

BEING MINDFUL OF GOD'S GUIDANCE

We make our beginning in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.
Dear Lord God, Sanctify us in Your truth, Your Word is truth. (John 17:17)
We ask that Your Word would be a blessing to our lives. Amen.

God has given wonderful promises to encourage and support us as we begin another year.
Let's take a good look at His promise in **Psalm 32:8**.

ESV (English Standard Version)

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

YLT (Young's Literal Translation)

I cause thee to act wisely, And direct thee in the way that thou goest,
I cause mine eye to take counsel concerning thee.

NLT (New Living Translation)

The LORD says, "I will guide you along the best pathway for your life.
I will advise you and watch over you.

NIV (New International Version)

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;
I will counsel you and watch over you.

These are all the promises and encouragements which are found in just this one verse:

I will instruct you ... I will teach you in the way you should go ... I will counsel you ...
My eye is upon you ... I cause you to act wisely ... I will direct you ... I will guide you ...
I will advise you ... I will watch over you ... I will guide you along the best pathway for your life.

Each of these promises is a strong reassurance that we do not enter this New Year on our own, and that we never have to face life on our own. We celebrated the birth of Jesus in December. His name Emmanuel means 'God with us'. This name reminds us of His constant presence.

Even in our worship services, we ask God to lead us, we ask for His guidance and direction. In the Lutheran Service Book, in Divine Service, Setting One and Setting Two, we pray together: "For the sake of Your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us. Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in Your will and walk in Your ways to the glory of Your holy name. Amen."

Let's see how God led and guided and directed His people in the Bible.

Genesis 12:1 Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." (God's guidance for Abraham was audible!)

This new land was Canaan. After many years, Abraham and Sarah were blessed with a son, Isaac. After Sarah's death and when Isaac was 40 years old, Abraham did not want his son to marry a daughter of the Canaanites so he commissioned his servant, Eliezer, to find a wife for Isaac from among Abraham's own relatives. His servant traveled to Mesopotamia, to the town where Abraham's brother Nahor lived. Abraham had assured his servant that God would send His angel before him so that his quest for a wife for Isaac would be successful. Abraham did not want Isaac to return to Abraham's native land because God had told him to leave that place.

Genesis 24 - all 67 verses - relate how Abraham's servant prayed for God's guidance to find the right wife for Isaac and it relates God's answer to that prayer. We'll read just a portion of this chapter to see how God guided Abraham's servant and answered his prayer.

Genesis 24:7 The LORD, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my kindred, and who spoke to me and swore to me, 'To your offspring I will give this land,' he will send his angel before you, and you shall take a wife for my son from there.

Abraham's trust in God had grown immensely since he first arrived in Canaan. He could now give full assurance to his servant that the Lord would guide his ways and oversee his search.

Genesis 24:10-21 Then the servant took ten of his master's camels and departed, taking all sorts of choice gifts from his master; and he arose and went to Mesopotamia to the city of Nahor. And he made the camels kneel down outside the city by the well of water at the time of evening, the time when women go out to draw water. And he said, "O LORD, God of my master Abraham, please grant me success today and show steadfast love to my master Abraham. Behold, I am standing by the spring of water, and the daughters of the men of the city are coming out to draw water. Let the young woman to whom I shall say, 'Please let down your jar that I may drink,' and who shall say, 'Drink, and I will water your camels' - let her be the one whom you have appointed for your servant Isaac. By this I shall know that you have shown steadfast love to my master."

Before he had finished speaking, behold, Rebekah, who was born to Bethuel the son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham's brother, came out with her water jar on her shoulder. The young woman was very attractive in appearance, a maiden whom no man had known. She went down to the spring and filled her jar and came up. Then the servant ran to meet her and said, "Please give me a little water to drink from your jar." She said, "Drink, my lord." And she quickly let down her jar upon her hand and gave him a drink. When she had finished giving him a drink, she said, "I will draw water for your camels also, until they have finished drinking." So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough and ran again to the well to draw water, and she drew for all his camels. The man gazed at her in silence to learn whether the LORD had prospered his journey.

Genesis 24:27 The man bowed his head, worshiped the LORD and said, "Blessed be the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken his steadfast love and his faithfulness toward my master. As for me, the LORD has led me to the house of my master's kinsmen."

Abraham's servant offered a specific prayer to be shown the right young woman to be Isaac's wife. Before he had even finished praying, God answered. The 'right' young woman was the first one he asked for a drink. She was kind and very generous to draw water for his ten camels. This truly shows God's leading, control and faithfulness in the entire situation. It's a perfect picture of **Isaiah 65:24**, Before they call I will answer; while they are yet speaking I will hear.

Abraham had encouraged his servant by saying "God will send his angel before you". His servant asked for God's control of the situation - 'Let her offer to water my camels.' God answered his prayer before he had even finished praying. Abraham's servant acknowledged that 'the LORD had led him' and he "worshipped the LORD" with praise and thanksgiving.

This is just a curious question: Since Rebekah was from Abraham's kinsmen, what relation was she to Isaac? Abraham's brother was Nahor; Nahor's wife was Milcah; their son was Bethuel; Bethuel's daughter was Rebekah. So ... Rebekah was the daughter of Abraham's nephew; she was Abraham's grand-niece. Isaac was the cousin of Rebekah's father.

After Adam and Eve were sent out of the Garden of Eden, Cain, their first-born son, the very first human baby to be born, was the very first person to whom God audibly spoke.

Genesis 4:6-7 The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it."

It was Cain's heart that displeased God, not his choice of sacrifice. Abel was a shepherd so he sacrificed a lamb as an offering. Cain was a farmer so he made a grain offering. Both were proper thank offerings. Abel's offering was given in true faith, but God knew Cain's heart. He knew Cain's motivation and attitude were bad. But because of God's great love and concern for Cain, He earnestly warned Cain about the danger of sin that was "crouching at the door". God wanted Cain to resist the sin that wanted to rule over him, the sin that was lurking in his heart. Already, as stated in **1 Peter 5:8**, the devil was prowling around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. God knew that Satan wanted Cain, so God advised him to be watchful, to be on guard against Satan. God's intention was to direct and lead and guide Cain away from the sin that was crouching at the door but Cain did not take heed, he went his own way.

Another VIP, a very important person, who needed God's warning and heeded that warning was King David who was directed and guided to repentance by God's prophet, Nathan.

2 Samuel 12:1-7, 9-10, 13-14 And the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him and said to him, "There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds, but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children. It used to eat of his morsel and drink from his cup and lie in his arms, and it was like a daughter to him.

Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the guest who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him." Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man, and he said to Nathan, "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity."

Nathan said to David, "You are the man! Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you out of the hand of Saul. Why have you despised the word of the LORD, to do what is evil in his sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and have taken his wife to be your wife and have killed him with the sword of the Ammonites.

Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.' David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." And Nathan said to David, "The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die. Nevertheless, because by this deed you have utterly scorned the LORD, the child who is born to you shall die."

1 Kings 3:6 says David 'walked before God in faithfulness, in righteousness, and in uprightness of heart' except concerning Bathsheba and Uriah, when he did evil in God's sight. At least in this instance, God did not speak audibly to David. Instead, He sent a prophet as His spokesman to rebuke David and to confront him with his guilt. God wanted David to repent of his sin and again walk in His ways. Even though all his sins were forgiven by God, the natural consequences of his sin were not removed. God used His prophet, Nathan, to lead David to repentance, and guide him back to faithfully love God with all his heart and soul and mind and strength.

Sometimes, Christians voice the opinion that if God would just audibly speak to them and give them direct guidance, living God's way, living in His will, and living according to His plan would be so much easier. But look at the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man in **Luke 16:19-31**.

"There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side.

And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.' And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, send him to my father's house - for I have five brothers - so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'"

God spoke to David through His prophet Nathan. He speaks to us today through His prophets, through the apostles, and through Jesus in His written Word. All these have greater authority than someone who would come back from the dead. God earnestly desires that we hear and listen to those through whom He spoke. **Hebrews 1:1-2** "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world."

Here's a problem situation: Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but she was a virgin. How should God tell Mary that she was chosen to be the mother of Jesus, the Savior of the world? Should He speak to her audibly, should He send a prophet to tell her, should He tell her in a special dream, or was there a better way? Mary had to know, without a doubt, that her pregnancy was an act of God, and that it was His will and His plan so she could, with full assurance and confidence, explain to her parents and to Joseph what had happened to her. God chose the appearance and words of an angel to be the best way. God sent His angel Gabriel to tell Mary that "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy - the Son of God." The virgin birth of Jesus was an extraordinary event. God revealed His will and guided her faith in an extraordinary way.

Here's another problem situation: Joseph, earthly father of Jesus, lived in Nazareth. Mary was about eight months pregnant. But it had been prophesied, many years earlier, that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem, the city of David. How should God lead, direct and guide Joseph to the right place? Should He speak to him audibly, should He send a prophet to advise him, should He send an angel to Joseph just like He sent an angel to Mary, or was there a better way?

Luke 2:1-6 In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the

house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth.

Jesus must be born in Bethlehem but Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth. God did not guide them to Bethlehem through a dream or an angel, nor did He 'speak' to Joseph. God directed Joseph to Bethlehem through Caesar Augustus, the Roman emperor. By this we understand that God is in control of all things, even 'world events'. All things work together for His will.

At other times, God guided and led His people through dreams. Both the Wise Men and Joseph were warned of danger in their dreams. **Matthew 2:9-14** "After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt."

God guided the Magi to the infant Jesus by means of a special cosmic event, through the stars and their orbits which He had created on the fourth day of Creation. The Wise Men and Joseph knew, without a doubt, that their dreams were from God, so they obeyed God's will without question, and without hesitation or delay. After all, the life of Jesus, our Savior, was at stake.

We may not always be aware of God's guidance. People have often made decisions, or events have taken place and, in hindsight, they have realized that God's 'timing' was indeed perfect for their situation, that His hand had indeed guided their decisions and the events.

In the Bible, God guided and led His people by speaking audibly to them; in answer to their prayers; through the Words of His prophets; through world events; through angels or in dreams. Do we recognize God's voice? Abraham knew when the one true God was speaking to him. He recognized and knew His voice and He had learned to completely trust and obey God.

John 10:3-5 The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.

Psalm 48:14 NIV For this God is our God for ever and ever; he will be our guide even to the end.

Isaiah 48:17 NIV The LORD says - your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: "I am the LORD your God, who teaches you what is best for you, who directs you in the way you should go."

John 1:1 "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." This Word is Jesus. Until God's Word was written down, God needed to reveal His will and guide the lives of His people in special ways. We are so fortunate and so blessed today to have ALL His Words, which He spoke to His people, gathered together, organized, and printed for our use.

2 Timothy 3:16 NIV "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."

God speaks directly to us through His Word. His wisdom, advice, encouragement, warnings, instructions, His promises and His guidance, are all within reach, right at our fingertips. God desires to guide us throughout every part of our life. He has promised to lead and guide us.

Psalm 32:8, which we read at the beginning, tells us that God desires to lead and guide us, to direct us and cause us to act wisely. It is our desire that God direct us and lead us and teach us in the way that we should go. Abraham's servant prayed for God's guidance and God answered his prayer. Even though God no longer speaks audibly to His people, as He did to Abraham, Cain, Noah and others, His desire to guide us is just as intense as it was in Old Testament times. He speaks to us in His Word, and we speak to Him in prayer. And God has promised to answer our prayers. We pray for His guidance and then we trust Him to lead and guide us with our decisions. He will cause us to act wisely and in accordance with His will.

We look forward to this New Year, knowing and trusting that God will lead us and guide us and instruct us in the way we should go. His name is Emmanuel for He is always with us! Hallelujah!

Prayer: How good and wise of you, O Lord, to communicate your will and your love to your people in your Holy Word. Place within our hearts a hunger and thirst for Your Word so that we will know and follow only your voice. Teach us what is best for us. Direct us in the way we should go. Be our guide, even to the end. We pray this in the precious name of Jesus. Amen.

Closing Hymn 707 in the Lutheran Service Book **Oh, That the Lord Would Guide My Ways**