



Hearing God Guidance Through “Witness”

We began and ended [last week's Gathering](#) with Jesus imploring us to “abide,” to take up residence, in his love—his love for us and his love for the Father. Dwelling here, within this divine love, we take up the responsibilities of obedience. Not obedience to dictated details, but rather, **choices made in-kind**, in love for God and one another. From the vantage point of [John 15](#), we discussed guidance. Guidance is the most common motive for seeking God and usually the desire that shapes our understanding of what we hear and why we believe God speaks. Yet, if we are honest, most of us feel like seeking guidance from God is more akin to stumbling through the woods rather than following a familiar path. So we acknowledged that how we expect God to respond (i.e., a message a minute, only through the Bible, or simply by what will be coming to be) could cause missteps if we don't understand what we know of God's intentions for and interactions with us humans (i.e., He speaks from love to love, he speaks to real humans who can really understand and know him, and humility is crucial).

Today we will continue to focus on guidance in our efforts to cultivate confidence and competency in Hearing God from within the relational affection of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Having found ourselves taking up residence *within* a loving and dynamic relationship, we can discern where and how God is directing our lives. The good news that God is sharing his life *with* us allows us to cultivate a conversational companionship with Him, which in turn guides our daily living. Look with me at two texts that set the tone for our conversation today.

Romans 8:31-39 (NEB) says,

With all this in mind, what are we to say? If God is on our side, who is against us? He did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all; and with this gift how can he fail to lavish upon us all he has to give?

Who will be the accuser of God's chosen ones? It is God who pronounces acquittal: then who can condemn? [Would Jesus condemn us?] Christ, who died, and, more than that, was raised from the dead—who is at God's right hand and indeed pleads our cause. [It would be silly to think he would, and he is the final and forever Ruler!]

Then what can separate us from the love of Christ? Can affliction or hardship? Can persecution, hunger, nakedness, peril, or the [violence]?

[Though it feels like the world is against us, seeking to destroy those ‘naive’ sheep of God's flock,] and yet, in spite of all, overwhelming victory is ours through him who loved us.

For I am convinced that there is nothing in death or life, in the realm of spirits or superhuman powers, in the world as it is or the world as it shall be, in the forces of the universe, in heights or depths—nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

You and I are immersed in the inseparable, “inexorable love of God.” In this loving relating *with* God, we can experience what the prophet Isaiah longed for and foresaw. Looking forward to the day in which the Messiah would deliver God’s children and once again share His presence with His people, a day which Jesus proclaimed at the beginning of his ministry had arrived ([Lk. 4:16-21](#)) and which Paul said in Romans had already come. Isaiah said on that day,

“Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, ‘Here I am.’

If you take away the yoke from your midst,
the pointing of fingers, and
speaking wickedness.

If you pour yourself out for the hungry
and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
then shall your light rise in the darkness
and your gloom be as the noonday.

And the LORD will guide you continually

and satisfy your desire in the scorched places
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.”

(Isaiah 58:9-11)

From within the security of our relationship with God, we can learn to discern God’s continual guidance. Secure in our “withness” and aware of both the potholes and guardrails, we can begin to recognize God’s guidance in our daily living.

So how does God guide us? What forms does the recognizable nearness of God take?

RECOGNIZABLE FORMS OF 'WITHNESS'

1. Nearly-Blind Faith

Well, some would say, lacking any credulity, that they simply believe that God is with them, and so he must be guiding them. His word says it is so, so it is. He has at times in the past proven to govern, so He must be doing so always. So they say. While this “nearly blind” faith recognizes the truth of the gospel, it lacks momentary awareness of how God is actually with us and working. Still, there are times where all we have is such a nearly-blind belief that God is here.

RECOGNIZABLE FORMS OF 'WITHNESS'

1. Nearly-Blind Faith

2. Strong Impressions

Others would say that they sense—individually and often confirmed in the community—a strong impression of God with them and guiding them. Something inside them draws their attention to a particular need, course of action, or towards a particular attitude. This powerful feeling is hard to describe. Sometimes it feels like an unshakable weight or angst, sometimes it feels like an epiphany, and sometimes it feels like a burden lifted. Yet if you have experienced this sense of direction, no explanation is needed. At times, this strong impression of God drawing you one way or another is also accompanied by more distinct experiences of being overwhelmed by God’s nearness that leaves us with a clarity of calling or purpose. An overwhelming light, a voiceless vision, or the like invades our minds, and without elucidation, we know what we are to do.

RECOGNIZABLE FORMS OF 'WITHNESS'

1. Nearly-Blind Faith

2. Strong Impressions

3. Extraordinary Events

Others would say that they have sensed God’s guiding presence through extraordinary or powerful events that could not be easily explained away. Perhaps after experiencing a strong sense of God’s nearness and love, they were able to do and say things that could only be attributed to God at work with them. Similar to how Paul and Barnabas described their efforts in [Acts 14:27](#). The only account they could offer was “God *with* them, and how *he* had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.” Pathways that did not exist before were made clear, and what seemed like an impossible dream became a reality. Whether the extraordinary and powerful be the effects of our actions in ministry or work, or the “open doors” miraculously before us, we see in the events God’s presence and guidance.

All three “forms” or God’s guidance are valid. Nearly-blind faith, strong impressions, and extraordinary events as forms of God guiding our daily living are biblically, historically, and experientially verifiable and beneficial in the life of faith. However, if we stopped here, our discerning of God’s guidance and interaction with God would be left on shaky ground. As one author says, to leave God’s guidance at “nearly blind” faith, strong impressions, and extraordinary effects or opportunities, is to leave it “to the level of vague feelings, the Ouija board, and even superstitious conjecture.”¹ Such guidance hardly gives us the kind of confident footing of which Isaiah spoke. A fourth form is necessary.

RECOGNIZABLE FORMS OF 'WITHNESS'

1. Nearly-Blind Faith

2. Strong Impressions

¹ Dallas Willard, *Hearing God*, 67.

3.Extraordinary Events

4.Personal Guidance

Being “led by the Spirit,” as Paul described it in [Galatians 5](#), is not interpreting “vague impressions and signs.” **If God is personal, and our relationship to him is personal (in love), then we can expect God to guide us personally as well.**

PERSONAL GUIDANCE: God directing us in our personhood, engaging our minds without coercing our wills.

What does it mean for God to guide us personally? Aren’t these three forms “personal”? Well, yes and no. Yes, these forms can be ways we individually experience God’s nearness and guidance, but **personal guidance is God directing us as persons in our personhood: with minds and wills of our own.** Let me explain it this way.

TWO TYPES OF GUIDANCE

1.CAUSAL: God steering us through life.

2.PERSONAL: God communicating to us.

There are two types of guidance, causal and personal. Causal guidance takes shape within the created order and the limitations of our physical reality. God’s causal guidance determined your birthplace and time in history, your core identity, physical restrictions, and the limitations we all share as the human species on the planet earth. God’s causal guidance within the created order and constraints of our physical existence, at times, has a mechanical feel to it, similar to the way you and I would guide a car. God takes the initiative to start the engine and move us forward, steering us through the means at hand to direct us to specific points.

Often, we think of causal guidance as the primary way God directs us, but that’s because—as we discussed last week—we undervalue God’s intentions for us to mature in a loving, freely responsible relationship with him and others. Because God desires us to abide in his love and word by obedience to his command to love one another, we must begin to recognize that God guides us in the same way we would guide another human being who has a mind and will of their own.

Dallas Willard describes God’s personal guidance—His directing us as persons---this way,

[Persons] have a mind with which to consider matters on their own and a will concerning what is to be done. Ideally, personal guidance brings things to the desired outcome but at the same time, allows the other person’s mind to be guided to its fullest capacity without coercing that person’s will. **Thus the outcome is the work of both the individual being guided and the one who is guiding.** [i.e., companionship]

For this purpose, God must *communicate* with you, the one who is to be guided. This is the only means by which God can have an impact on you and yet still leave you with the mental and spiritual space to retain integrity as a free personality. You can live as God’s friend yet also govern your own life.

God generally deals with nonhuman or nonpersonal creation as one guides a car [consciously causing it to proceed in a particular direction] by a casual influence mediated through physical reality that he has ordained in his creation.

But God's *personal* creatures, whether angelic or human, are also guided by his communicating his intentions and thoughts. Personal creatures are *addressed* by him.

In Psalm 32:9, we are admonished, 'Do not be like a horse or a mule, without understanding, whose temper must be curbed with bit and bridle.' We are to be led by—guided by—reasonable, intelligible communication, not by blind impulse, force, or sensation alone.²

Reasonable, intelligible, communication; is how God desires to guide us. God's guidance, while not less than believed, impressed, evidence of his acting, is also meant to be more. It's meant to be personal. And when we want to guide someone personally, we do so in a different way than we would drive a car or lead a horse.

Let's think about this for a second. God says he will guide us continually, but at the same time—as we have argued repeatedly from our scriptures—he does not desire to lead us mechanically (at least primarily). **God's desire for us is to be like Jesus: daughters and sons whose words and actions are not dictated movements but rather the free initiative of those who know and love the Father. So...he communicates his intentions and his thoughts to us, whom he loves.**

God guides us like we would guide someone who we love: with respect and dignity for their mind and will.

PERSONAL GUIDANCE THROUGH

1. Words | we know the intentions and thoughts of the Father because he speaks them to us.

Such guidance would require us to use words, to speak to our child or friend. And what we see when we look at the book of Acts, are story after story of God's voiced guidance to the early church. Take [chapters 9 and 10](#), for example. In these chapters, we see four unique stories of God speaking. Among them are God speaking to Ananias, telling him to find Paul (then called Saul) to open his eyes to see clearly the intent of the Father. We also witness Peter on the rooftop in Joppa hearing God speak in a vision that guided him to the house of Cornelius, and an expanded view of the Father's purposes in humanity.

According to one author, "These purposeful, conscious communications by words seem to have been quite normal experiences for the early Christians."³ Take 1 Corinthians 14:26 as an example. Paul is helping his highly dysfunctional faith family stay on course with Jesus together, and so he offers this advice,

"When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up."

² Ibid., 68-69.

³ Ibid., 70.

Apparently, conscious communication with God was not abnormal, even if it left them a little vexed at how to apply it! What we see in the early church is not some out-of-left-field experience of easily excitable charismatics, but rather the fulfillment of the prophet Joel's words describing life with God in his kingdom,

And it shall come to pass...that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh. Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit. (Joel 2:28-29)

Hearing God speak, experiencing personal guidance by the voice of God is not abnormal, even if we lack the skill to distinguish his voice or the wisdom to respond appropriately at times.

PERSONAL GUIDANCE THROUGH

1. Words

2. **Shared Active Focus** | we know the intentions and thoughts of the Father because we are focused on what he is focused on.

Over the next several weeks, we will work on both our capability and response. Still, for today, there is one more thing about personal guidance that we must understand if we are to confidently and competently Hear God: **we come to discern what God wants us to know through immersion with him in his work, through a shared active focus.**

Look with me again at Isaiah's promised hope, which we live in through Jesus,

"Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, 'Here I am.'

If you take away the yoke from your midst,
the pointing of fingers, and
speaking wickedness.

If you pour yourself out for the hungry
and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
then shall your light rise in the darkness
and your gloom be as the noonday.

And the LORD will guide you continually
and satisfy your desire in the scorched places
and make your bones strong;
and you shall be like a watered garden,
like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail."

(Isaiah 58:9-11)

Between God speaking and his guiding, is our actions. More precisely, our activities that align with his actions. As Isaiah points out in the “If you’s,” when we are actively putting off the old self (enslavement, comparing and contrasting, and works of the flesh) and putting on the new self (overcoming evil with love and goodness), then we’ll see clearly the steps in front us—even in the middle of the night. To put it another way, **when we focus on what God focuses on, we come to understand his intentions and share his mind.**

Remember that psalm I quoted a few minutes ago about God not wanting us to be led through life like a horse? Well, the verse directly before such a vivid picture of what God does not want describes what God does want. Psalm 32:8 says,

I [God] will instruct you and teach you in the
way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

The King James Version translates the final line as, “I will guide thee with mine eye.” God guides us, counsels us by helping us focus our attention upon what his attention is focused. God speaks to instruct, that’s the first line of verse 8, but he also instructions through our attentiveness to his attention.

This form of guidance is not strange when we think about it. In the workplace or on a sports team or even in marriage, “when we work or play closely with another,” we come to “know the intentions and thoughts of the other’s mind by our awareness of what they are focused on.”⁴ Through shared activity in which we are continuous of the other’s movements and focus, we begin to think and work congruently. We are “in-step” or “in-sync” with our co-laborer, teammate, or spouse. Meaning, we know what to do without being told. Like we said in the first week of this series, through the parable in Luke 17:7-10, Jesus reminds us that in God’s kingdom, “If a servant does only what he is told do, he is an unworthy servant.”⁵ God does not want horses; he wants companions and friends.

We also see shared activity as a means for personal guidance in our friendships as well. In friendship, as Jesus described to us in John 15, there is an interaction that is “cognitive but occurs beyond words.”⁶ Leslie Weatherford describes the interaction this way,

If my friend’s mother in a distant town falls ill and he urgently desires to visit her, which would reveal deeper friendship—my lending him my motor-bike in response to his request for it, or my taking it to his door for him as soon as I heard of the need, without waiting to be asked? In the first case there has to be a request made with a voice. But in the second the fact of the friendship creates in me a longing to help.⁷

A shared focus in actions and friendship creates both the longing and understanding of what to do in daily life. Paul names this shared focused as “the mind of Christ” ([1 Cor. 2:15-16](#)), which we have been given in our

⁴ Ibid., 71.

⁵ Ibid., 72.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Quoted in *Hearing God*, 72.

relationship with the Father to know what the Father desires. If we are co-laborers and friends, our desires are shared with the one to whom we work alongside and who has our affection.

To this truth, Dallas Willard pierces my heart with these words,

In many cases our need to wonder about or be told what God wants in a certain situation is a clear indication of how little we are engaged in his work, [or because] the friendship aspect of our relationship is missing.⁸

In summary,

RECOGNIZABLE FORMS OF 'WITHNESS'

1. Nearly-Blind Faith

2. Strong Impressions

3. Extraordinary Events

4. Personal Guidance through God speaking & our shared active focus

We are guided by our “withness” to God. Our nearness to him is recognized in ‘nearly-blind’ faith, through strong impressions, and displays of the supernatural effects of his presence. But the confidence grounding form of his nearness is the intelligible communication we have with God through his speaking and our shared activity.

When all these types of presence are in place...then having a personal relationship with God becomes a concrete, commonsense reality rather than a nervous whistling in the spiritual dark.⁹

Let’s pray.

⁸ Ibid., 72-73.

⁹ Ibid., 75.

COMMUNION

“God does indeed guide us in many ways, by special acts of intervention in our lives as well as by general providential ordering of the world. But his direct communication with us, by word and by shared activity, is the most important part. This is because we are to become...ones that actively understand and cooperate with God’s purposes, ones that are inhabited through a willing, clear-eyed identification of ourselves with Jesus Christ.”¹⁰

Or, as Paul describes this willing, clear-eyed identification,

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Gal. 2:20)

May our receiving of these elements of communion, Jesus’ body broken and his blood poured out in love for us, be our willing, clear-eyed, identification with Jesus and the bittersweet reminder of Jesus with us.

¹⁰ Ibid., 75-76.