

Personal & Corporate Guidance

Oct. 22, 2023

Series - *A Church That Prays: Prayer in the Book of Acts*

In some ways, it seems like yesterday to me. But really, it was quite a long time ago.

We had made it through Y2K unscathed, but the dot com bubble had burst. And who could ever forget 9-11? Distressed jeans were in style, and the “Rachel” haircut was all the rage.

Now, if you’re sitting there asking yourself questions like, “What’s Y2K?” and “Who’s Rachel and why should I care about her haircut?” then chances are, you’re under a certain age.

But if you’re old enough, you know that the era I’m talking about is the early 2000’s. One evening back then, the board of our young church was meeting in Dorothy and Mike Pang’s living room. The pastoral staff— at that time just Andrew and myself— had joined them. Our common goal? To seek God’s guidance together in prayer.

Specifically, we were seeking God’s long-term vision for the church in terms of facilities. Would we indefinitely remain a mobile church meeting in rented facilities, like we were at the time? Would we become a house church network gathering mainly in people’s homes? Or, would God have us build our own building in due time?

The guidance God gave us as a leadership team that evening in the late 90’s would eventually take tangible form in the building we’re in right now—Cornerstone Centre: A community centre style church facility designed to serve and bless not only this congregation, but the entire community, in Jesus’ name.

I’m sure that every one of us who was at that leadership meeting all those years ago would agree: God definitely gave Cornerstone some very clear guidance that night.

Of course, God not only gives corporate guidance for whole churches. He also gives personal guidance to those who follow Jesus.

Let’s go back in time again, but not quite as far. Let’s go back to 2011— 12 years ago.

Aren’t you supposed to be going to China?

That’s what God said to me, not audibly, but clearly and distinctly, in my spirit.

I was heading back to the church office after a lunch meeting, and as I drove, I prayed (eyes open, of course). I was asking God whether or not I should be part of an upcoming mission

trip to Nicaragua. You see, I was trying to put into practice something I had been learning—that if you ask God specific questions about what he wants you to do, he'll often respond with a specific word of guidance— provided you get quiet enough to hear the “still small” voice of his Spirit, and you have a heart willing to obey whatever he says.

“Shall I go to Nicaragua, Lord?” I prayed that afternoon as I drove along Highway 7. And that's when I distinctly heard the Holy Spirit's whisper in my heart:

Aren't you supposed to be going to China?

Long story short, I told God I was willing to go if that's what he really wanted. I talked to my wife Jan and to Pastor Andrew about it— because community affirmation is an important factor in confirming the authenticity of such whispers. And I ended up travelling to northwest China to visit a Cornerstone member who was serving long-term in that region.

I was able to minister some much-needed spiritual refreshment to a number of hard-working expat Christian leaders in the area. And in the process, I was given the privilege of observing the Lord's work in a part of the world that is spiritually dark and oppressive in some ways, and yet beautiful and breathtaking in others. A whole new world opened up to me, because God had spoken his guidance into my life.

Have you ever received God's specific guidance and direction? Could you use his guidance right now? How do we go about seeking God's guidance, whether personally, or as a family, church leadership team, or congregation?

Scripture is an essential piece of the puzzle, of course. As the Bible says in Psalm 119:

Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path.¹

God is never going to guide us in ways that contradict what he has already revealed in his written Word. But having said that, you're not going to find chapter and verse that tell you to build a community centre style church facility as opposed to other options. And you won't find chapter and verse that tell you to go to China rather than Nicaragua. Scripture is foundational for discerning God's guidance. But that doesn't mean scripture speaks directly and specifically to each and every decision you'll ever face.

That's why scripture itself points clearly to the fact that **prayer is at the heart of receiving God's guidance.**

¹ Psalm 105:15 (NIV)

That's what we're going to talk about this morning, as we continue in our series *A Church that Prays*, which is all about prayer in the New Testament book of Acts.

I've structured this message into two main parts. First, we'll survey various texts from the book of Acts on prayer and divine guidance. Second, we'll sum up a few key principles on the subject. Then, I'll tell you about a take-home guide sheet that I'll be making available after service, to help you put what we've been learning into practice.

Let's get started by surveying some texts in Acts that highlight the connection between prayer and divine guidance.

I'll remind you that the first Christians lived lives that were saturated with prayer. We read in Acts 2 that:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.²

They were *devoted* to prayer.

Indeed, as we've seen throughout this series, prayer is a major theme throughout Acts. Bible scholars often refer to Acts as something of a template for what a Holy Spirit-filled church looks like. If that's the case, then there's no doubt that God wants every church—including this one—and every believer—including you and me—to be devoted to prayer.

And it's when we're devoted to prayer that we find ourselves in the best position to receive God's guidance. Indeed, throughout Acts, prayer and the reception of God's guidance are intimately linked together.

For example, in Acts chapter 1, the believers pray for God to show them who should replace Judas as the twelfth apostle, and God reveals that Matthias is the person for the job.³

In Acts chapter 8, we read of a believer named Philip who receives specific guidance from an angel of the Lord to travel down a certain desert road. Philip does so, and on that road he sees a chariot. The text says that:

² Acts 2:42 (NIV)

³ See Acts 1:12-26

The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”⁴

Why such specific guidance? Well, a royal Ethiopian official happened to be sitting in that chariot, trying to make sense of scripture. Philip took this opportunity to lead him to faith in Jesus, and the man was baptized by the roadside that very day.⁵

While this account doesn’t mention prayer explicitly, it was clearly integral to this encounter. How so? Well, prayer is meant to be a two-way conversation. It’s not only about speaking *to* God. It’s also about learning to *listen* to what God has to say to us. And as we see in this passage, Philip clearly walked in *conversational relationship* with God. He was a person of prayer, which is why he was ready to hear and respond to such specific guidance from God— to the eternal benefit of the Ethiopian official, and to the continent of Africa as it first received the gospel of Jesus.

Another place in Acts where we see the connection between prayer and divine guidance is chapter 13. It says of a group of church leaders in Antioch that:

While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.⁶

Here again, we see that specific guidance from God is given in a context of prayer.

There are other examples I could point to, but the connection between divine guidance and prayer is especially evident in the amazing story of Cornelius and Peter in Acts chapters 10-11. There was this Gentile (or non-Jewish) man named Cornelius, a centurion in the Roman army. Acts 10 tells us that:

He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need, and prayed to God regularly.⁷

Cornelius and his family were part of a group of people known as *God-fearers*— a term used to describe non-Jews who believed in and revered the God of the Jews. Even though Cornelius wasn’t yet a follower of Jesus, he prayed regularly to the one true God, as best as he understood him at the time. And God honoured that, because:

⁴ Acts 8:29 (NIV)

⁵ See Acts 8:26-40

⁶ Acts 13:2-3 (NIV)

⁷ Acts 10:2 (NIV)

One day, at about three in the afternoon [which was a customary hour of prayer—so Cornelius was praying when] he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, “Cornelius!”

Cornelius stared at him in fear. “What is it, Lord?” he asked.

The angel answered, “Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea.”⁸

Do you notice how the text highlights the connection between prayer and the guidance Cornelius gets from God? The same kind of connection pops up again and again as the passage continues to unfold.

In response to the vision, Cornelius sends some servants to Joppa to find Peter. Then, we read that:

About noon the following day, as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray.⁹

While Peter is praying, he has a vision of a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners. It contained all kinds of birds and animals, and a voice told him, “Get up Peter. Kill and eat.”

“Say what?” thinks Peter. “I’m a good Jew, and I’ve never eaten a non-kosher animal before in my life!”

The voice addresses Peter a second time: “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

And Peter has this same vision three times in a row.¹⁰

Then, in verse 17 we read that:

⁸ Acts 10:3-6 (NIV)

⁹ Acts 10:9 (NIV)

¹⁰ See Acts 10:10-16

While Peter was still wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent from Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate. They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there. While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."¹¹

Peter responds to this divine guidance, and goes downstairs to welcome them inside, which is astonishing. Why? Because Jews weren't supposed to extend hospitality to Gentiles. But God had been guiding Peter during his time of prayer, helping him to see that in Jesus, *all* people are welcome into God's family.

The next day Peter travels with his guests to Cornelius' home. When they arrive, Peter goes right inside. Again, astonishing. Because Jews weren't supposed to visit Gentile homes. Why did Peter go in? Because of the divine guidance he had received when he was praying. He explains:

But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection.¹²

Then Cornelius tells Peter his side of the story:

Three days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly, a man in shining clothes stood before me and said, "Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea. I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us."¹³

The story goes on to describe how Peter shares the good news of Jesus with Cornelius and all those gathered in his home. While Peter is still speaking, the Holy Spirit comes upon this house full of gentiles, and they all end up being baptized as followers of Jesus.

Because Peter and Cornelius obeyed the guidance they received from God in prayer, the Christian church would soon enfold people of all cultures, races, nations, and backgrounds.

¹¹ Acts 10:17-20

¹² Acts 10:29a

¹³ Acts 10:30-33

From that moment onwards, Christianity ceased to be a Jewish movement, and became a worldwide movement.

We see in this passage, and the others we have surveyed, that Luke, the author of Acts, has been very intentional in showing us, again and again, that **prayer is at the heart of receiving God's guidance.**

That's not to say that prayer is the *only* factor in receiving God's guidance. There are other factors, too—important factors. But Luke has taken pains to show us that prayer is a most vital factor, a central factor.

With this in mind, we can move on to sum up a handful of basic principles related to prayer and divine guidance. The first principle is to:

1. Be people of prayer.

As I mentioned before, God's guidance flows best when we are committed to being people of prayer. We don't just pray when we need guidance. Rather, prayer is to be a vital part of our daily lives. In Acts, the church was a praying church. And the people in the texts we surveyed were praying people. Because of this, they were primed and ready to hear what God had to say to them.

How is *your* daily prayer life? Because you need to be growing as a person of prayer if you want to dependably receive God's guidance. For prayer resources to help you in your daily prayer life, check out our prayer page at www.cornerstonechurch.ca/prayer.

2. Believe that God speaks today.

To be in a position to receive God's guidance through prayer, we have to believe and expect that God still speaks to his people.

We talked about how prayer is meant to be a 2-way conversation. We speak to God, and God speaks to us. But some Christians today believe that God no longer speaks to his people directly, personally, and specifically as he did in Bible times. Today, God only speaks through the Bible itself, some say. And of course, as I said earlier, the Bible *is* the bedrock, the foundation. We can immediately reject any so-called guidance that contradicts scripture. But does that mean the Bible is the *only* way God speaks to his people today?

On the contrary, both the Old and New Testaments are full of stories of God speaking very personally and directly to his people, giving them very specific guidance, like we saw today in the book of Acts. Are those stories just *exceptions* to the way God usually works? Because there are Christians who believe that— that the Bible is this amazing set of stories about

how God *used* to speak to his people— how God *used* to act in the world. But think about that for a second. Does it make sense that God would give us a book of exceptions? That would be like someone giving you a map of Paris when you're trying to make your way through London. It would be like giving you an owner's manual for a Toyota when you drive a Chevy. Is the Bible a book of *exceptions*?

Or is it better to see the Bible, at least in many ways, as a book of *examples*? Examples of how people heard from God in this situation and that—examples that we can learn from when it comes to hearing God's guiding voice for us today.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd, we read in John chapter 10, and we are his sheep. He says that his sheep follow him because they hear and know his *voice*—his *guiding* voice.¹⁴ So we need to grow in the conviction that by his Spirit, the Good Shepherd still speaks to his sheep today. The third principle is that:

3. God's guidance often flows in the direction of His mission.

God's ultimate mission is to restore this fallen world through Jesus Christ. As God's people, we are agents of God's mission. Every example of divine guidance in the book of Acts served to move God's mission forward in the world.

Some of the most vivid experiences I've had of receiving God's specific guidance had to do with the advancement of God's mission in this world. Like when the Holy Spirit directed our leadership team to build a community centre style church facility. Or like when the Holy Spirit sent me on a mission to China. The fourth and principle is to:

4. Seek community affirmation.

The community of God's people—other Christians—often play an important role in helping us discern whether we're hearing God's guiding voice faithfully. Remember, when I sensed that the Spirit said to me, "Aren't you supposed to be going to China?" Well, I didn't just jump on the next flight to China. I talked to my wife about it. I talked to Pastor Andrew about it. And their affirmation added a sense of confidence that I had actually heard God's voice faithfully.

When our late 90's leadership team sensed God was guiding us to build a community centre style church facility, we had prayed on our own before the meeting as well as together during the meeting. And we got quiet and tried to dial into what God's Spirit might

¹⁴ See John 10:1-18 (NIV)

be saying to us. We then compared notes, and there was this deep agreement among us. We each felt that God was guiding us in the same way, and this gave us a real sense of confirmation and confidence that we had truly heard the Spirit's guiding voice for Cornerstone. In the months that followed there was further community affirmation when the whole congregation embraced the vision.

Remember the story about Cornelius and Peter, when the first Gentiles became followers of Jesus? Well, a few chapters later in Acts 15, a council of Christian leaders affirms the inclusion of non-Jews in the church. In doing so, they confirmed the guiding vision Peter had received when he was praying on the rooftop in Joppa. So right there in Acts, we see this principle of community confirmation in action.

When you believe God is speaking his guidance to you in a personal way, a best practice is to run it by 2 or 3 fellow believers who know you well, who have a good knowledge of scripture, and who are not afraid to speak into your life with grace and truth. Because I believe that what Proverbs applies to God's people as a whole also applies to each of us personally:

Where there is no counsel, the people fall;
But in the multitude of counselors there is safety. ¹⁵

Spiritual direction is a form of one-on-one community that can help train the ears of your heart to tune into the voice of God (www.cornerstonechurch.ca/spiritualdirection). For years now, I've been regularly seeing a spiritual director, who comes alongside me to help me listen to what Jesus, my Good Shepherd, is saying to me. It's a vital aspect of my walk with Jesus.

If you're interested to learn more about spiritual direction, you can check out the link you see on the screen.

So those are some basic principles related to receiving divine guidance in prayer. Furthermore, I have prepared a guide sheet. It explains the following practical methods and tips:

1. It takes practice. (Learning to hear God's voice doesn't happen overnight.)
2. Quiet yourself in God's presence.
3. Prepare to surrender. (Be willing to obey, whatever guidance God gives you.)
4. Ask God specific questions. Start with small things.

¹⁵ Proverbs 11:14 (NKJV)

5. "Try on" different answers.
6. No pressure.
7. Pay attention to feelings of consolation and desolation.
8. Scripture check!
9. Seek community affirmation.
10. Take action or wait as needed.

To read more about these practical methods and tips, please help yourself to a guide sheet on your way out today, or download one online at www.cornerstonechurch.ca/joy.

Okay. I began this message by sharing two stories about prayer and divine guidance. I'd like to close with one more.

About 5 years ago, my daughter Nicole was going through a medical mystery that was really affecting their life. It was incredibly tough, for her obviously, and also for Jan and me as parents, and for our two boys as well. One day, as I was praying earnestly for Nicole, crying out for God's help and guidance about her situation, I asked the Lord:

Is there anything you want us to know? Is there anything we need to do?

I sensed the Holy Spirit whisper in response, clearly and distinctly these words:

Pray and watch. I am working.

I went and wrote those exact words on the whiteboard in my home office.

I can't tell you how much that whisper of divine guidance meant to me during the long and difficult weeks that followed.

We still didn't have any answers about Nicole's distressing medical situation, but at least I knew what to do in the meantime. I was to pray and watch. And the Holy Spirit was kind enough to let me know that God was working in this, somehow.

We really went after the prayer part of the guidance. We got hundreds of people praying for Nicole— including so many of you in this church family— thank you for your prayers!

Because eventually, through an incredible series of events, Nicole ended up in just the right place at just the right time not on one but two separate occasions, with the result that she got a clear diagnosis and was accepted into a highly specialized pilot treatment program that has made all the difference in her life, all praise and thanks be to God.

Since then, Nicole has faced some new medical challenges that have been perhaps even more difficult, but I've continued to cling to the word of divine guidance I received five years ago: *Pray and watch. I am working.*

And God has been. Oh, how we've seen him move! Oh, how faithful and kind he has been! Take me for coffee sometime, and I'll tell you the rest of the story.

But I can't convey how grateful I am for that word of divine guidance I got that day, and the others that God so kindly granted to me throughout my life as I've prayed.

What guidance might God want to impart to you through prayer? I wonder if God is inviting you to experiment with the guide sheet, and see what guidance he might have for you?

I am the Good Shepherd, says Jesus, and my sheep know my voice. Let's learn to listen and tune into his voice, amen?

Let's pray...