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Guidance From God 2 – Does God have a specific plan for my life?

Hypothetical: Let's say I'm at the grocery store, and my heart is heavy over a friend I have sinned against. So I'm praying that God will show me what to do about it, because you see, this offense happened several years ago, and I'm not sure the guy even knows about it, so I could call and apologize but maybe it would just stir something up that is better left in the past. So I pray, "Father, give me a sign!" And I look up, and I'm standing in the meat section, and there in front of me is a display of Wampler's Pure Pork Sausage. It just so happens that my friend's last name is Wampler, I figure that's a sign from God, so I call him and apologize, and things turn out well. So when I talk about it, I say that God told me to call this guy, or God directed me with that sign.

Do you accept that this is the leading of God? Raise your hand if you do.

Another hypothetical. I'm at the same store, and I'm praying, "Lord, our church needs to reach out to our community, to the youth. What should we do? Give me a sign!" And as I push my cart out into the parking lot, there across the street I see a church that is building a gym. And I figure that's just as clear as the sausage, so I stand up in church on Sunday and say: "God told me that we should build a gym!"

Raise your hand if you accept THAT as the leading of God.

I suggest to you that the main difference between the two is that the first one involves just me and my friend and the second one involves you and your money! Remember I said last week that we tend to nod in agreement if someone says "God told me" as long as the message doesn't affect us, but if it's my spouse who thinks that God told her to disrupt OUR lives, I'm going to look at it more closely.

Actually, there's another difference between the two situations. The first one, where I apologize to a friend – that's something that the Bible says we should do anyway, without a specific leading from the Lord. The only reason I was hesitating is that I had put it off so long (for years, in fact) that I worried it might do more harm than good at this point, but Jesus told us clearly that if you are offering your worship and you remember that your brother has something against you, then you should go and make it right (**Matthew 5:23-24**). I really shouldn't have waited for God to lead me to the sausage section to admit that. But the second situation is much different. The Bible says we are supposed to spread the good news, and maybe a gym can help do that in some cases, but there are a hundred other ways to do it

The fact is, even though these are fictitious, something like each one happened to me, and I decided that the first one had merit because, with or without a sign from God, the Word of God had already spoken, whereas in the second case, I came to the conclusion that it was just an idea, and it wasn't the right time to carry it out, and maybe it never would be.

The thing both situations have in common is that in each case, the "sign from God" is very subjective, meaning that you can't measure it against an objective standard to determine whether it's really from God or not. Maybe I saw the Wampler's truck out in the parking lot as I came in, and that's what got me to thinking about the situation in the first place. Usually when someone

says “God told me”, they’re talking about an impression or a sign or a circumstance that is very subjective, which cannot be tested against objective truth.

We began a series last week about Guidance From God, and we said that when someone says “God told me”, you should be careful, and when someone here at church says “God told me”, you should be VERY careful because we are all susceptible to reading our own desires and plans as if they were the revealed will of God, and in some ways, there is even pressure from other Christians to justify our ideas as such.

But then we asked the question, “**Am I really supposed to have a personal relationship with God?**”, and the answer we found is “Yes, we are”. God wants to relate to us the way a Father, a wise and loving father, relates to his children. In fact, we looked at some Scriptures that talk about God coming to live with us and even IN us, and wouldn’t it be incredibly odd if He lived within us and never communicated with us? But we also said that, as with any good friendship, God wants to guide us through the context of the relationship, not like the GPS unit on your dash guides you in a mechanical way with a disembodied voice that says “Turn left in 500 yards”.

And then, by way of caution, we said that we have to be careful not to draw unwarranted parallels between those times in Scripture when God guided people and our own experience. Someone recently said to me that, since God talked to people all the time in the Bible, we should expect him to talk to us. Well in this series we ARE looking at how God leads us, but the cases in Scripture where God speaks don’t help us much. Joseph, after all, didn’t say “You know, I just can’t shake this impression in my heart that what is conceived in Mary is of the Holy Spirit, and that I should take her as my wife and name the boy ‘Jesus’”. Quite the opposite. He didn’t think that at ALL, but an angel visited him and set him straight. Paul didn’t say, “You know, I enjoy persecuting Christians and all, but I keep hearing this name ‘Jesus’ everywhere I go. Maybe I should take some time off and investigate his claims”. On the contrary, he was breathing murderous threats against Christians until the risen Jesus knocked him down on the road to Damascus. Ananias didn’t say, “I hear that Paul is in town, and while I was journaling this afternoon I got the impression that I should go witness to him”, but instead God told him to go, and persisted against Ananias’ objections. I believe that God can speak in such a direct fashion today if he wants to, but let’s admit that when we talk about inner impressions and signs we receive at the grocery store, we’re talking about something much different from the kind of thing we read about in the Bible.

Now let’s move on to the second question I raised last week: Does God have a specific plan for my life? This is where we get into the question of God’s will.

We all know that God has a plan for the universe that will march forward and reach the conclusion that God intends. Christ will return, the dead will be raised, the wicked will be judged, and the righteous will be rewarded for their faithfulness. That plan certainly includes us, but we cannot stop it nor will we know all the details of it before they happen, though we ought to be better acquainted than we are about what the Bible does say through prophecy about this plan. But that’s not the plan we’re talking about.

We also know that God has a moral and spiritual plan for us. This is the whole point of much of the Bible. God wants us to be honest, and to do good work. He wants us to be sexually pure and give generously to those in need and to seek to unite people rather than divide them (especially within the church). God expects us to pray and seek his face and turn from our wicked ways. He wants us to love his Word and study it. He requires us to forgive people (more than makes sense) and to be peacemakers and to honor our parents. These and many other commands of Scripture tell us clearly God’s will for how we live. Oddly enough, many Christians who are looking for God’s will in some very specific way are at the same time ignoring some of the very basic moral commands of Scripture – an intolerable contradiction. And here’s a personal

observation: Those times when I have been most convinced that God guided me directly, or when I have been convinced that God guided someone else directly were times when God's message to me (or them) applied some aspect of God's moral law to my life (or theirs). I think God DID arrange it so that I received a sign that made me apologize to my friend. See, that is something God's moral law already said I should do, but God loves me enough that he showed me where I had ignored him.

Most of the time when we talk about finding God's will, we're not talking about his moral and spiritual will. But we should be.

What we ARE usually talking about when we ask if God has a specific plan for my life is choices. How do we make choices? Where God's Word doesn't speak and where the consequences are great, how do we choose? I'm not talking about McDonald's, Wendy's or Taco Bell, but stuff like: Who should I marry? Which house should I buy? Should I go back to school? Should I go into business for myself? Should I take this job? Should I quit this job? And how about the church? Should we build? Should we borrow? Should we hire someone?

The question is "How do we make those choices?" and the deeper question behind it is: "Does God have a specific plan for my life or for our church?" meaning does he have a detailed plan that we can discover and live by? If he does, we certainly need to find it because to be outside his plan brings serious consequences. But if he doesn't have such a plan, there are serious consequences too – namely, we can waste a lot of time and pile up a lot of guilt as we fail to find something that isn't there.

Let's look at a passage that might indicate that God has a specific plan for us: **Romans 12:1-2** - **¹Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. ²Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.** So far, he's talking about God's moral and spiritual will. **Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.** Oh, now that last part sounds like what we're looking for. If I walk closely with God and let him transform my mind, I will be able to know his will.

Now consider that last line about his good, pleasing and perfect will – some people teach that as if it means good, better and best, that I could make some choices that God thinks are "good" (not "great" but okay), and others that are pleasing ("now you're getting warmer!") and one choice that is PERFECTO!

Or you could **diagram it like this**: A large circle which is God's permissive will, within which is a smaller circle that is pleasing, and a dot at the center, a bulls-eye that is God's perfect will for you. So if you're choosing a college, God would be okay with Roane State or UT or Tech, but not UK (of course) and most certainly not Florida! But to be honest, God would really prefer Carson Newman or Milligan College. But obviously the center of God's will can be found in one place and one place only. Johnson Bible College!

I'm making it sound silly, but in reality there probably are good reasons to choose one school over another even though many choices would be okay. The question is: Does God have something like this laid out for us in a specific plan for our lives, and if he does, can we know it? And can we apply the same thing to getting married or choosing a church to attend or buying a home? Does **Romans 12** teach that?

I don't think it does. Here's why. Even though we like to pull verses out of context and dissect them, this passage exists in a context. Paul didn't even know that he had finished **chapter 11** and started **chapter 12** – chapter and verse divisions were added 1,500 year later. Now right

before this passage had had been talking about God's dealings with Israel, and he just finished by saying:

**³³Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!**

³⁴"Who has known the mind of the Lord? (11:33-34)

That should pull us up short if we say we can know God's mind, but I don't want to make too much of that. After all, **chapter 12** really does change the subject, and besides Paul asks elsewhere "Who has known the mind of the Lord" but he answers that "we have the mind of Christ" (**1 Corinthians 2:16**), and we've already established that God lives within us and wants to lead us. But what I'm interested in is what follows in **chapter 12**. Right after saying that we can test and approve the good, pleasing and perfect will of God, he goes on and says the word "For", linking it back to what he just said about knowing God's will – and then he makes God's will concrete for us, saying things like:

- Don't think of yourself too highly. **v.3**
- Use your gifts to serve God through your church. **vs. 4-8**
- Hate what is evil. Cling to what is good. **v. 9**
- Share and practice hospitality. **v. 13**
- Bless those who persecute you. Don't repay evil for evil. **vs. 14-17**
- Obey the law. Respect the authorities. **ch. 13**

Paul, this is pretty basic stuff. I want to know God's will about buying a Chevy.

In **chapter 14**, he gets to some issues where people could have used some guidance: Should I eat meat or only vegetables? Should I eat shellfish (for example) when some of the Christian brothers and sisters of Jewish decent think that this is wrong? Should I be forced to observe a sacred day that someone else thinks is important when I'm convinced that every day is the Lord's day? These were practical issues, and this would have been a good time for Paul to say to go spend time with the Lord and ask him to tell you what his good, pleasing and perfect will is for you with regard to these matters.

Do you know what Paul says? He says, "You know what you should do? You should act in love. If your actions bother someone else, then you aren't acting in love, and everyone should know that God wants us to act in love toward our brothers, even if they have some old-fashioned or legalistic ideas about how to please God". So Paul points them back to God's moral and spiritual will and he says: "Base your actions on that. That's his good, pleasing and perfect will."

Most telling for me is the way Paul speaks about his own plans in Romans 15. Now Paul certainly had an individual calling from God, a direct assignment to preach the Gospel to everyone and especially to the Gentiles. There were even occasional signs from God directing his travel plans, such as a vision (**Acts 16**) where he saw a man from Macedonia saying, "Come over to help us" and just before that, there was a time when they tried to enter Bithynia but the Spirit of Jesus prevented them from doing so (**Acts 16:7**). Now again, to repeat the warning from last week, he doesn't say that he had an impression from God in his heart that he should go to Macedonia, or that he went to market and saw some Italian bread being sold and felt that God was telling him to go to Rome. It was much more direct and undeniable.

But **Romans 15**, along with other letters, shows that this wasn't how he made many of his plans. Listen: ²⁰**It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation.** Your ambition? We

might have lectured Paul on following God's plan, not his own ambition. But he was following God's plan. He was carrying the Gospel to as many places as he could. Then he goes on to say that he's done all he can where he is: **23But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to see you, 24I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to visit you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while. 25Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there.**

The thing that is striking about how Paul talks about his plans is how ordinary it all sounds. In another place he says, "I'm staying here in Ephesus until Pentecost, because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me" (1 Corinthians 16:8-9) indicating that he looked for God's will in opportunity, and he didn't always measure it by how easy it was. Paul's pattern in Acts is that he goes one place and preaches there until they throw him out, and then he goes somewhere else and someone invites him to come speak and he does it.

Now, understand, God is leading in all of this. What I'm trying to show you is that Paul doesn't spend a lot of time looking for the dot at the center of the circle, waiting for God to tell him where to go next and when to leave and which road to take, and he doesn't therefore pile up a lot of frustration and guilt upon his own back thinking that he has somehow failed to hear God or find the exact plan God has for him. And here is an apostle to the Gentiles, the author (from a human standpoint) of half of the NT.

Now, the question I set out to answer today was: **Does God have a specific plan for my life? The answer is yes. The plan he has is incredibly specific and it touches every area of your life** – your integrity, your attitudes toward authority, your money, the way you behave sexually, the kind of language you use, the kind of parent you become, the way you do your job – it has to do with your basic character. **The plan is that you become a fully devoted and equipped follower of Jesus Christ, and that you live a life worthy of that calling.** This is very personal and very specific in that it covers everything you are and do, and it will take you a lifetime to work it out under his power and to experience the full joy of it.

But if you're asking: "Has he picked out my future wife? Has he chosen my college? Does he have a Sunday School class selected for me, not to mention my next car and my retirement home?" I'll say the following:

- From the perspective of eternity, he does in fact know these things.
- With most all of those issues, there are choices you could make that would be poor choices. Some of those choices are poor because to pick them would be to ignore God's word on finances, for example, or about marrying a believer or acting in love and consideration for your family. Some would be poor choices because they don't fit how God made you, what gifts he gave you.
- But when it comes down to it, there could be a variety of good choices you could make **AND no one choice that is clearly superior to the rest.**
- And I can't find in Scripture any promise where God says that he'll pick one for you. On the contrary, it's in the choosing **and in the living with our choices while still being faithful to God** that we grow and mature and learn FROM God.

Just like any REAL relationship.

Next week I want to talk a bit more about the very serious problems it creates when we believe we have to get God to tell us exactly what to do, and I want to talk about the third question: How does God guide me?

For now, the invitation. I know that God's plan for your life is that you not perish, but that you come to everlasting life. I know that he wants to be a Father to you, a wise and loving Father who will guide you and listen when you pray and carry you in his love and help you to stand in his grace and break free from the things that threaten to enslave you. I know his plan is for you to come to him through Jesus Christ, by accepting him as your Savior and your Lord.

I've had choices
Since the day that I was born
There were voices
That told me right from wrong
If I had listened
No I wouldn't be here today
Living and dying
With the choices I made

I was tempted
By an early age I found
I liked drinkin'
Oh, and I never turned it down...

hey this is Jesse Weigle, and I was hoping to get this video to dennis or the pryors...Me and another military buddy of mine are leaving this sunday for Walakitang, Nicaragua we will be there for 10 days minstering and praying and doing light construction for the families of this small village...attached is a video that tells all about this trip, this video was taken last year or 2 years ago. I am not really sure...Me and my friend are going through the River Commuinty Church in cookeville, TN...the purpose of this video was hopefully to help get prayer for this trip...I really feel like we need alot of people praying for this trip!...I was hoping to have this video play on sunday morning, to show all my friends and family what it is like down there...I hope it can be played! when I get back I would love to come talk about my experiences that I had...This trip is really important for alot reasons...this will be the second time that the River Church will have sent a team...It use a team of 5, but now we are down to 2! yep just 2 of us lol.....Please be praying for us...if you want to reach me before I leave you can contact me at 865 399 2691 (cell phone)...or email me back! hope to hear from you guys!.....Also this is not the PURPOSE of this email, but If anyone feels compelled to maybe give a small amount of financial aid towards this trip, it would be greatly appreciated lol...I still owe 676 dollars left for last payment...anywho sorry for the last minute update, and the to remind the Financial part is not the purpose of this email, but we greatly need churchs PRAYING for Me and Mike down there...and not to worry I have contacts that I am going to meet up with down there that will get us there safely! lord willing lol! Have a blessed day:
Jesse Weigle