

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: [truthfortoday@aol.com](mailto:truthfortoday@aol.com)

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**Speaker:** Mr. Peter Ollerhead

## Psalm 23 - Aspects of our LORD: The LORD as our Guide

Good morning and welcome to *Truth for Today*, where we are continuing with the second talk in a series of four, under the general title of "Aspects of our LORD". Last week my colleague, George Stevens, delivered the first of these when he considered the Lord Jesus as the Provider. The title of my talk today is "The Lord as our Guide", which is obviously pertinent to the lives of all Christians. Right through the ages, men and women have sought to find the will of God for their lives generally, or in specific moments, when they have felt the need for the Lord's leading. Psalm 23, one of the most well-known and well-loved psalms, is full of references to sheep being led by a good shepherd.

To refresh our memories, I will read the opening three verses of that psalm from the English Standard Version of the Bible: *"The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake"* (Psalm 23:1-3).

I will not comment on these verses, other than to impress the point that David, the author of these words, was convinced that he could rely upon God to guide him through his life in a way that was beneficial to him and honouring to the LORD at the same time.

I now wish to reinforce this point, by further references from Scripture to the possibility that God will guide His people, if they place their confidence in Him. This first text is fresh on my mind, as I have recently listened to a preacher using it as the basis of an address. It is Proverbs 3:6: *"In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make straight your paths."*

*"Make straight your paths"* has the sense of making the way plain for the traveller. Another promise, this time from Psalm 32, emphasises the same truth: *"I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you."* (Psalm 32:8)

Another, similar statement, from Psalm 73, reveals the Psalmist's confidence in God when he writes: *"You will guide me with your counsel"*, (Psalm 73:24).

Isaiah expresses the same glad confidence in God's guidance for His people, though I have only time to quote two references. The first is Isaiah 49:10: *"... they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them, for He who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water He will guide them."* The second reference is from the Isaiah 58:11, where Isaiah promises that God will guide His people continually.

You will have noticed that all my quoted verses are from the Old Testament, so I will refer to just one example from the New Testament to establish the continuity of the thought of God's guidance throughout the Bible. *"Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life"*, John 8:12.

Such texts, as I have quoted, are indicative of the many promises of guidance that the Scriptures contains. One of my favourite commentators writes: "The vault of Scripture is inlaid with thousands of such promises that glisten in their measure as stars which guide the wanderer across the deep" (FB Meyer, *The Secret of Guidance*). Therefore, I sum up the first section of this talk by stating that the promises for God's leading and guidance of His people are consistently evident throughout the Bible.

The problem faced by many of us is not that we don't believe that the Bible promises us guidance, rather that we are often at the cross-roads, where a decision is needed, without any guidance forthcoming. No angel, or secret sign, appears to help us, therefore what do we do? Which way do we go? In 1896, Charles Sheldon wrote a best-selling novel entitled "In His Steps", with the sub-title "What would Jesus do?" It concerns a church congregation in America, which is challenged to always ask "What would Jesus do?", before they act in any situation. This novel was very popular, running into many editions, yet I would suggest that there is a flaw in this method of seeking guidance. Such a process of seeking help is very subjective. It requires one to know how the Lord Jesus would behave in any given situation. I am of the opinion that we need further signals, to help to discover God's will, than my subjective feelings. If I think that a particular way is right, or that the Lord is guiding us simply because it feels right, then we have to be

aware of the danger of moving along life's road without being directed by the Lord. We are sinful creatures with a will biased towards sin. It is so easy to make decisions in our own strength with a brave confidence, disregarding any spiritual input. Just because it seems right to us does not make it so. Proverbs 14:12 states: *"There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death."*

When Jonah fled to Tarshish, away from the presence of God, he found a ship at Joppa ready to sail (Jonah 1:3). He could quite easily have persuaded himself that this was a sign from God that he was doing the right thing. Unfortunately for him, Jonah knew that the Lord had directed him elsewhere, so he knew he was being disobedient (Jonah 1:12). We cannot knowingly contravene God's will and expect the Lord to lead us. Therefore, the question now is, How can we discover God's guidance?

To answer this question there are, according to Scripture, various guidelines that we need to observe to discover the will of God. In my experience, one of the greatest difficulties is differentiating my natural desires and preferences from that of the Lord's purposes for us. We have to be extremely honest with ourselves, in all our judgments, when we stand at the cross roads of decision. In John 8:12, as we have already seen, the Lord Jesus said: *"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but have the light of life."*

When we have, through grace, become believers in the Lord Jesus, we will not practise the gross and indecent forms of sin, yet we are always liable to pander to self. Personal advantage, and the praise of our fellow Christians, can often affect our judgment, when small or great decisions have to be made. We must be determined to always lay aside personal inclinations, in order to listen for the 'still, small voice' of God's guidance.

If we look in John's Gospel again, we will receive further help from John 5:30, where the Lord is talking about His own pathway: *"I can do nothing on My own. As I hear, I judge, and My judgment is just, because I seek not My own will but the will of Him who sent me."*

Obviously, we can never be as close to God as was the Lord, yet the clarity of the statement would suggest to us that we also should not be trusting in our own will. Proverbs 3:5 reinforces this: *"Trust in LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding."*

Perhaps I have spent sufficient time on emphasising that so long as any spirit of selfishness, or personal gain, has the upper-hand we will find it difficult, or even impossible, to discover God's will for our lives.

The antidote for this is to be surrendered unto the Lord, as hymn number 608 in *Mission Praise* which can also be found in many other hymnals suggests:

*"All to Thee is yielded,  
I am not my own;  
Blissful, glad surrender -  
I am Thine alone.*

*Fill me with the knowledge  
Of Thy glorious will;  
All Thine own good pleasure  
In Thy child fulfil."*

Emily M Crawford (1864-1927)

Such feelings are more easily sung than practised, yet for us to know the Lord as our Guide such action is necessary.

You will, no doubt, have noticed that all of the speakers on *Truth for Today* quote texts, or even longer passages, from the Bible. It is incumbent for us to read the Word and absorb the teachings of this ancient book, which we believe is the Word of God. When I was a child, we learnt a chorus stating that the best book to read is the Bible. One of the lines said,

*"...if we read it every day,  
it will help us on our way"*

P Bilhorn (1865-1936)

A truth that I have never forgotten, yet sadly have not always practised. It still remains, however, that if we do not read the Bible we cannot expect to hear God's voice speaking to us at decision making time, or on any other occasion.

A further step in discovering how the Lord guides us is the use of our critical faculties. If we have to make decisions, we need as many facts as possible. A friend of mine applied for a job, for which he was well qualified, and which he obtained after a long interview. It was only when he commenced to work for the firm that he discovered that he would be expected to work in a way that was not in line with Christian principles. Immediately resigning, he never made the same mistake again. Each one of us has the responsibility to decide how the Lord is leading us, which ultimately may be made clear to us, through what FB Meyer has called "sanctified common sense". I emphasise that word "sanctified", for we have spent several minutes saying that we need to be surrendered to the Lord.

The writer, I have just mentioned, gives a very useful example from Scripture that is helpful, so I shall quote the whole paragraph: "When Peter was shut up in prison, and could not possibly extricate himself, an angel was sent to do for him what he could not do for himself: but when they had passed through a street or two of the city, the angel left him to consider the matter for himself. Thus God treats us still. He will dictate a miraculous course by miraculous methods. But when the ordinary light of reason is adequate to the task, He will leave us to act as the occasion may serve" (FB Meyer, *The Secret of Guidance*).

At the risk of wearisome repetition, I add that "the light of ordinary reason" has to be sanctified ordinary reason.

One important factor in the Lord guiding us, that has not yet been mentioned, is that of prayer. The older I get the more often I turn to the Psalms, which express the feelings of those with deep experience with God. There is no lack by the Psalmists of serious, and sincere, longings for direction into the path of righteousness. Psalm 25:4-5 expresses such desire: "*Make me know Your ways, O LORD; teach me Your paths. Lead me in Your truth and teach me, for You are the God of my salvation: for You I wait all the day long.*"

We can read similar thoughts from Psalm 86:11, where the opening phrase has been turned into the first line of a well-known hymn:

*"Teach me Thy way O Lord,  
Teach me Thy way!  
Thy gracious aid afford,  
Teach me Thy way!  
Help me to walk aright,  
More by faith, less by sight;  
Lead me with heavenly light:  
Teach me Thy way!"*

B Mansell Ramsey (1849-1923)

Prayer is essential for the child of God. Not perfunctory or vain repetition (see Matthew 6:7), but rather heart-felt pleadings for the reality and truth of God in our lives, and that we might know the pathway down which He would lead us.

Earlier, I quoted several Scriptures, in attempt to establish guidelines to discover God's will for our lives. I find it helpful to distinguish between God's purpose and God's will. Before we proceed with this, however, can I say to any who have just joined us, that you are listening to *Truth for Today*, where we are discussing how the Lord can be our Guide. Now, to return to God's purpose and His will. I stress that it is helpful to me to look at guidance this way. Many might disagree with me by saying that there is no difference between God's purpose and His will, so I say again, it helps me to look at guidance this way.

In Romans 8:28-29 we read: "*And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that He might be the firstborn among many brothers.*"

And also in 2 Timothy 1:9, there is another reference to the purpose of God: "... [God] who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of His own purpose and grace, which He gave us in Christ Jesus before the world began."

From these verses, we learn that God had a purpose in saving us. I want to impress upon you that I am using the words 'God's will' and 'God's purpose' to try to make clear that I believe God's purpose is the same for all Christians, whereas His will is for an individual. I repeat that I am using these two phrases in this way because it helps me in my daily pathway. God requires all Christians to seek to learn from the Lord Jesus and to be like Him - that is His purpose. He is leading us all into a life of holiness, in order that we should be conformed to the Lord, now in this world, in this day and age. In a coming day, we shall be made like Him for all eternity, as the Apostle John wrote (see

1 John 3:2). When it comes to God's will, however, this might be different for you than for me. It might be His will for me to work in a clinic, or a school in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, as happened to a friend of mine. Or He might lead you into helping with your church youth group, or to be a Christian visitor to the lonely. One thing you can be sure of is, that where ever He leads, it will be along the path of righteousness. You will not be led of the Lord into unholy behaviour or doubtful pastimes.

As we approach the end of our time together this morning, I want to emphasise some of the elements in discovering His will. Previously, I mentioned our feelings, and the possibility of relying upon them, in determining God's leading in a particular situation. Our feelings vary with tiredness, or illness, or with the elation of the moment. We have all been in meetings, or services, where a powerful sermon, or inspiring singing has filled us with joy and holy emotion. Next day when we are back at work, which might be on a production line in a noisy factory, things are different. Or are they? God's purpose for us is to live as Christians where He wills us to be. That never changes. If promotion is offered, or a change in employment, we then have to decide "Is this God's will for us?". Though our circumstances can change many times, even in the course of a year, God's purpose for us never changes.

I trust I have not made the subject of the Lord guiding us too difficult, or complex, but just in case I have, I am going to finish by repeating some of the important aspects of the Lord guiding us.

- He will never lead us along a path of unrighteousness.
- We should always remember that the Lord, through the Holy Spirit, dwells in us.
- If we take a wrong turning we should not ignore the Spirit within us, for He will be grieved and we will know it.
- We must be prepared to pray at all times and wait upon God. Sometimes our lives are so busy, and filled with things to do, that we have no time to wait upon the Lord. We will never know the voice of the Shepherd if our ears are filled with the clamour of the world. We need to read and study the Scriptures, as there is a wealth of texts, passages and examples in the Bible that will assist us as we seek the Lord's guidance. It is no good complaining that we are bereft of guidance if we never read the Word. Remember the phrase 'sanctified common sense'.
- We must also sincerely desire to know the Lord's guidance. If we merely play lip service we shall, in all probability, make many wrong turnings.
- Finally, we have to keep before us at all times the purpose of God for our lives.

As I have stated, at some length, His purpose for all Christians is to display the grace and holiness of God, as we walk through this world. Any decisions that we make that will detract from us living as God would desire, which is to be more like His Son, are wrong decisions, and definitely not the Lord guiding us.

In 1862 Joseph Gilmore wrote some lines about the Lord guiding us. I finish by reading his words, acknowledging that they are more easily sung than put into practice:

*"He leadeth me! Oh blessed thought!  
Oh words with heavenly comfort fraught!  
Whate'er I do, where'er I be,  
It is His hand that leadeth me.*

*Lord, I would clasp my hand in Thine,  
Nor ever murmur or repine;  
Content, whatever lot I see,  
Since 'tis my God that leadeth me."*

Joseph H Gilmore (1834-1918)

Good morning and thank you for listening.

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