**ACTS chapters 5-16 God’s Guidance in the early church.**

Have you ever come across someone who has said to you “God told me to do such & such”? Or, “God told me *you* should do such & such?” If so, I wonder how that sat with you?

When I was in year 11 at high school, the young man I was going out with at the time (who was a little older than me) told me that God had told him that he was to marry me. I was a little freaked out by that – and said that I hadn’t heard God say anything of the kind to me! (That wasn’t Jay, by the way.)

How easy do we find it to determine God’s guidance in our lives - to know what he wants us to do in a given situation? We’ve all faced, and will continue to face major decisions in our lives. How do we work out what God’s will is for us?

As we follow the apostles’ adventures in Acts we can gain some helpful insights about receiving God’s guidance.

1. Guidance through being compelled by the Holy Spirit.

If we go way back to Acts chapter 4, not long after Pentecost, we find a series of events where Peter & John acted in the power of the Spirit. First, they healed a lame man in the temple. You remember the story? As they were entering the temple, the lame man spotted them and asked for money. Peter was inspired to look him in the eye and say to him, “We haven’t got any money, but we’ll give you what we do have: in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, get up and walk!” – and the man was healed.

Then, in the power of the Spirit, they preached an eloquent sermon in the temple precincts. There were 5000 converts!! (I think we could do with a bit of that here, don’t you?)

When they were subsequently arrested and challenged, again in the power of the Spirit, they preached to the leaders of the temple, and stood up to them saying, "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard." They were compelled by the Holy Spirit!

This type of guidance was not something they sat and ruminated about. They didn’t weigh up the pros and cons of their particular course of action. If they had, they may never have ministered healing to the lame man! They were running with full tanks after Pentecost. They were focused on serving God with every fibre of their being. They simply responded to an impulse of the Holy Spirit within them, and amazing things happened.

Can we experience that sort of guidance today? Yes we can! We’re told in Ephesians 5:18, to “go on being filled with the Spirit.” Christ’s followers all have the Holy Spirit – but this ’filling’ of the Spirit is something that we need to pursue on an ongoing basis.

There are all sorts of metaphors we could use – a car’s petrol tank, for instance. As the car drives, it uses fuel, and needs to be refilled; or our bodies - our bodies need to be fed with nourishing food, or we become physically weak. In the same way, we need to pursue the infilling of the Spirit as we serve God each day. When we are filled with the Spirit, we are far more likely to experience the sort of compelling guidance the apostles did.

1. Another means of guidance in the book of Acts was through the direct intervention of an angelic being.

In Acts chapter 5, Peter & John had been arrested again, and this time ended up in prison. Act 5:19 “But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors, brought them out, and said, "Go, stand in the temple and tell the people the whole message about this life."

In Acts 12, Peter is in prison yet again, and the believers are fervently praying for his release. We read this: “Suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared and a light shone in the cell. He tapped Peter on the side and woke him, saying, "Get up quickly." And the chains fell off his wrists.

The angel said to him, "Fasten your belt and put on your sandals." He did so. Then he said to him, "Wrap your cloak around you and follow me."

God has used angels throughout Scripture to be his messengers. After the coming of the Holy Spirit, we don’t see them as often – but here is an instance, after Pentecost, when God sends an angel to guide his people.

A word of caution is needed here. We live in a culture where angels are ‘the flavour of the month’. In New Age circles in particular, people are encouraged to seek contact with angels and so called ‘Spirit Guides’. This is a way that the evil one can actually divert people’s attention away from serving God. Angel worship can take his place.

While God *may* send an angel to guide us, he is far more likely to guide us through our relationship with *him,* through his people and through his Word. But we shouldn’t be closed to the idea either.

1. Dreams and Visions: We have numerous accounts in the book of Acts of people receiving God’s guidance through a vision.

In Acts 9, God speaks to Ananias in a dream, and tells him to go and heal Saul who has just been soundly converted on the Damascus Road. God assures Ananias that he has plans for Saul for the good of the Kingdom. As Ananias obeys, Paul is healed & filled with the Spirit, and goes on to be one of the great leaders of the early Church.

Then there’s the story of Peter and Cornelius, both of whom received guidance from God through a vision. You’ll remember the story from Acts 12: Peter is hungry, and God shows him a vision of ‘unclean’ animals, telling him it’s okay to kill and eat. Through this vision and his encounter with Cornelius, Peter recognises that God loves the non-Jews as well, and has included them in his kingdom. Cornelius’s vision shows him Peter coming to preach God’s word to them – which he does - and they are subsequently filled by the Holy Spirit.

In Act 16 Paul is given a vision of a man from Macedonia, begging him to come and help them. It’s this vision that leads him to Philippi, and the encounter with Lydia.

Are we still guided by visions today? I believe we are! God sends us visions and to comfort us, encourage us and guide us.

When our daughter Bethany was 19, she went into a diabetic coma and spent 10 in ICU hooked up to a ventilator. When they took it out her throat closed up and they had to do an emergency tracheostomy. A day or so later, when she had recovered enough to communicate, eyes like saucers, she mouthed the words, “I saw Jesus”!

Later, when she could actually talk again, she told us more about what she’d seen. Amongst all the tubes and drips, in the midst of all her pain and discouragement, Jesus had sat on her bed and told her that he loved her. He told her that her friends and family loved her, that her friends really missed her, and he assured her that she would get better. They were words of great encouragement for Bethany, and helped her through the long convalescence that followed.

1. A fourth means of guidance we see in the book of Acts is that of circumstances.

In Acts 16, we find Paul and Timothy travelling together, and we read these verses: Act 16:6 “They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them”

We can assume from this short passage that circumstances prevented Paul and Timothy from taking the route they’d planned. In those circumstances, they saw the guiding hand of the Holy Spirit. It was then, in the midst of their frustration, that Paul saw the vision of the man from Macedonia asking them to go and help them.

Does God guide us through circumstances today? Again, yes he does.

Interestingly, as I’ve spoken to people about their spiritual journeys over the years, the means of guidance that seems to be the most relied upon in the church is that of circumstances.

The presence of positive of negative circumstances certainly constitutes a valid form of guidance. However, just as we need to discern God’s voice in other means of guidance, so we also need to discern his voice in the circumstances in our lives. The fact that a particular course of action brings with it obstructions or unpleasant circumstances is not necessarily an indication that we are outside the will of God.

Take for instance all the floggings and imprisonments the early apostles experienced; the crowds who sabotaged their meetings and who wanted to stone them; the authorities who wanted to kill them. All these things were obstructive, inconvenient, and painful – but not necessarily indicators that the apostles were not doing what God wanted them to.

On the other hand, *positive circumstances* are also not necessarily an indicator of God’s will. Think back to the story from Acts 16 in today’s reading. Paul and Silas were imprisoned in the deepest darkest cell of the prison. During the night, there was a violent earthquake which shook the prison to its foundations. The doors were flung open, and all the shackles fell off. You’d think, wouldn’t you, that this circumstance would be an indication that God wanted Paul & Silas to walk out of there free. But they didn’t dive out of the door to freedom – they stayed! As a result, the jailer and all his family came to faith in Christ.

Throughout the book of Acts we see many spectacular means of guidance – the compelling of the Holy Spirit, angelic beings, dreams and visions. We also see the ordinary and mundane – people making decisions that seem best to them at the time, and people being guided by their circumstances.

The thread that ties all these avenues of guidance together and validates them is their context. The apostles sought and were given guidance in these ways, but always in the context of the church, their knowledge of the teaching of Jesus, and their relationship with him.

In isolation, an impulse of the spirit, an angelic visitation, a dream, a vision, might send us off on a tangent that is not necessarily of God.

But if we experience these forms of guidance and they are confirmed by the body of Christ, through the Word of God, and our ongoing relationship with him, then we can be confident that God is leading us.

The book of Acts leaves us with encouraging insights about guidance:

* God *does* guide his people.
* He guides us in all manner of ways – and we should be open to all of them, not just our circumstances.
* God gives us his Church, his Word and Himself, to ensure that we hear him correctly, and experience his amazing work in our lives.

Let’s pray.