

“God, Which Direction Should I Go?” //

Psalm 25 // Help # 4

Since I last preached here, something significant has happened in my life... I got a new pair of J’s!

- These were a gift from **Pastor Chuck** and several of our staff... they **insisted that I wear them if I got elected** as SBC president to indicate it was a new day
- And I promise you that the moment they announced my election my first thought was, “**Oh no, I promised to wear those Jordans on stage...**”
- But that’s the other big thing that happened in my life—I got elected to serve as President of the SBC—it’s a 1-year term with a 1-year renewal.

So, a couple of things I want to reiterate to you:

- Being elected President doesn’t change my relationship here at all—I will continue to serve in my full capacities as your pastor—which, after my family, is my 1st and most important ministry assignment—and this church will always come 1st in my commitments.
- (We have even structured my travel schedule so that I won’t miss any more weekends than I do in other years.
- (Being SBC president may lead to a lot more alliteration in my sermons and more potlucks, but that’s about the only difference you should notice.)

Works Consulted:

“Disciplines of Guidance,” Tim Keller

“Listen Here,” Andy Stanley

“Listen Up,” Andy Stanley

“Psalm 25,” John Piper

As I told you months ago, the reason our elders, my wife and I opened ourselves up to this when we were approached about it was for reasons pertaining to the Great Commission.

- If there is a **code that I try to live by it is to prioritize** the reaching of the lost in all that I do and to follow the Holy Spirit as best I can... and both of those things pointed to saying yes to this opportunity.
- **I’ve told you before:** Around 240 of our members live on church planting teams overseas and every year we send out more than 100 on domestic church planting teams. The vast majority of these go in partnership with SBC initiatives.
 - It (doesn’t make any sense to commission our people to go if we are not willing to do what we need to do on this side to create good sending and support structures.)
- It’s like I often tell you: **William Carey**, the father of the modern Missions movement, famously said...

Here’s what I am praying, and I’d love for you to pray with me:

- **Psalm 67.** When God blesses his people, he does so with the nations in mind
- **For me personally, I’ve been praying Prov 10:22** (as God has made us rich in opportunity and influence, I’m praying there would be no cause for sorrow in my family, my church)

Well, that’s that, so let’s get on it this weekend. Ps 25 if you have your Bibles.

We’re in a series called **Help** in which we consider prayers that almost all of us have prayed at some point, regardless of our level of spiritual maturity.

- Week 1: **Pastor Derrick** preached on, “**How long, O Lord?**” (*How long will I remain in pain? How long will injustice prevail?*) And the answer was not long at all, and in the meantime, we should focus on our Savior not our situations.
- Week 2: Pastor Will preached on, “**Where are you, God? I feel all alone.**” And the answer was that through Christ we are never alone. We know that if Jesus was faithful to us in his darkest hour, he’ll be faithful to us in ours.
- Week 3: “**God, do you not even care?**” And the answer was he does, and when you trust in his love you’ll see him do some amazing things even in the darker chapters of your life.
- **(I will say, this has been some of the best 3 weeks of preaching we’ve ever had at this church! – One of things we say at this church we always say that we are committed to raising up leaders, awesome to see it happen.)**

This weekend I want to consider the prayer, “**God, which way is the right way to go?**” All of us **have prayed** that at some point, right? *‘Which school should I go to? Should I go to grad school? Should I go out with him, or break up with her? Should I take the job?’* Or may be even more serious questions like, “Is it right to separate from my husband in this season.”

All of us have been in a time when we didn’t know what to do and asked God for help, right? **How many are praying it right now?**

This is probably one of the main causes of stress in our lives!

- Anybody remember the ‘Choose your own adventure’ novels...? **Here’s one of my favorites as a kid.** You’d be reading the book and then you’d have a choice: “You’re being chased by a flock of rabid wolverines and an old lady invites you into a house to escape... If you want to accept her invitation, turn to page 210. If

not, turn to page 130.” And I’d accept the invitation, “Turns out she was a witch and so she puts a spell on you and cooks you in her stew. The end.” And I would think, “Oh, if only I could have known.”

- **And that’s how we see the will of God:** We have 2 doors in front of us and one leads to peace and prosperity but the other to doom and destruction. “If I only knew!”
- **Eventually in reading these books** I got to where I’d start with the last page that had the happiest ending and **read backwards**. I’m sure that indicates something disturbing about my personality. But **wouldn’t it be great** if we could do that in life?

And how do we know what God wants in those situations?

- Does he give us some **warm, serene feeling of peace** when we think about the right decision? Strange sign? *A friend told me about a friend who was pulling back into his driveway with his dad when 7 doves took off out of the yard. And he said, “See son. There’s my sign. The dove is God’s preferred animal to show his will—like Noah sending it out of the ark to find an olive branch or a dove descending on Jesus to show he is God’s son. And 7 is God’s number for completion which means the decision is over. God is with me.”* **Is that the kind of thing we’re looking for?**
- **Don’t shake your head in dismay**—we’ve all done something like that. For many of us, we want God to be our **Magic 8-ball**. (we keep one of these around the office to help us make big decisions)
 - Will I preach more than an hour today? Up to you
 - Are cats evil? No doubt about it
 - “Is NC the greatest actor of our generation?” (You know what, some things you don’t need an 8-ball to figure out.)

Well, this weekend, I want to **acquaint you with a new favorite Psalm** of mine, because it is about how God guides us.¹

¹ Tim Keller, “Disciplines of Guidance,” from the *Lessons on Drawing Near* series, preached at Redeemer Presbyterian Church on February 9, 1997.

Now, one word of perspective before we totally dive in: Up until 50 years ago, there was almost no talk about knowing the will of God—at least in terms of personal decision-making.

- If you look through the sermons in the **early church** or Reformation **you can** scarcely find a single sermon on this topic. (At least I couldn't.)
- **Today, of course, we are obsessed by it.** It is the most popular seminar at any given conference, and the question I get asked most often.
- **And I think** just that by itself can teach us something.
- **Previous generations didn't worry as much about discerning** the will of God, but in our culture, we are all about **individualism** and **self-actualization** and **security** and **the will of God** is a way of getting those things.
- Many of us have turned the will of God into an idol, and we want to know the will of God more than we want to know God himself. We think finding the will of God **will remove** uncertainty and help us achieve our dreams.

The Bible does talk about God's guidance in our lives, but it puts the emphasis in different places. It puts much more emphasis on knowing and trusting God and becoming the kind of person God wants you to be than it ever does in detecting some mystical guidance in a particular decision.

In fact, here's your big idea for the day: **The question** (in this psalm, and pretty much every place in the Bible) **is not how God guides, but whom God guides.** Guidance is not as much something God gives to you as something he does for you. The question is are you the kind of person that he guides?

Look at Psalm 25 (this is a psalm of David—and it is a **prayer for guidance**, and it's a great template for how to pray for guidance today.) Let's start with vs. 12–13: **12 Who is this person who fears**

the LORD? He will show him the way he should choose. **13 He will live a good life, and his descendants will inherit the land.**

- The guidance David trusts God for in this psalm touches **lot of different things**: there are **allusions to relationships** and family, career choices, even parenting decisions.
 - **In Vs. 15 David trusts God to keep him from disaster** (to keep his feet from tripping in the net);
 - **in vs. 17 he trusts God to guide him** through the things that are bringing him stress.
- So, if your thought is that **maybe God only cares about** the spiritual stuff—put that away. We see David trusting **God's guidance over every inch** of his life.
- David **sums up** his hope at the beginning and end of this psalm:
 - **Vs. 2, 2 My God, I trust in you. Do not let me be disgraced.** (in anything)
 - **Vs. 20, 20 Guard me and rescue me; do not let me be put to shame** (again, in any area of my life), **for I take refuge in you.**

There are a few really precious promises in here:

- First, vs. 2, David declares: **Others cannot mess up God's will for me (vs. 2).** All throughout this psalm David talks about enemies who are trying to ruin his life: **2 Do not let me be disgraced; do not let my enemies gloat over me. Vs. 19, 19 Consider my enemies; they are numerous, and they hate me violently.**
 - **Some of you look back in your life** and see how somebody really messed you up—a father, mother, a brother, an ex-spouse, a business partner.
 - David had those people, too, and he says, *"I trust that your promises are greater and more powerful than any of their evil intentions against me."*
 - It's **hard here not to think of Joseph**—his brothers sinned against him greatly, in a way that really messed up his life (sold him into slavery!) (and he suffered greatly because of it), but **ultimately God used those things** in his life as a way of fulfilling Joseph's destiny. At the end of his life **Joseph**

summarized it to his brothers by saying, “All these things you did to me—you meant them for evil, and they hurt me, but God meant them for good.”

- (And BTW, it is **this belief that enabled Joseph to forgive** his brothers. It’s not that he released them from any responsibility for their actions, just that when he realized God had a greater plan, he was able to let go of the bitterness that comes from thinking someone else has ruined your life.
 - Belief in the **sovereignty of God** and his **promise to turn** all things for good enables you to forgive others.
 - **I know that some of you may be** trapped in a cycle of bitterness because you can’t shake how someone else seemingly ruined your life.
 - **Here’s my challenge for you** (and I’m serious about this). **Later, get by yourself, and** write out the name of that person that hurt you—your parents, your ex-spouse, your boss—and say, “You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.”
- **Promise 2: My own past mistakes don’t permanently disqualify me from God’s will either (vs. 11).** At least 2x in this Psalm David asks God for forgiveness for past mistakes. Once is **here in vs. 11**:
 - **¹¹ LORD, for the sake of your name, forgive my iniquity, for it is immense.** Not little iniquity, but big-league iniquity.
 - And yet he still prays for God’s guidance and perfect plan for his life. Here’s what you need to see: **David believes God’s promises are greater even than his own mistakes.**
 - Some of you say, “Well, I get that God will protect me from the mistakes of others, but **my own**?” It seems like God may just let me suffer for them and say, ‘You brought this on yourself.’”
 - And, it is true, sins and mistakes bring consequences into your life and they can be **painful**; but even those don’t disqualify you from God’s ultimate plan for your life.
 - **Look at Jacob—like Joseph, in Genesis—he sins against Esau** and there are many negative consequences. But

estranged from his family, he **meets Rachel the love** of his life and from his relationship to her comes the line of the Messiah.

- **Was this plan B? Did Jesus come out of the wrong plan?** Was he somehow part of plan B?
- Now, does that **mean that it’s alright Jacob** sinned? No, that sin affected him the rest of his life. Yet the **Messiah still came** from his line.²
- **If you are willing to trust God, even your past sins can’t disqualify you from God’s ultimate destiny for you.**
- **In fact, in an amazing picture** of God’s grace, even through your sins God brings about his plan!
 - I always love here to tell the **story of my wife... UVA**
 - I love vs. 10, **¹⁰ All the LORD’s ways show faithful love and truth.**
 - Faithful, consistent love. He doesn’t give up on you even when you give up on him.
 - **Or let me apply this one other way:** I’ve met people who were born from sinful circumstances. Out of wedlock. And they think, ‘**Maybe I’m a mistake.**’ Sometimes they’ve even been told that—“you were a mistake.” *No, friend, you were not.* Maybe the **circumstances by which** you came into the world were sinful, and that’s on your parents. But **you were not a mistake.**
 - **Here’s how I know: The Messiah came** into the world through the sinful choices of others, and he’s not a mistake. So, you aren’t either.

So, as you can see, these are some **incredible promises.**

So, the question is, “**What do I have to do to experience this kind of guidance?**” (Remember: The question in this psalm is not how God guides, but whom God guides.) So,

² Keller

What kind of person receives the guidance of God?

(4 characteristics)

1. Those trained in the ways of God (vs. 4)

⁴ Make your ways known to me, Lord; teach me your paths.

- **David is talking here about at inward familiarity** with the ways of God that trains him in how to act.
- It's **how an athlete** trains: an athlete can't be instructed on exactly how to respond in every situation—the defense is always changing. But they can be trained how to read situations and given the skills to respond accordingly.
 - **One of my favorite MJ interviews:** He had done some crazy split the defense move—"Do you know what you are going to do before you go jump?" "I jump and decide in the air."
 - **Those aren't planned moves;** they are in-the-moment responses that come from **skilled training. (J's)**
- **Here's how the NT talks about this:**
 - **Hebrews 5:13–14,** Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. (NIV)
 - "...trained themselves to distinguish good from evil," refers to **things not outlined** in Scripture. Being trained in the Scripture can still give you the instinct to **know what God wants.**
 - "Constant use" means being **so saturated in Scripture** and skilled in its application that it becomes 2nd nature.

³ A goblin kingdom underground is trying to take over the above-ground kingdom. The princess, Irene comes to realize that the goblins are coming out from underneath to capture her. She has a fairy godmother (her grandmother) who appears and gives her something special: a beautiful ball of thread and a ring. The thread is so thin when you stretch it out that you can't even see it; you can only feel it. She ties one end to the ring and holds onto the other end. She takes the ball of thread and puts the ring under her pillow. When you're in trouble, find the ring on

- **To go back to my illustration about athletes: Sometimes I play basketball now...** my mind knows but my body won't obey. In my mind I see the move, but I look less like a graceful athlete and more like a wounded duck coming in for a crash landing. That's because I'm not trained through constant use. **And old.** But that's outside the scope of this illustration.
- **So, here's your action step:** You need to get saturated in God's ways. So saturated that you think in patterns of Scripture! **You won't live out the will of God any more than you know the word of God.**

2nd characteristic of those God guides:

2. Those obedient to the commands of God (vv. 9–10)

⁹ He leads the humble in what is right and teaches them his way. ¹⁰All the Lord's ways show faithful love and truth to those who keep his covenant and decrees.

- **Humble means you believe that God's way is best.** The opposite is pride, where you assume your way is better than God's.
- David is saying: **God's promise to give guidance in the areas Scripture doesn't address is extended to those who are obeying him in those areas the Scriptures do address.** When you disobey, and proudly assume your way is better, you **cut yourself off** from the guidance.
- You want guidance over there, but **won't obey here?**
- (There's a kid's story by **George MacDonald**, a Christian, called *The Princess and the Goblin*...³

and feel for the thread and follow where it leads. If you turn back the thread will disappear; trust the thread. A couple days later, Irene realizes some goblins were trying to get in her room so she finds the ring and follows the thread. The thread leads her outside (instead of up the steps where she normally finds her grandmother). It eventually takes her all the way to where the goblins were. She wonders what is happening? But grandmother said, "Don't doubt the thread." So she goes deeper underground, seemingly closer and closer to danger. Finally, she reaches a dead-end of boulders and she falls down and cries. But she can't turn

- **Some of you are right now saying**, “God, **what is your will** in this decision?” but you have some area of disobedience! And God is pointing you back to that... go and deal with this and **then** you’ll experience my guidance.
 - Or maybe your obedience feels like it is only leading you to more difficulty. **Maybe you say, “God, why aren’t I married by now?”** And the thread keeps leading you farther and farther underground, it seems, away from marriage. And you are tempted to compromise (be with someone not God’s choice for you; engage in immorality.) To experience the guidance of God, you have to follow the thread.
 - Or **maybe you are concerned about your business** and you are tempted to compromise your integrity to get ahead. Or maybe telling the truth could hurt your career so you are tempted to **lie to your boss**. David specifically addresses this one:

³ No one who waits for you will be disgraced; those who act treacherously without cause will be disgraced.

Ultimately, **you have to decide whom you trust** with your future: waiting on God means doing things his way and trusting him to exalt you in his time.

Disobedience means taking matters into your own hands, which leads to disgrace.

- **One more:** Maybe you have **someone in your past to whom you refuse to extend forgiveness**, even though you know that you should. That’s keeping you from experiencing God’s blessing in the present.

back. She tries to break through the wall of boulders and finds her friend Curdie on the other side. Curdie asks, “How did you ever find me?” Irene, “My grandmother sent me; now I know why she sent me this way.” Curdie wants to escape, but the thread keeps going the same direction where Curdie got imprisoned. Irene is

- **Servant girl with Naaman.** Taken captive by Naaman—his slave, after he had done great violence to her people, likely killing her parents. He gets leprosy and she goes to him and say, “If only my master would see the prophet (Elisha).” Why did she say this? Because she forgave him. **She followed the thread.** She obeyed God. And she became powerfully used by God to the point that she is included in the Bible!
- ~~David knew what it was to be in pain... (vv. 16: I am alone and afflicted. Vs. ¹⁷The distresses of my heart increase...)~~ but **he knew that what he was to do was to obey God.**

So, (2) those obedient to the commands of God...

3. Those trusting in the promises of God (vv. 3, 14)

³ No one who waits for you will be disgraced; (“Waits” means “waits patiently for God to fulfill his promise knowing he always will.” It takes time! **That’s hard!**)

And, **¹⁴ The secret counsel of the Lord is for those who fear him,**

- The “**secret counsel**” implies that there’s nothing withheld from you.
- Tim Keller says that **this phrase indicates** those special moments of Spirit-guidance he wants to give you.⁴
- There are multiple ways he can do this.
 - The counsel of the church. (Acts 13:2)
 - Arrangement of circumstances. (Paul in Acts 16; 2 Corinthians—I wanted to but God shut the door)
 - Inner promptings in prayer. (Nehemiah) (I wrote about these in **JC**)

resolved to follow the thread. Curdie doesn’t know why she listens to the thread. But Irene keeps following it and escapes.

⁴ Keller.

When these are necessary, they are given to the person who **trusts in God** and walks in his ways.

You say, OK, trained in the ways of God, obedient to the commands of God, open to his special counsel... **“Practically, what does all that mean when a decision is actually upon me?”**

It means that you take advantage of every means of wisdom you have at your disposal: Scripture, your reason, counsel, ways the Spirit might be leading you, and then make the decision as best you can and trust that God is guiding you just like he promised he would!

- There is a short little phrase tucked in Acts 15 that reveals how the Apostles made decisions that I love: *“It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...”* (Acts 15:28)
- **What if it is the wrong one?** Then you trust God to guide you!
- **Prov 3:5–6:** “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not upon your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him and he will direct your paths.”
- And then trust that God is guiding you! I’ve found it helpful to pray what I call the **“sheep prayer.”** Sheep is your spirit animal.
 - Bad news, good news. Bad news: sheep are idiots. Good news, you’ve got a great shepherd.
 - Not the competence of the sheep, but the competence of the shepherd
 - Make it obvious to me, God!
 - The good news: God tells me not to lean on my own decision-making ability, but his willingness to guide me. God gave up on my decision-making ability back at the Garden of Eden. If he gets to where he needs to go, it won’t be because of his competence as a sheep... **So, he tells me to lean not “on my own understanding...”**

Again, big idea: **The question in this psalm is not how God guides, but whom God guides.** Because *guidance in the Bible is not as much something God gives you as it is something he does for you.* You

become the kind of person God wants you to be and trust him with the rest.

Let me give you one more image. MAP. (why you got married; major source of stress). **When many of you think about the will of God**, you have thought about getting a map from God. What God offers is a **relationship with the Guide!**

- **Elisabeth Elliott in *A Slow and Certain Light*** tells a story about when she was in the Amazon jungles. A couple of explorers from America came to her asking for directions, to draw a map. She said, “You don’t need a map, you need a guide.” They said, “Oh no, we can make it.” She said she never saw them again. Maybe they made it; maybe they didn’t. **The point: Sometimes what you need is a map; you would probably be overwhelmed and frustrated.** You need a **relationship with a guide that’s so constant** that at every point, you get the next piece and the next piece.
- That’s **Psalm 25.**

(MUSIC)

Finally, one last one, very important, that I’ll close with: Those trained in the ways of God, those obedient to the commands of God, those trusting in the promises of God, and...

4. Those depending on the grace of God (vs. 10)

- Several times in this psalm David talks about God’s rescue of him. He talks about God’s forgiveness and deliverance, and in vs 10 he exults, **¹⁰All the LORD’s ways show faithful love and truth...** (hesed: **unconditional**)
- **What haunts many of us in our pursuit of God’s will** is that maybe God has mixed feelings toward us—maybe he is still **holding some grudges** against us because of sins or disappointments with us.

- **So, in any good blessing, you are waiting on the other shoe to drop.** (Because we assume God is saying to us, “**Now, you don’t really deserve to be *that* happy**, do you... come on!” So, in any good you are waiting on the bad.
- Friends, **how God guides you and what God gives you** is no longer based on the worthiness of how you lived, but on the **worthiness of how** Jesus has lived.

¹⁰ **All the LORD’s ways show faithful love and truth.** All the wrath was poured out on Jesus!

The NT way of saying this is, “**There is therefore no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.**”

- That means you don’t need to wait for the other shoe to drop! It dropped on Jesus.
 - **I love this verse and gave it to you at the beginning:** Prov 10:22, “The blessing of the Lord makes one rich, and he adds no sorrow with it!”
- In the gospel I can **embrace my promise to walk in blessing all the days of my life.**
 - In Christ, I am blessed with **every spiritual blessing...**
 - **All the promises** of God are yes;
 - **Every good and perfect** gift comes from above, from the Father of lights in whom there is no shadow of turning (which means no 2nd thoughts, no mixed feelings)
 - **Or, to quote David once more,** “Surely goodness and mercy will follow me...” and that is how we go through life with confidence.

