

Making Decisions in Accordance with God's Will

The Bible seems to indicate that God leads His people:

"In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths" (Proverbs 3:6).

"I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with My eye" (Psalms 32:8b).

What is the nature of this guidance? How does this leading of the Holy Spirit take place? How specific is the leading? Does He guide in decisions that involve choosing a spouse or making major purchases? Does He guide in decisions relating to matters of lower importance? If I sense that He is telling me to do something specific, is it merely my emotions confusing me or might He actually be communicating to me? If I am sensing the Holy Spirit's leading, is there a way for me to accurately discern what the Holy Spirit is actually trying to communicate to me? Or, is everything the Holy Spirit wants me to use in the decision making process already revealed in the Bible as some Christians think?

I have been a Christian since 1975 and have lived those years believing that the Spirit does give specific guidance to Christians. There were times that I was fully convinced the Spirit was giving me specific direction. There were also occasions when I was not as confident. At times, I wondered if I was merely being confused by my emotions or simply reading too much into my circumstances.

I remember one occasion when a Christian gave our family one hundred dollars. At that time, we were experiencing financial hardship. When we received it, I sensed God's love for me because He prompted someone to give that money to us. Later that evening, I was driving in my car with that money in my wallet. Suddenly, while stopped at a red light, out of the blue, a strange thought came to my mind. "Get out of the car and go up to the car in front of you and give him the hundred dollars." I thought, "What a strange thought? Could this be the Spirit speaking to me? Or am I just confused?" Instead of giving that money away, I convinced myself that it was probably not the Spirit speaking. Or, if He was speaking, perhaps I did not understand the communication properly. I will never forget that experience. Often I looked back with regret wishing I had gone with my perception instead of holding on to that money.

If you are like me, you want to make decisions that are in keeping with God's will. Also, if you sense the Spirit nudging you to do something, you probably would like to have confidence that He is truly communicating and that you understand His guidance properly. The Bible provides insight into the process of discerning the Spirit's leading. As a means to gain some understanding, this article will focus mainly on the life of the Apostle Paul as recorded by Luke in the book of Acts. As we observe how Paul lived and made decisions, we will learn the following things about how the Spirit gives specific guidance to Christians:

- The Spirit does indeed give specific guidance to individual Christians.
- The Holy Spirit's specific guidance usually seems mysterious to us humans.
- The Spirit does not tell us what to do or think each minute via special revelation.
- Sometimes, God purposely seems to withhold specific guidance from us.

Note: This article mainly addresses the Spirit's leading in specific life decisions. But it should be noted that there is a general leading of the Spirit towards holiness. When Paul uses the phrase, "led by the Spirit," he does so in the context of what it means to live under the guidance of Jesus as Lord as opposed to living autonomous lives driven to please ourselves. We already know God's will in regard to making decisions on whether to obey Him or disobey Him. The Spirit's leading moves us toward obedience. His leading includes the dispensing of grace (power) that makes holy living possible and without this effectual leading, none of us would be motivated to please God. Since this is the primary way the Spirit leads us, a short explanation of it is provided in Appendix A, "The phrase "led by the Spirit" mainly relates to living under the lordship of Jesus Christ."

The Spirit does indeed give specific guidance to individual Christians.

Have you ever heard the following expressions?

- "I feel led by the Spirit to do such and such."
- "I do not feel led by the Spirit to do such and such."
- "I just don't feel a peace about it."
- "God told me to do such and such."

Are expressions like these ever valid? I hope to show in this section that the Spirit does indeed give special direction to individual Christians. I hope to demonstrate that statements like those above may indeed be valid expressions of the Christian experience. I do not claim to have all the answers on this subject, but I think the Bible does offer some light. To gain some insight, let us turn our attention to the experience of Paul as recorded by Luke in the book of Acts.

Sometimes Paul received very specific direction from the Spirit.

In almost a prophetic way, Paul sometimes received specific guidance. Here are a few examples from Acts:

¹"Now in the church that was at Antioch there were certain prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. ²**As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."** ³Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away. ⁴So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia, and from there they sailed to Cyprus" (Acts 13:1-4).

In the example above, the Holy Spirit gave specific guidance to the church at Antioch to send out Paul (and Barnabas) to go on a mission to make disciples and plant churches.

⁷"After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them. ⁸So passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. ⁹And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." ¹⁰Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them" (Acts 16:7-10).

In the example above, Paul and Barnabas wanted to go to Bithynia but the Spirit “did not let them.” We are not told how they were restrained but as Luke continues, we learn that the Spirit did indeed have a different direction in mind. Paul had a dream/vision during the night and he later concluded that God was directing him to go to Macedonia.

⁹ *“Now the Lord spoke to Paul in the night by a vision, “Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; ¹⁰for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city.” ¹¹And he continued there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them” (Acts 18:9-11).*

According to the passage above, God gave very specific guidance to Paul through a dream/vision during the night.

²²*And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, ²³except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me” (Acts 20:22-23).*

Though specific words of the Holy Spirit are not recorded here, Paul says that the Holy Spirit was speaking to him wherever he went that chains and tribulations await him.

¹⁰*“And as we stayed many days, a certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. ¹¹When he had come to us, he took Paul’s belt, bound his own hands and feet, and said, “Thus says the Holy Spirit, ‘So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles’” (Acts 21:10-11).*

In the passage above, we are told that a prophet named Agabus said, “Thus says the Holy Spirit,” and then proceeded to say that the Jews would bind Paul and deliver him to the Gentiles. We learn from the following verses that Paul did not let this prophetic utterance deter him from his plans to go to Jerusalem.

“Paul advised them, ¹⁰saying, “Men, I perceive that this voyage will end with disaster and much loss, not only of the cargo and ship, but also our lives” (Acts 27:9b -10).

In the passage above, it appears Paul received very specific information from God about the impending shipwreck and he communicates that to everyone on board.

Based upon all of the passages discussed above, we can make some statements. On some occasions, Paul received very specific direction from the Spirit in what appears to be a prophetic way. As we continue to examine the narrative in Acts, we will see that this type of communication does not seem to be the normal way Paul received his direction from the Holy Spirit. But since Paul sometimes received direction from the Holy Spirit this way, should we expect similar guidance? Should we look to Him also for specific direction and pray that He will speak to us specifically some how (in a prophetic fashion)? Does the Holy Spirit still communicate with Christians in this seemingly prophetic way? Or should we look for direction of a different sort?

Whether or not a Christian believes that God sometimes chooses to communicate very specifically like He did to Paul, I think all Christians would prefer to have specific direction from God when they are trying to make important decisions. A common example of this occurs when Christians are trying to discern if God is calling them to go to a specific land as a missionary. When missionaries of the past were threatened with death, they may have wondered to themselves, “Did God really send me here?” Some Christians probably warned them not to go because of all the danger they would face. Yet, when older, many missionaries have testified that the Spirit did indeed lead them to go as missionaries to these dangerous places. The testimony of missionaries like these should not be the basis for our individual convictions about how the Holy Spirit provides guidance, but I personally think we should consider the possibility that the Holy Spirit did indeed give them very specific guidance. We should be careful not to assume that such guidance was not given.

From our study of the Bible so far, we at least know that during Paul’s day, some Christians received very specific guidance from the Holy Spirit in what appears to be a prophetic way. But is this type of specific and

direct communication the extent of Paul's experience? As we proceed, we will learn that generally, the Spirit's guidance to Paul was actually, not "prophetic" in nature. These findings will show that the Spirit has been and continues to be Someone we can and should look to for guidance in every aspect of living.

The Holy Spirit's guidance often seemed mysterious and not quickly discernable.

²*As they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said, "Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2).*

In the passage above, there is no mention of a prophetic vision. Just prior to this verse it does say that prophets were present. But Luke does not record whether any "prophetic utterances" were made about this. It does not give clear indication of how the Holy Spirit communicated this specific direction but it does suggest that the Christians were seriously seeking God's heart and mind. They were fasting. Though we do not know how these Christians received this specific guidance, it seems clear that they were looking for it.

Though the Acts 13 passage does not say specifically, we get the impression from Acts 14:27 – 15:5 that the entire church may likely have been involved in the praying, fasting and laying on of hands which occurred once the specific communication was received. Since this was the way the church operated once the missionaries returned from their trip, it is likely that they operated this way when they initially sent Paul and Barnabas out (per Acts 13). Acts 13:2 says that while they ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit then communicated. Therefore, we should at least wonder why, after receiving the communication, verse 3 says, "*Then, having fasted and prayed, and laid hands on them, they sent them away.*" This sounds like the pattern we read about in chapter fifteen: "*So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, describing the conversion of the Gentiles; and they caused great joy to all the brethren*" (Acts 15:3). The word apostle means "sent one." It is most logical to conclude that whenever apostles were sent out, the entire church was involved. They were called to fast and pray about such serious matters. This way, the entire church confirms the mission even though the entire church did not hear the Holy Spirit say, "Set apart Paul and Barnabas."

Some have suggested that when the Holy Spirit communicated, prophets in the congregation received special prophetic communication from Him. But the Acts 13 passage does not specifically say this occurred. So, at the very least, we can suggest that this communication in Acts 13:2 was very possibly more subtle. Perhaps those who were praying together just sensed this direction and began talking about it with each other. Perhaps for the months leading up to this, they would discuss Jesus' last words before His ascension, "You shall be witnesses to me to the uttermost parts of the earth." Perhaps they talked with each other about how this might occur. Perhaps they even discussed plans to carry out this great mission. Perhaps, because they knew the mission was humanly impossible, they prayed with each other about this often and the Acts 13 passage merely records such praying and fasting. Perhaps while they fasted, the Holy Spirit simply gave them a sense that they should indeed go. It is very possible that the Holy Spirit was simply giving them ideas about spreading the gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth long before this time of fasting and that He used their meeting to confirm the guidance He had been shaping in their hearts and minds for several months.

At this point, someone might wonder why I would go on and on about something that we cannot know for certain. I do so just to point out the possibility that the leading of the Holy Spirit is often gradual and not usually given in a prophetic fashion. As I continue, I hope to show that this is indeed how the Holy Spirit communicated most often to the Apostle Paul.

⁷*"After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them" (Acts 16:7).*

The passage above indicates that, on occasion, Paul and Barnabas did not know the exact direction God wanted them to travel. They wanted to go to Bithynia. They probably discussed the best way to get there and even planned out their journey. Do you think Paul thought that it was perfectly appropriate to operate independent of God? Or, do you think Paul thought it was very important to go exactly where God wanted him to go. If you were him, wouldn't you want to know exactly what God had in mind? You would probably fear

what might happen if you ended up in the wrong place, especially back in those days. It is illogical to think that Paul was content to go wherever he wanted to go without consulting God. Knowing his testimony and the testimony of others about him, Paul certainly prayed and fasted all along the way. Though he did not receive prophetic visions from the Holy Spirit very often, he undoubtedly looked to God for direction continually and with a sober mindedness that we should expect from any Christian whose life was often in danger.

From the Acts 16:7 passage above, we should conclude that Paul and Barnabas believed that the Holy Spirit was leading them to Bithynia. So, they made plans to go there. But this passage says that the “Spirit did not let them.” If they were prevented because of human or earthly obstacles, I doubt that Luke would use this wording. The most logical interpretation is that Paul and Barnabas were uneasy in their spirit. Or, at the risk of using an often misused phrase, they just “did not feel a peace about it.” Perhaps circumstances seemed to conflict with their plans and caused them to wonder if God opposed their plans to go to Bithynia. Luke specifically said, “The Spirit did not let them.” This suggests that whatever the circumstances, Paul and Barnabas were suddenly not fully convinced that God wanted them to go. Since it says that they tried to go, we know that it was not a matter of them hearing a prophetic message from God. Otherwise, they would not have tried to go. While still wondering about it, Paul subsequently did have a vision:

⁹“A vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’¹⁰Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them” (Acts 16:10).

Even in the vision, the Holy Spirit did not come right out and say, “Go to Macedonia.” Paul and Barnabas later deduced they were supposed to go to Macedonia and their prior “lack of peace” about going to Bythynia factored into their deduction. First, they suddenly were not fully convinced that the Spirit was leading them to Bythynia. Then Paul has the vision. Those two circumstances combined led them to conclude that the Spirit was leading them to Macedonia.

From this passage, it seems that Paul, like most Christians I have talked to about this, was not always fully certain about how the Spirit was leading him. It also shows that Paul seriously desired to go only where God wanted him to go. It also shows that Paul kept thinking that God would eventually show him where he should go. So, he stayed put until he was fully convinced that the Holy Spirit had indeed provided specific direction. Perhaps Paul had many such situations in which he was not fully sure where God wanted him to go. Luke does not tell us about every circumstance Paul faced during his trials. But I find it comforting to see that Paul, was not always sure just like I have often been unsure. But Paul also believed that God did have specific places in mind and no matter how conscious he was of the Spirit’s leading from moment to moment, he kept looking for guidance from the Spirit. His reverence for God kept him from operating independent of Him when making decisions.

²²And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there,²³except that the Holy Spirit testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me” (Acts 20:22-23).

Again, this passage does not say exactly how the Holy Spirit “testified” to Paul, but since Luke does record those few specific, prophetic communications and does not speak of them here, it is most logical to conclude that Paul just seemed to have an ever-growing conviction that he would some day be in prison and undergo many tribulations at that time. So, at least to Paul, the Holy Spirit did communicate but in a more subtle, less direct fashion about things that would happen to him in the future.

“Paul advised them,¹⁰saying, “Men, I perceive that this voyage will end with disaster and much loss, not only of the cargo and ship, but also our lives” (Acts 27:9b -10).

It appears from the passage above that Paul perceived future events without receiving a prophetic communication from the Holy Spirit. The reason I suggest this is because later on this voyage, an angel appeared to him and assured him that he, and all those aboard, would survive and be in Rome one day. (See

Acts 27:23-24.) In the passage above, it was more of a perception that came over him but he concluded with conviction that the Spirit had given him this perception, no matter how subtle it might have seemed to him.

Since Paul told Christians to imitate him (I Corinthians 4:16), I believe we should live our lives as Paul lived his life, looking for guidance in making decisions. The Spirit is personal and our relationship with Him is personal. This implies two way communication no matter how you cut it.

Paul sometimes made decisions without any “special communication” from the Spirit.

The book of Acts does not record every thought and action of Paul. Therefore, we only have a limited testimony of how the Spirit guided. But a closer consideration of the narrative will show that Paul sometimes seemed to make decisions independent of the Spirit’s direct leading. Before proceeding, I think it prudent to remember that Paul lived his life with great reverence for Jesus his Lord. So, when it seems as if Paul made some decisions on his own, it is safe to assume that as he made them, he believed he was making them in total harmony with God’s will and that he remained ready and willing at every moment to change course if God showed him to do so.

“But when the Jews saw the multitudes, they were filled with envy; and contradicting and blaspheming, they opposed the things spoken by Paul. ⁴⁶Then Paul and Barnabas grew bold and said, “It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken to you first; but since you reject it, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, behold, we turn to the Gentiles” (Acts 13:45-46).

As Paul proclaimed the gospel in Antioch in Pisidia, the Jews eventually began to mock his message. Suddenly, Paul stopped and said that since they reject it, he plans to take his message to the Gentiles. Unlike the passages we considered in the prior section, it does not appear that the Holy Spirit suddenly gave Paul a vision or even that He gave Paul a perception about it. It seems as if Paul made the decision all on his own to stop preaching to the Jews and turn to the Gentiles. Therefore, either Paul suddenly stopped taking his lead from the Spirit, or the Spirit was still guiding but in a way that was less perceivable than in those more prophetic occasions. I suggest that Paul made his decision on the basis of Jesus’ teaching to leave those who refuse to believe. It was therefore a “no brainer.” Paul already knew God’s will in the matter so when faced with the situation, he immediately acted in accordance with it. Let us consider more of the narrative to see if we can glean more understanding.

⁸*“And in Lystra a certain man without strength in his feet was sitting, a cripple from his mother’s womb, who had never walked. ⁹This man heard Paul speaking. Paul, observing him intently and seeing that he had faith to be healed, ¹⁰said with a loud voice, “Stand up straight on your feet!” And he leaped and walked” (Acts 14:8-10).*

Since a crippled man was healed, we logically should believe that the Holy Spirit was definitely working through Paul. How did Paul make this decision to say, “Stand up straight on your feet.”? Did the Holy Spirit first suddenly speak clearly to Paul, “Heal this man Paul.”? Did Paul perceive that the Holy Spirit wanted him to take action even though he was not hearing from the Holy Spirit in that more prophetic way? If Barnabas asked Paul about it later, do you think Paul might have said, “I sensed God telling me to do it.”? The text does not tell us everything. But it does say that Paul looked intently at the man and “saw that he (the man) had faith to be healed.” On the basis of the text alone, it seems as if Paul simply made his decision on the basis of what he observed. And since a man was healed, we can also conclude that Paul made his decision with full confidence (faith) that the man would be healed.

¹⁹*“Then Jews from Antioch and Iconium came there; and having persuaded the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. ²⁰However, when the disciples gathered around him, he rose up and went into the city” (Acts 14:19-20).*

Paul had been preaching the gospel in a town. Then, Jews from two other towns came there and stirred up the crowds to stone Paul. Then they dragged him out of the city thinking he was dead. Suddenly, while the disciples were gathered around him, Paul stood back up and headed right back into the town in which he was stoned. What moved Paul to make that decision? Some people would say that such a decision could not have been inspired by the Spirit of God because it was foolish for Paul to knowingly put himself right back in danger like that. I think that the disciples that were with him likely may have questioned the wisdom of going back into that town. I wonder if afterwards, they asked him why he did it. Do you think Paul would have said, “I sensed God telling me to go back into the town.”? Maybe he did. Maybe he didn’t. But just maybe, the Holy Spirit was stirring Paul. Whether he was conscious of it or not, it appears that he was led back into that town by the Holy Spirit. If we take into account Paul’s instruction to walk by faith, I think it safest to believe that Paul walked back into that town by faith. By faith, Christians are able to face death and all sorts of danger. Without faith, we shrink back at any danger or discomfort.

¹“Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. ²Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, (Acts 17:1-2a).

The passage above says that Paul had a custom or habit of going to synagogues to preach to Jews. This suggests that Paul did not constantly receive special guidance for every moment from the Holy Spirit. While we know that Paul spent much time in prayer each day, he obviously was not given an agenda of new things to do each day by the Spirit. It seems that he was used to doing certain things that he thought God wanted him to do. He was not receiving a “things to do” list on a moment-to-moment basis

¹⁶“Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him when he saw that the city was given over to idols” (Acts 17:16).

The passage above says that Paul’s spirit was provoked within him as he beheld the many idols in Athens. Was this provoking of Paul’s spirit merely Paul being grieved? Or, did the Spirit also play a role in this provoking? I suggest that if it were not for the work of the Holy Spirit in Paul, he would not have been provoked at all. I suggest that if the Holy Spirit does not work in us, we would never have any inclination to think about God or be concerned with what He wants us to do or think. So, I firmly believe that this passage also sheds light on the leading ministry of the Holy Spirit.

²¹“When these things were accomplished, Paul purposed in the Spirit, when he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, to go to Jerusalem, saying, “After I have been there, I must also see Rome” (Acts 19:21).

¹“After the uproar had ceased, Paul called the disciples to himself, embraced them, and departed to go to Macedonia. ²Now when he had gone over that region and encouraged them with many words, he came to Greece ³and stayed three months. And when the Jews plotted against him as he was about to sail to Syria, he decided to return through Macedonia” (Acts 20:1-3).

Based on the passages above, it appears that Paul reasoned within himself when making plans for future ministry and travel plans. He did not wait around until a prophetic communication came to him. Yet, knowing that Paul was a man of prayer, we should also believe that Paul continuously prayed about everything, including his travel plans and ministry. He was a man who lived a life of dependence on God. Perhaps this is why the author notes in Acts 19:21 that Paul “purposed in the Spirit” to go to Jerusalem. He was not just making up things in his own mind without a care about God’s wishes.

Sometimes, the Spirit purposely seemed to withhold guidance.

In a different book, Paul testified about trials he and his friends went through on a different occasion:

⁸“For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia: that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life. ⁹Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead” (II Corinthians 1:8-9).

Obviously on this occasion, Paul did not know what was going to happen to him for sure. They were at the point of assuming they were about to die. So, we know from this that the Spirit purposely withholds communication from us on some occasions for our own eternal good. Without this experience, Paul subsequently would not have been as convinced about his future resurrection and God’s promises concerning it. But the trial of his faith (during which God “kept silent”) ended up being exactly what Paul needed for his faith/convictions to be strengthened.

A summary of insights into how the Spirit guides based upon the experience of Paul:

Though we cannot come to a complete understanding of how the Spirit guides His people from our limited examination of Paul’s life within the chapters of Acts, we at least get a sense of how Paul lived and made decisions. I think we can make the following statements based upon our study about Paul:

-On occasion, Paul received communication of a prophetic nature from the Spirit.

-As a lifestyle, Paul sought always to understand the leading of the Spirit in every aspect of his life.

-It appears that Paul believed that he was making his decisions in accordance with God’s will, even when he had not received solid, direct communication of a prophetic nature by the Spirit. He believed his life was owned and directed by God.

-On occasion, Paul seemed to not know what the Spirit wanted him to do next.

On the basis of Scripture’s teaching, how should the Christian live and make decisions?

Many of us have memorized the following passage:

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your path” (Proverbs 3:5-6).

If we are honest, we must admit that we have been clueless about the Spirit’s leading at times. It is not as if the Spirit is holding up signs from moment to moment with arrows pointing the way He wants us to take. Could it be that He is always giving specific, knowable direction but we cannot discern it because we are simply not acknowledging Him in all our ways. Is it that we are just out of touch spiritually because we are too earthly minded? While I believe that there may be some truth to this, we should remember that Paul also experienced being unsure at times. If it happened to Paul, then certainly it will happen to us. I conclude therefore that the promise of Proverbs 3:5-6 is a general promise that can be trusted but that the nature of this directing is not a continuous neon arrow being held up in front of us by the Holy Spirit. Built into it is a test of faith. To receive its promise, we must wait upon the Lord and learn that essentially, we are like dumb sheep that tend to go astray. But because His Spirit resides within us, we have an inward longing to be in the safe shelter of our Shepherd. So, we cry out to Him and tune our ears to hear His voice calling us. And because of His promises and our experience that proves them, we keep expecting that He will indeed show us the way.

We should bathe each major decision in prayer and wait upon the Lord for guidance. But assuming we have surrendered all to Jesus, we should also believe as Paul did, that He is guiding our footsteps even if we do not see neon arrows pointing the way at all times. At the beginning of a typical day, we should not fret about if we have the day mapped out perfectly. We should not become paralyzed with fear that we might sin by failing to perfectly discern each and every step of the way. We must remember that we are neither all-wise or omniscient.

Then we should move forward as dumb sheep but sheep who are loved and guided by the Chief Shepherd who faithfully watches over us.

Prerequisite for expecting guidance from the Spirit

¹“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. ²And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Romans 12:1-2).

As stated in the Appendix, the main thrust of Scripture in regard to the leading of the Spirit has to do with living a life submitted to the lordship of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit always leads us toward holiness and away from a life subject to the bondage of sin. In addition, we have also learned that the Spirit gives specific guidance to those whose Lord is Jesus. But there is a prerequisite. We should not expect to receive guidance from the Holy Spirit about decisions we need to make unless we are fully surrendered to Jesus as our Lord. In Romans 12:1&2, we observe that God desires that we prove what is that good and acceptable will of God but that for this to occur, we must first surrender our bodies as a living sacrifice to Jesus our Lord. We must not try to retain ownership of our lives. James put it this way:

⁵“If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. ⁶But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. ⁷For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord. ⁸A double minded man is unstable in all his ways” (James 1:5-8 KJV).

James says that God is willing to give wisdom if we ask for it. But if there is anything in our lives that we know has not been submitted to the lordship of Jesus, faith cannot function. In that condition, we are double-minded. Jesus may be Lord over some things, but if I am holding back ownership over something, then I am acting as if I am God over my life still. No wonder James says that any man in that condition is unstable in all his ways. We should not expect guidance from the Spirit in this condition.

We have confidence He is guiding when we are walking in the Spirit

Paul said, “Walk in the Spirit and you will not fulfill the desires of the flesh” (Galatians 5:16). Only if we have surrendered all to Jesus can we “walk in the Spirit.” When we walk in the Spirit, we have confidence that Jesus is walking with us. In this condition, we experience the glory of His presence and intimacy with Him. While we may not see neon arrows pointing the way, we are confident that the Chief Shepherd is protecting us and right there with us. We really don’t need neon arrows when we are walking in the Spirit.

When we are walking in the Spirit we will be on the lookout for opportunities to serve Jesus. We will be asking Him to show us those opportunities. For example, we will be looking for opportunities to give a gospel tract or explain the gospel to someone or to help someone who needs help. We will have Jesus’ interests at the forefront of our minds.

The leading of the Holy Spirit is always consistent with His character and revealed desires.

The Holy Spirit’s leading is always in harmony with holiness. His leading can never contradict the desires and purposes of God as revealed in His Word. God is not the author of confusion and therefore, we know that the Holy Spirit never intends to confuse those He leads.

From these basic principles, we know that the Holy Spirit would never lead a person to commit a sin. He would never therefore lead a husband and father to abandon his family and become a missionary far away. He has a responsibility to provide for his family. To neglect that responsibility would be sinful. Thus, we know the Spirit would not lead him to abandon his family.

What should we do when we need to make an important decision and we lack the Spirit's guidance?

As we have already noted, we should not expect the Spirit to make His will known to us if there is anything in our lives that we have not surrendered to Him. *“Let not that man think that he will receive anything from the Lord” (James 1:7)*. But if to the best of our knowledge we have surrendered our lives completely unto Jesus, then we should ask God for guidance. Praying is the most obvious first step. Fasting is another measure that we can use as a form of pleading with God. If we are negligent in our responsibility to pray, then we should not expect the Spirit to give the guidance we need. (See James 4:2b.) As we pray, we need to wait for God to make His will known. This is the pattern we saw in the Acts narrative about Paul. We observed how the believers at Antioch fasted and prayed before the Holy Spirit made His will known. We saw that when the Spirit restrained Paul and Silas from going to Bithynia, they did not go. Their journey was slowed and interrupted. They surely prayed since being restricted by the Spirit. They did not pick the pace back up until Paul first had a vision. Then, only after discussing it (and praying over it), did they pick the pace back up but in a different direction. Their plans were submitted to Jesus at all times and they waited until the Spirit made His will clear until they resumed. Likewise, we need to be willing to wait upon the Lord. It shows Him that we are gladly submitted to His leadership instead of our own.

Seek counsel from godly people within the church. Assuming that we are already seeking the Spirit's direction ourselves in prayer, we should be on the lookout for Him to show us His will. Very often, He makes His will known through other Christians. After Paul had the vision of the man from Macedonia, he immediately began to talk with Silas about it. **TOGETHER**, they concluded that the Spirit was telling them to go to Macedonia. The narrative in Acts clearly shows a pattern of believers seeking guidance together in prayer and the pattern also shows that the Spirit provided the guidance they sought when they came together in prayer. If we are not willing to tell our brothers and sisters about our need for guidance, it reflects an independent spirit. In the following passage, Jesus indicates that His ear is bent toward the assembly of believers. When two or three of them are gathered together, He is in the midst of them and that their agreement about a matter adds significant weight to the request.

⁸Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. ²⁰For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:18-20).

We should not only ask for prayer, but we should also discuss the situation with fellow Christians in hope that God will make His will known through them. But with whom should we discuss the situation? In the Acts narrative, the disciples don't hesitate discussing these matters with any and all who co-labor with them. For example, Paul discussed the Macedonian vision with his partner Silas. I doubt that Peter would have sought out counsel from people that were worldly minded such as Simon the former sorcerer. (See Acts 8:9-23.) If we are seeking wisdom from God, it follows that we should seek out people who are Spirit-filled rather than worldly. Many Christians assume that a pastor is the best candidate for obtaining wise counsel. This may be true if that pastor is a man who is Spirit-filled. Unfortunately, some pastors are assumed to be Spirit-filled just because they possess above average knowledge of the Bible or hold the office of pastor. Just remember that Bible knowledge itself does not mean a man is Spirit-filled. Seek out someone who is humble and is a real doer of Jesus' words. These are the most prominent characteristics of someone who is Spirit-filled. Steer clear of anyone who insists you do what they say simply because they hold a position of authority. The tendency to “lord it over” people suggests that they are not humble and not Spirit-filled.

How should we interpret a prompting to do something good?

If you ever receive a nudging to do something good, I suggest that you be very careful to consider the likelihood that it is indeed the Spirit speaking. For example, if you sense He might be telling you to give somebody a monetary gift, be careful not to merely shrug it off. Just remember that the flesh tends to nudge in the opposite direction. On the other hand, if giving a monetary gift will result in some type of fleshly

gratification such as accolades from others, then maybe the flesh is leading instead of the Spirit. But if there is no chance for the flesh to be gratified, then quite likely, the Spirit is the One doing the nudging. You need to search your own heart. If it is a nudging that could lead to a major change in your circumstances, it might be good to discuss it with other Christians. Husbands should discuss such things with their wives and visa versa.

When we don't follow His lead, we miss out on seeing the glory of God.

In the beginning of this article, I told about a situation in which I sensed a nudging to give one hundred dollars to a total stranger. I chose to ignore this nudging and held on to the money. Now imagine if that person in front of me had been contemplating suicide or despairing due to his circumstances and I had followed through on the nudging. Suddenly, a complete stranger (me), hands him one hundred dollars and says, "I don't know why, but I believe God told me to give you this money." Such an event could have been a life-altering moment and given the man a peek into God's loving heart. I can imagine God using such an event in the process of saving a soul. It could possibly have been the start of a long friendship for me with someone who would later follow Jesus with great zeal. No matter what the actual outcome would have been if I had done it, I suspect that because of the choice I made that night, I missed out on a blessing from God.

One time while at a garage sale, my wife experienced a nudging to give a man a gospel tract. In the garage, she explained to the owner about our ministry to Muslims. There were two other men in the garage who seemed lost and miserable. One of them said to the other, "We have no clue about anything that they (my wife and the owner) are talking about." They seemed to be admitting to each other that they were completely lost. It was at this moment that my wife experienced the nudging to give the gospel tract to one of the men. But she was suddenly paralyzed by fear because these men seemed like they could be dangerous. She left without giving them the tract and has regretted it ever since. She has prayed often that God will cause her to meet that down trodden man again and she tries to always have a tract with her with a little note on it just for him. She is confident that the Spirit was nudging her and that she failed to follow through. She does not look at the experience as something to wallow in guilt about. She sees it more as a blessing lost. But she continues to pray for this man and ask God to bring him across her path again.

When we do follow His lead, we experience the glory of God.

Several years ago while we were experiencing significant financial difficulties, my wife Linda had accidentally stepped on her glasses. I tried to fix them but they were just not the same after that. So, as a family, we asked God to supply \$ 400 so she could purchase a new pair. (They were special glasses.) After a few weeks of praying, Linda became weary of looking through the broken glasses. One morning while she was praying, she began crying because it was difficult to see with her glasses. She asked God why He had not provided funds so they could be replaced. Shortly after, she came downstairs and got the mail out of the mail box. In it was a letter from a man who had recently lost his job. In that letter he said, "God told me to give this to you." Also enclosed was a check for \$ 400 the exact amount needed for those glasses. It was absolutely clear to us that God arranged the entire event. As the recipients of the \$ 400, we sensed God's love and faithfulness with tears of joy. When we explained the sequence of events to the giver, he too experienced the glory of God. He was made rich in knowing God was working through Him mightily.

I recall one time that my wife visited the grocery store. She noticed she had a tract in her purse. Then she sensed that God wanted her to give it to someone at the store but she did not know who. She saw a teenage "bagger" and thought this was the one. She had seen him there before and felt compassion for him because he was mentally challenged. But the boy disappeared from her sight so she looked to see who else God might have intended for the tract. Then her eyes caught another person. She really did not want to give the tract to because of a past experience. She wrestled in her soul, "O Lord, please...not her." But it turned out as she got closer that she sensed it was not this woman. So, she started to think that maybe God really did not have anyone intended for the tract. She was on her way out the door when suddenly, the teenaged bagger appeared directly in front of her. She was confident that God wanted her to give the tract to him. She went up to him, handed him the tract and said, "Hello Brian, would you like a booklet that tells you how you can get to know Jesus Christ?" The boy took the tract, ran up to his nearby friend and said with enthusiasm and sincerity, "Look what this lady gave to me!! I am going to have my mama read it to me tonight!!"

Like so many other Christians, I can look back in awe on many blessings that resulted from simple obedience to the Spirit's promptings. For example, many times, I came away from evangelism encounters knowing that the Spirit prepared hearts and then spoke the gospel to them using me. Whether it be giving this way or helping someone with a physical need, we come away basking on the glory of God as if we have been feasting at Jesus' table.

Summary

Like Paul, we should live obedient lives joyously surrendered to Jesus. As we do, we should continually seek to know God's will about the events that confront us and the decisions we make. Even if we are unsure of God's direction at any given moment, we should keep asking Him for direction and when we are uneasy, we should patiently wait for God to show us His will. We should make plans for our lives that are driven to address Jesus' interests and take steps toward the fulfillment of those plans. As long as we are totally submitted to Jesus, we can be confident that our plans are in God's will knowing that if He desires to alter them, we stand ready and willing at all times to follow His lead. As we live surrendered lives to Him and continually pray for His will to be done in our lives, we step out and follow His nudging to give of ourselves. As we do, we experience blessings that would not have been experienced had we just lived our lives according to our own understanding and desires.

A most urgent warning

If you live your life independent from God, making decisions solely on the basis of your own desires, you are not one of those who are being led by the Spirit. You are not a son of God. If this is your experience, Jesus is not your Lord. You are acting as if you are God and God commands you to repent of this self-driven life and lose your life to Jesus.

Appendix A: The phrase “led by the Spirit” mainly relates to living under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Let us consider the passages of the Bible that record Paul’s usage of the phrase, “led by the Spirit.”

¹²Therefore, brethren, we are debtors—not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. ¹³For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. ¹⁵For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, “Abba, Father” (Romans 8:12-15)

¹⁶I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. ¹⁷For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. ¹⁸But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law (Galatians 5:16-18).

In the two passages above, Paul uses the phrase “led by the Spirit.” As we examine the immediate and prior context (including Romans chapter 6 & 7), we should note that Paul is teaching how the Christian has been saved by Jesus to live holy lives no longer as slaves to sinful, fleshly desires. So, when Paul says, “*As many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God,*” he is not really talking about the idea of receiving direct communication from the Spirit about decisions that relate to planning our agenda. Rather, he is addressing one of the core elements of the gospel that relates to the topic of repentance.

The Apostles, John the Baptist and Jesus all preached a message of repentance. This message was not conveyed by them yelling out at people, “Repent!” Rather, they taught things that communicated what the term “repent” implies. For example, Jesus said, “*He who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it*” (Matthew 10:38-39).

Paul said, “*Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s*” (I Corinthians 6:19-20). Before Jesus saved us, we lived lives for ourselves as we saw fit. We lived as if we were God. When true repentance takes place, ownership of our lives is surrendered to Jesus and we begin living our lives for Him as Lord. Instead of making our own decisions based upon what seems to be most logical and best to us, we begin looking to Jesus for guidance as the One who has the right to call the shots, even if it means that we will end up suffering or dying as a result. This is what it means to repent. It comes down to, “Who is Lord?”

In the immediate context of where he uses the phrase “led by the Spirit,” Paul discusses the most intense aspect of the battle over who is Lord. When faced with temptation, will I obey Jesus or give into the lust of my flesh. The Holy Spirit NEVER leads us to sin. He is the Holy Spirit and He always leads us toward holy living. The most vivid evidence that a man is a son of God is observed when he rejects the impulse of the flesh and chooses to obey Jesus, his loving Lord. All true Christians do not want to live under the bondage of sin. We desire to live under the safe shelter and protection of Jesus which is experienced when we are submitted to His will instead of our own.