

God's Guidance

1 Samuel 23:1–13, Acts 16:6–10

All Christians agree that the Bible is authoritative, though not all practice this consistently. Some have other sources of authority, such as human tradition. This of necessity neutralizes the authority of Scripture. Others are mystical, seeking promptings or inward leadings of the Spirit. This takes attention away from God and focuses it on man. Only a consistent appeal to Scripture alone gives God undisputed rule in his church.

Our Old and New Testament texts this morning are often appealed to in order to justify the notion that an individual can discover the will of God apart from Scripture. Is this what these texts teach? Let's take a look.

In 1 Samuel 23 we have the thrilling story of David and his men saving a city right on the edge of Philistine territory. David had earlier defeated the Philistine champion Goliath by the power of God. All Sunday school kids know the story. Goliath had taunted the Israelites, saying, "I defy the armies of Israel this day; give me a man, that we may fight." None of the mighty men of Saul's army would take up the challenge. But along came David, and said to the Philistine, "You come to me with a sword. But I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will deliver you into my hand. Then all this assembly shall know that the LORD does not save with sword and spear; for the battle is the LORD's, and he will give you into our hands." David felled the Philistine champion, and God gave Israel a decisive victory over the Philistines. Saul, mad with envy, has David on the run.

But now the Philistines are raiding Keilah and making off with its grain stores, threatening the people with starvation. David's blood boils. How could the Philistines do this to God's people? Should he and his 600 men attack the Philistines? David inquires of the Lord, and the Lord replies, "Go and attack the Philistines, and save Keilah." This is actually a very telling word from the Lord. The word for "save" is the root of the name *Jesus*; it calls to mind the angel's promise to Joseph in the book of Matthew, "Thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins." "Jesus" means *Jehovah saves*. Just as the Lord saved Israel from the Philistines by the hand of David, so the Lord saves his people from their sins by the hand of Jesus. Jesus is the mighty champion!

So in our Old Testament story God assures David that he will use him and his ragtag band of 600 men to deliver Keilah out of the hands of the Philistines. But David's men are not yet convinced. They say to him, "Look, we are afraid here in Judah. How much more then if we go to Keilah against the armies of the Philistines?" Why were they afraid? Keilah was a border town close to the Philistine power. In the relative security of Judah, David's men were afraid. But as one commentator put it, "going to Keilah, closer to the Philistines who were in

battle array and armed to the teeth, would be even worse—in fact, it would be too frightening to contemplate.”¹ So David inquired of the Lord once again, and again the Lord answered and said, “Arise, go down to Keilah. For I will deliver the Philistines into your hand.”

Twice now, the Lord has promised David victory if he and his men attack the Philistine invaders at Keilah. This time, David’s men are convinced, and they go to battle. They strike the Philistines with a mighty blow, and save the inhabitants of Keilah. God did not deliver Keilah by the hand of King Saul but by the hand of David and his ragtag band of men. It was a mighty victory.

But King Saul hears the news. And rather than rejoice that his people had been saved, Saul is again overcome by the spirit of envy. He calls the Israelites together for war, to go down to Keilah to attack David and his men. Rather than embrace the deliverance that God had given his people by the hand of David, Saul wants to destroy Israel’s savior. If God uses someone else beside Saul to deliver his people, then that deliverer becomes Saul’s enemy and must be destroyed! So it would be again, 1,000 years later, with the Jewish leaders at the coming of Christ. If God would save his people by his Messiah, whom the Jewish leaders rejected, then the Messiah himself must be destroyed. Mad with envy, the Jewish leaders would rather take their people with them to hell than to see them delivered by God’s Messiah. Evil rulers in every age will sacrifice their people rather than relinquish their power. So it is in the present as well. This is why we must never put our trust in man, but always in God.

So Saul and the armies of Israel are on their way to Keilah to attack David. David hears of this and a third time comes to inquire of the Lord, this time by the hand of Abiathar the priest. When Saul had wickedly slaughtered the 85 priests of Nob by the hand of Doeg the Edomite, Abiathar alone escaped, and brought with him the ephod, a sacred vestment worn by the priests as a symbol of their authority. Since it wasn’t safe for Abiathar to be around King Saul, he joins himself to David. David calls Abiathar and says, “Bring the ephod here” (the ephod was used in Old Testament times to discern God’s will). Praying over the ephod, David inquires of the Lord, “O Lord God of Israel, Your servant has certainly heard that Saul seeks to come to Keilah to destroy the city for my sake. Will the men of Keilah deliver me into his hand? Will Saul come down, as Your servant has heard? O Lord God of Israel, I pray, tell Your servant.” And the Lord said, “He will come down.” Then David said, “Will the men of Keilah deliver me and my men into the hand of Saul?” And the Lord said, “They will deliver you.” Having heard that, David and his men escape from Keilah.

¹ *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (PocketBible)

Note what happened here in our Old Testament text. Three times David inquired of the Lord to discern his will, asking four questions in all. All four times the Lord responded. The word that is used is the common word “and he said.” We are not told exactly the manner in which God responded to David. Did he hear an audible voice? In the third instance, when Abiathar was present with him, did Abiathar too hear an audible voice? We are not told. Or perhaps David heard an unmistakable voice within. We do not know for sure. We know only that, by whatever means, God gave specific counsel to David, revealing to him his will. God alone knows the future. He alone knows in advance whatsoever comes to pass, such as David’s decisive victory over the Philistines at Keilah. And he knows events that *might* come to pass if he does not intervene. As our Confession of Faith tersely puts it, “God knows whatsoever *may* or *can* come to pass upon all supposed conditions.”² God alone could inform David that he was going to give him a great victory over the Philistines at Keilah. God alone could warn David that he better get out of the way, for the people of Keilah were about to betray their deliverer to King Saul. God alone has perfect knowledge of the future, and he will reveal it to save his people.

Now consider our New Testament text. As we noted last week, the apostle Paul and his missionary teammates Silas and young Timothy were on a journey (Paul’s second) to take the gospel to the land now known as Turkey. Our text says that “when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia. After they had come to Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them. So passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them.”

Interestingly, the critical text (which is usually shorter than the traditional Byzantine text and omits words and phrases) adds the words “of Jesus” to verse 7, rendering it, “When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of *Jesus* would not allow them to.” The critical text also changes “the Lord” in verse 10 to “God”: “we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that *God* had called us to preach the gospel to them.” Now I believe that the Byzantine is the better text, but the changes are interesting, giving us a progression from “the Holy Spirit” to “the Spirit of Jesus” to “God,” referencing all three Persons of the Holy Trinity. One author states that “the heightening of terminology ... from ‘the Holy Spirit’ to ‘the Spirit of Jesus’ to ‘God’ is ... an

² WCF 3.2 (https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_03)

unconscious expression of the early church's embryonic trinitarian faith."³ "One-God-in-three-Persons" is a fundamental tenet of the Christian faith. Our Lord Jesus was at once both human and divine. He became man to die for men. He had to be man in order to die, and he had to be divine both to bear in his person the tremendous burden of his sufferings and to give infinite value to them. Truly, when Christ on the cross uttered the words "It is finished," he had borne the sins of all his elect in every age. And as our Confession puts it, he did "fully discharge the debt of all those that are thus justified, and did make a proper, real, and full satisfaction to his Father's justice in their behalf."⁴ The Spirit, too, is divine, applying the benefit of Christ's atonement to each of the elect, working faith in them, and enabling them to confess Christ as their Savior and Lord.

Paul and his missionary teammates wanted to take this message to Asia—used here, not in reference to the Far East but in its much more restricted sense of the Roman province of Asia in what is now western Turkey, on the eastern coast of the Aegean Sea. Three times we read of the Spirit's guidance to the missionary team: "they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia" (v. 6), "they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them" (v. 7), and "a vision appeared to Paul in the night" (v. 9). The word rendered "vision" refers to *that which is seen*. By this we know that Paul saw something. Now this is not the first time that he saw something; he saw the Lord in a bright light on the road to Damascus, when God converted him. But here Paul saw something in the middle of the night. Did he see it in a dream, or did he waken to see what appeared to be a man in bodily form in his room bearing the message, "Come over to Macedonia and help us"? We are not told. But Paul understood it to be an authoritative communication from God, an announcement that the missionary team was not at this time to preach the gospel in what is now Turkey but were to go further to Macedonia, a province in the north part of Greece. In response the missionary team immediately made plans to go to Macedonia.

Why did God want the three missionaries (actually four, including Luke; see the words "we" and "us" in v. 10) to go to Macedonia? Because his spirit was preparing the heart of a woman named Lydia, and through her intended to reach the Roman jailer in Philippi. God is the good Shepherd. He cares for every one of his sheep, going to great lengths to rescue them from sin and death.

Yesterday over lunch Pastor Ralph Rebandt addressed the presbyters. Ralph is a minister of our presbytery running for governor. Ralph spoke of how he is self-consciously trying to keep his campaign Christ-focused. At one campaign appearance several weeks back a couple came up to Ralph and Carole and wanted

³ *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (PocketBible)

⁴ https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_11

to know more about Christ. They said they had never heard such things as Ralph had spoken of. Ralph and his wife stayed for several hours after the meeting, witnessing to the couple about Christ. Ralph and Carole were profoundly moved to have been used by God as he opened up the heart of a needy couple on the campaign trail.

We have shown that in both our Old and New Testament texts God reveals his will directly, apart from the written Scriptures. Do these texts, and others like them, teach us that this is normative for us as well? Should Christians today expect God to reveal his will for their lives through dreams, visions, impressions or audible words? Consider with me two points, first,

1. God revealed himself in visions and dreams before the canon of Scripture was completed.

It is important to observe the context. In our Old Testament and New Testament readings today we see the saints struggling to ascertain God's specific will for their lives without reference to the completed Scriptures. We must remember that God did not give his word all at once. There is what we call *progressive revelation* given over a period of time. God reveals himself to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Even at that early date he reveals that he was going to send his promised Messiah who would be the seed of the woman—a baby conceived not through the physical union of husband and wife but supernaturally, through the woman alone (a virgin birth). Speaking to the serpent God said, “I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and *her seed*; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel” (Gen. 3:15). Notice the reference to “*her seed*”—that is, the seed of the *woman*. Now this revelation was given to Adam and Eve before any human babies had been born. There was a lot for Adam and Eve to learn. This Scripture is called the *protevangelium*. That is a Latin term meaning *first gospel*—“first anticipation of the gospel”—but it can be found in an English dictionary.⁵ As the original couple was being evicted from the Garden because of their sin, God promised the coming of the Savior, the virgin-born divine Son.

As the story of the Bible progressed, God revealed more and more of himself. The writer to the Hebrews expressed it this way: “God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds” (Heb. 1:1–2). The culmination of God's revelation would be Christ. After the coming of Christ, God's revelation would cease; there would be nothing left to reveal. Our Lord Jesus Christ put his stamp of approval upon the Old Testament Scriptures with his definitive pronouncement,

⁵ Protevangelium: “a messianic interpretation of a text (as Gen. 3:15 RSV) presaging man's ultimate triumph over sin through a coming Savior—used as the first anticipation of the gospel” (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/protevangelium>)

“Thy word is truth” (John 17:17). At his coming he chose the twelve, whom he named apostles, and authorized them to preach his gospel. Within a generation of his ascension up to heaven, the Holy Scriptures were complete; the canon was closed.

Do not miss the obvious fact that our Old and New Testament texts today, wherein we read of men of God ascertaining his specific will for their lives by special revelations, recorded incidents that took place *before* the completion of Holy Scripture. It is very important to remember this context. God gave special revelation to his people at various times and in various ways, but now, in these last days, he has spoken definitively by his Son. Let’s unpack that a little more.

Consider with me point two:

2. Today, now that the Scriptures are complete, God reveals his will in holy Scripture.

The Bible does not instruct the saints today to seek to discover God’s will by waiting for voices, dreams, visions, promptings or impressions. Rather, it tells us, “Search the Scriptures.” The Bible is a completed book. With the coming of Christ God has nothing new to say. He has spoken with finality in his Son. Christ is the culmination of God’s progressive revelation. Whatever he wants us to learn can be seen in Christ.

Are we downcast? There is hope in Christ! Are we perplexed? There is wisdom in Christ! Are we tempted? There is strength in Christ! Are we lost? There is salvation in Christ!

Peter writes that “his divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue” (2 Pet. 1:3). Note the phrase “all things that pertain to life and godliness.” “All things”—not just religious truth, not just things that are useful only in church, “*all things* that pertain to life and godliness.”

Who is the one who has called us to glory and virtue? Christ, the one who is bringing many sons to glory. The Holy Bible is the word of Christ. Paul instructed, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord” (Col. 3:16). Scripture is the word of Christ. Scripture is where we need to turn to learn the answers to life’s perplexing questions. The Bible is God’s infallible word; it will never lead us astray.

But not only do we have the word, we have the Spirit. Shortly before he went to the cross Jesus told his disciples, “I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will show you things to come” (John 16:13).

Does the Bible teach that individuals today can have direct subjective communion with God? It does not.

“The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.”⁶

How are we to determine God’s will? By studying the Scriptures, learning its principles and praying for wisdom to apply them to the problems that we face in our daily lives.

It’s actually very simple. God revealed himself in visions and dreams *before* the canon of Scripture was completed. *Today*, now that the Scriptures are complete, God reveals his will in Holy Scripture. Let us learn to pray, “God, reveal your will to me in Holy Scripture. Amen.”

⁶ Westminster Confession of Faith 1.6 (https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_01)