



LOOKING FOR ROAD SIGNS

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When we invite the Lord Jesus into our lives, we begin a journey of faith. And, as is true with many journeys that we embark upon over the course of our lives, we usually set out with enthusiasm and anticipation. We meet fellow-travelers on the road, compare destinations, and recommend various side-trips. But after a while, our initial excitement subsides. We grow weary. It seems to take longer and longer to get to the next town, the next rest stop. We become irritable, and conscious of our lack of progress. We begin to realize that our journey will probably take much longer than we thought. The roads are more traveled than we had imagined. Detours have to be made and near collisions avoided. Sometimes the directions are not quite clear. We watch for the road signs, but we don't want to stop and study the map. That is when we wish the path was more clearly marked. We would like to have a navigator simply tell us where to turn.

During our summer vacation, my family and I were driving around a small island in the Caribbean. Our map was not very detailed, and the roads were not well marked. I was doing the driving, while my son navigated. At one point we didn't know where we were. The girls were complaining that we were lost. It was hot, and we were tired. There was no place to pull off the road. But my son, completely confident, said, "I know exactly where we are. Just take a left at the next fork in the road." As we rounded a corner, there it was: standing in someone's lawn was a nine-foot long, green fork! My son was the first to spot it. Calmly, he said, "There is the fork in the road; just take the next left."

In the journey of faith, we begin with enthusiasm and abandon, but before long we begin to look for giant green forks in the road. We think we know where we are headed, but sooner or later we find the travel is a bit more strenuous than we bargained for. At times, we sense we are lost. The way is not as clearly marked as we would like. Progress is slow. The directions we get from fellow-travelers often conflict. Uncertainty sets in, and we grow fearful and insecure.

Figuring out God's will and his direction for our lives surely is one of the most confusing things about being a Christian. If we could just talk to God for 15 seconds, we think, just to get one simple yes or no answer, our path could become clear. Grippled with anxiety over something, some Christians resort to opening their Bibles, closing their eyes, and placing their finger on a verse, hoping that God will speak directly to them.

We are traveling with Gideon, from the book of Judges, on his journey of faith. Last week, we saw that God approached this timid, fearful man as he was beating out wheat in a winepress. The Lord's salutation shocked Gideon: "The LORD is with you, O valiant warrior" (6:12). Of all people, God was calling Gideon to deliver the nation of Israel from the bondage of the Midianites. So God, we learned, initiated this whole adventure. In response, Gideon invited the Lord into his life of weakness and uncertainty, and he began to worship God.

Today, we will continue with Gideon on his journey. We will learn that this valiant warrior looks for road signs when he is confronted by his own doubts.

We take up Gideon's journey in chapter 6, verse 25:

Now the same night it came about that the LORD said to him, "Take your father's bull and a second bull seven years old, and pull down the altar of Baal which belongs to your father, and cut down the Asherah that is beside it; and build an altar to the LORD your God on the top of this stronghold in an orderly manner, and take a second bull and offer a burnt offering with the wood of the Asherah which you shall cut down." Then Gideon took ten men of his servants and did as the LORD had spoken to him; and it came about, because he was too afraid of his father's household and the men of the city to do it by day, that he did it by night. When the men of the city arose early in the morning, behold, the altar of Baal was torn down, and the Asherah which was beside it was cut down, and the second bull was offered on the altar which had been built. And they said to one another, "Who did this thing?" And when they searched about and inquired, they said, "Gideon the son of Joash did this thing." Then the men of the city said to Joash, "Bring out your son, that he may die, for he has torn down the altar of Baal, and indeed, he has cut down the Asherah which was beside it." But Joash said to all who had stood against him, "Will you contend for Baal, or will you deliver him? Whoever will plead for him shall be put to death by morning. If he is a god, let him contend for himself, because someone has torn down his altar." Therefore on that day he named him Jerubbaal, that is to say, "Let Baal contend against him," because he had torn down his altar. (6:25-32, NASB)

Cleaning up his own back yard is the first step on Gideon's journey of faith. He had put God to the test, and God had responded by igniting his offering. Now God puts Gideon to the test, instructing him to tear down the altars to Baal and Asherah and build an altar to the Lord. God tells Gideon to take two bulls to accomplish this. Joash, his father, may well have intended to sacrifice the first bull to Baal, but instead, Gideon uses it to tear down the altar. The second bull was seven years old; exactly the length of the Midianite oppression. This was no small request. If you remember, the Midianites swept into Israel every year and devastated the produce of the land, capturing all the livestock in the process. So this was a costly offering.

Gideon obeys, but he fearfully carries out his instructions at night. And he does so with ten servants to help bolster his flagging faith. He still lacks confidence. He is weak and timid, but he obeys. The people of the city awaken in the morning, angry at what has happened. They want to kill the person responsible, but Joash intercedes on Gideon's behalf, saying, "If he (Baal) is a god, let him contend for himself." Joash might well have felt shame at this point, and he, too, is transformed. Perhaps this is why he names his son, Jerubbaal (lit. "let Baal contend"), which came to mean "Baal-fighter" or "Baal-conqueror."

God had entered into Gideon's life, promising him his presence, granting him his peace. But the first order of business for Gideon was the Lordship of God in his home. Until he put things right in his own backyard, God would not and

could not use him to deliver his people. Baal must go before Midian could go. God's altar could not be built until Baal's altar was destroyed. Thus the place Gideon had to begin was in his own backyard.

This is where our journey begins, too. We do not embark on a long automobile journey without first checking under the hood to see if everything is functioning properly. Similarly, when God calls us to embark with him on a journey of faith, the first order of business is our own heart condition: worship, obedience, and purity. God is not satisfied with double loyalties. There is no victory where there is idolatry or a divided heart. This is the first priority. God tells Gideon (verse 26) to arrange the offering in an orderly fashion. It is because God is orderly. Things must be done in an orderly progression. Our worship of him as the one true God must come first. The main thing must become and remain the main thing.

Oftentimes this is difficult for us. We must be willing to burn the bridges of sin in our lives and not look back. We must sever relationships that lead us into evil. We must throw away books and magazines that catapult us into destruction. We must begin to arrange our lives in the worship of God. We must lay the foundations for a relationship that will encourage and edify us until we are strong enough to venture out.

And we discover that the most difficult place to begin is at home. Representing Jesus Christ among our own family and our closest friends is difficult. They are aware of our altars, our places of worship. But this journey of faith must begin at home. If our commitment to the lordship of Jesus Christ does not first affect our home life, it very likely will be superficial and hollow. The progression is, heart to home.

Supposing you bought a fixer-upper house that needed a lot of remodeling. You wouldn't begin by painting the walls, wallpapering the bathroom and hanging pictures, would you? No, you would start with the foundation, the plumbing, the electrical circuits. You must begin with the interior structure before the house starts to look good outside. This is the proper order for building anything, and that includes a solid spiritual life.

Last week, I visited a young man in prison. He had been a part of our young singles group several years ago. My heart ached as I talked with him. He said that he often thought of our talks over the past six years, but he had remained outside the church. This young man did not tear down the altars in his own backyard, and the results are devastating.

Gideon made a good beginning — he started in his own home. Now he is ready to travel a bit further down the road. Verse 33:

Then all the Midianites and the Amalekites and the sons of the east assembled themselves; and they crossed over and camped in the valley of Jezreel. So the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon; and he blew a trumpet, and the Abiezrites were called together to follow him. And he sent messengers through Manasseh, and they also were called together to follow him; and he sent messengers to Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali, and they came up to meet them. (6:33-35)

The Midianites and Amalekites are beginning their annual assault upon Israel as they come up and camp in the valley of Jezreel. We read that the Spirit of the Lord "came upon Gideon," literally, "clothed Gideon." This word is used of a man putting on his clothes (Gen. 28:20), or a warrior putting on a suit of armor (Is. 59:17). The Holy Spirit wore Gideon in the same way that a man puts on a suit of clothes. And his own family, the Abiezrites, came up to follow him, together with their allies, Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali.

But at this point Gideon becomes a little nervous. The enemy has come up and taken their positions. Gideon enlists the aid of his own people, the Abiezrites, and also the help of four other tribes, Manasseh, Asher, Zebulun, and Naphtali — 32,000 men. This is a large army, but the enemy is described later as being "as numerous as locusts." Their camels are without number, as numerous as the sand on the seashore (7:12). The situation is getting extremely tense. Gideon responds by proposing a little test. He needs a 9-foot, green road sign.

Verse 36:

Then Gideon said to God, "If Thou wilt deliver Israel through me, as Thou hast spoken, behold, I will put a fleece of wool on the threshing floor. If there is dew on the fleece only, and it is dry on all the ground, then I will know that Thou wilt deliver Israel through me, as Thou hast spoken." And it was so. When he arose early the next morning and squeezed the fleece, he drained the dew from the fleece, a bowl full of water. Then Gideon said to God, "Do not let Thine anger burn against me that I may speak once more; please let me make a test once more with the fleece, let it now be dry only on the fleece, and let there be dew on all the ground." And God did so that night; for it was dry only on the fleece, and dew was on all the ground. (6:36-40)

This is the second of three signs that we encounter in the life of Gideon. (The first was the offering which was ignited by the Lord; the third will be a dream, as we will see next week.)

"Fleece-setting" is often recommended as the way to discern God's will and direction for our lives. (Gideon's example is held up as a positive sign.) But a careful reading of the text reveals four problems with this method of discerning God's will.

First, the text is quite clear: Gideon already knew God's will. Twice he admits, "as Thou hast spoken" (6:36-37). God had given him a clear statement of his will. He had given him a clear revelation of his person, and an experience of his power. God had ignited the offering; he had helped Gideon tear down the altars to Baal in his own backyard; he had helped him gather 32,000 men; he had clothed him with the Spirit. So Gideon knew what God's will was in this situation.

The second problem is that fleece-setting does not increase true faith. Faith is what God wants to teach each one of us. Faith is believing something you do not see, but fleece-setting attempts to remove the need for faith. It is an attempt to bypass faith. It is an "end-run" around faith.

Third, fleece-setting is tantamount to dictating to God. It is telling God our program, telling him what he needs to do for us. But when we propose a test to God to discern some course of action, it is really preposterous to think that he should alter the laws of nature because we ask him.

Fourth, fleece-setting does not really solve problems. Gideon has to try it twice just in case the first time was a coincidence. He wants to go two out of three. Fleece-setting didn't produce a certainty. It doesn't yield the confidence that faith brings. It doesn't bring about the result that God desires.

Recently, a friend of mine told me a story of his friend who was trying to decide whether to enter into the ministry full time. He decided to propose a test to God. There was an old, rotting tree in his back yard, and he said to God that if the tree fell down that week, he would go into the ministry. A few days later, he awoke to find that the tree next to the one he had designated had fallen down! Now what should he do? Was that close enough, or does close count only in horse-shoes? The man was still left in uncertainty.

If fleece-setting is not what God desires, then how are we to discern his will? First, we need to be clear about how we define God's will, because this is a key issue in the Christian life.

We need to be aware that there are two aspects of the will of God for our lives: God's will is both general and specific. First, the general. This is what God's will is for every believer, and it involves the whole realm of our moral and ethical choices. This statement of God's will is revealed in the Bible. Technically, God's will is for us to become like Christ. This is his primary concern for each one of us. In 1 Thessalonians 4:3, Paul says: "this is the will of God, your sanctification." It is that we be holy, that we be set apart to be who he wants us to be, morally, ethically, and spiritually. In another place, Paul says that Christians are to "rejoice always, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thess 5:16-18). Technically, God's will is that you mature spiritually, that your life reflect his holiness and love, that you manifest the fruits of the Spirit, for faith to be completed in your life. His will majors on character, faith, and holiness.

And the blueprint for all of this is in the Bible. God's word is God's will for your life. Therefore, we know what God's will is for every moral decision we are faced with:

- Should I marry a non-believer? No.
- Should I sleep with my boyfriend or girlfriend? No.
- Should I cheat on my taxes or my expense report? No.
- Should I love my neighbor? Yes.
- Should I know how to share the good news with a friend? Yes.

God's will primarily deals with what kind of a person you are. If you are not the kind of person the Scripture exhorts you to be, then it will do you little good to be in the right location or to have the right vocation.

And next, the specific. What does God want you to do specifically with your life? With many of these choices, the answer is, it doesn't matter; it is not a moral decision. God doesn't have any preference whether you want to be an engineer or a doctor. In a very real way, it doesn't matter whether you live in Omaha or San Francisco, or whether you work at Hewlett Packard or IBM. It simply depends on your preference. If it pleases you, then God is pleased. What really matters to God is that you are being the right kind of person where you are — growing in faith and love — rather than your thinking the right circumstances will make all the pieces of the puzzle fit into place. There is no perfect job, no perfect place to live, no perfect spouse. These things will not make your life "right." The job doesn't make you; you in Christ make the job. Marriage doesn't make your life right; you in Christ make the marriage right. If you are not the type of person you think you should be here in Cupertino, then you will be the same person in Seattle. There is a right way to live in relationship to God and to the world. This is God's primary will for your life. As long as you have that as your goal, then everything else will follow.

But this is not quite enough, is it? We face many difficult decisions on this road of faith. These decisions are important to us. We need some guidelines by which we can feel confident about God's specific will in our lives. Let me mention six:

1. *God does not give us road signs as much as he gives us a guide.* Which would you rather have? A map or a guide? God is a guide. The psalms are a wonderful source of help and encouragement here. For example, Psalm 32:8 says: "I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go, I will counsel you with My eye upon you." Psalm 37:23-24 says: "The steps of a man are established by the LORD; and

He delights in his way. When he falls, he shall not be hurled headlong; because the LORD is the One who holds his hand." Hear the encouraging words of Psalm 48:14, "For such is God, our God forever and ever; he will guide us until death." And Isaiah 58:11, "And the LORD will continually guide you, and satisfy your desire in scorched places, and give strength to your bones; and you will be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water whose waters do not fail."

When Jesus told the disciples that he was going to prepare a place for them, Thomas said, "Lord, we do not know where You are going. How do we know the way?" Jesus said to him: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me" (John 14:5-6). Discovering the will of God is not a mechanical process. Discovering God's specific will for our lives is the means by which we get to know the Guide — to know God and to grow in our faith in him.

2. *Guidance is sought and confirmed though prayer.* Our usual way of making a decision is to check for road signs and begin to consult with other people. However, if we really want to know where God wants us, then we need to first ask him. The book of James says, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach" (James 1:5). At times, the last thing we do is pray about a decision. But, James continues, "You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives" (4:2-3).

Douglas Webster, in his book, *Finding Spiritual Direction*, writes:

We no longer pray for wisdom, we pay for advice...In a busy world of hyperactivity, prayer seems dysfunctional, unproductive, a waste of time. We ought to be out there doing something. But it all amounts to chasing the wind...The wisdom required to live in the world cannot be bought, earned or invented. The wisdom of God is given by God and must be asked for. This does not mean that when we pray, everything will be placed in order and we'll feel great. Prayer does not tidy up life and arrange it in labeled file folders. It focuses and intensifies life. Prayer orients our thinking, directs our actions and prepares us for God's work. Through prayer I am brought face to face with my Creator. Prayer centers my life in the will and work of the living God. Instead of grabbing, clutching and scratching, I receive God's understanding of how to live in a world unlivable without him.

When we seek guidance, what we are really looking for are deep, internal convictions. But road signs don't often yield this result. Rather, these convictions are arrived at by entering into prayer, by talking to the Guide, by being humble and quiet. The best guidance gives us deep confidence, deep peace, deep assurance.

A few years ago, my family and I were considering a ministry opportunity in Kansas City. All the road signs pointed toward moving. For one thing, we had relatives living near the city. That was a plus. We had our house for sale and were having trouble selling it. We had a marvelous time at the interview, and we loved the city. But as my wife and I prayed together, we became convinced that this was not where God wanted us. Had we looked at the "road signs" we would have been led astray. Subsequent events have led us to believe that we made a good decision in remaining on in this area. What we needed was a deep conviction, and we found this through prayer.

3. *Guidance may or may not be confirmed by circumstances.* When we make a decision, we usually wait to see how things will pan out. If the results are favorable, then we think we made the right decision, that we are in the will of God. But God does not necessarily view favorable circumstances as a

sign of success. Sometimes good decisions will yield good things, and sometimes the circumstances may not go the way we envisioned. But this does not mean we missed out on God's will. The job may be satisfying, but we have a terrible boss. The boss may be great, but we don't like the work. The neighborhood may be just right, but the neighbors are too noisy. Our spouse may not be the kind of person we thought. These things do not mean it is the wrong job, the wrong neighborhood, the wrong spouse. This is why we need deep internal convictions of how God is leading us. If we do not have these convictions, then we will continually second-guess ourselves if things do not go well according to our estimation.

Stuart and Jill Briscoe, that delightful English couple, were called by God to take up a ministry in Milwaukee a number of years ago. When they applied for visas, however, they were refused, and they had to remain in England for another year. They finally got to Milwaukee, but people thought, based on the circumstances, that they had missed out on God's will. The Briscos needed the deep conviction of their hearts to help them weather that storm.

4. Guidance is communicated through the desires that God gives us. God doesn't want us to be miserable. We must be willing to follow him, to do whatever he wants — and he wants to give us the desires of our hearts. We can be assured that he loves us. And if we really want to do something, it doesn't necessarily follow that God will be against it. The psalmist says, "He will fulfill the desire of those who fear Him; He will also hear their cry and will save them."

5. Guidance is confirmed through the counsel of other believers. Even though we arrive at deep convictions, we do not live in a vacuum; we live in a community. And there is a great deal of wisdom that comes through the counsel of others. Our family knows us well and they can help us sort through our motivation. Friends in the body who have been through similar things can give us valuable insights. Once we arrive at some convictions, therefore, it is wise to check them out with people we trust. If no one shares our convictions, then we would do well to rethink everything.

6. God's will is often very logical. If it makes sense, if it is logical, then there is a good chance that God is in it. God's will is not wild and bizarre; it is not something that is arrived out through hocus-pocus. At times we will have to make decisions and we will have no clear-cut choice. But God has given us a mind. We can list the pros and cons, and ask him to direct us. Decide what to do, based upon logic, then move out and trust God. Flipping a coin or pointing to a verse is illogical. And then, after we have made a decision, we should trust God for what follows. He cannot work if we don't trust him. He will open and close doors as he desires. So make a decision, go with it, and then see what God does.

Perhaps these principles have raised some questions in your minds. I hope I may have stimulated you to discuss and share with each other the ways that God has led you on your own personal journey of faith. We could easily add to this list, and there are many exceptions to these guidelines. With God, you can never say "always." God is not always logical. At times he calls us to do things contrary to our desires. But we would be wise to work along these guidelines most of the time.

Now let us sharpen our focus a little. Let us not leave here merely thinking about our jobs, our neighborhoods, etc. We need to relate to God on this issue of finding his will. As I study Gideon's journey of faith, two thoughts immediately

come to mind. First, the process of the journey is essential. Gideon has begun his own journey of faith: faith is the destination, but what he is learning is that the process is key. The process is the means by which we get to the destination, the means by which we come to know and trust the Guide, the means by which we acquire the desired faith. We are not on a scavenger hunt acquiring information about God. We are here to acquire skills in faith itself. The process cannot be bypassed.

When I was in college, I travelled with some fellow-students to Miami for the Orange Bowl one year. One leg of the journey was from New Orleans to Miami, and we travelled all day and night in order to arrive in time. I love to drive long distances, but during the day everybody seemed eager to drive, so I held back. I knew they would tire. When night fell, one by one they slacked off and went to sleep. That was when I took the wheel. I drove all night, arriving in Miami just as the sun came up. I loved that journey. I loved the process of driving all night to get to our destination. The other guys just wanted to get to our destination; I wanted the process.

Our journey in faith is not a short, weekend jog. We are in this for the long haul. Many decisions must be made. The road is not always well-marked. There are not many 9-foot, green forks in the road. But we need to enter into the process, to experience it and allow it to build faith in our lives. The destination is not easily achieved. Faith is not as easy to come by as fast food. We can't get it at the drive-up window. We can't microwave it. Everyone is in a hurry, and we, too, want shortcuts and quick answers. We are liable to fall prey to what one writer describes as "today's passion for the immediate and the casual." We are attracted to any spiritual leader who might help us. But when we do this, we only get in the way of what God is doing. Our marriage may be difficult, our job may be painful, our family circumstances trying, the unwanted divorce or separation might be gut-wrenching, the lack of finances might be worrisome, but these are often the roads we have to travel to learn faith. If we insist on throwing out fleeces, we reduce the need for a deep, personal faith.

Secondly, God is very patient. How did he respond to Gideon? Verse 40 says, "And God did so that night." God responded with patience. Gideon was short on faith. He was fearful, weak and confused, and he put God to the test, but God reassured him. God is understanding.

God is patient with slow learners. And when it comes to faith, most of us are slow learners. All summer long while I was on sabbatical, as I thought through my relationship with God, this theme has been on my mind. I talk a lot about faith, but I don't "do" it very well.

God is well aware of the fact that our journey of faith is hard work. It is long, and often painful. He knows that at times we would like some positive proof along the way that we are headed in the right direction. He knows that we are fearful and timid at times, and yet he is patient with us. He loves us. If we ask him to do some little thing for us today to show us that we are headed in the right direction, he will respond. This is the wonderful thing about God. He is our loving heavenly Father.

So we begin our journey of faith looking for road signs. May God grant us grace to trust the Guide more than the signs; to acquire faith in him, not just information about him, on our journey.

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