

Jesus Guides



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“The one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep... The sheep recognize his voice and come to him. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out” (John 10:2-3, NLT).

We all need guidance for decisions in life. Yet in a world as chaotic as ours, getting good guidance isn't always simple or easy. Jesus says it's different for Christians. He makes it clear in the above passage that his followers—“his own sheep”—know his voice and “come to him.” The picture is of a Good Shepherd providing his sheep with all the oversight and care they need.

Does that suffice for the hard decisions we all have to make? Each of us has serious matters to decide: “Whom do I marry? What vocation will I pursue? To what purpose or mission will I give my life?” These decisions can be fraught with tension, especially if we regret poor decisions made in the past. My life has been blessed by God immensely, but I don't want my children or grandchildren to make the mistakes I've made. Like any parent, I want to be able to give them the best guidance possible.

The good news is we have a Shepherd who is a faithful guide to us in all things, no matter how faulty our decisions. He has the authority to guide us into an amazingly blessed life, regardless of our failures. Indeed, he says that is his purpose in guiding our lives: “My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life” (10:10). How our decisions turn out depends on the quality of our guide.

We all know it's important to follow a quality guide. Think about the big life decisions you've made: Who was guiding you? What was their experience, skill and knowledge in getting you where you wanted to go?

Some years ago I spent a weekend with a group of friends for some “guy time.” We met in east Texas and decided to take a road trip to San Antonio to see the Alamo. One of the guys on our team, a friend of mine, offered to navigate for us. “That's my hometown,” he said. “I'd love to be your guide.”

But once we arrived in San Antonio, things got a little confusing. A few of us noticed we'd passed the same Macy's store three times. “Hey, aren't we going in circles?” someone asked. “No, no, we're getting close,” my friend assured us.

Then we found ourselves in a rough part of town. Then in a traffic jam. Then going in circles again. Finally, someone said, to my friend, “Hey, I thought you knew your way around. You said this was your hometown.” “It is,” he answered. “But we moved away when I was two.”

Obviously, Michael wasn't our ideal guide. He had good intentions but no idea where to lead us. He represents the kind of guide we may think we want in life, but who leads us in circles instead of into the rich and satisfying life Jesus designed for us.

Another kind of guide can have the right information but may be missing other essentials. My wife, Kelly, and I went on a mission trip to the Philippines. On our day off, we took a guided canoe tour to a place called Pagsanjan Falls. The crew was several small but athletic Filipinos. At one point, we came to a place in the river too shallow to float through. “Uh- oh,” I thought, “this must be the end of the line.” To my surprise, our strong young guides lifted up

our canoe—with Kelly and me still in it!—and carried it to deeper waters. “Wow,” I thought, “talk about reliable guides!”

Later, we came to a beautiful spot where the river widened, and the leader signaled for us to stop rowing. “Oh, boy,” I thought, “now we’re going to hear some rich history. Maybe this is where the country’s democratic leaders planned their revolution.” Visibly excited, our guide pointed and exclaimed, “Here on this spot is where the movie ‘Rambo’ was made!”

That was a little disappointing. But soon we came to another beautiful spot where the river opened up to a lush, green field. It looked like the kind of place where an historic battle might have taken place. “On this spot,” said the guide, clearing his throat, “Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie had a picnic!”

There are some guides in life who have the knowledge to get us through some troubling dilemmas. But do they also have the knowledge to carry us to the abundant life Jesus promises? As our Lord, Jesus is up to more than just guidance—he’s forming a relationship. He wants us to know more than just when and where to go. He wants us to have the rich blessing of knowing him personally in every area of life. So while we’re busy looking for an instruction manual, he’s saying very simply, “Follow me.”

To lead us into a blessed life, Jesus first shows us the many hindrances to receiving his guidance.

To illustrate the rich, satisfying life Jesus has for us, he uses the image of a sheep pen. “Yes, I am the gate. Those who come in through me will be saved. They will come and go freely and will find good pastures” (John 10:9). There in the pen, his sheep are safe from all enemies. They feed on the “good pastures” of God’s kingdom, enjoying health, peace and freedom.

It is this blessed life that our enemy, the devil, seeks to steal from us. Satan is bent on destroying our precious faith, and Jesus describes him as a thief who sneaks into the pen: “Anyone who sneaks over the wall of a sheepfold, rather than going through the gate, must surely be a thief and a robber!... The thief’s purpose is to steal and kill and destroy” (10:1, 10).

If there is anything Satan wants to steal from us, it is the life God has designed for us. He does this by seeking to remove us from the “good pasture”(i.e., crucial spiritual food) that Jesus has given us. Immature Christians are most susceptible, as long as they remain on a diet of “milk,” never advancing to the meat of God’s Word. They are especially subject to Satan’s wiles in times of crisis. They spiral into a panic, filled with fear and worry, thinking, “I don’t know how to make a decision. Where are you, God?”

I saw this happen a lot when I was on the pastoral staff of Times Square Church in New York City. The teaching that people fed on there was deep and meaty, drawn from the dedicated study of God’s Word. Imagine my shock whenever a parishioner told me they’d skipped a service to go hear a known charlatan, some preacher whose only focus was money. How could they do that after a steady diet of solid biblical food?

This brings up a second hindrance every Christian faces: the alluring gospel of a false teacher. Jesus teaches, “(My sheep) won’t follow a stranger; they will run from him because they don’t know his voice” (10:5). Such “strangers” look, sound and dress like any good pastor. But the gospel they preach gradually leads people away from Christ’s rich, satisfying “good pasture” to the destruction of their souls.

It’s absolutely required that we learn the voice of our Good Shepherd, to be able to distinguish it from the voices of false shepherds. How do we do this? By feeding on the meat our Shepherd has so generously provided: “So faith comes from hearing, that is, hearing the Good News about Christ” (Romans 10:17). The only way to detect a counterfeit is to know the original intimately. Only by immersing ourselves in God’s pure Word will we become intimate with the look, sound, scent and taste of that which comes from heaven.

Some Christians want guidance for the smallest daily decisions. If you want to know whether to buy a brand of toothpaste, God would say to you, “Just be sure to brush every day.” There are certain things we don’t need his explicit guidance for, because we already know to do them by what we read in his Word.

Recently, I was in Turkey near the border of Iraq, praying to discern how World Challenge might help in the refugee crisis. People were fleeing the violent persecution by ISIS and were flooding into the area, but the U.N. wasn’t present to provide any order. The need was overwhelming as desperate people arrived with nothing but the clothes they wore. I talked to one young boy who had seen his parents blown up by an ISIS landmine. I couldn’t imagine

the trauma this child had been through.

On the flight home I prayed, “Lord, would you have World Challenge provide help here?” I immediately felt a holy conviction surging through me, saying, “Why are you praying about this? You know to help!” I realized, “Of course World Challenge is supposed to be here. We have the hope of the gospel, and we will pray in God’s resources to help. That has always been this ministry’s DNA. Feed the hungry? Bring comfort to the suffering? Make a difference in an orphan’s life? Why do I need to pray? Let’s go!”

Make no mistake, I believe in prayer for guidance. But because we are God’s sheep and we know his voice, there are certain things we know to do. One of them is this: “Pure and genuine religion in the sight of God the Father means caring for orphans and widows in their distress and refusing to let the world corrupt you” (James 1:27). We can also be misguided when we look to hirelings rather than to Jesus.

“A hired hand will run when he sees a wolf coming. He will abandon the sheep because they don’t belong to him and he isn’t their shepherd. And so the wolf attacks them and scatters the flock.... I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me, just as my Father knows me and I know the Father. So I sacrifice my life for the sheep” (John 10:12, 14-15).

Let’s face it, even the most dedicated pastor is a hired hand. He’s someone the Good Shepherd trusts, an approved workman hired to care for the sheep. But sometimes even a trustworthy servant is no match for a desperate, hungry wolf (unless that servant is supernaturally emboldened like David!).

The point here is that even the best pastor will fail you at times. He’s human after all. And he doesn’t know you the way the Good Shepherd does. Don’t misunderstand: Most of us need the godly counsel of a faithful pastor. At times we may need the wisdom of a professional counselor. And Scripture tells us there is wisdom in a multitude of counselors, including our devoted Christian friends. The difference with Jesus is that *he is always there for you*: “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep” (10:11). He never fails you, never leaves you, and always has your best in mind.

We all know the famous scene in the Gospels where Jesus turned over the money changers’ tables in the temple. It was a literal act but also symbolic. Jesus was overturning an inferior religious system, declaring in effect, “You leaders are supposed to be shepherds over the people. Instead, you sell them sacrifices rather than making true sacrifices to the Father. I’m overturning your system. I am the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. I faithfully guide them into the good pastures that will bless and keep their lives.”

If you want true guidance in life, get to know your Shepherd’s voice. It may or may not come to you audibly, but it always comes through his written Word. Do you need direction in your life? He has but two words for you: “Follow me.” Keep your eyes on Jesus. Focus on what his Word says and obey it. Following his voice is the best way to find yourself at the altar facing his perfect partner for you. He owns every green pasture—and you can trust him to lead you into his promise of a rich and satisfying life!

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