

Living by the Word of God

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[0 : 0 0] Well, the title tonight is simple, Living by the Word of God. And that is how God does guide his people today.

Last week, we remember, we focused on the important verse in Deuteronomy chapter 29, verse 29. The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.

We saw the importance of both of these things, the secret things and the revealed things. Yes, it's true, God controls all things, even the minute details of our lives and our future lives.

But the Bible tells us we're not to go seeking after those secret things. In fact, that is the essence of paganism, divination, fortune-telling, trying to get a glimpse of the future so as to make the right decisions now.

No, the believer says the Bible is not to be like the pagans. We're to trust God with the hidden things, not to distrust him, not by telling him that we need to know these hidden secrets so that we can actually then take charge and make the right decisions, take it out of God's hands.

[1 : 1 3] No. But on the other hand, the things revealed, well, they do belong to us, that we may do them, that we may actually live by them. And that's God's plan for us, that we should live by the revelation he gives to us.

It's clear, it's unmistakable. What God has revealed to us is sufficient. And we're to trust him that we don't need any more. And it's also authoritative. We are to obey him.

We're to heed what he has revealed to us. So we're to trust and obey. That's what the life of faith means in practice. And as the old hymn says, trust and obey.

There's no other way to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey. But the problem is that much of our Christian thinking and much popular evangelical thinking is in fact really much more like pagan thinking.

We're seeking out the secret things of God. We want new revelations to give us special knowledge about making the right decisions and so on. As if it was all hidden in the dark. As though we were at risk of making terrible mistakes unless we had special guidance.

[2 : 2 2] But the Bible rebukes us. It may be that we dress all that up in pious language about texts and words and spiritual senses and all that sort of thing.

But actually, the Bible tells us it's just unbelief. And it enslaves us in fear and worry. Endless contortions of having to think about guidance before we can ever do anything.

We've got to have a green light. Or else we can't dare to go on in case we end up in disaster. But no, says the gospel, we're not living in the fear of a hidden will of God.

Something that's so impossible to discern that we have to live in fear of getting on the wrong side of God. No. For freedom Christ has set us free from all of that.

We serve a God who controls everything. Who loves us. Who cares for us. And who has revealed to us in Christ everything that we need to know. So that we can launch out on life.

[3 : 23] In confidence and with joy. So today I want to go on and unpack a little bit more in detail about how this actually works out in the practical life of believers today.

How do we trust and obey in the things that God has revealed to us. But first, let me summarize again just some specific reasons why this idea, this so prevalent idea of having to constantly seek out special guidance.

Why that's wrong. Why it's so out of line with the truth of scripture. It's deeply ingrained in us this. So we have to deal with it. But first of all, it comes from a wrong doctrine of God, a wrong understanding of God.

I said plenty about that last week. If you weren't here, you want to hear more, then you can get the tape or listen online. But we must grasp that, yes, God is totally sovereign.

Yes, he does know everything about the future. Indeed, he determines everything. Every detail from the beginning of our life to the end. But that does not mean that God can only work out those things with our help.

[4 : 31] By him giving us special direct intervention and guidance at every crossroads in life, so that we then get it right. We then take responsibility not to mess it up.

No, it doesn't mean that at all. All through the Bible, God's sovereignty is just assumed. It's declared with absolute clarity. But nowhere, nowhere in the scriptures, are we led to expect that these secret things of God will be revealed to us in advance of the way that we're to make choices in life.

No, rather we're to live by the things that are revealed by trust and obedience. When you think about it, the alternative is that we're really trying to usurp the place of God.

That, of course, is the basic sin of man. Adam and Eve grasping at the knowledge that God told them was not to be theirs. So it begins with a wrong understanding of God, and we went into that a lot more last week.

Secondly, it comes from a wrong doctrine of scripture. God's revelation, the Bible as we have it, comes to us not as a random collection of verses to be used and abused in any way we take the fancy to.

[5 : 42] No. It's a coherent unfolding story. In at least two ways. First, God's revelation accumulates as the story of the Bible unfolds.

We begin in Genesis. We go through the patriarchs, the judges, the period of the kings, the prophets, all the time moving forward until the great climax of God's revelation, the coming of Jesus Christ.

And in the revelation of God in Christ and in the apostolic gospel about Jesus Christ. Hebrews 1 and 21. In the past, there were many and diverse revelations.

But in these last days, God has spoken to us in his son. That's the climax. And Jesus is God's final word to mankind. Jesus and the apostolic witness to him.

Jesus says to his disciples, the apostles in John 16, that after he had ascended, the Holy Spirit would come to them and to lead them into all truth so that they might write the New Testament scriptures, that we might have a complete revelation.

[6 : 46] That's why Peter says God has given us everything we need for life and godliness. We have the gospel, the word of the apostles. So we don't need any new revelations from God.

We have this final revelation of the gospel in his son. And if we say that we need more, what we're really saying is that that revelation is insufficient. We don't trust what God has given us.

No, we don't need more revelation. What we do need to do is apply what God has revealed to every part of our lives. So God's revelation accumulates as the Bible story goes on.

But not only that, God's story of redemption itself unfolds. Something totally cataclysmic happened with the coming of Jesus Christ in history, with the completion of his work, with his resurrection and his ascension.

It wasn't just God's final revelation to man, it was God's final work on behalf of man for his salvation. So a new era has dawned, the age of the Spirit, as we're told in the New Testament.

[7 : 56] And since the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit has animated believers in Jesus Christ in a new way, a way that was impossible before the Lord Jesus Christ ascended to heaven.

Now that is a whole series in itself to get into all of that. But at the very least, it means that Christ, the wisdom of God, now indwells his people in a new way.

We are one with him in spirit, Paul tells us. And it's an irony, you see, that often those believers who are keenest on talking about seeking guidance from outside by special signs and words and all that sort of thing, they're saying we're doing that to emphasize the role of the Holy Spirit.

But in fact, that's actually to have a hugely inadequate doctrine of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is within us. He's renewing us. He's sanctifying every aspect of our personality, especially our thinking.

He's renewing our minds. That's his primary work, and that's a far greater thing. He's within us. Why would we constantly be having to look for guidance from outside?

[9 : 10] So it's a wrong doctrine of Scripture. Thirdly, it's also a wrong handling, very often, of Bible text. And we do that in all kinds of ways, justifying all sorts of practices by verses that we just take completely out of context, sometimes in absolutely scandalous ways.

And here's a common one, Proverbs 3, verse 5. Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not to your own understanding. People say, oh, that means you're not to think about a decision, you'll wait for the Lord to tell you.

That's nothing to do with what it's talking about. It doesn't mean don't think. It means think in godly ways, with the fear of the Lord behind you.

The very next verse says, in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your path straight. You can't just pluck a verse like that out and say, don't think God's going to tell you what to do.

It's ridiculous. Or we take the story of Gideon. How often do we hear people using that phrase? Or we'll put a fleece out. Metaphorically speaking, as though God was going to do something.

[10 : 15] I actually know of a case where somebody facing a big decision in life went and bought a fleece, and actually was putting it out in their garden every night. But not only is there absolutely no justification whatsoever for that kind of approach to guidance in the New Testament, after Pentecost, if you just go back and read the story in Judges chapter 6, it's perfectly plain.

There was no question for that being a sensible thing to do even then. You just read the story, and we're meant to see that Gideon's being a twit. God just tells him what to do, and then Gideon's fluttering about with his fleece back and forward.

It's a complete pantomime. We're meant to see that it's idiotic. It's God's staggering mercy that we're meant to marvel at in that story. There's so many more examples we could take.

Another one is James chapter 1, verse 5. If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all, and it will be given to him. Again and again, that's used as supposed to be talking about praying for guidance.

Pray for guidance in any situation, and God will zap into your head what you have to do. There's nothing to do with that. The wisdom that James is talking about is a quality of life.

[11 : 34] He's talking about mature, godly, Christian character. So in James 3, 17, he says, the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

That's what he's telling people to pray for. Growth in Christian character, a spiritual way of life, as against a worldly way of life. Or again, people today read the Acts of the Apostles in a totally mistaken way, as if that unique period in the expansion of the church, in the apostolic era, was meant to reply directly to us and be exactly as we are to think today.

Of course it's not. It's unique. But even if it were, there's no mention anywhere in the book of Acts about prayer for guidance. Take Acts chapter 15.

A great worldwide crisis, the ecumenical council that took place to decide how the Jews and the Gentiles were going to relate in the church. Huge decisions. We don't read anywhere about them all getting down to pray for God's guidance.

What does he say? It seems good to us and to the Holy Spirit to do this. It seems good to us to do this. That doesn't mean they didn't pray or weren't prayerful. But it does mean particularly in that context that they were interpreting the Bible and its demands for their way that they had to live and work then.

[12 : 59] There's no mention anywhere in the Acts of the Apostles about the Apostles or anybody else going to seek God's guidance, to seek his will for what they're to do from prophets, even though there were prophets ministering then.

So in Acts chapter 21, Agabus comes along and quite out of the blue, not having been sought, but out of the blue, says, Paul, you're going to be bound up and beaten if you go to Rome.

Well, Paul wasn't looking for that. And in fact, in the circumstances, he completely ignored it. He clearly didn't take it as guidance that God was giving him. So we just mustn't abuse the word of God.

We mustn't turn it into a horoscope. That's scandalous. What we're doing when we do that is turning God into the genie of Aladdin's lamp that we call up to give us an answer whenever we have a problem.

No, no, no. As we said last time, ultimately it comes back really to this, a wrong attitude of God, of heart to God. Because we have sinful hearts, we're constantly drifting back.

[14 : 06] And the fact is that we're constantly being taken up with earthly things, not the heavenly things that God is taken up with. So our hearts are full of worries about what we'll eat, what we'll wear, what we'll drink, how we'll work, who we'll marry, all these things, earthly things.

And these become the things that fill our prayers, as Jesus says, just like the pagans. Instead of trusting our heavenly Father, who, as Jesus says, knows that you need all these things, but what he wants you to do is fill your prayers with the concerns of his kingdom, his way.

So we must repent of these attitudes. They're not just unhelpful, they're wrong. They're evidence of the unbelief in our hearts that needs to be suppressed and put down and repented of.

So that's where we must start. We must get first things first. A right attitude of heart. Well, surely there is a better way then, the way of faith, not the pagan way.

Well, yes, there is. It's the way of walking by the things that are revealed. It's living by all the revelation that God does give us to us and to our children. Don't forget that bit.

[15 : 18] It's quite simply this, living by the word of God. Well, what does it mean to do all the words of this law? What does it actually mean to live by all the revelation that God gives us?

All the revelation that God means us to have instead of seeking after the secret things that he doesn't mean us to have? Well, let me suggest that we can think of God's leading and guiding us today by his revelation under three headings.

God leads us by his revelation to us, by his reformation within us, and by his regulation around us. So first then, God's revelation to us.

God's word is, first of all, his spirit's revelation to us. His Holy Spirit breathes out the words into Scripture, and the same spirit opens our minds so that we may understand God's word from Scripture.

Look at these words that we read in 2 Peter 1. Remember, Peter is writing on this threshold of the post-apostolic era. Soon there won't be any apostles living.

[16 : 28] They're going to be terrible days. How are they going to cope? Who do they turn to? Well, his answer is not to popes, or bishops, or presbyters, or anybody else.

No. His answer is to the word of Scripture. Verse 3, he's very clear. God has given us everything we need for life and godliness. It's through our knowledge of God and his great and precious promises, his word in Scripture, that we'll escape the corruption of this world, that we'll make it to heaven.

He expands on that very clearly in verses 16 to the end of the chapter, speaking about the authority and the sufficiency of all of the Scriptures that we have.

Verse 16 to 18, he talks about the apostolic witness, the witness of the New Testament. In verse 16, he says, we're not only eyewitnesses, but verse 19, we were earwitnesses.

We heard the voice of God interpreting with clarity from heaven. This is my son. This is what you're to think. So the words of the apostles, the New Testament Scriptures, are trustworthy.

[17 : 36] Verses 19 to 21, he affirms at the same time the Old Testament Scriptures, the prophetic word. He says, it's a lamp to lighten our ways until the very last day, a sure and certain word.

We would do well to pay attention to it. And again and again in this letter, he says, this is how you're to live, by the Scriptures, by the words of the prophets and the apostles.

Look over to chapter 3, verse 2. Remember the predictions, the promises of the holy prophets, he says, the Old Testament, and the commandment of our Lord and Savior through your apostles.

That's the New Testament. That's how you're to live. Keep to that. And by the way, just look at that verse for a second. Notice that Jesus' commands come to us through the apostles' commands.

commands. That's enough to give a liberal theologian a heart attack. You can't have any of this, oh, we want Jesus and not Paul. No, the commands of our Lord and Savior come through the apostles. And look also that the promises are the promises of the Old Testament prophets.

[18 : 44] The commands come from our Lord and Savior in the New Testament. That's enough to give a faint to those who want to do away with the law of God in the Old Testament as though it was no help to us. But you see what he's saying?

We've got everything we need. We have the scriptures, old and new. We no longer need these many and diverse ways of God speaking to his people in the past.

We have the final revelation. And to deny that is to deny the uniqueness of Christ, to deny his revelation to us as the final word of God in history.

It's to deny the sufficiency of Christ as our Redeemer who finished his work. So first and foremost in our thinking about guidance we need a right grasp of scripture.

Not just to believe it as God's authoritative word but to trust it as God's sufficient word as all that we need for life and godliness. Now that's hard for some people.

[19 : 44] Many seem to assume something rather different. They say, well that's fine, God's word is authoritative, it's a general guide that he's given us but when we need specific decisions no, no, no we need something more.

We need special guidance. We need something else. But that is to misunderstand entirely what it means to be a believer united to Christ by his Spirit.

I've already said that's to devalue the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. It's not to give prominence to him. The Holy Spirit is within us. He's united us to Christ.

He's transforming us to be like Christ, to think with the mind of Christ, to live in the way of Christ. That is the work of God's Spirit in us. And that transformation, Paul tells us in Romans 12, verse 2, is being worked by the renewal of our mind, by the word of God.

It's his revelation to us. It's changing our thinking so that we're less and less conformed to the ways of this world and more and more conformed to the ways and the thinking of God.

[20 : 55] God's not interested, you see, with you and me, in an endless process of guiding us to make right decisions. No, he wants to transform us so that making right decisions becomes an instinctive and natural part of our life.

Otherwise, we'd never grow. We'd never get anywhere in the Christian life. I can illustrate it like this. A week or two ago, a minister friend came to visit me and before he came, he asked for the address and I said, do you need directions?

He said, no, it's all right. I've borrowed a relative's car and it's got GPS. I said, well, what's that? A global positioning system. I said, well, what's that? Oh, you just type in your address and you type in where I'm starting from and a lovely lady's voice comes on every few seconds, about 100 yards before I have to make a turning.

Turn left at the next road. Turn right at the roundabout. Make a U-turn. You're on the wrong road. He said, it's fantastic. He had to make one U-turn but apart from that, he made it very clear.

But I said to him, do you think you'll be able to find your way back next time without that? He said, oh, no. You see, I thought that sounded great. It would have been handy for me perhaps when I first came to Glasgow.

[22 : 10] But my car's not posh enough to have GPS so I just had to get the map out. I had to try out the routes that people advised to me. I had to observe the traffic. I had to learn alternative routes.

I had to learn how to go. I had to learn when to go to avoid the traffic on the Kingston Bridge. I had to learn sometimes just when not to go because it was disastrous. But the result is that I now know all sorts of different ways to get to church here.

I can even manage it when there's a rangers match at Ibrox just coming out near where I live. Very difficult. But you see many Christians want GPS guidance.

They don't want to think. They want that voice coming and telling them a hundred yards before every turn. But you see what that means? No growth. No development. No godly transformation.

You just won't be able to find your way instinctively in the future. William Stowe once said God doesn't want a heaven populated by infants. and that's right.

[23 : 13] He wants spiritual grown-ups. He's transforming us. He's renewing our minds through his revelation to us. This is so important. Let me say it again.

God's revelation to us in Scripture is all sufficient. It's all we need for life and godliness. Turn over to 2 Timothy chapter 3 to that passage that we read.

You'll know these verses very, very well where Paul speaks about in verse 15 the sacred writings which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, for training in righteousness that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work.

Now do you see what he's saying there? Often we miss the real significance of these words. We use that text as a proof text for the inspiration of Scripture. Well it is that.

But in the context here that's not primarily what Paul's talking about. He's not primarily on about Scripture's authority what we're to believe about Scripture.

[24 : 21] He's actually concerned with its sufficiency. What we do with Scripture do you see? He says it's sufficient for salvation and to equip us for every good work.

Do you see what he's saying? The same as Peter. It's all that we need for everything. Don't need anything else. Now of course what he means is not that we're to use it as a horoscope picking out a text getting a word.

No. But in all its fullness the Scriptures of the Old and the New Testament to inhabit us to shape our thinking to transform our thinking.

That's how it works. Of course sometimes the Scripture speaks to us in a very specific way teaches us in a very specific decision I mean that's obvious if I'm trying to think about what career I should follow the Scripture tells me you're not to be a thief it's very direct and clear isn't it?

If I'm thinking about who to get married to it tells me very clearly not to somebody who's a pagan it's very clear. But you see Paul's talking about much much more than that. God's revelation in Scripture he says must be at work within us to create a Christian mind.

[25 : 37] Oliver Barclay the former leader of the UCCF had an excellent book called Developing a Christian Mind a Christian Worldview learning to think biblically about everything until the ways of Christ become instinctive to us.

That's what he's talking about. It's all part of the remaking of our humanity to make us conform to the Lord Jesus Christ. So in that sense guidance it's all just part and parcel of growing up maturing as a Christian believer.

And the first thing we need to do in that process is to understand God's revelation. That's why in 2 Timothy 2.15 Paul says to Timothy work hard labor unashamedly to be somebody who rightly handles the word of truth not somebody who abuses it.

But it's much much easier isn't it to press the button and sit back and listen to the lovely voice of the GPS sort of guidance. Do this do that do the next thing. But God wants us to get to know his atlas for life.

He wants us to get to know his word to work with his word to become instinctive with it. And it's just like starting to read a map. When you start to do that you have to learn certain things.

[26 : 58] You have to learn the key, the symbols, the conventions, the scale, all these sorts of things. It's just like that with the Bible. You won't get into the Bible just by chance. You need to learn how to handle it.

You need to learn the big story of the Bible, how it fits together. You need to learn the doctrine of the Bible, how it's consistent in what it says about life and the world. You need to learn how to read a text responsibly as part of a letter, part of a sentence, part of a paragraph.

But many of us it seems just seem to think that's too hard, it's too complex. But Paul says do your best, work. He's talking about hard labor, sweating, thinking.

That's the way you get guidance he says, God's way. Get into God's word. That's the way to real transformation, to beginning to think about the world and life and everything from a biblical perspective so that what God is doing starts to shape what we're doing in a way that's natural.

But of course this is not primarily a mechanical thing. It's not primarily an intellectual exercise. I must say that clearly. It's a spiritual one. We are all to be theologians, the Bible makes that clear, but we're not being called to be dry academics.

[28 : 24] God's word for us is primarily not just for information but it is revelation, it's personal. He's revealing himself to us with power to transform us and therefore we must approach his word as that.

We must approach it prayerfully. We must approach it with open hearts. And that leads us to the second thing that God's word is the agent of reformation within us.

God's spirit is at work within us transforming us as he applies God's word, God's revelation to our hearts. God leads and guides his people by shaping their hearts.

Remember we said this morning in the Bible the heart isn't the seat of the emotions. In biblical thinking that's your guts actually. That's why in the authorized verse we talk sometimes about bowels of mercy.

Sounds strange to us. But no, the heart is the control center of our being. It's our thoughts, it's our affections, it's our desires, our will, our conscience, everything.

[29 : 25] It's our inner man or inner being as Paul calls it. And that's where Christ dwells in us by his Holy Spirit. So, in Ephesians chapter 3 for example, Paul's praying for them that they would be strengthened with power through his spirit in your inner being so that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith.

And that happens, Paul says, as they comprehend, as they understand the extent of the love of God to them in the gospel, in God's word. So, God's word transforms our hearts from the inside out.

It's important, very important that I stress this because to say that God guides us by his word is not just saying an intellectual thing.

It's not saying that there is no place for feelings, for desires, for spiritual discernment. I'm not saying that. Sometimes when people are talking about what I'm talking about tonight and emphasizing that guidance shouldn't be thought of as primarily from without but should be from scripture, sometimes it can sound like that.

It can sound rather cold, rather distant, rather impersonal. Rather like God has said, well, here's my word, here's the parameters, here's the scope of my will, now get on with it.

[30 : 50] Stay inside that and you'll be okay. Now, there's a sense in which that's right because we needn't be crippled by doubts and fears. But no, there's much more to it than that.

It's not just an impersonal thing, it's not just an intellectual thing, it's deeply personal. God's word is to be in our hearts so that we're living close to God's heart.

It's a relationship. He wants hearts continually yielded to him in love. That is the real fruit of the Holy Spirit transforming us within.

God wants us to yield our hearts to him in love. He wants that more than anything else. And we do that as we allow his word to possess us. That's what Proverbs 3.5 is all about, by the way.

It's not telling us not to think, it's telling us to think in a godly way. To meditate, to let God's word go into our hearts, our innermost being. And that's the key to living within God's will.

[31 : 53] It's living in a love relationship with Jesus. And that relationship is nurtured by his word. so that we can say like the psalmist, I desire to do your will, O my God.

Your law is within my heart. Now we can think about this in a number of ways because if the heart is our whole control center, then God's word reforming our heart means a number of things.

First of all, it means developing a godly mind. Not just theological knowledge, although that is important, but what the Bible calls godly wisdom. Proverbs 6.21 talks about binding God's word on our heart and around our neck so that wherever we go we're led by it.

God's wisdom is a light, a lamp. And God's word is to work reformation within us so as to direct our lives in line with the desires of God, in line with the wisdom of God.

And that's not primarily an intellectual thing, it's a spiritual thing. Proverbs 2.1-6 says, if we call out to God for insight, then he'll give us understanding.

[33 : 02] And that understanding begins with what he calls the fear of the Lord, a right relationship with God, knowing God as God and knowing us as his creatures.

And all of Scripture is given to us to make us wise for salvation and for every good work because all Scripture grows that right relationship with God.

one reason, perhaps, that we find guidance so difficult is that we very often ignore that part of Scripture which is most full of wisdom, the wisdom literature.

You want to know how to live? Well, read the book of Proverbs. You want to know how to puzzle out life? Well, read the book of Ecclesiastes. How to suffer? Well, that's why we've got Job.

How to love? That's why we've got the Song of Songs. God's will is his wisdom. It's a matter of his spirit at work in us, applying that word to the mind of our hearts, if I can put it that way.

[34 : 07] But another aspect of God's work in our hearts is developing a godly conscience. We've got a responsibility to think through the implications of the gospel for our day-to-day lives.

What is the right thing to do because it's in line with the gospel? And what's wrong to do because it's not? And we come to our mature thinking about these things at different rates. The Bible recognizes that.

Paul says, we're not to force things against other people's consciences for them to do, nor are we to go against our own conscience. In Romans chapter 14, he talks about all of us being fully convinced in our own minds, thinking through the implications.

We've got a responsibility to do that for our conscience to be honed by the gospel of God. Third thing is developing a godly prayer life. Not by saying, oh, I've got a decision to make, I'll pray about it.

And what we mean is, I'll use that as a substitute for thinking. No, if that's what you think, don't pray about it. Stop praying about it. As if God's going to zap the answer into your head.

[35 : 10] No. But what developing a godly prayer life is all about is becoming a person of prayer. And prayer and God's word go together.

God's word is only understood if we approach it in an open, prayerful way with a prayerful heart. That's why many scholars can be experts in the Bible but understand not the first thing about it.

We come to it in prayer. So what should our prayer for guidance be? Lord, give me day by day an appetite for your word and an understanding of it.

Give me the right desires in my heart, not for my glory but for yours. Give me a humble heart to heed your correction, to listen to others. Help me to trust you.

Help me to go forward in faith, not in fear. That's what James 1.5 is about. It's praying for the wisdom that's from above. It means developing a godly obedience.

[36 : 10] Our will must be bent so that we not only know the will of God but we actually do it. Paul says very significantly, doesn't he, we have to present our bodies as a living sacrifice.

In other words, we're to obey him in fact, not just in theory. Actually in the flesh, not just in our minds. I don't know about you but I find it a great deal easier to be obedient to God in theory than in practice, don't you?

But it's not just a matter of our thinking, it's a matter of our living, of obedience. So often it's not actually knowing God's will that's the problem, it's doing it.

So in all these ways, God's revelation to us must be working in our hearts to work a reformation in us. The Holy Spirit molding and shaping our hearts, changing us so that we become more and more conformed to the Lord Jesus Christ so that his will becomes our will.

The psalmist says, delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart. Well, he has to because there will be his desires.

[37 : 21] Finally, we must also recognize too though that we are also guided by God's regulation around us. God's intimate providence is quietly shaping all things around us all the time in ways that are often unseen and silent but his providential care is also seen in many ways that he has revealed to us, things that he has made known to us directly for our benefit.

I've got three C's here. The first is the church. That's part of God's regulation around us. We're not alone. He sets the lonely in families. He's given us the blessing of fellowship and communion with his people so that we can learn from one another what it means to live with godly wisdom.

Thank God that he has. It's together with his people that we begin to understand and apply scripture properly. We're not individualists. The word of God is written to the church.

We have help from our brothers and sisters to work out our thinking in the light of scripture to learn godly wisdom to learn how to pray. We need to be humble.

We need to learn to take advice from other people about decisions we have to make. Proverbs 15 22 without counsel plans fail but with many advisors they succeed.

[38 : 41] As long as they are actually wise and godly advisors not just asking endless people until at last somebody says oh yes I agree with you after 99 folk have said no you're an idiot.

Not that. Take an example so called call to ministry. I find that people very often make that a very mystical thing as though there was some great strange and weird call from outside.

Well I don't find that in the New Testament. The only call that seems to be recognized there is the call of the church when it recognizes somebody's gifts and suitabilities for a specific need.

In Acts chapter 16 there's no mention of Timothy having a call. Paul took him and he took him and he circumcised him too.

He didn't get any say in that apparently. Of course that doesn't mean that there's no such thing as an inner desire or call. It doesn't mean that we can't recognize to some degree our own gifts but what it does mean is that in his wisdom God has given us the church.

[39 : 48] He's given us the fellowship. It's a manifestation of God's care for his people and as such it's a source of wisdom for us. God imparts wisdom very often to individual believers through the corporate fellowship of his people.

The spirit is at work in our lives. We encourage one another. We teach and train and admonish one another. But one warning. We mustn't ever elevate that kind of wisdom above the clear teaching of scripture of course.

God is always at work reforming his church according to the scriptures not vice versa. Lots of people seem to think that today. God is always reforming the scriptures according to what his church thinks.

No. But the church is a great gift of God. A source of wisdom. Second, circumstances. God controls all things. His will and his purpose.

And very often it's hidden to us but sometimes it's very clear. God opens doors and he closes doors. So in Romans 1.13 Paul says he hoped to come to them but God closed the door.

[40 : 54] Whereas in 1 Corinthians 16 a great and effective door was opened by God for his ministry. In 2 Corinthians 1.16 God prevents him from going to Corinth.

In 1 Thessalonians he even says Satan hindered him on one occasion. And sometimes it is hard isn't it to know exactly what's going on in the heavenly realms but surely that's the place for prayer.

Whatever the circumstances we can come to God and lay it before him and we are to pray for the advance of his kingdom. We're to pray that whatever hinders that will be removed.

But sometimes circumstances just prevent us from doing what's in our heart's desire. If that's the case we have to take that. We take it to the Lord in prayer but we accept it.

Again we've got to be careful never to put circumstances above the clarity of scripture. If I'm praying day by day Lord lead me not into temptation and yet one evening late on I find myself in the company of another woman who's not my wife.

[42 : 02] I don't suddenly conclude that God must have providentially arranged things so that I can commit adultery with nobody knowing. Of course not. No God's word must rule my heart and my body whatever the circumstances.

That brings us neatly to the last C. Common sense. I often ask people who are confused about guidance. I say to them well what did you do to think things through?

How did you decide things before you were a Christian? They say well I thought about it. I looked at all the angles. I turned it all over and I made the best decision I could possibly make. Now why would God want you to jettison your intelligence, your common sense and everything else for some kind of bizarre voodoo when you become a Christian?

Of course he doesn't. he wants to sanctify your mind and your common sense. And I just think an awful lot of trouble would be avoided in this whole sphere if Christian common sense were a bit more common.

We need to laugh at ourselves sometimes. But that's just godly wisdom at work. It's sound biblical judgment. Some decisions are clear matters of obedience to the Bible.

[43 : 11] I'm not to lie. I don't need any more guidance. But of course other things are matters of exercising wise judgment, sober judgment, sanctified common sense.

If we're assessing our gifts and abilities, if we're thinking about our own path in life, our work, our secular career, maybe serving in the church, Paul has very sane words for us in Romans 12 verse 3, don't think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment.

Well, we need to do that. It's common sense. We need to be wise about ourselves and others. There's nothing pious. About thinking that is totally divorced from reality.

It's no good thinking it would be a great idea for so-and-so to teach Sunday school if they just can't possibly cope with children. It would be chaos and mayhem. God is very unlikely to be calling you to play the organ as part of your service to the church if you've never ever played a note even on the piano.

Yet somebody came to me and said that God had told them that that was their sphere of service. We need some sanctified common sense. For yourself, if you're thinking about your career or your future, you need to think about what grips you, what gives you energy, what animates you, what sort of thing were you made for.

[44 : 32] God's very, very unlikely to be calling you to a life of misery, doing something you just cannot do, you have no aptitude for, no spark. No, he's not.

Nor is he going to likely want you to marry somebody you can't stand the sight of or being in their presence. Don't worry. In the areas of opportunity, sometimes we just have to ask what's possible.

For example, in our mission strategy, surely it's right, surely it's right, like the Apostle Paul, that we should plan and have a strategy for evangelizing. But sometimes certain things at certain times just seem to be impossible.

We have to change our strategy. Sometimes God may even directly redirect or change our direction in something. He may intervene, especially, I suppose, if what he wants us to do seems to fly totally in the face of everything that our wisdom and common sense would tell us.

So, in Acts chapter 8, when Philip is in the middle of a revival, the Holy Spirit directly intervenes and takes him off into the desert. Why? Well, he would never have thought of that by himself.

[45 : 40] Clearly, it flies in the face of all normal judgments. Well, sometimes God does do that. But there's never any indication in the Bible that we're to wait for that sort of intervention before we start doing something.

We're not to just knock on doors timidly and wait and see if they open. No, we're to just push through the door and get on with it. If God wants us to do something different, he'll slam it.

If I might just make a pointed application of that, I think that sort of thing applies to the whole realm of human relationships. I think a lot of young Christian men these days are rather feeble knockers on doors.

I think they need to get on, fling the door open and get on with it. But maybe you don't think that. Let me think of two things in closing here.

There's a word of comfort here for all of us. God is good. We don't need to fear. We can trust him. God leads us clearly. He doesn't send bolts from the blue that will unsettle and confuse and put us into a panic.

[46 : 45] The person who does that is the devil, not the Lord Jesus Christ. God may answer us very firmly on things when it's a matter of disobedience, but he will tell us that is wrong and this is what you must do, but that will be clear to us in scripture.

But we don't need to fear. God is not a pagan God. He's not vindictive. We don't need to fear the future.

We don't need to be full of anxiety like the pagans are. A wrong decision that you make is not going to put you out of God's will. It is not going to consign you to God's second best dustbin forever.

That is impossible. impossible if you are seeking to live a life of obedience in love to Christ. Believe me, you are free.

You can launch out. You don't have to fear. But finally, there is a warning also because there is a sense in which there can be crucial things in life where a wrong turning does change the whole course of our life.

[47 : 58] But that concerns not matters of guidance but matters of obedience. And that's always the hardest thing, isn't it? Not to discern but to obey. And there isn't ever any excuse for a turning that is a turning away from God.

A turning that is a turning away from the way of faith and obedience. We cannot ever presume upon God. We can't ever say, well, I'll do this but later on I'll repent.

No, sin always has consequences. And there is all the difference in the world between a misjudgment and a rebellion. The first thing can never put you out of God's will or put you into second best or any such thing.

But rebellion against God ensures that you're not out of God's will but flagrantly against his will. God's revelation is ours.

It belongs to us. He says you must live it. It's at work within us to reform us, to make our desires his so he wants us to love it.

[49 : 10] And his providential care surrounds us all the time. Every hair on your head is numbered. So rejoice. And as Paul says in Philippians 2, continue to work out your own salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.

Trust and obey for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey. And when we do trust and when we do obey, we cannot be out of the good, gracious, kind purposes of God.

We can't. So don't worry.