how to hear him because on these occasions, his voice is so clear. They may not understand the message, or they may think it’s someone else, but it is a voice and they hear it.

Now in reality, very few Christians who claim that God guides them would say that they hear a voice in their ears. Nevertheless, they seem to have found something real, a real way to hear from God, and that’s what we want to know more about in this series. But let’s admit that the many examples we could pile up from Scripture where God speaks to people don’t really address what we’re talking about when we speak of a personal relationship.

But when you look closely at the Bible, even in the Old Testament and especially in the New, you’ll find some indications that God wants us to be more than fans.

In **Isaiah 58**, God is speaking to the people through the prophet, telling them that their religion needs to have some practical outcomes, such as feeding the hungry, giving shelter to the poor wander, setting slaves free rather than taking advantage of them to enrich themselves. And then, still speaking to all the people, God says:

<sup>9</sup> **Then you will call, and the LORD will answer;  
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I.**

"If you do away with the yoke of oppression,  
with the pointing finger and malicious talk,

<sup>10</sup> and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry  
and satisfy the needs of the oppressed,  
then your light will rise in the darkness,  
and your night will become like the noonday.

<sup>11</sup> **The LORD will guide you always;**

he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land  
and will strengthen your frame.

You will be like a well-watered garden,  
like a spring whose waters never fail.

**Isaiah 58:9-11**

That can be called a personal relationship, and here it is, even in the OT. Now, this passage may not support everything people mean when they talk about a personal relationship with God, but here is the indication that it is personal.

In **John 15**, Jesus, is speaking to his disciples in the Upper Room, but he is also speaking to his disciples down through the ages and around the world too, through Scripture. He is speaking to us when he says: **"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (15:5)**. That also can be called a personal relationship. In fact, Jesus plans to do his work in the world through us like a vine produces fruit through its branches, as long as those branches remain connected to the vine. Later on in the chapter, he calls his disciples "friends". They're not just fans or students, but friends. And the implication is: We can be too. This is personal.

Likewise, listen to Jesus in **John 14:23** – **"If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him."** Paul talks about God revealing to people **"the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27)**. What could be more personal than Christ in you? Another unbiblical expression people use is inviting Jesus into your heart, and it is unbiblical, meaning the Bible doesn't say it quite that way, but the truth is that this relationship with God means God living within us, and it's a very personal relationship.

Now if that's so, wouldn't it be incredible if God didn't mean to give us some guidance? Indeed, I think it shows how much we misunderstand salvation if we suppose that our connection with God is supposed to be impersonal and distant.

One of my favorite expressions of God's desire for a personal relationship...

<sup>33</sup> "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel  
after that time," declares the LORD.

"I will put **my law in their minds**  
and write **it on their hearts**.

I will be their God,  
and they will be my people.

<sup>34</sup> No longer will a man teach his neighbor,  
or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,'  
because **they will all know me**,  
from the least of them to the greatest,"

declares the LORD.

"For I will forgive their wickedness  
and will remember their sins no more." **Jeremiah 31:33-34**

God really does want a relationship with you. Personal is a good word for it. Now that raises a lot of other questions about guidance, such as: Does God have a specific plan for my life? Just HOW specific? What if I miss it? How do I find it? We'll deal with those as we move forward in the series, but understand that God plan, his guidance must always come from this relationship. He wants to guide us, but not like a GPS device – rather, like a Father.

For now, let's end with the invitation. In **Luke 15**, Jesus revealed the Father's very personal love and care for his sons and daughters who run from him. You all know the story. When the prodigal returned home, knowing deep down that he wasn't worthy to return home, his Father ran to him and hugged him and welcomed him home as a son. That IS personal. And that is where God stands in relation to you today.