

# “Let the Will of the Lord Be Done”: Seeking God’s Guidance in Our Lives Today

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## Introduction

### The Text

<sup>1</sup>And when we had parted from them and set sail, we came by a straight course to Cos, and the next day to Rhodes, and from there to Patara. <sup>2</sup>And having found a ship crossing to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. <sup>3</sup>When we had come in sight of Cyprus, leaving it on the left we sailed to Syria and landed at Tyre, for there the ship was to unload its cargo. <sup>4</sup>And having sought out the disciples, we stayed there for seven days. And through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem. <sup>5</sup>When our days there were ended, we departed and went on our journey, and they all, with wives and children, accompanied us until we were outside the city. And kneeling down on the beach, we prayed <sup>6</sup>and said farewell to one another. Then we went on board the ship, and they returned home.

<sup>7</sup>When we had finished the voyage from Tyre, we arrived at Ptolemais, and we greeted the brothers and stayed with them for one day. <sup>8</sup>On the next day we departed and came to Caesarea, and we entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. <sup>9</sup>He had four unmarried daughters, who prophesied. <sup>10</sup>While we were staying for many days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. <sup>11</sup>And coming to us, he took Paul’s belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, “Thus says the Holy Spirit, ‘This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.’” <sup>12</sup>When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem. <sup>13</sup>Then Paul answered, “What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.” <sup>14</sup>And since he would not be persuaded, we ceased and said, “Let the will of the Lord be done.” (Acts 21:1-14)

### Do I Like Blondes or Brunettes?

- A. It was maybe twelve years or so ago now. I was sitting in the back of an old lecture hall in the Van Til building of Westminster Theological Seminary on the other side of country there in Philly, PA.
1. And somehow or other, during a time of question and answer with one of my professors, we got into a discussion about God’s personal guidance of his people today—whether we can and should still seek him for that sort of thing in our own lives.
    - a. Does the Spirit still lead us in personal matters as we see happen in [Acts 21](#), for example.
  2. And, in a particularly tense moment, one student cut straight to the point: “So, in your opinion, professor, if I am interested in dating or marrying someone, should I pray and ask God for guidance? Should I ask God to help me determine who to date, who to marry? Will the Holy Spirit help me in that, offer direction in that, or is that outside his purview? Should I seek God’s personal guidance on the matter?”

3. Do you want to know what his answer was? I'll never forget it. His words moved through my ears like fingernails down a chalkboard.
  - a. He said: "No. You shouldn't pray for God's personal guidance in these matters. He's not going to tell you whether you should marry Susie or marry Sally. When it comes to things like this, you'd be better off simply asking yourself: 'Well, do I like blonde girls or brunettes?'" And just go with that.
- B. At that point, in all honesty, I almost walked out. I was so troubled, so disturbed, so opposed to what was being said.
  1. Of course God wants you to ask. Of course God wants a personal relationship with you. Of course he wants to be involved in the everyday decisions of your life.
  2. That's why Jesus came and died and rose and ascended and poured out his Spirit upon you: to bring you close—to get into every little detail of who you are, what you're doing, where you're going, who you marry!

## To Be Fair . . .

- A. Now, to be fair to my old professor, let me at least say a couple things . . .
- B. First, I recognize that his answer was given a bit tongue-in-cheek. There was obviously some sarcasm there. He was being intentionally scandalous, in an effort, it seems, to shock us awake to the point he was trying to make.
- C. And that gets to the second thing I'd want to say. If I understand him rightly, I can actually appreciate the point he's trying to make.
  1. In essence, the position held by a lot of Reformed theologians is that God has given us all the guidance we really need in Holy Scripture. That's where you find his revelation, his will for you.
    - a. It's not going to come in some personalized form by the Spirit—some whispered answer in the night to our questions like: should I marry this girl or that one?
    - b. The Spirit has inspired the Scripture and that's sufficient.
      - i. You get your promises and your precepts and your principles there and you apply it to your life as best you can by means of wisdom.
  2. So when he says: "Do you like blondes or brunettes?"—
    - a. he's not saying: "Just go with whatever your heathen heart desires";
    - b. he's saying: "Don't get so worked up on secondary matters, searching high and low for clues that might lead you to God's secret and personal will for you on the matter. Don't obsess over those things. Don't be led too far afield by all that. Look to the Scriptures."

3. And I understand why he'd want to emphasize this point. So many these days are tempted to move in the opposite direction. And they get into all sorts of trouble.
    - a. They prioritize what they "feel" God is speaking to them over (and sometimes even against) what God has already spoken to them in Scripture. It's a problem.
- D. So here is the guy praying about who he should marry.
1. We already have clear principles from Scripture in terms of what we should look for.
    - a. She should be "in the Lord," a believer (cf. [1 Cor. 7:39](#)).
    - b. She (and, therefore, he) should prioritize the internal beauty of Christian character rather than mere external adornment (cf. [1 Pet. 3:3-4](#)).
    - c. You look at [Proverbs 31](#) and see more details there.
  2. But imagine he neglects all of that and prays and fasts and concludes the Spirit must be saying: "Marry this girl."
    - a. But she's not a Christian. She doesn't have the fruits of the Spirit. She doesn't fear the Lord.
    - b. Ah but you have a feeling, an impression.
      - i. You say it's "from the Spirit," but really, you just think she's cute. (It's amazing how many guys feel like God is calling them to date the cute girl in the college ministry. I led a college ministry. I should know ; )
- E. So I get what my professor was saying here. And, again, I appreciate it—very much so, in fact. But, in my opinion, even still, my professor went too far. As we often do, in an effort to correct one error he fell off into another.
1. He is right to be wary of overemphasizing the pursuit of personal guidance.
  2. But I believe he is wrong to say it shouldn't be sought for at all—so long as it is kept in its place submitted to the authority of Scripture.
- F. So, now, in view of the text we just read, with the time that remains, I want to consider this subject of personal guidance and the Spirit's leading of us under three headings: (1) The Possibility of Personal Guidance; (2) The Risk of Mixed Signals; and (3) The Way Forward.

## (1) The Possibility of Personal Guidance

For Paul, the Early Church, and . . . Us?

- A. In [Acts 21](#), it is clear that Paul has some sense of the Spirit's leading of him personally ([vv. 13-14](#)). And there are others, if you noticed, who are given a sense of this for him as well (cf. [vv. 4, 11](#)).

B. But the question before us now is: Does God do this for us still today? Should we even look for such a thing? Was this just for the early church, for the time when Scripture was being inspired and recorded, and now we don't really need it? That time has passed.

1. Well, obviously, as I put it in the heading, I do believe in the possibility of personal guidance.

a. But why do I think this?

## A Few Reasons

A. Well, I could point you to many reasons, but the simplest is this: God nowhere says in Scripture that what he began there with the early church at Pentecost in [Acts 2](#)—with the outpouring of the Spirit, the power, the sense of God's presence and personal guidance—would serve its purpose and then be done soon thereafter.

1. If anything, he seems to explicitly say we should expect this kind of thing to continue on to the end.

B. In fact, there are hints towards this truth right here in our text in [Acts 21](#).

1. Why does Luke make mention these four daughters of Philip “[who prophesied](#)” (v. 9)

2. Well, I think he is linking us back to what Peter said on the day of Pentecost when he there pointed us back yet further to a prophecy given by Joel some 500 or so years before . . .

C. [Acts 2:14-18](#): “<sup>14</sup> Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them: ‘Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. . . . <sup>16</sup> [T]his is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: <sup>17</sup> “And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; <sup>18</sup> even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.”’”

1. First notice, what is happening?

Because of Jesus, because of the cross, because of his grace, everyone is given access, remarkable access, to the Spirit of the living God. “[I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh . . .](#)”

a. Not just some flesh. Not just the priestly or the regal class or something like this.

b. Everyone will be swept up in this spiritual deluge. There's a ubiquity to it, a democratization of it. Everyone has access:

i. “[sons](#)” and “[daughters](#)”;

ii. “[young men](#)” and “[old men](#)”;

iii. “[male servants](#)” and “[female servants](#)” . . . “[they shall prophesy](#)”!

(1) They shall know something of God's heart, something of his will, something of his plans.

(2) They shall have an intimate and powerful relationship with him.

2. That's what is happening. Now notice, when is all this happening?

"In the last days," Peter says.

- a. And these last days, let's be clear, they're not somewhere out there, way off on the calendar.
- b. No! Peter is saying, they're right now. The last days are these days.
  - i. The cross of Christ doesn't just give us all access to the Spirit of God, it also thrusts us into the last days. It moves us forward and into the last chapter of God's redemptive plan.

(1) And these last days will be characterized he is saying—not just at the beginning, but all the way through—by the powerful presence (and guidance) of God's Spirit: "[I]n the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit."

(2) This is the mark of the eschatological age in which we live.

- D. It's this same idea Paul is getting at in 1 Cor. 1:4-8, when he writes: "<sup>4</sup> I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, <sup>5</sup> that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— <sup>6</sup> even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— <sup>7</sup> so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>8</sup> who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ"

1. What? You are "not lacking in any gift . . ." You've got the Spirit and a sense of his power and guidance in your Christian life.
2. When? All the while "as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ"—for the day his return.
  - a. The outpouring of the Spirit doesn't merely kick off the last days, it characterizes them all the way through to the last day (cf. 1 Cor. 13:10).

- E. The NT presents Jesus' triumph at the cross as the great "uncorking" of the Spirit of God. Upon Jesus ascension, the Holy Spirit is poured out in unparalleled measure.

1. Are we then to understand that all this was soon after bottled up once more and put back on the shelf? I don't think we have any indication of that.

- F. So we should be open, even expectant, and desirous of the Spirit's guidance and power.

1. Paul tells us explicitly that we should "earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy" (1 Cor. 14:1).

## (2) The Risk of Mixed Signals

## Encouraged but Warned

- A. But now to this encouragement we must add a warning.
1. Because, as we seek his guidance and try to discern his will for us in some personal way, we can get it wrong sometimes.
  2. We can get the wires crossed, the signals mixed.
  3. We can think we're hearing from the Spirit, when really we're hearing something else.
- B. This is the part that is the most troubling about our text back in [Acts 21](#).
1. If you've been following with us thus far in the book of Acts, then you know: the Spirit has been telling Paul explicitly to go to Jerusalem and that suffering is waiting for him there.
    - a. So, for example, [Acts 20:22-23](#): “<sup>22</sup> And now, behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there,<sup>23</sup> except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me” (cf. [19:21](#)).
  2. And yet here in our text, the Spirit seems to be saying something else.
    - a. So in [v. 4](#), Luke says of these Christians in Tyre that “[through the Spirit they were telling Paul not to go on to Jerusalem.](#)”
- C. What is this?! How are we to understand it? Is the Spirit literally contradicting himself here?
1. Well, I think we're given greater clarity when we look at a more detailed example of this sort of thing happening down in [vv. 10-12](#).
    - a. Now Paul is in Caesarea.
    - b. And a man named Agabus (whom we'd already met back in [Acts 11:28](#)) comes in with a word of prophecy for Paul.
    - c. [V. 11](#): “[And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands and said, 'Thus says the Holy Spirit, "This is how the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'"](#)” He's not wrong. This is what the Spirit had been telling Paul as well.
    - d. But now—and this is where the signals start to scramble—what do the people do with this information from the Spirit? [V. 12](#): “[When we heard this, we and the people there urged him not to go up to Jerusalem.](#)”
      - i. And don't miss the first person plural there—“[we](#)”—indicating that even Luke, the author of Acts, is seemingly involved in this urging of Paul away from Jerusalem here.

## Right Impression, Wrong Conclusion

- A. So what's happening here? Well, here's the issue as I see it . . .

1. Back up in [Acts 20:22-23](#), the Holy Spirit had two parts to his message: (1) you're going to Jerusalem; and (2) it's going to hurt.
  2. These folks in Tyre and Caesarea seem to only get the second part ["through the Spirit"](#) and they miss the first.
    - a. They hear rightly that it's going to hurt, but assume wrongly that means he mustn't go! Their application is off.
    - b. They get the right impression, in one sense, but they come to the wrong conclusion.
    - c. They mix the signals.
- B. They hear a little bit of the Spirit and a little bit of their own heart. Do you know what I mean?
1. They heard that it would hurt Paul to go. And, because they love Paul and don't want him to hurt, they began to urge him not to go.
  2. Their own desires get in the way of God's desire for him.
    - a. And, hence, (and this is the real tragedy) they end up pulling their support in the very moment he needs it most.
- C. This is why Paul responds the way he does there in [v. 13](#): ["Then Paul answered, 'What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be imprisoned but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.'"](#)
1. The word there translated ["breaking"](#) is the idea of breaking into pieces. That's what they're doing to his heart.
    - a. They're calling him away from the very thing God is calling him towards.
    - b. They're pulling him back even as God is pulling him on.
    - c. And it's ripping him apart. He's a rag doll in the hands of these folks that love him.
    - d. They mean him well but they do him harm.
      - i. He's in pieces because of it.
- D. I've been reading Nehemiah in my devotions, and I came across the same sort of thing just this past week.
1. We know God had set it in the heart of Nehemiah to come and help rebuild the wall around Jerusalem.
  2. But it was hard work. And the foreigners in the surrounding areas were vicious and threatening.
  3. And so we're told in [Neh. 4:12](#): ["At that time the Jews who lived near them came from all directions and said to us ten times, 'You must return to us.'"](#)

- a. In other words, family and friends, because they loved these folks, were saying: “The work is too dangerous. This can’t be what God wants for you. Stop at once and come home.”
  
- E. Isn’t this how we can be with our own friends and family, especially with our kids. I call it “compassionate coddling.”
  - 1. We mean well, trying to keep them safe and comfortable.
  - 2. But we cripple them if, in that, we’re also keeping them from God’s will for them.
    - a. We’ve got to be careful. Nowhere does God say he’s come to keep us from all suffering.
    - b. On the contrary, as Paul himself says: “[through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God](#)” (Acts 14:22).
      - i. God has not promised to keep us from tribulation.
      - ii. Oh but he has promised to carry us through it.
  
- F. We need more parents like the mother of Hudson Taylor, missionary to China back in the 1800s.
  - 1. Before he was even born, his parents had been praying that God would send him on mission to China.
  - 2. And, yet, when, at the age of 21, Hudson did at last sense and answer the call from God to go, he recounts how deeply it pained his mother—because it was an exceedingly dangerous mission and it could very well claim his life.
    - a. As Hudson boarded the ship, he later wrote of the agonizing cry his mother let out from the dock as the ship finally pulled away: “[I shall never forget the cry of anguish wrung from that mother's heart as she felt that I was gone. It went through me like a knife. I never knew so fully, until then, what 'God so loved the world' meant.](#)”
      - i. Even though it was killing her, she was willing to let him go for God!
      - ii. She didn’t try to tear him back even though it was tearing her apart.

## The Story Beneath the Story

- A. We like to imagine that God’s will for us must only be that which seems immediately good and comfortable and pleasing to us. But a lot of times it’s hard.
  - 1. Are you going to twist and reinterpret and try to get out of it?
  - 2. Or are you going to lean in towards it, knowing Jesus already did just that for you?
    - a. That’s what Taylor meant when he said: “[I never knew so fully, until then, what 'God so loved the world' meant.](#)” “My mom and I were just doing here, what the Father and his Son had already done for us.”
  
- B. This is really the story underneath the story of our text in [Acts 21](#). Paul is simply following in the footsteps of his Savior.

1. Jesus had “set his face to go to Jerusalem” in accordance with his Father’s will (Luke 9:51).
  2. Jesus knew that there he would be rejected by the Jews and “delivered over to the Gentiles” (Luke 18:32).
  3. And his friends, just like Paul’s, tried to discourage him from following such a course. You remember Peter: “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you” (Matt. 16:22).
  4. And though, no doubt, such things broke Jesus’ heart to pieces, even still, he went on ahead with it—fully confident that, though it would hurt in the moment, God would turn it for good in the end. And he does!
- C. So the lesson here is this: We’ve got to be careful when it comes to trying to seek God’s guidance, whether for others or for ourselves.
1. Our desires can get in the way of our discernment.
  2. Our hearts can get in the way of our ears.
  3. What we want can influence what we hear and how we hear it.
  4. We can pick up a little bit of him and a little bit of us.
  5. We can mix the signals.

### “I Don’t Like Tanya!”

- A. I’ll tell you, I’ve personally been the recipient of “mixed signal” prophecy and guidance “in the Spirit.”
1. I used to attend a prayer meeting with some folks back when I was the college pastor at my church in San Luis Obispo.
  2. And there was a couple that, from time to time, would speak of what they felt God was saying. They were never super pushy with it. They handled it okay it seemed to me.
  3. And sometimes what they shared seemed to be right on.
  4. But one time we were all gathered and singing and praying and the guy stops and he says: “I feel like the Holy Spirit is saying two people in this room are going to get married.”
  5. I was single at the time. I knew he was talking about me. He had shared with me in private a few weeks prior that he and his wife were “hearing wedding bells in my future.” Honestly, I told him at the time: “Don’t ever say that to me again. It’s going to mess with my head. If it’s going to happen great. But I can’t be getting all mental with it.”
  6. Well he didn’t listen. He shared this with the group.
  7. I looked around. There were a bunch of girls my age and then two or three much older men, not exactly eligible bachelors. So I knew I was in trouble.
- B. But here’s the thing: They took what seems now in retrospect to have been a true word from God and they began to mix in their own interpretation. They came to the wrong conclusions.
1. There was a girl in that meeting, Tanya. She and the wife in this couple were close friends.
  2. And, I think, no doubt, they wanted Tanya to get married. They must have let their desire for this cloud their discernment.
  3. And I see them after meeting with Tanya, telling her: “We think it’s you.”
  4. And here’s the thing: I don’t mean her any disrespect, she was actually an awesome girl, but I didn’t have feelings for Tanya.

5. I remember, I went on a trip at that point to Italy to visit my sister who was studying abroad. And I took some time to backpack around. And I was alone, sitting on the pebbly coastline of Cinque Terra, wrestling with God, writing in my journal: “Am I supposed to feel something? Is this your will? For me to marry Tanya? But God I don’t like Tanya!”
  6. Well, long story short, I didn’t marry Tanya.
  7. But I did, to my great surprise (and delight), realize later that there was one other girl there at the meeting that day—quiet and in the back corner of the room: Megan . . . the woman who’s now my wife.
- C. So we’ve got to be careful, right? We can really mess this up.
1. This is why my professor landed where he did. It’s certainly cleaner to say: just read the Scriptures and don’t even mess with trying to get personal guidance from God. We just mix it all up.
  2. But I think God wants us seeking him like this, we just have to learn how to handle it responsibly.
    - a. So what can we do?

### (3) The Way Forward

#### Three Steps

- A. What’s the way forward in all of this? In light of all we’ve looked at thus far, what should we do when it comes to seeking God’s guidance for our lives personally? I’ve got three steps: (1) Surrender (to his heart); (2) Soak (in his Word); and (3) Seek.

#### Step #1: Surrender (to his heart)

- A. The bottom line is: we will not hear rightly if we are not surrendered completely. We’ll twist and turn what he might be trying to tell us to get it to be what we want it to be.
- B. I say we must surrender “to his heart” because deep in your bones you have to trust him.
1. You have to know that what he says—whatever he says—is going to be for your good, no matter how hard it may seem in the moment.

- C. Are you there? Can you say with Samuel: [“Speak \[LORD\], for your servant is listening” \(1 Sam. 3:10 NASB\)](#). If you can’t you won’t hear him. If you can, you just might. But it starts with surrender.

#### Step #2: Soak (in his Word)

- A. My professor is right. Scripture has to be priority.
1. It is the only sure and solid revelation we have from God.

2. Everything else is prone to mixture and confusion because it comes to us and through us, and we can miss something or twist something—we're not apostles, we're not prophets in the inspired sense of the word.
- B. But the Bible is different. As Paul says in [2 Tim. 3](#): “<sup>16</sup> All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness;<sup>17</sup> so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (vv. 16-17).
1. As you open the Book, God opens his mouth.
- C. So if you're truly seeking his will for your life, you've got to soak in this. After surrender, this is where you go—to his Word. You look for what he says here.
1. He might not here give you the particulars for a given decision set before you, but he lays out the parameters.
  2. He might not tell you which woman to marry, but he'll tell you what kind of woman to look for.
- D. So we've got to soak in his Word.

### Step #3: Seek (out his guidance)

- A. Contrary to what my professor said, I think this does matter.
1. I think God does want us talking with him, asking him for guidance in our everyday decisions, however big or small.
  2. And I think God does sometimes lay things on our hearts. I think he can speak.
    - a. But there's a reason this is step #3 and not step #1. It comes last. It's the least reliable.
    - b. And it needs to be weighed and tested and subjected to what God has already revealed to us in Scripture ([1 Cor. 14:29](#); [1 Thess. 5:19-21](#)).
- B. It's like what I told you a few weeks back . . .
1. I'm going to hold the Bible in my right hand, my dominant hand.
  2. And I'm going to hold any other impression or sense of God's guidance I may get in my left, my non-dominant hand.
    - a. It still matters, but I don't hold it nearly as tightly as I hold to what he's said to me in Scripture.
      - i. Here I think I have a sense of what he may be saying, what he may want me to do.
      - ii. Here I know what he's saying and what he wants me to do.
- C. I think this is why Paul comes out at the end of [1 Cor. 14](#) after all this discussion about spiritual gifts and prophecy and things like that and he says: “<sup>36</sup> [W]as it from you that the word of God came? Or

are you the only ones it has reached?<sup>37</sup> If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord.<sup>38</sup> If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized” (vv. 36-38). Did you hear that?

1. He’s saying: If you’re truly hearing things from God it will be subordinated to, subjected to, in agreement with the apostolic doctrine and teaching of Scripture.
2. And if it’s not, it’s not from God!

D. I think this is why our story in [Acts 21](#) ends the way it does.

1. After all this back and forth with the Apostle Paul about whether he should go to Jerusalem or not—when they realized, as Luke tells us, “[he would not be persuaded](#)”—they stop fighting, they submit their sense of what the Spirit is saying to the authority of the Apostle.
2. And instead they say, [v. 14](#): “[Let the will of the Lord be done.](#)”

- a. I guess we got our interpretation and application wrong. We’ll go with the apostle on this. We’ll go with God on this. “[Let the will of the Lord be done.](#)”

E. So should you seek out God’s guidance for things in your life, yes!

1. Just keep your sense of his personal leading in your left hand,
2. keep the Scriptures in your right,
3. and keep yourself there on that altar—surrendered to him, trusting his heart.