



# PERSONAL REVIVAL

by

Roger and Dianne Smalling

This book is now available in [KINDLE](#)

## Preface

Some rivers run so deep, they seem quiet. Shallow ones roar as they bounce over boulders. It's easy to dam up the shallow ones. Deep ones plow down everything in their path, with profound impact on the countryside.



God is looking for people who, like some rivers, want to run deep. He needs reformers, men and women committed to bringing revival and reformation to Latin America. This requires ordinary individuals doing the extraordinary, with a burning passion for a cultural transformation that brings freedom to the people and glory to God.

This book is the first step in the Visión R.E.A.L. training plan. It comes first because reformers must be revived and reformed themselves.

Future reformers must learn to hear from God, be led by God and walk consistently in his grace. This takes time. They must learn new motivations beyond initial enthusiasm. Above all, a passion must grip them to see the glory of God break the devil's dominion over their culture.

This preparation involves a new kind of spiritual discipline, leading to a tenacity that from the devil's perspective is too dangerous to ignore. It may require the believer to learn in quiet for a time, making few splashes but getting ready for deep impact.

We're looking for reformers.

## About the Authors

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The Smallings travel extensively throughout Latin America, holding seminars and conferences in churches of various denominations and overseeing the training centers.

Their training program, books, study guide and essays are available on their website in both Spanish and English at:

[www.Smallings.com](http://www.Smallings.com)

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## Chapter One

### ***The Wilbur Syndrome***

Wilbur has big eyes, expressive brows and a wooden head. He is Roger's ventriloquist dummy. Over the years Wilbur has accompanied us to churches and mission fields, entertaining kids and adults alike. He can be hilarious and a bit cocky.



In front of a group one day, Roger decided to teach our wooden friend a lesson in humility.

"Wilbur, I have a surprise for you", Roger said.

"What?" Wilbur asked, brows raised.

"It's me that's making you talk."

"Well, if it makes you feel good to think so..." Wilbur responded.

Wilbur clearly needed an attitude adjustment. Roger told him so.

"What are you gonna do to me?" Wilbur asked.

Roger leaned Wilbur against a wall, and walked away.

"Hi Wilbur!" Roger waved from across the room. Wilbur sat motionless.

"Say something to us, Wilbur." Silence. Roger walked over and retrieved him.

"Whew, why did you embarrass me like that in front of all these people?" Wilbur whined.

"To make a point," Roger smiled. "Without *me* you can do nothing!"

Roger explained this was also a statement from Jesus and it meant something important.

"So Jesus was a ventriloquist too?" Wilbur asked.

"No, he was clarifying that his disciples need him for any growth or fruitfulness."

Wilbur winked at the audience. "Well I knew that all along. I just wanted to see if *you* knew it. I was going to trade you in on another ventriloquist, but I think I'll keep you around awhile."

Roger congratulated Wilbur and closed the ski with the key point:



Christ is not a supplement. It doesn't matter what we can do without him. He prefers to use someone who can't do without Him.

*God wants us to come to the end of ourselves. Our culture won't let us come to the end of ourselves. It gives us books on how to be better and we believe it! —Steve Brown<sup>1</sup>*

## Vital signs

In Ecuador, Roger was preparing a young theology student for ordination. During a break, Roger leaned back and asked, "José, how are you doing with your quiet time?"

"My what?"

"How many times during the week did you read the Bible and pray, expecting to hear from God?"

José tipped his head, thinking seriously. "Well, maybe a couple of times. I'm not sure."

Roger was stunned. José was one of our most promising students, charming and bright. We had assumed if he were mature enough to study, he must have been having a quiet time.

José was suffering from case of the Wilbur syndrome.

"José, here's what we are going to do," Roger said. "After we finish today's lesson, we need to touch on something vital."

"What could be more vital than preparing for my ordination?" he asked.

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Brown, evangelist; Radio 2008

“Hearing from God.”

**From this chapter we learn...**

- Without Jesus we can do nothing to please God
- Fellowship with Jesus is the heartbeat of Christian living
- This fellowship involves applying the means God provided

## Chapter Two

### ***Turn Up the Volume***

Ashley propped her feet on the chair in front of her and cocked her head. "Why doesn't God speak loud and clear like in Bible days?"

"Yeah, like through Moses and some of those prophets," Ryan said.

"That would be totally huge!" Tyler agreed. "We'd always know exactly what to do."



Ashley leaned her head way back and looked at the ceiling. "Why doesn't God just turn up the volume?"

Nick listened carefully as they volleyed frustrations back and forth. As their youth leader, he noticed they craved an easier, failsafe way to know God's will for practical situations. The consensus showed they preferred the more straightforward approach of Old Testament days.

Nick let the air hang heavy for a moment, then said, "Let me ask you something. If God still used prophets to guide us, how mature would we be? Just how mature were the people of God in Moses' day?" he continued.

Low chuckles and a unison of nods spread throughout the group.

"Here's the difference. Back then God spoke through one man. Now that Jesus has come, all of God's people have his Spirit. He wants us to hear from him individually. That's how we grow."

"Yes Ashley, it is possible to turn up the volume. God tells us how."

### **The key at the door**

One day, a young man approached Roger and asked, "Do you think you could help me find God's will for my life?"

"Yes," Roger replied. "First, tell me what God has been saying to you through your quiet time."

"What do you mean by that?"



"The daily time you spend with God in his word and prayer, regarding his will?"

After a bit of silence Roger continued, "I knew by your question that you might be weak in your devotional life. I'll help you with that. I predict it will answer your question."

Many Christians live frustrated. A desire for deeper faith drives them to a futile search for formulas or experiences. The answer is much simpler.

*... fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.  
-Heb. 12:2*

At first, this seems ambiguous. How do we look to Jesus?

### **Let's get practical**

All relationships entail communication. God has provided tangible ways to communicate with him.



Personal revival is about steady growth, not leaps and bounds.

*But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*

-2 Pet.3:18

We do not see a tree sprout branches overnight, nor do children put on six inches in a week.

Some believers are disciplined in the physical sense. They work out every day but neglect the Bible and prayer. Good spiritual habits, like physical ones, come by exercise. The term "discipline of grace" has validity.

It would seem grace by its sovereign nature, would automatically bring discipline. It doesn't. Why not? God uses his word, prayer and fellowship to develop in us wisdom and character, along with discipline.

This book is about how to take advantage of these means consistently. Then we will enjoy God, glorify him and grow.

This is revival.

### **From this chapter we learn...**

- God speaks today by his Spirit through practical means: the Word, prayer and fellowship
- Daily devotions is way to apply these means
- Personal revival is about steady growth

## Chapter Three

### **Connect the Dots**

Reformed people can end up relating to sound doctrine. Sound doctrine, however, is not God. Or, they may relate to the church...but the church is not God either. Our fellowship is *with God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ.*<sup>2</sup>

The concept of expecting to hear from God in one's devotional time should not seem strange to our ears. Our quiet time is a spiritual communion with Christ. This is the primary means of grace.



Extra-biblical revelation practiced by some groups, has caused reformed theologians to react with suspicion to the idea of personal spiritual experiences.

This is tragic and unnecessary. It provokes an equal and opposite error, the Wilbur syndrome...living by mere natural reason, independent of God's leading.

Christians have subjective experiences from the Holy Spirit. We are led by the Spirit,<sup>3</sup> and have the witness of the Spirit<sup>4</sup>. The internal nature of these is difficult to describe, teach or defend.

*...if there is no private communion between you and Jesus – frequent and deep communion – then your religion is worthless.*<sup>5</sup>

— Kris Lundgaard

With a few biblical parameters, Christians can hear from God through the ordinary means of grace without extra-biblical revelation or a Christianized version of naturalistic humanism.

In this book, we hope to make this tangible, leading to authentic revival.

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<sup>2</sup> 1Jn.1:3

<sup>3</sup> Rom.8:14,16

<sup>4</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith Ch.1, Art.5

<sup>5</sup> The Enemy Within, P&R Publishing, 1998, pp.119

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In the Bible we see God's people spending time with him daily.

*Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. -Mark 1:35*

*...in the morning my prayer comes before you.*  
—Psa. 88:13

*...Come near to God and he will come near to you*  
—James 4:8

In practical terms, we do this through a personal quiet time.

God created our minds to think comparatively; "this is like that, therefore this." That's why God gave us stories. The Spirit links the principles in the Word to ourselves.

This is called an analogy. It is subjective, involving our intellect. This connection is both spiritual and intellectual. This is called analogical reasoning.

To simplify:



Hearing from God is when the Spirit makes a comparison between what is in the Word and our own circumstances.

A good example is Paul's experience in Antioch. While preaching in a synagogue, he justified his right to preach to Gentiles by quoting a verse from Isaiah 49:6,

*For this is what the Lord has commanded us: "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth."* Acts 13:47

If we look back to the context in Isaiah, we find a prophecy about a future ministry to the Gentiles by the Jews. Paul evidently saw the connection between his personal missionary call and this text. He considered this to be a personal guidance from God.

Did he think this verse requires every Jewish believer to preach to Gentiles? Certainly not. Nor did he interpret it in ways not intended by Isaiah. The Spirit used the analogy between Paul and the text to guide him.

As we pay attention to the Holy Spirit while reading the Word, hearing from God becomes easier, making the Christian life exciting.

**From this chapter we learn...**

- The church and doctrine are no substitute for fellowship with God
- Hearing from God personally through our daily quiet time is not extra-biblical revelation
- When the Holy Spirit makes a connection between Scripture and our own circumstances, this is hearing from God

## Chapter Four

### ***Running On Empty***

“Everybody has about as much of God as they want.” Our friend’s conclusion jolted us. Simplistic? No, just simple truth.

*Come near to God and he will draw near to you. James 4:8*

God is dynamic and he expects initiative from us.

God gave us concrete ways to help us become vibrant culture-changers. The Bible describes these means as: The Word, prayer and fellowship of the church.<sup>6</sup>



Starting with the Word, we note two elements necessary for it to become effective: The Spirit and faith.

*for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.*  
—2Cor.3:6

*...the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith.*  
—Hebrews 4:2

### **What to expect**

As we relate to God through His word, the Holy Spirit draws comparisons between what we’re reading and our own circumstance. This is where the Spirit and faith act as catalysts to teach, motivate and guide us.



We must approach His word intentionally, expecting to hear from Him. It is a relationship we are seeking, not mere knowledge.

Since this involves the whole person, heart and mind, it is both an intellectual and spiritual encounter.

That is biblical revival. This is different from the popular definition of revival as widespread religious enthusiasm. Such revivals have occurred throughout

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<sup>6</sup> Reformed theologians say the last one is the ‘sacraments’, baptism and the Lord’s Supper. For the purposes of this book, I’m expanding that to the relationship of the believer to the whole church since the Lord’s Supper is a supreme expression of that. 1Cor.10:16.

history. The scriptural norm, however, is a call to faithfulness in applying the means of daily grace.

*My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.*  
—John 10:28

Fellowship. Relationship. Sharing something in common. Personal revival goes beyond formulas and results in maturity.

An internal aspect to the normal Christian life exists which is the heartbeat of that life. This subjective element is difficult to define and delicate to teach.

Perhaps this explains why many Christians remain undisciplined in the practice of *'fellowship with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.'*<sup>7</sup> We write this book to help make these subjective elements more tangible and easier to apply.

The reformers understood the importance of lasting impact. Revivals come and go, but the reformation has global influence to this day. The reformers insisted on the word, prayer and fellowship as the means of grace in the lives of individual believers.

Through this amazing process God communicates his grace. We call the Bible the "primary means of grace." Why primary? It endorses the other two: prayer and fellowship.

A daily quiet time is vital to the process of becoming revived. Without it, we quickly leave off looking to Christ and start resorting to other things to attain our goals. Methods end up replacing biblical means and human plans supplant the power of God.

*Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith...*  
—Heb. 12:2

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Is the quiet time concept a new idea? Let's see some examples:

*In the morning, O LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait in expectation.*  
—Psa. 5:3

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<sup>7</sup> 1Jn.1:3

*Three times a day he got down on his knees and prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before.*

—Dan. 6:10

*Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.*

—Mark 1:35

People of God throughout history considered it purely natural to take time with God on a daily basis. This is not a law or a rule but a sign of life. They expected God to hear them and vice versa.

We expect the same today.

**From this chapter we learn...**

- The Holy Spirit draws between the Word and our personal circumstances
- Personal revival is more than enthusiasm
- A daily quiet time leads to daily grace



## Chapter Five

### **Where Do I Start?**

*Do not have your concert first and tune your instruments afterward.  
Begin the day with God.*

— Hudson Taylor<sup>8</sup>



God usually speaks when we expect him to. Approaching our quiet time with this attitude is more dynamic than a mere Bible study.

When we teach devotional life in our leadership training centers, our students follow initial guidelines to develop discipline in their ability to hear from God. We suggest using this strategy for a few weeks, until hearing from the Lord becomes a habit.

#### **Suggestions:**

- Have your quiet time in the morning, when possible
  - Putting God first in day is a way of showing he is our priority. This goes along with the principle; *seek first the kingdom of God.*<sup>9</sup>
- Read primarily in the New Testament
  - The New Testament goes straight to the point when it comes to living in the Spirit. Though all scripture is equally inspired, the New Testament specifically addresses dynamic Christian living.
- Avoid commentaries or study notes
  - The idea behind a quiet time is to know what God is saying to you, not what others say.
- Read entire books of the Bible straight through, rather than jump around

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<sup>8</sup> *A Place of Quiet Rest*, Moody, 2000, p. 99.

<sup>9</sup> Mt.6:33

- This brings cohesion to your reading and helps you think more about what the Lord is saying to you than where to find verses.
- Read the Word, pray and worship, in the order according to your personal taste

Find a quiet place by yourself and do these things.



As you read, pay attention to how the text speaks to you. This is God speaking.

## Our truth book

Here is where a quiet time becomes exciting. Buy a notebook for this purpose. Every day, write the date, the scripture through which God has spoken and how it applies personally. In a few days, you will be amazed at how clearly God speaks.

Our truth book has practical consequences:

- When faced with important decisions, we can refer to our truth book. We often discover that God has already prepared Dianne and I for the correct decision. We often notice a thread of relevant verses that deal with the theme.
- During a crisis situation on the mission field, we reviewed our truth books. We discovered to our surprise, that God had already spoken to us about the principles needed for that problem.

*"Sometimes providences, like Hebrew letters, must be read backward."* —John Flavel <sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Swiss reformer, 16<sup>th</sup> century

<http://athousandtimes.wordpress.com/2009/02/24/ten-for-tuesday-past-present-and-providence/>

- Our journal can be a great source of inspiration if we are invited to share something with others. The best topics are those God has taught us. These have a ring of authenticity like nothing else, because they are born of personal experience, based on the Word.
- With a journal in hand we demonstrate, 'I expect his application in everyday circumstances.'
- We are forgetful. Writing what God says allows us to review if we have applied the truth.
- Writing what we get from God helps us figure out why things happen.  
*"This happened so that..."*  
—2Cor.1:9

God uses our devotional time to hone our ability to discern his will in times of uncertainty. We learn how to judge spiritual experiences, grow in faith and change our concept of God and ourselves.

### **From this chapter we learn...**

- We approach our quiet time expecting God to speak.
- Keeping a truth book helps us remember what God says.

## Chapter Six

### ***Oops!***



A young man was reading the Bible while seeking God's will about whether to marry. He noticed the account of Jesus healing Peter's mother in law. He concluded God was speaking to him personally that he ought to marry.

Whether or not God wanted this young man to marry is unknowable from the narrative. We do know, however, that God was not saying so from that text. Why? The passage is about the healing ministry of Jesus, not marriage.



A lady had been complaining about the leadership in her church. While reading James Chapter 3, she found the expression; *the tongue is a fire, a world of evil*. She concluded God was speaking to her personally about her tongue.



Is this a legitimate use of scripture? Absolutely!

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It is fine to use the scriptures to hear from God personally, if we apply the general principle in the passage without reading our own desires or motives into it.

How would you feel if someone took a letter you wrote and attached a meaning you never meant? Likewise, we must respect the intention of biblical writers.

During the Middle Ages, mystics often read into the scriptures ideas that lead to absurd teachings and practices. The reformers reacted against this by insisting on the original meaning and its historical context.

Some reformed movements overreacted to these abuses of scripture by adopting a paranoid stance toward any kind of subjective experience.

This is unfortunate. Such a mind-set robs believers of legitimate spiritual experiences.

## If the shoe fits...

We must avoid applying to ourselves things intended only for the Old Testament era.

The Bible is a progressive revelation. It flows from Old Testament predictions to their fulfillment in the gospel. Therefore, the Old Testament is what the New Testament says it is, and nothing more.

*Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. ...11 These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come.*

—1Cor. 10:6

We take the general examples of Old Testament stories about avoiding sin, without focus on the details.

A man in missionary training, seeking God's will about which field to go to, found the name, "Barzillai" in 2Samuel 17:27. Because of the similarity between this name and the word "Brazil", he took this as evidence God was calling him to that country.



Now we see what's wrong with this. It ignores the general principle in the passage and focuses on an historical detail.



The New Testament is the Christian's primary focus for learning how to walk with God.

The opening verse of Hebrews points to this:

*In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son,...*

—Heb. 1:1

In the same way, the Epistles clarify the Gospels and Acts. This is why we encourage believers to focus initially on the Epistles. In Acts Chapter One, we see the Apostles casting lots to decide who should take the place of

Judas. They rolled dice. Would it be appropriate today to use dice to determine God's will?

This would ignore the historical context. Acts is a transition between the Old Testament period and the gospel. Since Pentecost, however, we never see the apostles recommending dice. All of God's people today have the Spirit and the Word for guidance.

Is the following a correct use of the scriptures?

A missionary was praying about whether it was time to evangelize a nearby region where no church existed. He was struck by 2Cor.10:16,

*...to preach the gospel in the regions beyond you.*

From this he began to consider that God might be guiding him in this direction.

The context is about Paul's preaching the gospel to unevangelized regions. The principle certainly applies to missionaries. We can see how God could lead the missionary this way.



This is hearing God through the Word. Now what do we do with it?

### **From this chapter we learn...**

- Avoid reading into the scriptures our own desires
- Respect the meaning of the text
- Avoid applying to ourselves things intended only for the Old Testament era
- The New Testament is the Christian's primary focus for learning how to walk with God.

## Chapter Seven

### ***Do the Math!***

Prayer equals results. Prayer equals results. Prayer equals results. Learn this equation well, because there will be a test.<sup>11</sup>



Problem: When it comes to prayer, none of us knows fully what we are talking about. We are not commanded to do it well. We are commanded to do it, period.

The only expert on prayer is the Holy Spirit.

*In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us...*

—Rom. 8:26

As the prayer goes to the Father's throne room, the Spirit cleans it up and if there is a screw loose, tightens it.

Prayer is a key to the power of God.

As E. M. Bounds notes,

*The Holy Spirit does not flow through methods, but through people. He does not anoint plans, but people...people of prayer. (Paraphrased)*<sup>12</sup>

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### **What God likes to hear**

#### **God likes rationality**

We present our prayers with facts and reason.

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<sup>11</sup> We heard this on Spirit FM radio in Miami. We do not remember from whom this is quote, but thought it worth repeating.

<sup>12</sup> A paraphrase of comments from Chapter One, E. M. Bounds, *Power Through Prayer* Cyberbooks, 1996 <http://www.leaderu.com/cyber/books/bounds/power.html>



What are some good lines of reasoning to present? The promises we get in our quiet time. When we 'argue' with God on the grounds of his promises, we have an irrefutable case.

It's not that we are lawyers arguing a case. God is father, not judge. He likes to see clear thinking in his kids.

There are times for spontaneous prayer. However, when it comes to praying the promises, we plan it rationally, not just shooting words into the air.

### **God likes boldness**

We are God's children, not beggars. If we talk like beggars, it reveals we suspect he has not accepted us. So talk to him as to a father, with a tone of reverence with confidence.

### **Does prayer affect revival?**



God uses prayer as a catalyst to fulfill his promises to us. This is why prayer equals results.

*Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.*

—John 16:24

God depends on nothing, not even our prayers. For our good, it seems like he does. Through parables and promises he encourages us to stick to the equation: Prayer equals results.

*God gives us the impression that His activity in the affairs of men is somehow contingent on the prayers of intercessors. If we don't pray, He doesn't act. In his divine arrangement..., our prayers are essential. It is His plan for us to ask; when we don't, we violate His plan...<sup>13</sup>*

—Chris Tiegreen

William Temple deduced, "when I pray, coincidences happen and when I don't, they don't."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *The One Year Walk With God Devotional*, Tyndale House, 2004, pp. 29

<sup>14</sup> British essayist of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.



**From this chapter we learn...**

- Prayer gets results
- It is better to pray poorly than not at all
- God likes us to pray logically and with confidence

## Chapter Eight

### ***Pray the Promises***

Christians who learn how to get promises from God, usually have a vibrant prayer life. They grow in faith because they have discovered the connection between promises and prayer.

Take Abraham for instance. He wanted to have a son. It was only when he received a promise from God that he was able to *"not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God," Rom.4:20*



Promises lead to praise because we know what to expect in the future.

Christians have an agreement with God, like Abraham did, though they may not realize it. The Bible uses the word "covenant" to describe this agreement. Many Christians are unaware of the benefits they can claim; things like blessing on their children, divine supply, security in their relationship to the Father.

### **Getting through delays**

We missionaries to Latin America have a saying, "God is Latin." We mean this comically, not irreverently. It seems he often answers later than we would prefer, sometimes at the last possible moment.

His reason has nothing to do with culture. He wants us to learn to trust him despite appearances. So he leaves in place the smoke screens of negative circumstances to the last moment, to help us learn faith.

The waiting period is a busy time. It reveals our hidden fears and doubts, shedding light on our hearts and the motives laying there. We also learn persistence and patience.

In practical terms, how do we handle the delays? Two ways:

### **Keep at it**

Jesus gave his disciples a parable, *'to show them that they should always pray and not give up...'*

*In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. **3**And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.'**4** "For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care about men, **5** yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice,*  
—Luke 18:1-5

God is certainly not an unjust judge. He uses prayer to develop in us tenacity and persistence.

### **Count it a done deal**

Suppose you won a lawsuit. The judge issues the decree that you should receive compensation. Does this mean you walk out of the courtroom with the money in hand? No. There is a difference between the legal decree and receiving of the money.

So with God's promises. He grants them *legally*. We must hang on to the promises until we receive them *in practice*.

Abraham noticed something about God; He '*calls things that are not as though they were.*'<sup>15</sup> God sees it in reality, even though that reality is future. He is timeless, so in his perspective it is as good as done. Jesus speaks along those lines when he said,

*Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.*  
—Mark 11:24

### **From this chapter we learn...**

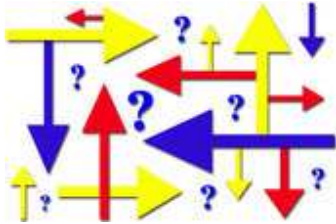
- Learning how to get promises from God is a key to a vibrant prayer life
- Delays can be expected as part of the process

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<sup>15</sup> Romans 4:17

## Chapter Nine

### ***How to Be Guided by God***



Years ago, Dianne and I found ourselves on the border of Texas, preparing to enter Mexico as missionaries. We had no idea where to minister in that vast country. So we spent a day in a motel seeking God's will.

It was a typical missionary situation. We were on the way, but did not know exactly where to go. As we sought God's will in that motel room, he spoke to us through biblical principles.

On the grounds of this personal leading we headed for the next large city in Mexico, beyond the border towns, about 200 miles south. We had the name of a missionary there, although we did not know him personally.

We found the missionary in Ciudad Victoria, sitting outside his trailer in 104 degree weather. In our conversation, he explained his desire to establish another church in a section of town that had none, but his up-coming move to Guadalajara left him no time. He introduced us to the family that wanted a church started on their property. We unpacked our suitcases and our ministry in Mexico began right there.

This sounds like we literally fell into God's will through a simple chain of events. Yet we recall vividly the feeling of uncertainty as we wrestled for guidance in that motel room.

Is it normal to find ourselves puzzling over God's will from time to time? During a recent Bible study on divine guidance, a new Christian complained that God's will is sometimes difficult to find. "Why doesn't He speak audibly and just say what He wants?" he asked. Don't assume something is wrong because God's will is temporarily murky. Good reasons exist for this phenomenon.

### **Getting a clue**

The Lord sometimes speaks in striking ways. At times we have no doubt about guidance.

Discovering God's will is frequently harder than that, as though he were deliberately hiding it. We may be obliged to act like a detective hunting for clues as we dig into the



Word, praying for guidance. Eventually the clues all point in one direction so we conclude what is God's will.

Some people project the impression they always know God's will accurately and instantly. Ignore such brashness. This is more a symptom of arrogance than infallible guidance.

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*... do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is.*  
—Ephesians 5:17

*If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him*  
—James 1:5

If God is generous with his wisdom, why is it sometimes hard to grasp? It's a growth process, not an instantaneous endowment.

As we read the Bible in our quiet time, we are alert to the Holy Spirit. God may focus our minds on verses that give clues to his will. We can safely approach God's Word this way as long as we take the principle in the text without reading into it our own desires. This is an essential step toward learning wisdom.

How do we know it is the Spirit of God leading us, not our own imagination? Here is where we learn what wisdom looks like when we see it.

Do we need to master wisdom to be guided by God? If that were so, we would all be lost in the woods most of the time.

Now let's see what wisdom looks like.

### **From this chapter we learn...**

- God expects us to find his will
- Finding God's will is not always easy
- Guidance is usually godly wisdom applied

## Chapter Ten

### **Traps**

*Discernment is not a matter of simply telling the difference between right and wrong; rather it is telling the difference between right and almost right.*

— C.H. Spurgeon



During our ministry in Ecuador, a couple in the states wrote offering us a car. It seemed to be a genuine answer to prayer. Though certain import restrictions intervened, a little white lie to the Ecuadorian government could resolve everything. After all, we reasoned, the whim of the local official is really the law here, so what difference does it make? We're doing God's work, we rationalized.

Peace escaped us, so we re-read James 3:17. We noticed what genuine wisdom looks like:

*But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.*

The word "pure" stood out, so we rejected the offer on those terms. Later, God provided a car another way without duplicity.

When we are confronted with an important decision, we can always compare what we think is God's leading with the characteristics of wisdom in James 3:17. If the decision lines up with all the characteristics of wisdom, then it is probably right. If any are missing, it is a trap.

### ***The wisdom that comes from heaven is...***

#### ***First pure***

Satan can counterfeit any aspect of divine wisdom in James 3:17 except purity. Shady dealing, duplicity or white lies are proof the decision is ungodly.

## ***Then peace-loving***

*Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts...*  
—Colossians 3:15

At the crossroads of a decision, we can use the peace of God in our heart to indicate God's will. In choosing a road at random, our peace may disappear as we pursue that option. This warns us it's the wrong road. If we take the other option and our peace returns, that is probably the right choice.

Godly decisions will normally not provoke dissension among believers. Most of the time, purity and peace work together. The exception is when sin is involved and we must take a stand for righteousness. This may cause division, which may turn out to be a good thing.



Purity is more important than peace, which is why it appears first in James 3. Sometimes we have to lay peace aside in order to maintain purity. For example, Christian leaders may be obliged to apply discipline to a sinning church member, knowing it will cause dissension.

Such occasions are a test of integrity. We aim for unity with other believers, if it is possible to do so without forfeiting the first principle of purity.

*If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*  
—Rom.12:18

Some Christians want unity to the point of shading the truth or letting sin and false doctrine continue rather than reproofing it. Whenever we sacrifice purity for the sake of peace, we lose both.

## ***Full of mercy and good fruits***

What is the end result of the decision? What is its ultimate fruit? Who will it help and how? These questions can shed light on important decisions.

## **Another important clue: Open doors**



*See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.* —Rev. 3:8

*because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me.*

—1Cor.16:9

Notice Paul mentions adversaries. Sometimes we misunderstand and suppose opposition is a sign that the leading is wrong. The reverse is often true. We are in a spiritual conflict with the devil and can expect resistance to what God wants us to do.

\* \* \* \*

Does all this guarantee perfect accuracy in knowing God's will? Certainly not. God wants the element of faith to be present in our walk with Him.

Some insist on absolute certainty before launching out in faith on any decision. If we were always sure, how could faith be involved? Genuine faith steps out, believing that God is leading, and trusts him to correct mistakes.

Those who yearn for a perfect system of guidance are involved in a futile search. Any who claim to have found one are self-deceived. Our faith must ultimately rest in God's ability to direct us rather than the principles themselves.

### **From this chapter we learn...**

- The first characteristic of divine wisdom is purity
- Purity and peace usually go together but sometimes not
- We must always choose purity over peace when they don't go together
- Absolute certainty in guidance is rare



## Chapter Eleven

### **Counterfeit Faith**

The Bible says we are saved by faith, we walk by faith and live successfully through faith. Sounds pretty important doesn't it? If we are going to be reformers in our generation, then it is imperative we understand faith and understand it very well.

More ridiculous ideas about faith exist than people. Have you heard any of these?

1. Faith is believing something without evidence or logical proof.
2. Faith is a spiritual force we control to produce whatever we need.
3. Faith is a spiritual experience to help us feel better about ourselves.



All three are wrong.

So then, what is faith and how do we grow in it?

The biblical faith is...

*being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.*

—Rom.4:21

This underscores that faith is ultimately the strong conviction about God's ability *to do what he had promised.*



Faith is not faith unless connected to a promise from God. Faith is therefore simply trusting God to keep his promises.

We were sitting at a barbecue café in Kansas, waiting for our sandwiches. We struck up a conversation with a man at the next table. He was a local businessmen and a Christian as well.

After chatting a while he mentioned, "I have faith that God will prosper my business this year."

"That's great," Roger replied. "What promise of God do you have for that?" His puzzled expression showed he was using the word *faith* when he really meant *hope* or *probability*.

In Romans Four, Paul uses the example of Abraham who hoped to have a son. But when the promise came, Abraham had something solid to stand on. That promise turned his hope into faith.

Our hopes become faith the moment we decide to disregard circumstances, human abilities and probabilities to trust in God's ability to keep his promises.

How do we recognize promises from God that apply to us? From the Word, through our quiet time. How does this work?



We approach our quiet time with anticipation, expecting the Holy Spirit to lead us to promises as they apply to our present reality.

This can be a neglected practice among some, which is why we highlight it throughout this book.

*Belief does not hover aimlessly in mid-air, but plants itself in the firm foundation of . . . the Bible.*<sup>16</sup>

— Sam Storms

## Look-a-likes

People often use the word faith when they should be using other words. Counterfeit faith leads to disappointment. Biblical faith does not mean believing something without evidence or logical proof.

Reason comes into play when we evaluate God's power in creation and deduce the obvious. If God can create a universe, he can surely keep a promise. This is different from a mere acknowledgement of God's existence.

Biblical faith has three components: Data, reason and trust.

Data refers to the information we already have about God's abilities and character. Reason sees the connection between his promises and his ability

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted from: Pleasures Evermore: The Life-Changing Power of Knowing God by Sam Storms, © 2000, p. 189. Used by permission of NavPress – [www.navpress.org](http://www.navpress.org).

to keep them. Trust means we rely on the promise regardless of circumstances.

## **Faith and planning**

Some think careful planning shows a lack of faith.

Bruce was watering his lawn one Saturday when the lady next door, also a Christian, commented with admiration, "Bruce, how is it that you have such a terrific lawn and mine looks pathetic?"



Bruce answered, "My wife speaks it into existence."

"Wow, that's wonderful!" she exclaimed.

"Yes," Bruce continued, "she says 'Bruce, get up off that couch and go take care of the lawn!'"

Jesus is that practical when it comes to applied faith. In Luke 22:35-36, he sent out his disciples with nothing. Upon their return, he established a principle for walking in faith.

*Jesus asked them, "When I sent you without purse, bag or sandals, did you lack anything?" "Nothing," they answered. He said to them, "But now if you have a purse, take it, and also a bag; and if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one.*

—Luke 22:35-36

There may be times God sends us to do a job with no tools in hand. These are rare. The ordinary way to walk in faith is to add sensible planning to a promise from God.

## **Faith and charm**

Some movements display brash confidence or engaging charm when talking about faith. Immature believers can be deluded into supposing this is faith, when it may be nothing more than crowd manipulation.

Genuine faith starts with a clear understanding of God's character and abilities. Then comes a promise from God. Finally, we stand on that promise regardless of circumstances or human limitations.

**From this chapter we learn...**

- Faith is simply trusting God to keep his promises
- We get promises from God through our quiet time
- Faith has its counterfeits

## Chapter Twelve

### ***Quit Calling Yourself a Sinner***

Fads lurk around churches, probing for an entrance like a virus. If not detected, they may even propagate themselves from the pulpit.

We stumbled across one such fad while visiting some churches. The teaching stressed we look at the corruption of our hearts until we feel despair, as we realize what sinners we are. This despair is supposed to drive us back to the cross, where we cry out to the Lord for forgiveness. He then grants grace and restores our joy.



Supposedly, this cycle should be a habit in the Christian life, the key to victorious living. The teacher called it, "living a life of repentance."<sup>17</sup>

Is there anything wrong with that? It would be better to ask if there were anything right with it.

Its like sticking your head in a garbage can and then coming up for air once in a while. Living like that would drive anybody crazy.

The teacher was right in saying our hearts have a lot of hidden sin. Our remaining corruption is always worse than we thought. He was wrong in assuming we are supposed to dwell on it.

### **So, what should I call myself?**



Which is our identity as Christians? Are we sinners pursuing grace? Or are we saints with remnants of corruption?

The point: Sin does not identify Christians as sinners, any more than it condemns them.

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<sup>17</sup> A psychologist friend diagnosed the author of this system as a manic-depressive schizophrenic. This type of schizophrenic lives a life of alternating emotional highs and lows. Evidently this author superimposed his pathology on the Bible to justify it, since he was never able to overcome it. The psychologist said the author wrote his material during the high periods of his cycle and never really came into the victory he promoted in his program. For courtesy, we will not mention the name of this author, who is now deceased.

Christians take their identity from their union with Christ, not from Adam. We're saints, not sinners, even though we sin.<sup>18</sup>

Living a life of repentance, as described above, is a subtle form of works-righteousness because it turns a feeling into a means of grace. What is that feeling? Humility.

This mindset robs grace of its sovereignty by making it dependent on our ability to repent properly. It amounts to a subtle denial of the sufficiency of the cross, the acceptance of the Father and a misrepresentation of the entire concept of grace.

In works-based religions, pain is an essential ingredient. It supposedly attracts the favor of a deity. Pain produces the humility necessary to evoke the sympathy of their deity.

In some religions, people crawl on their knees or whip themselves. Christians know better than to beat themselves with whips. Some, however, whip themselves with words.

The truth is, we can never whip ourselves enough. We can never be humble enough because we can never be anything enough.



Though humility is a virtue, it is not the way God provides grace. The only vehicle of grace the New Testament recognizes is faith.

The New Testament does not authorize Christians to live a life of repentance by groveling. We would find it front and center in the epistles. Instead, we see exhortations to stand firm in our identity as saints of God, with authority over the world, the flesh and the devil.

How many epistles are written to sinners? None. How many to saints? All of them.

Does this mean we should never call ourselves sinners? We certainly may. If we are referring to the remaining corruption in our nature, it is perfectly appropriate. We are in a lifelong struggle against the sin remaining in our flesh. This corruption is truly sinful.

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<sup>18</sup> Only two verses in the New Testament appear to label Christians as sinners. These are 1Tim.1:15 and xxx. Even these are doubtful in their interpretation. Though we see Christians in the New Testament sinning, they are not called sinners due to being justified by faith in Christ. A sinning saint is not the same thing as a sinning sinner.

If we are referring to our status before God, it is inappropriate to call ourselves sinners. Otherwise, let's call ourselves what God calls us.

Let's look now at a healthy way to live a life of repentance.

**From this chapter we learn...**

- Sin does not identify Christians as sinners
- When we refer to our remaining corruption, it is fine to call ourselves sinners
- When we refer to our status before God, we may call ourselves saints because that is what he calls us

## Chapter Thirteen

### ***New Identity***

We find little in the New Testament about Christians repenting. One would expect to read a lot about it, considering how much we sin. However, just as sin does not define us as sinners, so repentance is not the main concern of the Christian life. It is *"to glorify God and enjoy him forever."*<sup>19</sup>

Why should we bother to repent if we have such an exalted status in Christ? For one, we fail to live up to our new identity. This may happen by making our faults our focus.

Another good reason to repent is because even though God is no longer our judge, as the Father he still disciplines us. Though we are clothed with the righteousness of Christ, this will not prevent him from applying the rod. Avoiding spankings is always a good idea.



Though God's law cannot condemn us, it is still wrong to break it. That hurts us spiritually, emotionally and sometimes even physically. If we are in that company that 'hungers and thirsts for righteousness', then we will repent just because it is right to do so.

*Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.*

—Hebrews 12:10

The focal point of biblical living is our union with Christ and the freedom it brings.

*It is for freedom Christ has set us free.*

—Galatians 5:1

Freedom from what? From any sense of condemnation. Free to do what? Approach God with confidence. Repent for not living like free people.

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<sup>19</sup> Shorter Catechism, Question one.





The New Testament clearly teaches us to relish our new identity in Christ, without trivializing our remaining corruption.

## Looking forward

When is it appropriate to repent for our remaining corruption?

To illustrate: We drive a car by looking forward through the windshield. Once in a while, we glance in the rearview mirror to see where we have been. If we concentrate mainly on the mirror, we will crash.



God provides special times for us to consider our sins and failures. During our quiet time, the Holy Spirit will occasionally point out areas in our life that need repentance.

This may not happen every day. Does this mean we are sinless that day? If we pick a rotten apple out of a barrel, should we assume it is the only one? Maybe so. Or, it may represent the whole barrel. In the case of human nature, the latter is more likely.

Another time and place God has provided for his people to practice a 'life of repentance', is the Lord's Supper. The Apostle Paul makes it clear we should examine ourselves at this time.

*A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. 29 For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself.*  
—1 Cor. 11:28-29

Our quiet time and the Lord's Supper are two specific times God draws our attention to sin. Other ways exist, such as sermons, counseling or the working of the Spirit in our conscience during the day. We repent and then go back to the usual business of enjoying our freedom in Christ and our identity as saints.

## License, laziness or liberty?

Freedom can be alarming. It makes some feel insecure because they see how it could be abused.

Some ask, "Doesn't this look like a license for laziness or even for outright sin?"



Teachings about identity in Christ and freedom are not a license to sin. They are close enough to it, though, to confuse some people.

The apostles warned against using freedom as a pretext to indulge the flesh. This warning proves freedom is exactly what they meant. The only right teaching is the one that would provoke that question in the first place.

Those alarmed at potential abuses will restrict themselves by rules to feel secure. Ironically, the Word of God gives Christians the freedom to do that to themselves if they want to. It does not give them the freedom to do it to others.

\* \* \* \*

Normal Christian living focuses much more on our identity, privileges and status in Christ than our remaining corruption. We are to live a life of joy in this identity with a life of repentance secondarily. This is a far-reaching freedom that stimulates growth through relationship, not rules, looking to the future more than the past.

### **From this chapter we learn...**

- There is a right way and a wrong way for a Christian to live a life of repentance
  - The right way is to approach God from a position of acceptance, as to a father
  - The wrong way is to approach God to be accepted, as to a judge
- A good reason to repent is for failing to embrace our new identity
- Our identity in Christ must not become a pretext for laziness or sin