

Guidance to Serve Abroad – understanding God's will

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God wants us to know his will even more than we want to know it.
Why then is it often so difficult to discover?
Why doesn't he tell us outright?

He does not want unthinking robots who are programmed to do his bidding but mature children who share their Father's concern for the world. He wants us to research and think through facts and feel his compassion and end up asking for that which pleases him. It helps us to know him better.

As we prayerfully evaluate overseas needs and opportunities, our gifts and training, our circumstances and God's Word, we develop a conviction about the course we should take—an assurance difficult to acquire any other way.

Even the great Apostle Paul had to find his guidance as we do. Acts 16 records that on his second journey he and his team visited their churches in the regions of Phrygia and Galatia. This part of God's guidance was clear because these new churches needed follow-up. Paul believed God then wanted them to continue on the highway into the Roman province of Asia—probably to Ephesus, its largest city. But his timing was wrong. How did the Holy Spirit forbid them? Were the roads impassable? Was there an epidemic? Did the Roman soldiers at the crossroads stop them? Whatever the circumstances, Paul knew the Holy Spirit was closing the door.

He and his team traveled north to Mysia, and tried to turn east into Bithynia. God closed that door, too. So they went west to Troas. It was not on Paul's itinerary but it was accessible. God had to get Paul to Troas so he could turn his steps to Europe! (How can you steer a ship until it lifts anchor and leaves harbor?)

Europe did not yet figure in Paul's long-range plans, so in Troas God gave him a vision of "a man from Macedonia." Luke, who had come from Macedonia, joined the team in Troas. (Did he arrive before or after Paul's vision?) The team evaluated the facts and quickly concluded they should go to the city of Philippi, an important city in Macedonia. (Acts 16)

So how are we to go about seeking God's guidance? Here are some principles.

I. Discerning God's leading

1. Seek to do God's will every day. Why should he say anything more to us if we disregard what he has already said? Jesus says, "Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not what I say?" (Lk. 6:46) He says, "If you love me you will keep my commandments." (Jn. 14:15-23) Start by obeying what you already know God has commanded. Learn to hear God's voice in small daily matters. This is good practice for major decisions.

2. Use common sense. But we do not need God's special guidance on everything. We do not need to ask each morning whether to get up or to dress. We would not usually ask if we should wear the brown suit or the blue one to work, because it is probably indifferent. Choose the one you prefer. The Lord does not seek to control each detail in our lives. Packer says rightly, that to ask for specific guidance for every detail of our day is not spirituality. Rather, it leads to a "frantic bewilderment or lunacy." A 12-year-old who needs the guidance of a two-year-old is abnormal. God expects

some maturity in us from his constant teaching, his past guidance and our life experiences. He is not likely to give special guidance where common sense or his Word should suffice.

3. Study the Bible for guidance. Regular Bible study saturates us with knowledge of what God thinks about everything, what his long-range plans are and how he acts. Jesus said, "If you abide in me and my words abide in you, then ask whatever you will and it will be done for you." (Jn. 15:7) "Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." (Psa.119:105)

A good understanding of Scripture helps keep us from mistaking God's guidance because he never guides anyone contrary to his written Word.

But seek guidance in clearly stated principles and in the lives of godly people in the Bible. Learn from Abraham's mistakes and imitate his faith. But the advice of Job's friends is as bad for us as it was for him. The pagan prostitute Rahab was commended for her new faith in God, not her lies and low morals. The dishonest steward in Luke 16 is praised for his prudence in preparing for his future, but verse 10 condemns even his smallest dishonesties. God wants us to apply biblical principles to our circumstances.

4. Desire to do whatever God says. Do we already want one answer so much that we are not open to others? God expects us to have preferences. He may even give us desires so he can fulfil them. (Phil. 2:13) But we must examine our motivation. If we are not willing to do whatever he says, we are double-minded and must ask him to make us willing.

5. Rely on God's promise to guide. "I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you" (Psa. 32:8). If you obey, "the Lord will guide you continually" (Isa.58:11). "Who is the man (or woman) that fears the Lord? Him will he instruct in the way that he should choose" (Psa. 25:12). "In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths"(Prov. 3:6). Paul prays the Colossians will be "filled with the knowledge of his will" (Col.1: 9). J. I. Packer says the Holy Spirit lives in us to teach and to guide, and for us to doubt his ability or willingness would be a slur on his ministry.

6. Ask God for guidance. "If any one lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to everyone generously and without reproaching, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind." (Jas. 1:58) This does not mean you must be sure of the answer, but you must be specific about your request. A "double-minded," wavering person, with mixed motives, will not be answered. We cannot ask God for his will, and then contemplate whether or not to obey. He may not guide until we are ready to obey.

James does not say that if we believe hard enough God will answer. Prayer is not convincing ourselves that God will give the answer we wish. Prayer is not twisting God's arm to do for us what he otherwise would not do. Our prayers free him to do what he longed to do from the start. He works through us, but does not force our wills. Nor can our faith force his hand. But our faith frees him to act, and opens us up to hear.

We must ask. God works mainly through us. He already knows what we need. But do we know? The rule of the Father's house is that the children must bring their requests to him. He longs to have us in his presence; our needs bring us there.

"Let us with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may find mercy and grace to help in the time of need." (Heb. 4:16)

7. Clarify the request in writing. God says, "Take with you words." (Hosea 14:2) The Holy Spirit usually does not speak to us in words except to recall to our minds the words of Scripture. But he does say yes or no to the words we bring to him. Writing helps because it requires us to think through the issues and to define our thoughts. If our requests are fuzzy

we may not recognize answers when they come. Too often we say, "Everything worked out," and fail to see God's answer to a specific prayer. Keep a prayer journal!

8. Believe that God is guiding. Believe your discoveries are not accidental, but that God is speaking through the data you uncover in a variety of ways. Not all of it will be relevant, but we must be alert to what God may be saying through items of information. It helps to record what seems significant in a prayer notebook.

Rest the matter with him. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him and he will direct your paths. Be not wise in your own eyes." (Prov. 3:5,6) "Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep (guard, sustain) your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 4:6,7)

9. Watch for guidance in your daily devotions—in the sequence of Bible passages you are reading. In 1957, after three years in Peru, I believed God wanted me to begin university fellowships in another South American country, so I applied for positions in several secular schools. Then I returned to California to spend Christmas with my family. It made sense to wait here until I had a new job contract. I hoped it would come quickly so I could stop in Peru on my way south to help put on the university conference we had planned. But I had enough money only for the air fare and one month's room and board. If I went, and a job was offered, I would be in trouble. Did God expect me to take such a big step of faith?

That was what I asked him as I began my regular morning reading, which happened to be in Acts 13. I read that Abraham left his home at God's command, by faith, not knowing his ultimate destination! The words jumped out at me. (I had not expected to find Abraham in Acts!) Was God telling me to go? He knew I would read that passage that morning. I became convinced it was God's answer to my question. So I flew off to Peru. The conference was fruitful, and a job finally came through—in Brazil—but that is another story!

10. Evaluate your circumstances. They can make God's will so clear that obedience, not guidance, is required.

Gary wanted to go to China in August. He would leave behind his pregnant wife and their toddler for six months, as house guests with friends. After the baby was born she was to travel to China alone with the two babies. It became such an issue she would not let him mention China. But he relied on his inner impressions alone and went to China against the counsel of family and friends. His wife filed separation papers. He finally broke his contract and flew home to salvage his fragile marriage.

Muriel, in the U.S. on leave from short-term service in Spain, bought a ticket to return. Circumstances should have told her the timing was wrong. Her grandmother was dying and her family (not firm Christians) begged her to wait. But she left, although she had no deadline in Spain and no specific assignment. She later claimed God had given her such great faith that even a death in the family could not delay her. But she ignored God's principles of love and concern for family.

God can change your circumstances. Record even small changes as partial answers. Believe God is working on the problem. As all God's words are actions (he fulfils them) so all God's actions are words (he speaks through them). Ask what he is trying to tell you through each change. No single one may convince, but the cumulative effect of several may be compelling.

11. Seek information about all possible options. God guides largely through information we prayerfully evaluate. But he does not do the research for us. That we take the initiative to ferret out facts is a test of how much we want his will. Jesus said that asking does not make seeking and knocking unnecessary. (Mt. 7:79) But it can guarantee their success.

12. Seek the counsel of informed Christian friends. They should be people who know you well. But if they lack facts or are not committed to missions, their counsel may not be better than your own. It is seldom helpful to ask someone who will automatically agree or disagree with you. I recall a man who would present his problems to his pastor in a way that would cause the pastor to agree. Then he would cite the pastor as his main guidance!

Do consult your pastor and church missions committee. But remember that some otherwise fine pastors have little interest in missions and even less in tentmaking. Some dissuade applicants from tentmaking because they do not understand it and they have confidence only in formal Christian workers. (A few GO Papers on tentmaking might help them understand this option better.)

13. When the deadline arrives make a logical decision. Trust that God has been guiding you. List the pros and cons, evaluate them prayerfully and then make a logical decision—the one that seems right. This step has helped take some of the agony out of decision-making for me.

If at the deadline two options seem equally good, God may be asking "Which would you rather do?" There is not always just one right place. Jane called to ask if she should accept the music teaching job in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil or the one in Dusseldorf, Germany. It seemed a tossup. So she chose Germany because of her German ancestry. God used her there for years in a fully self-supporting position.

14. Then confidently, joyfully, begin to implement the decision. Step out in faith, asking God to stop you if you have misunderstood. Watch for further confirmation.

15. Do not give up at the first few obstacles. God may be only testing your resolve. Seek more information and counsel. Be open to the possibility that your destination, ministry or timing may be wrong. How God resolves the problems can give great assurance later.

The administrator from Peru who was to bring my contract to San Francisco never appeared. I was already packed. Besides, friends had already given me two farewell parties and I felt a bit obligated to go! I had to ask myself if I was now as willing to remain home, if that was God's will, as I was to go. Then a cable arrived, instructing me to come at once. The administrator had been replaced by a new one. God never let's us down.

16. Watch for prayer impressions. Do they confirm your decision or cause discomfort? You should not take discomfort lightly. But you should expect some apprehension. Before I went to Peru, friends said I had to have complete peace or it could not be God's will. But my emotions ranged from mildly anxious to scared stiff! Then veteran missionary David Adeney said to me, "Only people who don't think are not afraid to take such a big step!" He questioned me and said he believed God was guiding me to go.

II. Guidance to serve abroad

Ask the following questions about yourself.

1) What academic training did God lead you to take? He often, but not always, leads us in a straight line. He may want you to serve in your chosen vocation, but be open to other options. Fifty percent of college graduates never serve in the vocation for which they prepared. But there is much overlap—concepts that are transferable to other fields. History major Jim became a basketball coach. Chemist Paul became a magazine editor. Famous Dr. Martyn Lloyd Jones gave up medicine in order to preach.

2) What are your spiritual gifts? In what ways has God already been using you? Ask if you are ready to serve him abroad. Not every soldier needs officer training, but all must know spiritual warfare, effective evangelism and Bible study. God sends no finished products because he has none. He keeps working on us as we serve him abroad. But a certain amount of prior preparation is important.

3) Has God directed your attention to any country or people group? My friend loved everything Japanese from childhood so it was no surprise that God led her to Japan. You may wonder if your interest in Jordan is from God. Then a Jordanian family moves next door and a missionary from Jordan speaks at your church. You are given a book on Jordan. You see three newspaper articles on this country. God is leading you to pray for Jordan, and maybe to go. If you then find a job opening there, it may be his leading.

God used my high school Spanish class to interest me in Peru—then a restricted, unevangelized country. My interest deepened in a Latin America prayer group at Biola. Then I took Wycliffe's summer linguistics course at the University of Oklahoma. But illness ended my hope of doing Bible translation in Peru.

Even after a long, slow recovery, no mission agency would have sent me out to the jungle. So I went to Chico State for a degree in education that would enable me to earn a living. I discovered that the campus was a "mission field." Friends and I started the first ICVF group there. Then I taught in a public school in the Bay Area, where two IVCF alums and I began a teachers' Christian fellowship which spread all over the region.

Then, in a period of a few weeks, God changed my outlook on going abroad. Navigators asked me to pray about doing a year's follow-up with young working women after the first Billy Graham Crusade in England. Surely I could tolerate life in London as easily as in California!

Then I helped organize a farewell for a friend going to Argentina, and discovered that most of the world's cities are in moderate climate zones! What a wonderful surprise! I realized with a thrill that I could probably work in cities almost anywhere!

Then I met Don and Nadine Burns, Wycliffe missionaries on leave from Peru. They had begun to pray that I would come teach in the international school in Lima. I had not known there was such a school! (This was still a decade before the global job market began to mushroom.) I applied for a position.

But I couldn't get a passport. To do so I had to go to San Francisco in person during work hours and I had no car. But during my school district's annual teachers' workshops in Oakland, a woman I hardly knew asked casually if I would mind going with her between meetings to San Francisco! To the exact address I needed! I obtained the passport. Then God pulled strings at the Peruvian end, and I was hired.

The cumulative effect of many small answers to prayer and the solution of many small problems gave me a conviction about God's will that I might not have developed otherwise.

2. Learn all you can about God's work in the world. Use *Operation World* by Patrick Johnstone, to pray around the world each year. See how relatively evangelized countries are. Need is not the only consideration, but it does matter. Why go to Chile where one in three people is an evangelical, when many other countries do not have a single church?

This book is full of surprises. The southern European countries have a smaller percentage of believers than India or China! About 80% of the world's people live in countries that are off-limits to missionaries and can be entered only by tentmakers. Japan is open, but is less than one percent evangelical.

A diagram of the 1040 window shows where most of the unreached peoples are—Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Animists. Learn a little about every country and a lot about two or three.

List questions to research. You may want to keep a notebook. If you are considering Turkey, find out about its culture, its cities, its spiritual need, the status of Christianity and Islam. You will learn that Turkey does not issue missionary visas. Learn about some of the tentmakers there. Imagine yourself going and seek answers to questions like the following: What job openings could you fill? What ministries could you do? Where might you live? Are there schools for your children? What is the cost of living? The cost of travel? Would you rent out your present home? GO can help you think through many of these questions.

3. Learn about mission agencies. Which ones work in needy countries that interest you—maybe Mozambique, Egypt or Thailand? Which agencies seek people with skills you have, like medicine or teaching or aviation? Find out more about what these agencies do. Read their publications. Ask what options they might have for you.

4. Learn about tentmaking jobs. What kinds of jobs are available in your target region that you could fill? Do you need further training? GO's job-matching service can provide you with job information. If God has not given you a burden for any particular country, he may use a job opening to direct you to where you should serve.

5. Consult with missionaries or tentmakers from your target country. They can give firsthand information. GO may be able to put you in touch with helpful people who are home on leave.

6. Do vacation service there. You might tutor English for a few weeks in Greece or Mongolia or Cambodia, or work along with missionaries in Italy or Taiwan. A short visit can give an idea of what life there will be like. (Find out about cheap flights.)

7. Define your purpose and devise a plan. Some missions courses require students to design a plan for reaching a particular people group. This helpful exercise makes them think through details and biblical principles. But you do not know what you will find. Do not let a fixed plan keep you from noticing all the surprises God will have for you! Be sensitive to the people and the situation around you.

As I started university student fellowships in about 50 cities in Peru, Brazil, Spain and Portugal, each situation was different. No one recipe was applicable to two cities! God wanted me to depend on him and not on already formulated plans. But it was important that I had firmly in mind the basic principles of a genuine student movement and the fundamentals of good Bible study, evangelism and leadership training.

8. Begin with a short term. You need only commit yourself and your family for an initial year or two, depending on your contract. This is easier than making a lifetime commitment to a country. Extend that commitment later as God directs. When I first went to Peru, I derived comfort from the knowledge that I could come home after a year if the situation proved too arduous. But the Lord gave such confirmation of his will, that even after 21 years in several countries I was reluctant to move home!

It is during an initial short term that tentmakers often make long-term commitments to their region—as long as God keeps opening up jobs.

A mission agency may require a longer initial commitment because you raise donor support, and they expect you to serve a number of years after costly language and culture training. But many agencies also have initial one to three year programs.

Many tentmakers serve only two or three years, but others join a mission agency after learning the language and culture at their own expense. The mission gains trained, tried and proven workers who can greatly cut down the costly attrition rate of regular missionaries, 30% of whom quit during or after their first term abroad.

8. Remember that God often leads through intermediate steps. A Christian couple burdened for the Baluch people could not get permission to live in Baluchistan, but God led them to an Arab country where thousands of Baluch are guest workers! Both husband and wife earned well and lived comfortably. He translated the New Testament for five million Baluch people who had never had the Scriptures before! A few years later these tentmakers were able to live for a time in the Baluch homeland in Pakistan.

Another couple worked with a few Kazakhs in Muslim western China. They could not have foreseen that the USSR would suddenly crumble and that they would be able to move across the border into Kazakhstan! By then they knew the language and culture and had prepared Bible materials.

If you hope to work in a rural or tribal area, it may make sense to work first in a larger city of your new host country, to become familiar with its dominant culture before learning one of its subcultures. You may also find families from your people group living in the city. Win them, and then help them win their own people! It is what Paul did.

9. Share your plans with humility. Ronald said, "First God told me to go to Japan, then China, and now he is telling me to go to Africa." It would be difficult to trust such a capricious God! Until we have arrived in our new host country it is better to say, "We believe God is leading us to Morocco. We are awaiting his further confirmation."

III. Special considerations

1. Family. God always takes into account the whole family. All of the above assumes that both husband and wife are equally committed to serving abroad. But often they are not. The eager spouse must be very patient with the more reluctant one and try to allay his or her fears with facts.

Contact GO for cultural data. Talk with people who have lived in your target country. Make a short visit. A couple must not move abroad unless both are convinced it is God's will.

God always considers the children. He loves them more than their parents do! Some jobs abroad are only for single men or single women, but most may also be family status. Children are no problem, but employers may turn down a family with too many. Salary and housing may range from modest but adequate to luxurious. In some countries it is still possible to have a live-in maid or a once-a-week cleaning woman.

Many large cities have excellent international or bilingual schools—and even a Christian school. Or several parents may pool their time and skills and do homeschooling. Children who grow up in another culture gain an enriched upbringing. Small children often adjust more easily and learn the language more quickly than their parents.

But it is more difficult to move teenagers abroad because of their more complicated relational and educational needs. The Andersons took their two teenage sons to Sudan, because both were eager to go, even though the high school senior had to take a correspondence course. A family vacation in the target country may change the reluctance of teenagers, but if they remain unwilling, the parents may have to wait a few years until they are grown.

Another consideration is elderly parents. If you have siblings who can care for them, you may feel free to leave. But many missionaries remain home for a short period to care for an elderly parent. One couple took their 90 year old mother to live with them to Thailand!

2. Health. Most mission agencies require missionaries and their families to have excellent health, because it is costly for the mission to move them home again after its costly investment in their travel, language and culture training. Secular employers have the same concern for their families.

But the 1990s are not the 1890s nor even the 1950s! Today most of the world's larger cities have qualified doctors and hospitals, and medications are readily available. In case of an emergency, jet travel can get one home in a hurry. If you do effective work in your home country, without many absences, you can probably do so in most major cities, but perhaps not in rustic rural or tribal areas. But if a family member needs constant medical attention, it is probably a sign God does not want you abroad at present.

We should now consider several guidance practices which are not helpful.

IV. Practices to avoid

1. Do not wait for a missionary call. The confusing idea of waiting for a call has probably kept more people home from the mission field than any other factor. The call is already given to everyone in the Great Commission. (Mt. 28:18-20) The Lord's call to us is never to a piece of geography or to a certain ministry. He called the Twelve to be with himself, to learn from him, and to be sent out by him—wherever he wanted them to go. And to come home and to go out again—wherever he sent them. (Mk.3:13-15)

The prophet Isaiah had a wonderful vision of God's glory. Afterward, he was so close to God that he overheard the following words: "Whom shall we send? Who will go for us?" Without hesitation, he answered, "Here am I, Lord. Send me." (Isaiah 6)

The call is to the Lord. The questions of where and how to promote the worldwide mission of the church is a matter of direction. You know that your present assignment is at home, as a witness to local compatriots and to internationals, and as a praying and giving sender of missionaries—until God leads you abroad. If you can witness to friends and associates at home, you are a likely candidate for overseas. Praying and giving shows your concern for this world.

A mission agency brochure cover says: "What if I have not been called?" You turn the page and read, "Go anyway." No supernatural dream or vision is needed. The desire is reason enough to investigate your options.

But many mission leaders use the word call to describe a strong conviction from God that helps you to go with confidence and keeps you steady when circumstances become difficult. This conviction is important, but rarely comes while we sit and wait for it. It develops through the process of gathering and evaluating data. You fly off by faith, unable to see the future. Guidance that still seems foggy from your homeland may seem crystal clear when you look back from your new host country. You wonder how you missed the cumulative impact of many answers to prayer.

2. Do not "put out a fleece." That is what Gideon did, but he had neither the Bible nor the Holy Spirit. He put out two sheepskins and asked God to do a miracle. We must not try to force God to answer in any particular way at any particular time. It is better to await God's answer in his own time. A delay may mean he is changing us, or is juggling people and circumstances in our target location. We must wait patiently—but not passively—for his timing and confirmation.

3. Do not cast lots or draw straws. The Eleven sought to replace Judas this way (Acts 1). But there is no instance of believers doing this again after the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost.

4. Do not play roulette with the Scriptures. You have heard the tale of the man who supposedly opened the Bible at random and found his finger on the sentence, "And Judas went out and hanged himself." Rejecting that guidance, he closed his eyes and pounced on the words, "Go thou and do likewise." His third random try? "And what thou doest, do quickly." God may sometimes lead a new Christian by this "blink-and-jab" method, but he expects more from us.

5. Beware of anyone with his own hotline to heaven. Some people claim to receive detailed orders from God. They disrupt fellowship because they consider anyone who questions their guidance unspiritual. When their guidance later proves false they make excuses. Not even Paul had that kind of guidance!

Nor did Abraham. He knew only that he was to go to Canaan. Genesis shows how he searched for the right location, near a busy trade route. He was a self-employed "tentmaker"—in agribusiness. But his motivation was missions—to be God's channel of blessing to the tribal nations around him. Wherever he built an altar he was staking a claim for God. He interceded for Sodom and acted justly in the war of the kings. He was faithful wherever God led him.

6. Do not bypass your mind. Hotline Christians often depend more on their intuition or prayer impressions. But no passage of Scripture encourages us to do this. Usually God reaches our emotions through our minds. That he tells us to seek his wisdom suggests he speaks to our minds. (Jas. 1:5)

Recall the verse, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not rely on your own understanding." (Prov. 3: 5) The last part refers to unaided human thinking—without prayer. Verse 6 continues: "In all your ways acknowledge him and he will direct your paths. Do not be wise in your own eyes." Use biblical principles, not worldly ones.

John Stott, in his little booklet *Your Mind Matters*, says some Christians think feelings and intuition are more spiritually dependable than their minds. But it is easier for Satan to deceive us at the intuitional level than at the rational level. Our minds respond more readily to reality checks. Total depravity does not mean that we are totally bad, but that every faculty of our inner being has been tainted with sin, including our imagination and intuition. But Paul says the renewal of our minds is part of our regeneration.

Stott says our minds are God's gifts, and we must not put experience above doctrine nor emotion above intelligence. Faith and guidance are not irrational. "Commitment without reflection is fanaticism in action. But reflection without commitment is the paralysis of action."

God abases human pride and human philosophies but not the human minds he made. God does not want mindless, repetitious worship that puts us into a trance (Mt. 6:7), but a warm devotion set on fire by truth—a devotion that has biblical content and balance and avoids fanatical extremes.

Paul says, "But we have the mind of Christ." (1 Cor.2:16) Stott says this is a mind which can judge matters rightly because it is informed by Christ's teaching, his principles and his will. Our minds, trained in Christ, become like his mind, so that we share his goals and his purposes.

In relation to guidance, God says, "Be not like a horse or mule, without understanding, which must be curbed with bit or bridle." (Psa.32:8,9) The mind matters.

He says, "Come and let us reason together. . ." (Isa.1:18) Analyze, think through, present arguments. Paul said to the Corinthians, "Why not judge for yourselves what is right?" (1 Cor.6) He is saying, "Why don't you use your brains? Why don't you use the same common sense in the moral and spiritual realm that you use in the physical realm?" (Stott)

Packer lists the main pitfalls in guidance. People are: 1) Unwilling to think, because of a false piety, an unhealthy supernaturalism. 2) Unwilling to think ahead and weigh long-term consequences or alternative options. 3) Unwilling to take advice. 4) Unwilling to suspect their motivation. "Search me, O God, and know my heart!" (Psalm 139:23,24). 5) Unwilling to discount someone's personal magnetism. Is someone putting pressure on you? 6) Unwilling to await God's timing.

V. While awaiting guidance

1. Sharpen your ministry skills. Gain expertise in your workplace evangelism and inductive Bible study preparation, your group Bible study leadership skills and your investigative Bible studies with seekers. Can you turn an inductive Bible study into an inductive sermon? Can you disciple a new believer? Can you help with a church planting project somewhere nearby?

2. Get further training. Do you need a correspondence course on Bible knowledge? Should you read a book or two on apologetics? Everyone should take the Perspectives missions course, if at all possible, or thoroughly study the textbook. The course is now offered all over the U.S. at hours convenient for working people.

Would an extra academic course or two enhance your marketability? Or a certain kind of work experience? An engineering firm customized training in computer-aided design for Frank before he left for Asia. If you hope to teach English, crash courses are given in many learning institutions. ESL teachers' manuals and student workbooks can be found in libraries. Can you find a foreigner to tutor? (Women who do not want a full-time job, can tutor English in their homes, and evangelize their students.)

3. Befriend internationals from your target country. Are any among your neighbors or on a nearby university campus? Learn about their culture and religion, as you tactfully evangelize them. But do not reveal your missionary plans.

While studying engineering in the University of Nebraska in the 1950s, Bob Rutz befriended a dozen Iranian students, including his roommate. He did not know God would lead him to Iran. On arrival in Teheran, their upper class families extended generous hospitality to this young man who had helped their sons. When the sons returned home they were all given top government positions and were valuable contacts and partners as Bob set up several businesses, including a restaurant and miniature golf.

VI. If you mistake God's will

If things go wrong in your new host country, it does not mean you have misunderstood God's will. The Twelve twice endured fierce storms on Galilee because they obeyed Jesus. Paul was personally commissioned by the risen Christ. Yet look how he suffered to do God's will! People who stay home also suffer. We are all damaged goods in a spoiled, enemy-occupied world. God graciously allows problems to help us grow, and to show the presence of Jesus Christ more clearly through us.

But what if you become convinced in Bahrain that you have mistaken God's will? It's not the end of the world! Do you think God would punish you for trying to serve him abroad when most Christians do not even care? He is probably pleased and will give you some ministry there until the right time for a new assignment at home or in another country. He allows us to make midcourse corrections!

Remember how graciously he dealt with Jonah? And he did not mistake God's will—he rejected it. God used even the forces of nature to rescue him and give him a second chance, because he understood the conflict in Jonah. None of us deserve to be used by God. Our ministry is by grace just like our salvation.

Packer says God not only restores us, but he even takes our mistakes and follies into his plan for us and brings good out of them! (Rom. 8:28) Note God's words to Israel, which had suffered a great locust invasion for its disobedience: "I will restore to you the years which the swarming locust has eaten. . . You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the LORD your God, who has dealt wondrously with you" (Joel 2:254, 26).

VII. What if no door opens?

1. What if all your prayers and efforts fail to get you overseas? You tried everything. Months have passed but no doors opened. You need not be embarrassed. You only expressed willingness to go if God so led.

He may delay you while he works out many details. He detained me for six years through illness so I would gain three kinds of training I did not know I would need: 1) A degree in education and English—marketable skills for tentmaking. 2) Experience in how to start university student fellowships. 3) Experience in how to evangelize in secular schools! He knew what I did not—that he was going to take me to the country he had placed on my heart, but not as a regular missionary. He would send me as a fully self-supporting tentmaker, so I would need both the academic training and appropriate ministry skills.

This was in the early 50's—about the same time that Christy Wilson and a few others went into Afghanistan as tentmakers—at least a decade before the post-World War II global job market developed. None of us knew much about tentmaking. No one could have told me how to prepare for tentmaking, or how to do it, but see how wonderfully God led me, even when I did not understand what he was doing! You can trust him!

But if your door does not open (as mine did not for six years), you will know by the process of elimination that for the present God has assigned you to two responsibilities: 1) To evangelize your compatriots and the internationals in your community. You can know this is God's will until he opens another door. 2) To be a sender—to pray and give faithfully to others who are able to go.

When God calls you to this double ministry at home, it is as important as any assignment he will ever give you. Genuinely trying to go abroad is a good way to be sure you are assigned at home. At least for the time being.

But check out overseas options from to time, since God may want to change your assignment. A sender is just as important as a goer, but it is not up to us to choose which we prefer to be.

Conclusion

God says, "I know the plans that I have for you, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." (Jer.29:11) "We know that in everything God works for good for those who love him, for those who are called according to his purpose." (Rom. 8:28). One day we will say with godly old Caleb, "You know in your hearts and souls, all of you, that not one thing has failed of all the good things which the Lord God promised concerning you; all have come to pass for you; not one of them has failed." (Joshua 23:14).

So we walk by faith. In this dark world God always reveals enough light for us to take the next step, but not enough so that we can run ahead of him. The process of seeking his will helps us know him better. He cares more about where and how we serve than we do. He cares more about us than any ministry we may render. He never really sends us abroad, but takes us by the hand and leads us, always present to guide, encourage, protect and help.

– Ruth E. Siemens

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