

taking action!

small group material



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Turning Lost Students into Christ-Centered Labourers

GOD'S POWERFUL PRESENCE • God's Will

What Do I Need to Know About the Passage?

Acts

Background

One of the chief signs that God's presence is in and among His people is the powerful sense that He is leading and giving direction. We see this clearly in God's manifestation of His presence to the Israelites in their exodus out of Egypt.

So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea...

By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people. (Exodus 13:18,21-22).

The Jews had longed for such a day to return, and believed it would come when their Messiah came and ruled from the Temple in Jerusalem. Unfortunately, when He came, Israel as a nation did not recognize Him. Jesus had promised that though He, Himself, would return to heaven, His presence would remain in the person of the Holy Spirit.

When the promised Holy Spirit arrives in Acts 2, immediately we begin to notice a new dynamic: God is once again leading His people. We continually read that the Spirit said to, "go here" or "do this" or "say that." For the disciples it would have been clear that the powerful abiding presence of God had returned. It would have also dawned on them, quite shockingly, that His leading was, in fact, coming from the Temple as anticipated – the believers themselves comprising the new Temple where God's Spirit dwells.

A Contrast: Acts 1:23-26

The last thing we see the disciples doing before the Holy Spirit comes upon them is trying to discern God's will over who should replace Judas as the twelfth Apostle. As they sought God, they prayed and cast lots. Casting lots was a fairly common method of discerning God's will in biblical times. Lots were usually made out of small stones, and the method of using them was similar to drawing straws, or flipping a coin – yet with a component of faith in God's providence to decide a matter. It is clear from the Old Testament, that God did, at times, give Israel direction through casting lots.

What is interesting to note is that this is the last time the use of "lots" is recorded in the Scripture, and it is literally the very last event recorded before the coming of the Holy Spirit. From this moment on, in the book of Acts, we see the Holy Spirit is very directly leading and speaking to the people of God. It could very well be that Luke has included this story to show the contrast.

The New Dynamic

Nowhere is God's leading and direction more miraculous and spectacular than in the incident of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch. The text mentions that the "Spirit told Philip to go to the chariot and stay near it." Philip immediately finds an open door to

What's the Big Idea?

This study looks at the means by which God leads His people. It surveys the Book of Acts to see how the Holy Spirit gave wisdom and direction to the first disciples.

What's the Problem?

The will of God is not often plainly revealed to us which leaves us open to missing it entirely or wrongly leaning on uncertain indicators as we try to figure it out.

What's Our Response?

There are a few things that would make great application points in this study.

1. Help the people in your group understand that God does desire to lead us and give us direction.
2. Help them understand what are the basic tools we are to use to discern God's will. They are: wisdom, Scripture, Godly council, our emotions, our mind, direct revelation, and circumstances. Discerning God's will requires us to be good detectives looking for alignment among these various senses.
3. Most critically, encourage them to have a heart that desires to do God's will above all else (Rom 12:1-3).





proclaim the gospel. Then the passage mentions after the man was baptized “the Lord suddenly took Philip away.” God seems to be moving the disciples around like chess pieces, with direction that has not been experienced in Israel since the Exodus. It is the dawning of a new era.

The Jerusalem Council

In Acts 15, one of the most significant issues to ever face the church is addressed by the godly leaders and disciples in Jerusalem. Should the Gentiles be forced to embrace all of the rituals of the Mosaic Law, as well as Christ? This would clearly be a hindrance to the spread of the gospel. While the outcome is interesting to note (they decided the Gentiles did not have to), it is the process that is of interest to this study. While clearly God was leading the believers in many dramatic and miraculous ways, we don't see any evidence of that here. They prayed, listened to testimony, and deliberated on what they should do. They pondered what God had been doing in the circumstances of Paul's ministry, they prayed, counseled together, and used wisdom to make a decision.

The point is just this: While God desires to lead His people through the Holy Spirit, that does not always, or even usually, involve miraculous visions. The principal in this story, as well as Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch, is the same. God is now leading His people powerfully through His Spirit. The means may vary, and do, but God desires us to know His will, that we may do it.

Romans 12:1-3

Christians are always seeking a sure-fire way to know what the will of God is for their life. The most foolproof method is found in Romans 12:1-3. The passage speaks to giving ourselves entirely to the Lord and His will, with no reservations; having our minds (thoughts, hopes, dreams, and aspirations) transformed by Christ; then, we will be able to “approve what God's will is.”

The message of the passage is exceedingly simple, yet profoundly true. If we desire to do God's will with all of our heart, then He will disclose it to us. If, in the end, all we really want God to do is simply bless what we want to do, then we will not have that assurance. God gives us enough clues, that if we are looking for them, we will find them. But He also gives us just enough clues, so that if we don't desire to follow Him, they will not be perceived, or will be interpreted wrongly.

How Does God Make His Will Known?

How do you find where you are going when you are lost? You use your senses. You might look for familiar things, or try to hear a local highway. In a similar way, we are to use our spiritual senses to attempt to bring in as much information as we can, in order to discern God's leading. A basic list of those senses appears in the sidebar of this page.

Looking For Alignment

What we are looking for is alignment among these senses: that our hearts would be telling us the same things as our circumstances, and godly, mature believers. There are many decisions we can make by wisdom and a knowledge of the Scripture; but often the decisions that have the most gravity are not as clearly spelled out and need some detective work. As we mature as Christians, we become increasingly better detectives.

Tell Me Now!

So why doesn't God just make it immediately clear to us what we should do? Because God has other objectives than simply having you carry out His will. He wants you to know Him better, and rely on Him. He wants to bring out heart issues you are unaware of. God uses major decisions to accomplish many purposes, purposes which could not be realized by immediate disclosure of His will.

What Are Our Spiritual Senses?

Wisdom: Accumulated knowledge of how God has worked in your life thus far.

Scripture: Unlike the period of Acts, where more direct revelation was needed, we now have the New Testament, as well as the Old, to give us insight into God's will.

Godly Council: Discerning God's will requires detective work. God leads us through the council of others who have greater experience discerning God's ways, and who are experienced detectives.

Emotions: The Holy Spirit does lead through our emotions. Our emotions can be a “mixed bag,” and often requires sorting out. However, we will often find we have a desire to do what God is calling us to.

Mind: Prayerfully considering what would be the wisest stewardship of our time, gifting, and lives, can be a reliable way to discern the Spirit's leading.

Revelation: As in the Book of Acts, sometimes God leads through mental impressions, and even dreams, as we are prayerful over His direction.

Circumstances: Operating from the assumption that God is already at work in our circumstances, we can get a sense of where He might be leading us.

What Are the Questions?

Acts

LAUNCH

How have you tried to discern God's will in the past? How confident have you been that you were figuring out what he wanted you to do?

EXPLORE

Read Acts 1:23-26.

1. This passage gives us a picture of the disciples trying to discern God's will before they had received the Holy Spirit. What did they do and why?
2. The following passages describe God's leading after the coming of the Holy Spirit. Read the passages and describe how God gave direction and what He was leading them to do.

Acts 6:1-7

Acts 5:17-20

Acts 8:26-40

Acts 9:10-16

Acts 13:1-3

Acts 16:6-10

3. What differences do you notice between how God led in acts 1:23-26, and these passages?
4. In Acts 20:22-23, Paul says, "And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem...I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me." How do you think Paul experienced the Spirit's compelling/warnings?

5. Do you think God leads believers the same way today?

Read Romans 12:1-2.

6. What is the essential ingredient in receiving God's direction? Why is this so important?

Share with your group the "Spiritual Senses" listed in the sidebar on page 2 of this study.

7. Is there anything else you would add to this list?

Read Acts 15:1-21.

8. The Apostle must make an extremely critical decision that will effect the whole direction of the church. What is the issue? What did they do to discern the answer?
9. Why do you think, for this critical decision, God does not give them a vision?

10. On significant issues, why do you think it's important to look for alignment from more than one of these "spiritual senses"?

APPLY

11. With which of the senses we talked about earlier have you experienced God's leading in your life? Describe how it happened.
12. What would you do if circumstances, as well as your emotions, were leading you to do something that seemed to go against a biblical principal?
13. What is the biggest issue in which you are currently trying to discern God's will? In what ways are you seeing His leading?

What Are the Answers?

1. They prayed, affirmed God's sovereignty, and cast lots, trusting Him to give direction through the "lots."
2. Allow the group to discuss what they see in each passage.
3. God is leading in a more direct, personal, and dynamic way.
4. We don't know for sure. It may have been through a mental impression, vision, or he may have simply felt compelled in the realm of his emotions.
5. Allow the group to discuss.
6. The most important thing is to desire to live for God's will with all of our heart. We can always make the clues God provides say what we want it to say, if we don't desire His will above all.
7. Allow the group to discuss.
8. They had to decide whether or not the Gentiles needed to follow all of the Mosaic Law. They listened to testimony, and deliberated on what they should do. They pondered what God had been doing in the circumstances of Paul's ministry, they prayed, counseled together, and used wisdom to make a decision.
9. God desires us to use all of the different means of discerning His will. If he always provided a vision, we would never grow in wisdom or other critical areas.
10. It is a way to cross-check our detective work, as well as guard against the deceit of our own hearts.
11. Allow the group to discuss.
12. Often sensing God's leading is more subjective. The Scriptures are much clearer, and God would not lead us to do anything contrary to His Word. All other sensing must be subjugated to the authority of Scripture.
13. Allow the group to discuss.

Memorize

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.

Romans 12:1-2