

## Learning to Hear God's Voice

# 2

## A People of the Way

In the last lesson we established the fact that God is indeed a God who guides. We have seen that God is not like the idols of antiquity, who “have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but they cannot see; they have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but they cannot smell; they have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but they cannot walk; nor can they utter a sound with their throats” (**Psalm 115:5**). Elaborating on this, E. Stanley Jones comments:

“Does God guide? Strange if he didn't. The Psalmist says: ‘He that planted the ear, shall he not hear? He that formed the eyes, shall he not see?’ (**Psalm 94:9**). And I ask, ‘He that made the tongue and gave us the power to communicate with one another, shall he not speak and communicate with us?’ I do not believe that God our Father is a dumb, non-communicative impersonality.”<sup>1</sup>

Even a cursory reading of the Bible reveals a God who has promised to “be our guide even to the end” (**Psalm 42:14**). So essential is this guidance to the nature of God that to subtract the guiding hand from the Christian experience would be to render God immediately distant and uncaring. As Dallas Willard writes in the preface to his book *Hearing God*:

“Hearing God? A daring idea, some would say: presumptuous even. But what if we are made for it? What if the human system simply will not function properly without it? There are good reasons to think it will not. The fine texture as well as the grand movements of life show the need. Is it not, in fact, more presumptuous and dangerous to undertake existence *without* hearing God?”<sup>2</sup>

Now the instinctive reaction of the average Christian seeking guidance is to want to get into the “nitty gritty” of guidance, to discover the “ins and outs” of how God actually guides. But before we look at the *principles* of guidance, we must first lay a solid foundation for understanding how God actually interacts with human life. And so in this lesson we will explore the *parameters* of God's guidance.

A God Who Guides

A People of the Way

The Voice of the Shepherd

Principles of Guidance

Toward Maturity

## The Most Important Lesson

Easily the most important lesson we can learn in the subject of guidance is that God's leading comes on two levels:

### ***General guidance***

General guidance is the most important type of guidance because it establishes the general direction of a person's life. **Isaiah 48:17** gives a classic promise of general guidance:

“I am the Lord your God, who teaches you what is best for you, *who directs you in the way you should go.*”

The general guidance of God is inscribed in the pages of the Bible. God's Word establishes the parameters of God's overall will for your life.

### **Read 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8**

What is God's will for your life? Well this verse tells us very plainly:

“God's will is that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him...For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit.”

There are no “ifs” or “buts” about it, are there? We do not need to seek God's guidance about whether or not we are to enter into an act of sexual immorality, for God's general will in this matter is already spelled out clearly in his Word. This is the first – and by far the most important – level of God's guidance.

### ***Specific guidance***

Specific guidance is what most Christians think of when the term “guidance” is used. They think of God telling them how to make a correct decision in life. An example of a classic promise of specific guidance is found in **Psalms 73:24**:

“You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory.”

This *counseling* aspect of God's guidance – dealing with specific decisions in your life – is a subject we will explore in greater detail later in this module.

Now here is the important lesson. How can we ask for God's specific guidance in our lives if we violate, either willfully or through ignorance, his general guidance? How can we be open to the *counsel* of God unless we are walking in the *way* of God?

It is vital for us first to establish *directions* before we make *decisions*. We must understand the *way* of God before we can discern the *will* of God. Isn't this what Paul says in **Romans 12:1-2** when he writes:

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God...Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. *Then* [and *only* then] you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

Likewise, in **Philippians 2:12-13**, Paul exhorts the Philippian Christians:

“Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – *continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling*, for it is God who works in you to will and to act *according to his good purpose*.”

Obedience in the *general* precedes discernment in the *specific*. And so, before we can appreciate any of the *principles* of guidance we will later explore, we must first establish the clear *parameters* of guidance. This is the focus of this lesson.

## The People of the Way

### Read Acts 11:26

Maybe you’ve read this verse and haven’t yet noticed the significance of what it says. If so, read it once more, and note that singular sentence: “The disciples were called *Christians* first at Antioch.”

This is **Acts 11**! The story of the Church is now well developed, with a few years and nine chapters having passed since the Day of Pentecost. Yet it was not in Jerusalem (the birthplace of the Church) that the disciples of Jesus were called *Christianos* (which means “ones who belong to Christ” or “followers of Christ”). It was in Antioch, the capital of the Roman province of Syria, to the north of Jerusalem, many years later. So the question that naturally arises is this: Prior to the term “Christian,” what was the name given to the early believers? What did they call themselves before the nickname “Christian” stuck in Antioch?

The Jewish enemies of the young Church often referred to the believers as “Galileans” (on account of the predominance of Galileans in the early Church) and, in **Acts 24:5**, as “the sect of the Nazarenes” (alluding to Jesus’ title as “the Nazarene” – **Matthew 2:23**). The believers themselves, however, tended to refer to themselves individually as “disciples” or “believers,” and as a group, “the Church” (which in Greek was the generic term for an “assembly” of selected people). But was there another name they used to distinguish themselves from other “disciples” and other “assemblies”?

### Read Acts 9:2

### Read Acts 19:23

The early believers also called themselves “the people of the Way.” Paul alludes to this name when he described his previous zeal in persecuting “this Way unto the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women” (**Acts 22:4**). But where did this term come from?

The term “the Way” has a rich history, both prophetically in the Old Covenant and in its fulfillment in the New Covenant. Let’s take a look at how this term originated and what it meant for the Jew of the first century. For in understanding the significance of the term “the Way,” we begin to understand the most important element of the guidance of God – his general guidance.

## Seeking the Way

The concept of “the way of the Lord” is a consistent theme running throughout the Old Testament, from the earliest days of the Sinai Covenant right through to the final prophecies anticipating the coming of the Messiah. In **Psalm 89:11**, the psalmist utters the cry of every Old Testament saint:

*“Teach me your way, O Lord, and I will walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name.”*

In response to this, the psalmist declares in **Psalm 25:9**:

*“[God] guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way.”*

Again, in **Psalm 32:8**, the Lord speaks through the psalmist’s voice:

*“I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you.”*

Another early reference to “the Way” is found in **Jeremiah 6:16**:

*“This is what the Lord says: ‘Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls...’”\**

But Jeremiah’s prophetic proclamation doesn’t finish there. This passage ends in a tragedy, for in Jeremiah’s time, the people’s response to God’s invitation to “ask where the good way is, and walk in it,” was outright rejection. **Jeremiah 6:16** goes on to describe this tragic ending:

*“But you said, ‘We will not walk in it.’”*

## The Tragedy of the Old Covenant

Few of us have yet fully grasped how dramatically things have changed since the Cross of Christ. But before we can fully appreciate the difference under the New Covenant, we must first appreciate the Way of God as it was understood in the Old Covenant.

Even under the Old Covenant, guidance was a covenantal promise from God. In fact, one of the defining prophecies of the Old Testament is found in **Isaiah 30:21**:

*“Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, ‘This is the way; walk in it.’”*

\* As we’ve seen earlier in our studies, this passage was taken up by the Lord Jesus in **Matthew 11:28**, who declared himself to be the “good way” where the people would “find rest for [their] souls.”

Now although this verse has New Covenant repercussions, it actually is not directly speaking to you, a believer under the New Covenant. So before we jump to conclusions about the meaning of this verse, let's look at its context.

### Read Isaiah 30:19-20

What is this voice that the Lord promised under the Old Covenant? What is this voice that the people would hear behind them, saying: "This is the way; walk in it"? It was the voice of *teachers* – those who would instruct the people in the Sinai Covenant. For the Lord promises very clearly: "...your teachers will be hidden no more; with your own eyes you will see them."

But the Lord did not leave it there. The Sinai Covenant had always been designed by God to be a temporary covenant – a "holding" covenant that kept the people within the boundaries of God's righteousness until the coming of the One to whom that covenant pointed (see [Galatians 3:16-17](#) and [Hebrews 8:7,13](#)). In fact [Hebrews 8:7-13](#) lays out clearly God's view of the matter and quotes from an Old Testament prophecy that foretold of the coming of a brand new and distinctly different covenant. Let's read that passage through step by step, and thus understand both the tragedy and the hope of the Old Covenant:

- **Verse 7** – "For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another." As holy and good as the Law itself was ([Romans 7:12](#)), the *Covenant of Law* had a fatal flaw, and that flaw demanded that another covenant supersede it.
- **Verse 8** – "But God found fault *with the people* and said: "The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah." The writer to the Hebrews is quoting from [Jeremiah 31:31-34](#). As we saw in [Module 109](#), the fault was never with the Law itself. The fault was with fallen humanity, which was incapable of keeping the terms and conditions of the Covenant of Law. The Adamic old self simply could not attain God's holiness, and so God foretold of a new covenant that would address this fatal flaw.
- **Verse 9** – "It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord." There is no question that the Lord is referring here to the Sinai Covenant, and this is where the Lord identifies exactly what fault he found with the people: "...they did not remain faithful to my covenant." This unfaithfulness on the part of the people caused a flagrant breach of the Sinai Covenant, which in turn resulted in an inevitable response from God: "I turned away from them."
- **Verse 10** – "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people." Here the Lord identifies the nature of this New

Covenant and how it will address the fatal flaw in the Old Covenant. How is it going to be different? Simple. Instead of imposing his laws from the outside, he will now write his laws upon the very hearts and minds of the people.

- **Verse 11** – “**No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.**” This is the result of the writing of the laws of God upon the hearts and minds of the people: “No longer will a man teach his neighbor”! Why? Because “they will *all* know me, from the least of them to the greatest.”
- **Verse 12** – “**For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.**” Here lies the reason why it is even possible for the people – “from the least of them to the greatest” – to be able to know the Lord on such an intimate basis. Under this New Covenant, there would be a blanket forgiveness of sins – a forgiveness that was never fully possible under the Covenant of Law (see [Hebrews 10:1-4](#)).
- **Verse 13** – “**By calling this covenant ‘new,’ he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear.**” Now the writer to the Hebrews describes with unquestionable finality the eclipsing of the Old Covenant by the New Covenant. Because the Sinai Covenant was flawed, he argues, it has been superseded by a covenant that has no such flaw. And because the New Covenant is now here, the first one is “obsolete and aging” and “will soon disappear.”

[Hebrews 8:10-11](#) is the crux of the New Covenant. These two verses make two clear points:

- By writing his laws upon the minds and hearts of the people, God will enable his greatest desire to come true: “I will be their God, and they will be my people” (note [Revelation 21:3](#)).
- This relationship between God and his people will be so intimate that no teacher will be needed to instruct the people: “Know the Lord.” For “from the least of them to the greatest” they will all have a personal walk with God.

Notice the phrase “from the least of them to the greatest”? This New Covenant would be so revolutionary that it would be all-inclusive. No one would be left out. Every single person that entered into this New Covenant would experience God on a personal level. It would not be for the select few – the prophets, the priests and the kings – to experience God on behalf of the rest of the people. This was no second-hand experience. This was a first-hand, personal encounter with God.

## The Prophecy of Joel

As we read through the Old Testament, what is so striking is just how many times the New Covenant is alluded to under the Old Covenant. When God poured out his Spirit upon the young Church on the Day of Pentecost, this was not a surprise move. It had been anticipated for centuries by those who “searched intently and

with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow” (1 Peter 1:10-11).

This is why, in Acts 2:16-21, Peter was able to declare to the astonished crowd:

“No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit *on all people*. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, *both men and women*, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and *they will prophesy*...And *everyone* who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

What Peter was saying was: “This is not something so new it was unanticipated. This outpouring of God’s Spirit upon ‘all people...both men and women’ was predicted centuries ago! This has been the covenantal goal that God has been moving toward all this time!”

Do you see once again the all-inclusive nature of the New Covenant? The Old Covenant saints longed for the days of the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy. Moses himself, who alone among all the people of Israel saw the “back parts” (KJV) of God’s glory at the institution of the Sinai Covenant, declared in Numbers 11:29:

“I wish that *all* the Lord’s people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!”

But it was not to be. In fact, the Covenant of Law actually hindered this anointing from resting upon the people. For sure, even under the Old Covenant, the anointing of God’s Spirit would alight upon men and women “at various times and in various ways” (see Hebrews 1:1; 1 Peter 1:13), but he could not reside and abide within the hearts of those whom the Law of Moses revealed to be, as Jonathan Edwards described it, “sinners in the hands of an angry God.”

Now let’s look back at Isaiah’s prophecy. Do you now see the stark difference between Isaiah 30:21 and Jeremiah 31:31-34? Under the Old Covenant, Isaiah 30:21 describes the action of teachers who animate and expound the Law of God, providing clear boundaries within which the guidance of God could operate. It is through the teachers, that the voice of God comes to the people, saying: “This is the way; walk in it.”

Even though Isaiah 30:21 is an Old Covenant promise, it anticipates the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer. Under the New Covenant it is *the voice of God’s Spirit* that we now hear behind us, saying: “This is the way; walk in it.”

And so we can see that the difference between the two covenants is in the *location* of the guiding voice. Under the New Covenant, the voice has shifted from an outside source to an inner source. Instead of the Holy Spirit speaking only through the voice of teachers, the Holy Spirit now resides *within* the believer. But whether under the Old or New Covenant, God still speaks exactly the same message:

“This is the way; walk in it.”

## The Revolutionary Change

### Read John 14:6

The coming of Jesus heralded not just a change of covenant, but a change in the whole way a person can interact with God. Jesus made the statement:

“I am the way...No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Although he was speaking of himself as “the way” in the sense of “the way to the Father,” there is no question that when the Church referred to itself as “the people of the Way,” they had the declaration of **John 14:6** in mind. In fact, **Hebrews 10:20** takes this one step further and calls Jesus the “new and living way.” But is that all the early believers had in mind when they called themselves “the Way”?

### Read John 7:37-38

In this famous quotation, the Lord Jesus is speaking concerning the coming of the Holy Spirit (see **verse 39**) who would be the source of these “streams of living water.” But have you ever wondered which passage of Scripture he was referring to when he said “as the Scripture has said”? Is there any passage which speaks of “streams of living water” coming from a person’s “innermost being” (NASB)?

This is not a direct quotation. There is no place in the Old Testament that directly uses the words that Jesus uses. But neither is there any question that Jesus is referring to one specific prophecy in the Old Testament.

### Read Isaiah 32:1-4

This prophecy tells of a time when a “king will reign in righteousness” and at that time something significant would happen:

“*Each man will be...like streams of water in the desert and the shadow of a great rock in a thirsty land.*”

Do you hear an echo of the New Covenant in this prophecy? This will be again be an “each man” experience.

### Read Isaiah 43:19

### Read Isaiah 35:1-7

In both these passages we again see the same “streams of water in the desert” theme. The *New Living Translation* renders **Isaiah 35:6-7** with these words:

“...Springs will gush forth in the wilderness, and streams will water the desert. The parched ground will become a pool, and springs of water will satisfy the thirsty land.”

This whole passage in **Isaiah** is clearly messianic in its emphasis. **Verses 5-6** declare: “Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.” It is probable that when Jesus answered John the Baptist’s query in **Matthew 11:2-6** he was at least in part referring to the prophecy of **Isaiah 35:1-7**.



But of particular significance is what Isaiah declared *after* this passage.

### Read Isaiah 35:8-10

The prophet is quite specific about what takes place at the coming of the Messiah. He speaks of a highway leading to Zion, which he calls “the Way of Holiness.” This Way is only for “those who walk in that Way.”

From this prophetic passage we can begin to appreciate the rich meaning behind the early believers’ choice of “the Way” as a name to describe their movement. What they were claiming was that *they* were the fulfillment of the prophecy of **Isaiah 35:8**. The Messiah had already come, fulfilling **verses 1-7**, and now *they* were the Way of Holiness, the highway in the wilderness, foretold in **verses 8-10!**

The writer of **Hebrews** also alludes to **Isaiah 35:3** in **Hebrews 12:12-13**, when he writes:

“Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. ‘Make level paths for your feet,’ so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.”

This Way of Holiness was designed by God to be a way where the spiritually lame would be healed – in other words, where those with “feeble arms” and “weak knees” would be able to learn to walk with God.

## Walking in the Way

As a believer in Christ, you are one of the ones prophesied by Isaiah who would “walk in that Way”! Just as **Psalms 85:13** describes God as a God whose righteousness “goes before him and prepares the way for his steps,” so **Psalms 18:32** describes him as a “God who...makes my way perfect.” This leveling of the path before your feet is just one aspect of the general guidance of God in your life. For according to **Ephesians 2:10**, “God [has] prepared [good works] in advance for us to do.”

What are these “good works” that have been prepared in advance? This is all part of what it means to walk in the Way of Holiness. For it is not primarily in the important decisions in life that God seeks to guide us (although as we shall see later in this module, God does indeed do this); it is in the day-to-day walk of life that God primarily seeks to guide us. As the *King James Version* so beautifully puts **Genesis 24:27**:

“*I being in the way, the Lord led me...*”

### Read Matthew 7:13-14

These two verses define the Way of Holiness. It has a small gate and a narrow road. Its gate is not so small that a person cannot pass through it, but it involves “getting down on your hands and knees” in humility before God. Nor is the road so narrow that it is a small dirt track. In other places in Scripture, the Way of Holiness is described as a “highway in the desert” (see **Isaiah 35:8; 40:3; 62:10**). But this is no two-way traffic, multi-lane freeway. It has a single direction and

single goal, and in this sense it is by definition narrow, compared to the broad, multi-lane, multi-direction superhighway that leads to destruction.

How is the road to life narrow? It is narrow because it is the singular Way of Christ, not the many ways of man. It is impossible to walk on this Way unless you walk *with* Christ and *in* Christ. That is why Isaiah says that only the “ransomed of the Lord” will walk upon this Way (note **Matthew 20:28**; **1 Timothy 2:6**; **Hebrews 9:15**).

And so we can see that the Way of Christ (the same Way of Holiness described in **Isaiah 35:8**) has three aspects:

- **A Covenantal Entry Point** – The Cross of Christ, which is the “small gate” described in **Matthew 7:13-14**.
- **A Covenantal Path** – The Way of Christ, which is the “narrow road” described in **Matthew 7:13-14**.
- **A Covenantal Goal** – The Character of Christ, which is the destination of “life” described in **Matthew 7:13-14**.

This goal is vital to our understanding of guidance. For without the goal, guidance has no real meaning.

**Romans 8:14** tells us that, under the New Covenant, “all who are *being led* by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God” (NASB). But the leading of God’s Spirit takes us toward a specific goal, what **Romans 8:29** identifies as being “conformed to the likeness of his Son.” And so, as we begin to appreciate the *general* guidance of God, we see that God’s purpose in bringing *specific* guidance into our lives is to further that one goal – that God would, as *The Message* puts it, “shape the lives of those who love him along the same lines as the life of his Son.”

## The Terms of the Covenant

As you approach the issue of guidance in your life, you must see it through the lens of covenant. For it is the covenant that you have with God which defines and makes possible his guidance in your life.

A quick comparison of the Old Covenant and the New Covenant is helpful in this regard.

- **Under the Old Covenant** – Guidance was given by God on the basis of a person’s obedience to provisions of that covenant, which meant keeping the Law of Moses in all its minute details.
- **Under the New Covenant** – Guidance is also given by God on the basis of a person’s obedience to provisions of this covenant, but that obedience is no longer focused on the keeping of an outward list of rules and regulations. It is now focused on walking the Way of Christ.

Obedience under the New Covenant is just as important as obedience under the

Old Covenant, but the *focus* of that obedience differs totally. In the New Covenant, we are called by God to obey in a very specific way, and that way is described by Jesus in **John 15**.

### Read John 15:1-8

The terms and conditions of the New Covenant have been reduced to one thing – a mutual abiding of Christ in you and you in Christ. Out of this mutual abiding flows the single commandment that Christ asks us to keep: “Love each other as I have loved you” (**John 15:12,17**).

Guidance cannot be separated from the Way of Christ. In this area, far too many Christians err, through a misunderstanding of the nature of guidance. They see guidance as a “quick fix” for the problems of life or as a “trouble-avoidance” strategy. They think that by learning the right tricks, they can “whistle” God down to let them know what they should do to navigate through the many obstacles of life. Guidance, however, is not about *knowledge*; it is about *lifestyle* – a lifestyle of walking with Jesus.

And so, from now on in this module, we will be referring to the general guidance of God in your life as “the Way of Jesus” or “the Way of Christ.” The specific guidance that you may seek from time to time must always find its context in the general guidance that is the Way of Christ. In fact, whenever you seek the Lord for guidance, what you are really asking him to do is to teach you how to walk the Way of Holiness in the midst of the circumstances you are facing.

The question always comes down to one: Are you following Christ? If you are, then your feet are walking the Way of Holiness and the issue of specific guidance is settled ahead of time. For as you follow Christ, he will indeed guide you in the decisions you face in life.

<sup>1</sup> E. Stanley Jones, *A Song of Ascents* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), p.188.

<sup>2</sup> Dallas Willard, *Hearing God* (London, Harper Collins, 1999), p.ix.

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