

WHICH WAY GOD?  
NBC CHAPEL 4-11-07

Read

Exodus 13:20-22

After leaving Succoth they camped at Etham on the edge of the desert. 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 that 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.

Acts 16:6-10

Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Our spiritual focus for this year comes from the life of Joshua and his challenge to us: "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

For Joshua to serve the Lord in this way, it was necessary for him to follow in the footsteps of God. For Joshua to follow in God's footsteps, it was necessary for him to know in which way God was going.

In my opinion, this is precisely the point at which Joshua got bum deal.

You see, Moses had it easy. He had the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. It's hard to get lost under those kinds of conditions. What was Moses to say, "Sorry Lord. I didn't notice your turn signal."

However, it is our understanding that by the time the Israelites crossed the Jordan, the pillars of cloud and fire were no longer present to direct Joshua in the way he should go. Furthermore, if we read the book of Joshua, we will note that apart from Jericho and Ai, the very first two destinations for Joshua in the Promised Land, God gave very little direction to Joshua other than to say "Go and fight."

If I were Joshua, I would have been a bit miffed at God. I might have even said something like "What gives God. Moses gets pillars, and I don't even get a map?" You see, I'm a bit dense at times. So when I'm going on a trip in life, I'm always more comfortable when I have specific directions from God.

I'm not like my mom. When she travels, here's the kind of directions she follows: You go for down this road for a while until you come to the old DeGroot blueberry orchard, then you turn left. It doesn't matter to her that the orchard became a 200 home subdivision ten years ago, and the only blueberries within ten miles are at the local Safeway.

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When I travel, I first get on the Yahoo highway and get a map that tells me start at this location, take this road for 2.53796 miles to this street at mile marker 12.4, and turn left. When I cry out “Which Way God?,” I want details. I mean show me every mile, road, and turn from finish to start. When I cry out “Which Way God?,” I want the pillars of cloud and fire of Moses. I want Paul’s man from Macedonia calling out to me “Stop, Do Not Enter, U-turn, One Way, This Way.”

How about you? As you are traveling through this life trying to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, do you find yourself looking for pillars of God’s presence? When you are faced with life-changing decisions, do you seek desperately for a Macedonian vision? When you cry out “Which Way God?,” what kind of answer do you want?

In spite of what I may desire or what I may be more comfortable with, I need to confess to you that the experience of my life with God’s direction has been more on the level of Joshua than that of Moses and Paul. There have been precious few pillars or visions.

So what does this mean when we are walking in the shoes of Joshua instead of those of Moses or Paul. Does God just leave us to stumble through life trying to guess at his will or to make these decisions on the basis of trial and error, and error, and error? Or is it possible for us move forward in life with confidence, to perceive the footsteps of God with clarity and assurance even when we don’t have a pillar of fire or a heavenly vision to illuminate the path?

I believe that by the example of Joshua, we can say “Yes!” This evening, I would like to share some biblical principles from the life of Joshua and from my own walk with God that you and I can use to receive divine guidance when we are facing critical decisions and our spirits are crying out “Which Way God?”

First of all, I would like to give you a warning regarding the popular practice of seeking for the “open door.” I have found that this practice is typically founded upon some faulty assumptions. One of these is that God is the only one who can open doors. When in truth, Satan is a master at ensuring that for every door God opens, there are at least two, three, or four other doors that are accessible to us.

If you don’t believe this, all you need to do is read about the Gibeonites who disguised themselves as foreigners and tricked Joshua into entering into a treaty with them. These were a pagan people whom God had expressly commanded Joshua to destroy. Yet Satan presented them as an open door, and Joshua walked through. As a result, these Gibeonites became a continual spiritual and moral snare and stumbling stone to the Israelites. This, then, is our first biblical principle. When we cry out “Which Way God?,” do not assume that every open door that presents itself to us was placed there by God.

Another faulty assumption with this open door practice is that we can always tell which is God’s door by how trouble free it is. I am sure that you have heard someone use this assumption when they have shared, “I know this is God’s will because everything just fell into place.”

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In reality, the door of God's will for us is often the most difficult to walk through. As a matter of fact, the doors God chooses for us may at first appear to be closed, and we may need to kick, and pound, and huff, and puff, and knock them down to walk through.

In Exodus, when God was giving Moses and Joshua the promise that he would drive out the nations before them, he made sure that they understood that he would not do this quickly or without any effort on the part of Joshua and the people. For, to do so would leave the people unprepared to inhabit and manage the land properly.

In the New Testament, Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, because a great door for effective work has opened to me, **and there are many who oppose me.**" Paul seems to be testifying that sometimes the door of God's choosing for us is the most difficult one to open.

In Hebrews 11:13, we read of the great saints in the faith, among whom Joshua is included, "These all died in faith, not having received the promises..." If these saints had judged God's will by which door was the easiest to open, how many of God's mighty acts in their lives would be stricken from the record of the Word, and how much poorer would our faith be?

I believe that Joshua would encourage us to conclude that when we cry out "Which Way God?," we cannot assume that the door of least resistance, or that any open door that presents itself to us is the answer of God to our prayer.

If this is true, then must we also conclude that apart from pillars of fire and Macedonian visions there is no way to discern God's will for our lives with certainty?

Thankfully, I do not believe this is true. God does not want his children to stumble forward in confusion or to make significant decisions based on or resulting in confusion and error. He states in James 1:5, "if any of you lacks wisdom, (or knowledge of my will in any situation) he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him." (NIV) It is, therefore, God's promise that even apart from pillars and visions, he has provided the means for us to know his will in relation to the decisions of our lives.

I would like to share three of the means for knowing God's will that I have found to be effective in my own life, and which I also see reflected in the life of Joshua.

First, God gives us wisdom of his will through universal biblical guidelines. For example, when a young person would come to me to talk about another individual they liked and were considering dating and ask if I believed it was God's will for them. My first question to them would be, "Are you confident this person is a genuine Christian?" They might ask why that made any difference, and I would respond that 2 Corinthians 6:14 commands us not to be "yoked together with unbelievers." Sometimes, they would respond, "But I believe God wants me to help this person become a Christian." To which I would respond, "Great, that's called evangelism not dating." This represents a universal biblical guideline that God intends for all believers to follow.

There are some situations in which God does not need to act in miraculous ways to make his will known, because he has already given us the direction we need. It is in this book, and he expects us

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to study the map and know it well enough that when we come to a fork in the road, we know which way he is leading.

Joshua gives us an example of this. In verse 15 of chapter 11, we are told, "As the Lord commanded his servant Moses, so Moses commanded Joshua, and Joshua did it; he left nothing undone of all that the Lord commanded Moses." Why did Joshua not need the pillars of fire and cloud after the people entered the Promised Land? Because God had already laid out his battle plan, and that battle plan was written in the Law of Moses. Joshua had forty years of advanced studies in those writings. By the time he got to the Promised Land, he didn't need to have God barking out commands at every situation he faced like a combat general. He knew what to do, because he knew the heart and mind of the general.

When we study God's written Word and hide it in our hearts and minds, it is amazing how when we face circumstances and decisions, the Living Word brings to us an awareness of biblical principles to keep our way pure.

However, we must acknowledge that the Bible does not speak directly to every specific circumstance or decision that will arise in our lives. Someday, each of you will face a decision regarding where God wants you to minister. There are very few occasions in which any of us would be able to point to a specific verse of Scripture that tells exactly to which church we are to go or which ministry position we are to take. In these situations, God often uses specific personal principles to guide and direct us. These principles are related to God's personal plan and purpose for our lives. These principles include our personalities, talents, gifts, convictions, desires, passions, and life experiences.

For instance, God has given me gifts and passions for the teaching and discipling ministries of the church. I loved school so much, that when I was three, I would cry every morning because my mother wouldn't let go to class with my two older sisters. I view the world from the perspective of a teacher. I approach ministry with the mindset of a teacher. From experience, I have learned that I work best in ministry situations that value these convictions and allow me to exercise these gifts. I can use this awareness of these personal principles to help me make wise, God-directed ministry decisions.

In addition, God has created a conviction in my heart that the foundation of his kingdom on earth is the local church. I do not believe that we can experience the fullness of his grace if we are trying to live out our faith as isolated believers. We need the body of Christ. This also means that the local church does not exist to benefit the denomination. The denomination exists to benefit the local church. The local church does not exist so that it can support NBC. Instead, the only reason God would chose to sustain the work of NBC is that it makes a meaningful contribution to the fulfillment of his plan within local congregations. It is because of this conviction that I not only serve as an instructor at NBC, but I also teach a Sunday School class at Springs First Church. God did not have to audibly tell me this was part of his plan for my life. The passions and convictions he created in my heart led me to this decision.

In the same way, God had been working in Joshua's life preparing him for the task of subduing the land of his people's inheritance. From being selected as Moses' personal aid, to climbing Mount Sinai with Moses, to ministering to Moses at the Tent of Meeting, to serving as one of the twelve sent to spy out the land, even to the change of his name, which means Yahweh saves or delivers,

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God was developing within Joshua the character, personality, gifts, passions, and convictions that were necessary to do the work to which he was called. Throughout the many years Joshua lead Israel in the completion of this work, there are only a few instances in which he records that God spoke his directions audibly. For the majority of this time, Joshua functioned out of the preparations God had implemented during the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. Through these preparations, God had developed a clear vision of his will in Joshua's heart and his mind, so that he was able to be guided by this vision in the daily decisions of his life.

When we become students of God's work in our own lives, we too will develop a deep sense of his plan and purpose for us that will serve as a trustworthy vision to guide and direct our life decisions with clarity and confidence.

So when we cry out "Which Way God?," we have both universal biblical guidelines and specific personal principles that we can use to determine God's will for our lives. However, these two alone will still not be sufficient to help us discern God's will in all instances. For, there is not a one of us who can have perfect knowledge and understanding of God's Word. Nor is there one of us who can fathom the full work and purpose of God in our own lives.

This is how God has intended it to be. In I Corinthians 12, Paul tells us that to keep us from the sin of pride, he has determined that his wisdom, gifts, and graces should be distributed among all the members of Christ's body. Therefore, each of us is dependent upon the other members of that body. This means that one of the primary means through which God makes his will know to us is other Christians. If you and I want to have full access to the direction of God for the decisions of our lives, we must seek out other mature believers who have developed spiritual wisdom and discernment.

This does not mean that we are to find persons who have some mystical, heavenly insight or who possess a superhuman ability to hear the audible voice of God. Instead, we must look for those individuals who have a disciplined knowledge of God's Word and a practiced ability to apply the commands and promises of that Word to the particular circumstances of life.

Joshua had a number of such people in his life. It appears from his writings that Caleb remained a trusted brother in the faith throughout Joshua's life. Joshua also frequently leaned upon the counsel and guidance of Eleazer the priest. In addition, he sought out the discernment of the leaders of all the clans of Israel. These were all persons who had proven not only to have wisdom of God's Word, but they had also proven to have a total commitment to live in complete obedience to that wisdom.

I am convinced that one of the reasons Joshua could stand before the entire assembly of the people of Israel and proclaim without any uncertainty and hesitation "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." was because he had no doubt about his ability to discern the will of God in any circumstance, even without the presence of pillars of fire and Macedonian visions. When he cried out "Which Way God?," he knew that God would provide an answer through universal principles of his Word, through specific personal principles from God's work in his own life, and through the wise counsel of the body of believers.

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I must be honest with you. This has not always been true in my own life. I have had to discover these three means of God's direction the hard way. There have been many times when I have stumbled over road signs like these that God has put in my path while I was busy looking for burning bushes.

I don't want you to take from this message that God no longer uses pillars of fire and Macedonian visions to guide and direct his children. I just want to encourage you not to make the same mistakes I made. For so long I spent all my energies seeking signs and wonders, and I had no resources left to develop the ability to read the signs that God had already placed right in front of my face.

All of us here tonight are going to face many decisions throughout our lives. We will come to many crossroads where we will cry out "Which Way God?" Some of these decisions will represent major turning points in our lives, for which we must have clear and certain direction from God if we are to remain in his will. Many of you are facing critical choices in the next few months that have the potential to be life changing. None of us wants to make these choices with uncertainty, hesitation, or confusion. God does not want us to live under these conditions either. He wants us to walk in his will with boldness and assurance.

My sincere prayer for you is that there will be moments of fiery pillars and Macedonian visions in your life. However, my prayer for you is also that you will not stumble about in darkness when there are no pillars or visions, but that you will develop the spiritual disciplines of wisdom and insight to see, read, and apply the road signs of God will that he has already placed in your path.

If you are facing one of these momentous crossroads in your life tonight, if your heart is crying out "Which Way God?," would you give us the great privilege of serving as the body of Christ to you tonight? As we sing this closing song, would you come and allow us to minister to you as we seek together God's wisdom for the cry of your heart, so that in this crossroad of your life, you may stand with Joshua and proclaim, "As for me and my house, WE WILL SERVE THE LORD!"