

Chapter 30

Where do we go from here?

The question of personal guidance is one that often causes concern to young believers, especially for those thinking about a career or simply looking for work. Asking where God wants me to go is perhaps the wrong question, but to attend to how he wants me to live can open up the next step of his plan for a committed life. He cares for each of his followers individually as well as lovingly linking them together to be his body on earth. Although God will have a different outcome in mind and use different ways of guidance for different people, it can still be encouraging to hear someone else's story.

Rani's story

A few years ago, I attended a congress in Singapore, organised by ICMDA. Many hundreds of people were there, mostly from countries in that region of the world. We met for prayer before breakfast and one morning I felt urged to pray for any at the congress who were burdened but finding it hard to find someone free to listen to them among the many meetings, greetings and languages going on around them. Sometimes God directs us to answer our own prayers and at breakfast I met an Indonesian medical student who told me how troubled he was about his brother. He was a law student, vainly trying to earn money for food and fees by peddling a rickshaw bicycle and I promised to look for funding when back at home. Eventually that chapter would end happily, but in Singapore I also had the privilege of hearing Rani's own story and I have used italics for the pointers God used as he directed his way. Some of them are likely to apply to our own very different circumstances.

Both Rani and his older brother came from a poor but loving Christian family and lived in a village fifteen hours' walk from the nearest bus stop. Somehow their widowed father supported the boys' attendance at the local school where, on the walls of his simple classroom, young Rani saw pictures of nurses and doctors and was filled with an

unshakeable longing to become a doctor. He imagined bringing medical aid back to his remote people who at that time had none. This became a *conviction*, although *common sense* might have said that there would never be enough money for such costly training. Yet early in life he had been taught the verse, 'With God all things are possible',¹ and believed that it was from a completely trustworthy God that this desire had come, and he would keep his word.² Still a child, Rani put the dream into the hands of this wonderful God and studied as hard as he could.

Rani's father died and with him the hope of more money, but his son's *commitment* still held, based as it was on trust in God's promise. As a *consequence*, another family member offered to pay for him to train as a nurse. Although his hope of studying medicine seemed to have met a *closed door*, he set off on the difficult journey to another island and there enrolled in a nurses' training school. It was not very long before one crisis followed another. The promised cash supply failed, he took on poorly paid jobs but became too sick and weak to work, or even to buy food. Yet *God's care continued*. Unknown to him, some local missionaries noticed the absence of the conscientious Christian sweeper in the market place so asked others about him.

The missionaries were told that Rani was sick, starving and dying. At this major *crisis* in his life, God prompted those *concerned Christian friends* to find him, nurse him and give him a job and a home as their church caretaker. When his health improved one of his new friends, hearing of the interrupted training, asked him what he had really hoped to do. His *circumstances* had now changed so much that he very shyly shared his old longing to be a doctor. The missionaries prayed about it, became assured by the Holy Spirit through the word of God that although not rich themselves they had been given enough to be generous³ and offered to pay for him to go to medical school. It was during those undergraduate years that we met in Singapore and I heard his story and shared his gratitude to the God who was meeting all his needs.⁴

At that time this still left the problem of his brother because Rani had very honourably felt that the money given to him by the missionaries had been dedicated for his use and he was not to share it. Throughout

his personal difficulties he had been learning more of the faithfulness of God, and encouraged his brother in that same trust. It was later very moving to hear how the two of them had knelt on their pillows and wept together as they thanked God for the way he finally honoured their faith by enabling the graduation of a young law student and later his medical student brother.

Rani and I met again at another ICMDA conference in Taipei, after his own graduation and just before his marriage to a Christian midwife. Today they and their children live over a clinic in the home they rebuilt after an earthquake. It is close to the remote area where his journey of faith had begun as he trusted God with a small boy's longing to help his own people. They *continue* to look to God for his wisdom and help with many daily problems, and have set up several prayer meetings in their district. Rani does not tire of saying, 'He is the God who understands his children's needs and, in his time, answers prayers. See what God has done in my life. If he can do it for me he will do it for you, too. Whatever the problem you face, he is the God who is always there and never leaves you.'

In the last chapter, we considered George Muller's guidelines when seeking God's will and they broadly match the detailed steps that finally led Rani to the place of God's choice for him. We, too, may confidently expect to find help from the same Lord as we look for his signposts on our way. Each journey will be different, though our goal will be the same- to glorify our God.

Commitment

The first essential is to commit our lives into God's hands and be willing to follow wherever he leads whatever the difficulties. Whether he takes us to work humbly at the back of beyond or to the top of our chosen profession, or even through a time of unemployment, is all up to him. He gave us our gifts in the first place, and will not waste them. Like Rani, we may eventually find ourselves doing exactly the work we had wanted to do, or instead undergo a surprising change of direction. Graduates undecided about which way to go may find help from counsellors, both secular and Christian, or there are a number of

helpful books available with various suggestions, including the idea of trying out short term service overseas.

A short term commitment to work overseas may influence longer term plans. Not all our activities involve such major decisions and twice the simple selection of which petrol station to use has led me to unexpected but important encounters. More urgently, a clinician may have to make a quick decision and shoots up an arrow prayer for guidance about what to do or say and only later realises that wisdom had been given.

A clear call

An unexpected telephone can open a new door. This is how I was invited to go to Albania ('as soon as possible'!) to help the desperately deprived children there. That previously closed country had just opened up its secrets to the outside world. Despite an inner 'Yes!' it was better, as Muller advised, to be sure that this was a call from God. Instead of reacting impulsively, it is better to pause prayerfully and see whether enthusiasm grows warmer or cooler. This can be one of the ways that his Spirit leads.

Common sense

God does not write messages in the sky to tell us what to do for each step of our way. By using what has been called 'sanctified common sense' some jobs will be out of bounds for any Christian, or we may lack the quick wits essential for, say, work with accidents and emergencies. Our gifts may be used better in a particular way, such as preventive medicine, administration or teaching. As Rani's story shows, God can remove obstacles in the path and whether or not doors open on all that we had hoped for, he still cares about his trainees as they are given lessons in trust.

Conviction

Our assurance of God's leading grows as we rely on his promises. By walking with him and reading his word, his Holy Spirit will put some of his promises into our memory bank to be recalled when faith

is tested, or to act as signposts in times of uncertainty. In a period of doubt, we may read in our daily reading, 'Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him and he will make your paths straight.'⁵ If about to take an important decision, it is so reassuring to read a word such as, 'The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land.'⁶ Even when too hard pressed or unwell for much reading, a stored verse may come to mind or the memory be triggered in some other way, acting as God's personal word given through his Spirit.

Muller spoke of the importance of this double leading, the word illuminated by the Spirit and the Spirit's nudge confirmed by the word. Feelings alone are a poor guide but, deeper than both natural anxiety and enthusiasm, we can know the stability of being anchored in God and the promises he sometimes underlines as we read them.

Consequences

Having committed our way to God, ready to trust his word and will, we can expect him to act. He is not in the same hurry as we may be, but in his time he will honour our faith. A friend of mine had finished his training as a general practitioner but, about to marry, no practice had yet accepted him and the young couple did not know where to look for a home but trusted God completely. At the last minute, they were amazed to be offered a practice and a home, both of them accommodated in an English castle! God's provision is sometimes far above all we could ask or imagine.⁷ What a unique wedding present!

Closed doors

When we have decided on a particular career, our work will often proceed along an expected pathway, whether it be medical, educational or theological training. The course set is often the direction we will keep although sometimes we start to feel an uneasy sense that it is time to move. Perhaps a job or promotion we had hoped for went to someone else, or we find ourselves out of work. An illness arises in our immediate circle or knocks us sideways and it is difficult to know what to do.

The end result is the same – our set path has come unset. Some doctors have a growing conviction that they are being called out of medical practice to give priority to people's spiritual needs, or to concentrate on work for social justice. It is so helpful at times of uncertainty to look back along the way and be assured with the words of an old hymn that 'he who has led us hitherto will guide us all our journeys through' and will never leave or forsake us.⁸ Past experience can fortify future hope.

Coincidences need confirmation

At times of uncertainty we can be tempted to see coincidences as God's way of directing our paths, as indeed they can be, but they can also be organised by the enemy of our souls. He is ever ready to try to distract, dazzle or destroy us.^{9,10} Perhaps a better way to view a coincidence is as a wake-up call to be prayed over, perhaps with a sympathetic friend.

I had already been looking at more senior jobs in Britain when three letters arrived in one day, all suggesting that I look at a post in Uganda. I had recently learned that coincidences can happen without necessarily being God's guidance, so I looked for his *confirmation* or otherwise that this was from him. In my daily Bible reading I also took up a neglected little book of selected verses (*Daily Light*) and that particular day there were so many of 'my' verses, including those quoted earlier, that the Spirit within me said 'This is the way!' (Many can testify to that unmistakable nudge as a verse lights up, so different from mere wishful thinking as it is not always pointing to something that we would have chosen.) I knew little about the country then but the name 'Uganda' kept surfacing in all kinds of connections. Surprisingly, having looked for guidance, instead of being excited I began to feel very apprehensive. Then a visiting speaker preached on Joshua's commission before he entered new territory. In the version that the preacher used the message came to me as well as to Joshua, saying, 'Don't be frightened!'¹¹ What could I do after that! The initial coincidence had been unmistakably confirmed by signs following and I applied for the post.

Crossroads and crosswinds

When facing a major decision, the understanding and prayers of *Christian friends* can be more important than we always realise. They, or our senior colleagues, may introduce *contacts* who offer experience or advice about this or alternative options. Yet a time of uncertainty may also be a reminder to go back to renewed and honest tuning in to God's word and Spirit. Are we thinking of giving up the present position because it is harder than expected, or do we just want a change? If we believe that this was clearly God's placement from the start he will help us to complete it.¹² If it is time for a move this will also be made clear.

At times it can still be hard to go forward, especially when crosswinds arise that could take us off course. The anchor of that previous confirmation will then hold us in the face of what could be enemy action trying to hold us back. After all that build-up of presumed leading towards the post in Uganda – I did not get it! It took many months for the Ugandan authorities to explain a misunderstanding and say that the post was still on offer. By now my enthusiasm had cooled and different options had come up, but that past leading had been too clear to put aside. Trust can grow through its testing, and at such times God seems particularly kind with encouragements to stay obedient and hold on to him, even should we then head for the unknown land, as I did, on dragging feet. He had other important lessons to teach me there.

A strange commission

Centuries ago, a rich landowner asked his trusted servant to set off with a party of a few men and ten camels to make a return journey of between eight and nine hundred miles across unknown territory, riding on camelback. He was to find a special girl that he had never met in his life and whose name he did not know and bring her back to marry his master's son. It is not surprising that he asked a hesitant, 'What if...?' before obediently setting off on this extraordinary journey.

Amazingly, he eventually found and identified a young woman with the right ancestry, and she invited him to stay with her family, taking all his camels and companions with him. Her parents welcomed him and gratefully received the many gifts he had taken and, overnight, with her father's blessing the girl agreed to leave home. No doubt it was with some excitement and perhaps a little apprehension that she set off with the party and headed for the unknown. She put her faith in the messenger and his story, and also trusted his God as she faced the prospect before her. When you are able, read the whole account in Genesis 24.

It is worth noting the number of times that Abraham's servant, Eleazar, prayed for guidance. He did his share in keeping a close lookout for God's signals, faithfully given, assuring him that he was on the right path. The journey had started with his commitment, in obedience to his master, to set out in the confidence that God would direct him, and ended with a celebration of praise that he had so wonderfully crowned the journey with success. It is of even greater significance to us that the bridegroom waiting patiently for his unknown bride was Abraham's God-given son Isaac.

Together they would become ancestors of Jesus, who is called Christ.¹³ Behind the mini-plan of Genesis 24 was a master plan, to be fulfilled by an even more remarkable journey as God's own Son came from heaven to earth to seek and to save us, offering amazing gifts to those who receive him. He promised that one day he will come again to take those who love him back to his home.¹⁴ What a wonderful destination, the greeting from our Lord Jesus in his unimaginable glory far outweighing any hardship we might have experienced on the way there.¹⁵

Sometimes our mini-plans meet unexpected delays or disappointments, but God's overall plan is to bring about something much greater, often not at all clear to us at the time. He delights in teaching us to have more trust in him and then he honours that trust. The retrospectroscope is a wonderful instrument for illuminating his wise and loving ways. In his summing up Eleazar said, 'As for me, the Lord has led me on the journey...'¹⁶

As we finally look back after years of commitment to that same Lord, may we each be able to echo his words, sharing in praise and thanks to God for his faithfulness, yesterday, today, and for evermore.¹⁷

For further thought

- Are you willing to go wherever God may take you?
- Did you start off like that but have now lost your way?
- There is a way back – and then forward again. Trust him!

Further resources

- Jensen PD with Payne T. *Guidance and the voice of God*. Kingston: NSW Australia: Mathias Media, 2005
- Eccles S, Sanders S (eds). *So you want to be a brain surgeon? (3rd edition)*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009
- Lavy V. *Short-term medical work*. London: Christian Medical Fellowship, 2013.

References

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|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. Matthew 19:26 | 10. 2 Corinthians 11:14-15 |
| 2. Psalm 37:4 | 11. Joshua 1:9 |
| 3. 2 Corinthians 9:11-14 | 12. Philippians 1:6 |
| 4. Philippians 4:19 | 13. Matthew 1:2, 16 |
| 5. Proverbs 3:5-6 | 14. John 14:1-3 |
| 6. Isaiah 58:11 | 15. 2 Corinthians 4:14, 16-18 |
| 7. Ephesians 3:20 | 16. Genesis 24:27 |
| 8. Deuteronomy 31:6 | 17. Hebrews 13:8 |
| 9. 1 Peter 5:8 | |

