

Receiving Guidance From God

by Dale and Juanita Ryan

Part of the “Letting God be God” Series

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God is our God for ever and ever
He will be our guide even to the end.
Psalm 48:14

All of us make decisions every day—big decisions and little ones. Sometimes a single decision will have consequences that last the rest of our lives. Most of our decisions in life, however, are small ones. Yet smaller decisions have an cumulative effect—shaping the people we become, defining the course of our lives. Unfortunately we often go about our days unaware of all of the choices we are making—unaware of how our decisions are shaping our lives and impacting others. Sometimes we are startled to find that a kind of aimless, unguided drifting characterizes our experience.

Fortunately, the God who made us and who loves us has offered to be our Guide. In Psalm 32:8 God says to us, “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go.” God remembers the destination our hearts long for. God knows how to help us find the path. Letting God be God means letting God be our Guide through life.

Although we need God’s guidance and God has offered to be our Guide, we may find ourselves resisting this guidance. We may fear that God will guide us in ways that we do not want to go—ways we fear will be hurtful to us. Or we may fear that God wants us to become mindless robots—that God’s guidance means that God will tell us what to do and we will have to do it without being engaged, without being an important part of the process of reflecting and choosing. For most of us these kinds of fears are *not* irrational. They often suggest that we have been hurt by people whom we trusted as guides in the past. If we have received guidance from people who were untrustworthy, then we may find it difficult to trust God for guidance.

It is important to know that the purpose of God’s guidance is not to make us mindless robots or rob us of joy.

Quit the opposite is true. The purpose of God’s guidance is to lead us to the place of our souls’ longing—to the place where we can be “at home” with ourselves and “at home” with God. God offers to be our Guide to becoming all we were made to be—our Guide to a life lived in love and marked by deep joy. That is why God’s guidance is always, at its root, guidance by love, in love, and toward love. The choices God directs and strengthens us to make—at work and at home, with strangers and family members and friends—are loving choices. As we seek God’s guidance and let God lead us, God teaches us to be like himself—loving and faithful.

This perspective on guidance gives a larger meaning and purpose to the daily process of decision making. Each little and big decision becomes a part of a transformation within us, a learning process, a way of life. Mistakes can be as useful in this process—and as important to our growth and learning—as are successes. Little victories that go unnoticed by others can be as pivotal as more public experiences. Facing our resistance and fears about God’s guidance can be as important to our growth as are moments of simple trust.

The purpose of these studies is to help you explore God’s offer to be your Guide. It is our prayer that, in the process of working through these studies, God’s Spirit will free you to receive guidance in new ways.

OUTLINE

1. God’s Promise to Guide—(Psalm 32:8-11)
2. Resisting God’s Guidance—(Isaiah 30:8-21)
3. Praying for Guidance—(Psalm 25)
4. Relying on God’s Guidance—(Psalm 37:1-9)
5. Letting God Guide Us—(Acts 22:1-21; 28:17-20)
6. Walking in God’s Guidance—(Proverbs 3:3-6)

Learning to Let God Be God

The “Letting God Be God” Bible study guides are based on three basic convictions.

The first of these convictions is that we are, by our very nature, dependent on our Maker. We need God. We need God’s help with the daily challenges of life. We need God’s love, peace, forgiveness, guidance and hope. The invitation to “Let God be God” is an invitation to let God be who God really is. But it is also an invitation to be who we really are—God’s deeply loved children.

Second, these studies are based on the conviction that God is willing, ready and eager to be God in our lives. God is not distant, inaccessible or indifferent. Rather, God is actively involved, offering us all that we need. God offers us all the love, strength, hope and peace we need.

Finally, these studies are based on the conviction that the spiritual life begins with receiving from God. What we do when we “let God be God” is to receive from God the good gifts which God is eager to give to us. God has declared his love for us. We are “letting God be God” when we receive this love. God has offered to guide us. We are “letting God be God” when we receive this guidance. Receiving from God is the starting point of the spiritual life. There is, of course, a place in the Christian journey for giving to God—a place for commitment and dedication. But if we have not learned well to receive from God, then we will almost certainly experience the Christian journey to be full of heavy burdens.

These are basic Christian convictions that closely resemble the first three steps of the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. The short summary is: “I can’t. God can. I’ll let him”. They are spiritual truths that apply to all of our lives. They may seem pretty simple. But most of us find that actually doing them—putting these truths into practice—is anything but simple. The problem is that receiving is not instinctive for most of us. What is instinctive is self-sufficiency, independence and managing by ourselves. What comes naturally is trying, trying harder and trying our hardest. Letting go of this performance-oriented spirituality and allowing ourselves to receive from God will be a challenging adventure for most of us. It is the adventure which is at the heart of these Bible studies.

These Bible studies are designed to help you explore what it means to receive from God—what it means to let God be God in your life. George McDonald used a wonderful metaphor when talking about the process of learning to receive from God. He said “There are good things God must delay giving, until his child has a pocket to hold them—until God gets his child to make that pocket. (as cited in Michael R. Phillips, ed., [Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1989], *Discovering the Character of God*, p. 156). These studies are designed to help you sew some new pockets that are big enough to hold the abundant good gifts that God has prepared for you.

Getting the Most from the Letting God Be God Bible Study Guides

The guides in this series are designed to assist you to find out for yourself what the Bible has to say about God and to grow in your ability to “let God be God” in your life. The passages you study will be thought provoking, challenging, inspiring and very personal. It will become obvious that these studies are not designed merely to convince you of the truthfulness of some idea. And they won’t provide a systematic presentation of everything the Bible says about any subject. Rather, they are designed to create an opportunity for biblical truths to renew your heart and mind.

There are six studies in each guide. Our hope is that this will provide you with maximum flexibility in how you use these guides. Combining the guides in various ways will allow you to adapt them to your time schedule and to focus on the concerns most important to you or your group.

All of the studies in this series use a workbook format. Space is provided for writing answers to each question. This is ideal for personal study and allows group members to prepare in advance for the discussion. The guides also contain leader’s notes with suggestions on how to lead a group discussion. The notes provide additional background information on certain questions, give helpful tips on group dynamics and suggest ways to deal with problems that may arise during the discussion. These features equip someone with little or no experience to lead an effective discussion.

Suggestions for Individual Study

1. As you begin each study, pray that God would give you wisdom and courage through his Word.
2. After spending time in preparation, read and reread the passage to be studied.
3. Write your answers in the spaces provided or in a personal journal. Writing can bring clarity and deeper understanding of yourself and of God's Word. For the same reason, we suggest that you write out your prayers at the end of each study.
- 4) Most studies in these studies contain questions that invite you to spend time in meditative prayer. The biblical text is communication addressed personally to us. Meditative prayer can enrich and deepen your experience of a biblical text.
5. After you have completed your study of the passage, you might want to read the leader's notes at the back of the guide to gain additional insight and information.

Suggestions for Group Study

Even if you have already done these studies individually, we strongly encourage you to find some way to do them with a group of other people as well. Although each person's journey is different, everyone's journey is empowered by the mutual support and encouragement that can only be found in a one-on-one or a group setting. Several reminders may be helpful for participants in a group study:

1. Trust grows over time. If opening up in a group setting feels risky, realize that you do not have to share more than what feels safe to you. However, taking risks is a necessary part of growth. So, do participate in the discussion as much as you are able.
2. Be sensitive to the other members of the group. Listen attentively when they talk. You will learn from their insights. If you can, link what you say to the comments of others so the group stays on the topic.
3. Be careful not to dominate the discussion. We are sometimes so eager to share what we have learned that we do not leave opportunity for others to respond. By all means participate! But allow others to do so as well.

4. Expect God to teach you through the passage being discussed and through the other members of the group. Pray that you will have a profitable time together.
5. We recommend that groups follow a few basic guidelines, and that these guidelines be read at the beginning of each discussion session. The guidelines, which you may wish to adapt to your situation, are:
 - a. Anything said in the group is considered confidential and will not be discussed outside the group unless specific permission is given to do so.
 - b. We will provide time for each person present to talk if he or she feels comfortable doing so.
 - c. We will talk about ourselves and our own situations, avoiding conversation about other people.
 - d. We will listen attentively to each other.
 - e. We will be very cautious about giving advice.
 - f. We will pray for each other.

If you are the discussion leader, you will find additional suggestions and helpful ideas for each study in the leader's notes. These are found at the back of the guide.

1. God's Promise to Guide

If you already know where you are and where you want to go, maybe all you need is a map. But if you are really lost and all your maps seem to get you more lost. . . then you need a guide—someone who can help you figure out where you are, remind you where you are headed and help you take the next step in the right direction.

We have all had the experience in life of feeling really lost. Maybe the paths we have tried have led us in circles. Our efforts may seem like “one step forward, two steps back.” Or we may have headed down a number of roads only to find that they were dead-ends. When this happens we can get so disoriented that we can't remember where we are headed—or where we are.

Fortunately, the God of the Bible is a God who promises to be our Guide. God knows where we are headed. And God offers to be with us on the journey. As we will see in this study, God calls us into a trusting relationship with himself and offers to lead us with unfailing love.

Prepare

1. What images come to your mind when you think about God as your guide?

2. What do you hope to gain as you work through the studies in this book?

Read

[8] I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you. [9] Do not be like the horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you. [10] Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD's unfailing love surrounds the man who trusts in him. [11] Rejoice in the LORD and be glad, you righteous; sing, all you who are upright in heart!

Psalm 32:8-11

Study

1. The psalms are conversations with God expressed in the powerful language of poetry. In this portion of Psalm 32, God is the one who is speaking. What title would you give this poem?

2. List the promises that God makes in verse 8.

3. What do you think God is saying in the imagery of the horse or mule?

4. How would you contrast God's promises in verse 8 with God's plea in verse 9?

5. In what way have you felt or acted like the horse or mule who “will not come”—who resists God’s guidance?

6. Reread these verses as if God were speaking directly to you—putting your name in where you can. What thoughts and feelings do you have as you read these words in this way?

7. Write a prayer expressing whatever is on your heart at this time. It may be a desperate plea for guidance, an expression of your openness to guidance, or words of gratitude for God’s promise and provision of guidance.

8. The final verses of this text call us to joy and celebration—the joy and the celebration of life with God. What experience have you had with joy and celebration in response to God’s guidance in your life?

9. In a time of quiet, ask God to speak these promises directly to your heart and mind. Ask God to quiet you and to guide you. What are you think God is saying to you?

Reflect

Read Exodus 33. God tells Moses that an angel will be sent to guide him. Moses refused to go anywhere without God. Put yourself in Moses’ place. What thoughts and feelings do you have as you reflect on this text?

Respond

Re-read Psalm 32:8-11 each day this week, repeating the exercise in question 9. Keep a journal of what you are experiencing each day.

2. Resisting God's Guidance

You have probably heard the old jokes about men who refuse to stop and ask for directions—even when they are obviously lost. Unfortunately this resistance to guidance is just a trivial example of a very general problem. When we are lost—and even when we know we are lost—we still often resist guidance.

Why would we resist guidance when we know we are lost? There are many reasons. For some of us, asking for guidance may feel like a loss of independence. We want that “I can do it myself” feeling. Or it may be that we are only open to guidance if it matches our own plans for the future. Or it might be that we are afraid that we will lose face if we admit that we need guidance. It might seem better to keep going down the wrong road than to admit that we took a wrong turn—even though we know eventually the mistake will become obvious to everyone. Or we might not trust the person who is giving us guidance. How do we know this person and the guidance they offer will be trustworthy?

Even though we may want God's guidance in our lives, we may have ambivalent feelings about being guided because of distorted perceptions about God. Honestly facing our resistance to receiving God's guidance can help us recover from our fears and distortions and to build a deeper, more substantive trust in God our guide.

In this study we will learn something about how God responds to people who resist divine guidance. Does God respond with anger and judgment? Or does God respond with the love, compassion and patience?

Preparation

1. Think about walking with a young child in an area that has major traffic hazards. What would it be like for you if the child took off and ran ahead of you, saying he wanted to do it by himself?

2. Think about a time when you felt, or acted, like that child in relationship to God. What was the experience like?

Read

[8] Go now, write it on a tablet for them, inscribe it on a scroll, that for the days to come it may be an everlasting witness. [9] These are rebellious people, deceitful children, children unwilling to listen to the LORD's instruction. [10] They say to the seers, “See no more visions!” and to the prophets, “Give us no more visions of what is right! Tell us pleasant things, prophesy illusions. [11] Leave this way, get off this path, and stop confronting us with the Holy One of Israel!” [12] Therefore, this is what the Holy One of Israel says: “Because you have rejected this message, relied on oppression and depended on deceit, [13] this sin will become for you like a high wall, cracked and bulging, that collapses suddenly, in an instant. [14] It will break in pieces like pottery, shattered so mercilessly that among its pieces not a fragment will be found for taking coals from a hearth or scooping water out of a cistern.” [15] This is what the Sovereign LORD, the Holy One of Israel, says: “In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength, but you would have none of it. [16] You said, ‘No, we will flee on horses.’ Therefore you will flee! You said, ‘We will ride off on swift horses.’ Therefore your pursuers will be swift! [17] A thousand will flee at the threat of one; at the threat of five you will all flee away, till you are left like a flagstaff on a mountaintop, like a banner on a hill.” [18] Yet the LORD longs to be gracious to you; he rises to show you compassion. For the LORD is a God of justice. Blessed are all who wait for him! [19] O people of Zion, who live in Jerusalem, you will weep no more. How gracious he will be when you cry for help! As soon as he hears, he will answer you. [20] Although the Lord gives you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, your teachers will be hidden no more; with your own eyes you will see them. [21] Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, “This is the way; walk in it.”

Isaiah 30:8-21

Study

1. The players in this drama are God and the people of God. How would you summarize what the people are saying in this drama?

2. How would you summarize what God is saying to the people?

3. What does this text reveal about God?

4. How does this depiction of God compare with your image—or your expectation—of God?

5. What fears or doubts about God—or about yourself—might be contributing to your resistance to God's guidance?

6. Our resistance to God's guidance may not be as overt as the resistance described in this text. When resistance is hidden or subtle it can be even more powerful—because we may not be aware of it. In a time of quiet, ask God to show you ways in which you are resistant to letting God be your guide in life. Write whatever you sensed during this time of prayer.

7. Verse 15 says, "In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength." What important truth is being communicated in this verse?

8. Our situation is like that of the pilot of a single engine airplane flying in the fog. We can choose to follow what the instruments and the air traffic controller are saying, or we can disregard this guidance and risk flying into disaster. The basic truth is that we need God's help and guidance but we are free to choose our own way. How might accepting this basic premise—of the wisdom of letting God be God—make a difference in how you respond to this text?

10. In a time of quiet, ask God to help you let go of the fears and doubts that cause you to resist guidance. Ask God to help you hear his voice saying “this is the way, walk in it.” Spend a few minutes listening for God's voice. Write what you sensed in this time of prayer.

9. Picture yourself as that airplane pilot, lost in the fog. You have been ignoring the air traffic controller's voice. You are realizing that your instruments are telling you that you are in danger. You now want to make contact with the air traffic controller. What would it be like for you to hear her gracious, compassionate voice guiding you back to a safe altitude and position?

Reflect

Write a prayer, acknowledging whatever resistance you have to receiving God's guidance and expressing your desire to hear God's voice saying “This is the way, walk in it.”

Respond

Continue following the exercise in question 10 each day this week. Keep a journal, noting what you sense God is saying to you about your fears, doubts and resistance, and about God's direction for your life.

3. Praying for Guidance

Developing the motivation to move past our resistance to guidance almost always begins with both a deeper recognition of our need and a deeper experience of God.

We need to stay connected to our need because—even though it may be emotionally painful—it will protect us from spiritual arrogance. We seek God’s guidance because our need is real, and even, at times, desperate. Asking for God’s guidance requires us to face the most basic of spiritual truths: there is a God and it is *not* me. The more we understand this fundamental truth, the more likely we are to be willing to ask God for guidance.

Our willingness to ask for guidance from God depends on our ability to trust that God understands our needs and will offer guidance that is full of grace and love. When we pray for God’s guidance we must sometimes confront our fears about God’s character. If we fear that God will shame us or that God is impossible to please, it will be very difficult for us to ask for guidance—or to trust the guidance given. So part of the struggle in praying for guidance is the struggle to let God be God—to let God be our loving, grace-full God.

The text for this study is a psalm which will help us put words on our heart’s longing for God’s guidance.

Prepare

Think of a time when you felt a great urgency about needing direction in your life. What thoughts and feelings accompanied this urgent need?

Were you able to talk with anyone about your urgent need for direction? If you didn’t, what kept you from doing so? If you did, what was the result?

Read

[1] To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul; [2] in you I trust, O my God. Do not let me be put to shame, nor let my enemies triumph over me. [3] No one whose hope is in you will ever be put to shame, but they will be put to shame who are treacherous without excuse. [4] Show me your ways, O LORD, teach me your paths; [5] guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long. [6] Remember, O LORD, your great mercy and love, for they are from of old. [7] Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways; according to your love remember me, for you are good, O LORD. [8] Good and upright is the LORD; therefore he instructs sinners in his ways. [9] He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way. [10] All the ways of the LORD are loving and faithful for those who keep the demands of his covenant. [11] For the sake of your name, O LORD, forgive my iniquity, though it is great. [12] Who, then, is the man that fears the LORD? He will instruct him in the way chosen for him. [13] He will spend his days in prosperity, and his descendants will inherit the land. [14] The LORD confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them. [15] My eyes are ever on the LORD, for only he will release my feet from the snare. [16] Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. [17] The troubles of my heart have multiplied; free me from my anguish. [18] Look upon my affliction and my distress and take away all my sins. [19] See how my enemies have increased and how fiercely they hate me! [20] Guard my life and rescue me; let me not be put to shame, for I take refuge in you. [21] May integrity and uprightness protect me, because my hope is in you. [22] Redeem Israel, O God, from all their troubles!

Psalm 25

Study

1. What emotions do you see being expressed directly and indirectly in this psalm?

2. How does the psalmist describe his relationship with God (verses. 1, 15, 20, 21)?

3. What does the psalmist say about God?

4. List all of the things that the psalmist requests from God.

5. What thoughts and feelings do you have as you reflect on this urgent prayer for help and guidance?

6. As you look at your answer to Question 2, how would you compare or contrast the psalmist's relationship with God and your relationship with God at this time?

7. As you look at your answer to Question 3, how would you compare or contrast what the psalmist trusted to be true about God and what you trust to be true about God?

8. What needs do you have for guidance from God at this time?

9. Take a few minutes and put your answers to Questions 6-8 into the form of a prayer, or a psalm.

10. In a time of quiet, share your psalm with God, being open to whatever response you might sense from God. Write whatever you sensed in this time of prayer.

Reflect

This psalm says (verse 9) that God guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way. Humility here has the sense of a teachable spirit, a child-like trust and dependency. Spend some time asking God for the gift of a teachable, trusting spirit.

Respond

Begin each day asking for God's guidance throughout the day. End each day reflecting on the ways you can see God's hand guiding you.

4. Relying on God's Guidance Study

We are faced with a choice in life. Trust that God is God. Or not. Trust that God is loving, powerful, involved. Or not. Trust that God will win, that goodness and love will win. Or not. Trust that if we commit our lives to God and follow God's way, our lives will be good and loving and thus, worth living. Or not. Trust these truths about God, even though they may seem to be obscured by evil in this world. Or not. The psalm for this study calls us again, to rely on God, to make the choice to trust.

Prepare

As you think about relying on God's guidance for your life what hesitations do you have?

What benefits do you hope to experience as you rely on God's guidance?

Read

[1] Do not fret because of evil men or be envious of those who do wrong; [2] for like the grass they will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away. [3] Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. [4] Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart. [5] Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this: [6] He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun. [7] Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; do not fret when men succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes. [8] Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret--it leads only to evil. [9] For evil men will be cut off, but those who hope in the LORD will inherit the land.

Psalm 37:1-9

1. What two or three themes are interwoven in this text?

2. The psalmist is encouraging his readers to refrain from anxiety (fretting) and from anger. What seems to be the cause of this anxiety and anger?

3. What causes you to be anxious (insecure, afraid, doubtful) or to be angry?

4. What does the psalmist invite us to do?

5. Reflect for a minute on these descriptive action verbs that have to do with entrusting our lives to God's care. Think about an experience you have had with trusting God's care and guidance in any of these ways. What was your experience like?

6. What does the psalmist say will be the result of our seeking God's wisdom and guidance in this way?

7. The source of our anxiety (fretting) and anger is our inability to believe, or to remember, that God is God. We lose track of the fact that God is good, loving and powerful; and that God is intimately involved in our lives. In a time of quiet, reflect on your fears and anger. Offer your fears and anger to God, asking for whatever healing you need. Write whatever you sensed during this time of prayer.

8. As we release our fears, we are able to increasingly trust God. In a time of quiet, ask God to deepen your trust. Commit your hopes, dreams and needs to God. Write whatever you sensed in this time of prayer.

9. The psalmist invites us to be still before God and to wait patiently. In another time of quiet, be still before God. Allow yourself to sense God's presence with you, surrounding you with light and love. Invite God to quiet you and to speak to you. Write whatever you sensed in this time of prayer

10. Share with others in the group, or with one other person (if the group pairs up, or if you are doing this study alone), whatever you are ready to share about your time of prayer.

Reflect

Read Luke 12:22-34. Reflect on Jesus' invitation to release our fears and to trust in God's loving care.

Respond

Repeat the time of prayer in question 9 each day this week, as you seek God's guidance for each day and for your life.

5. Letting God Guide Us

There is no owner's manual passed out at birth which describes in detail how to live life. There is no step-by-step, guaranteed, blueprint for successful living. Life is just too complicated for that. Not even the Bible serves this kind of function. The Bible clearly shows the struggle of godly people trying to find their way in life. At times they find life easy and unambiguous. But at other times it is confusing, at times frustrating, at times hopeless. There is no reason for us to expect that life in God's Kingdom will be any less challenging.

Life is an adventure. It is a quest, a pilgrimage, a journey. Sometimes it may feel like marching in triumphal procession behind the banner of a victorious King. We don't need much guidance in times like this—we just keep marching! But, at other times, it may feel like being lost in the woods without the tools and resources to find our way out. In times like this we need guidance and we want it to be clear, unambiguous—preferably accompanied by a burning bush or pillar of fire. But God's guidance rarely comes like that. As we will see in the text for this study from the life of Paul, guidance can come from several places. Guidance in times like this are like a mosaic, with some assembly required.

Prepare

1. Imagine the leader of scout troop giving instructions to the troop about a day-long adventure in the woods. The task of the day is to find your way back to base camp, using all the skills you have been taught. What would this experience be like for you if the scout leader repeatedly emphasized that you must never get off course, must arrive exactly on time and that the consequences of any error in judgment on the journey could be catastrophic?

2. What would this adventure be like for you if the leader told you to anticipate that you might occasionally make a wrong turn or need to double back and that the important thing was to realize that recovering from mistakes was part of what he hoped you would learn during the adventure?

3. Which approach to leadership is closer to your personal experience of God as a leader and a guide?

Read

Setting: Jerusalem

[1] “Brothers and fathers, listen now to my defense.” [2] When they heard him speak to them in Aramaic, they became very quiet. Then Paul said: [3] “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. Under Gamaliel I was thoroughly trained in the law of our fathers and was just as zealous for God as any of you are today. [4] I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, [5] as also the high priest and all the Council can testify. I even obtained letters from them to their brothers in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished. [6] “About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. [7] I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, ‘Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?’ [8] “‘Who are you, Lord?’ I asked. “‘I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied. [9] My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me. [10] “‘What shall I do, Lord?’ I asked. “‘Get up,’ the Lord said, ‘and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.’ [11] My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me. [12] “A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observ-

er of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. [13] He stood beside me and said, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight!’ And at that very moment I was able to see him. [14] “Then he said: ‘The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. [15] You will be his witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. [16] And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.’ [17] “When I returned to Jerusalem and was praying at the temple, I fell into a trance [18] and saw the Lord speaking. ‘Quick!’ he said to me. ‘Leave Jerusalem immediately, because they will not accept your testimony about me.’ [19] “‘Lord,’ I replied, ‘these men know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you. [20] And when the blood of your martyr Stephen was shed, I stood there giving my approval and guarding the clothes of those who were killing him.’ [21] “Then the Lord said to me, ‘Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles.’”

Acts 22:1-21

The following night the Lord stood near Paul and said, “Take courage! As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.”

Acts 23:11

Setting: Rome

[17] Three days later he called together the leaders of the Jews. When they had assembled, Paul said to them: “My brothers, although I have done nothing against our people or against the customs of our ancestors, I was arrested in Jerusalem and handed over to the Romans. [18] They examined me and wanted to release me, because I was not guilty of any crime deserving death. [19] But when the Jews objected, I was compelled to appeal to Caesar--not that I had any charge to bring against my own people. [20] For this reason I have asked to see you and talk with you. It is because of the hope of Israel that I am bound with this chain.”

Acts 28:17-20

[30] For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. [31] Boldly and without hindrance he preached the

kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ.

Acts 28: 30-31

Study

1. What might be the newspaper headline for an article about this story?

2. Paul begins this story by explaining how he was trained in the law and was zealous. Like anyone who has all the right answers to all the right questions, Paul didn't feel any need to seek God's guidance during this time in his life—he already thought he knew exactly what to do. How can religious training lead to this kind of thinking?

3. What personal experience do you have with this for of resistance to guidance?

4. In this story God uses several means to provide guidance to Paul. What means does God use?

5. What experience have you had with any of these gifts of guidance from God?

6. Are there any of these means of guidance that are especially difficult for you to trust?

7. One of the themes of this story is that many people are used by God to provide guidance in Paul's life. How does this theme show up in the text?

What has your experience been with God using other people to provide guidance in your life?

8. Another theme of this story is that things are not always what they seem. God is at work even when it seems that others are in charge. How would trusting this make a difference to Paul during his difficult experiences?

How might trusting this make a difference to you?

9. Sometimes God's guidance is in the ordinary events of our lives. Sometimes God's guidance changes the entire course of our lives—as it did for Paul in this story. What experience have you had with change?

10. In a time of quiet, ask God to remind you how your life has been guided in the past. Write whatever you sensed from God during this time of prayer.

11. In a second time of quiet, ask God to show you where he is guiding you now. Write whatever you sensed from God during this time of prayer.

Reflect

Read Genesis 12-20. Reflect on God's guidance of Abraham—on the ways God provided guidance, on the ways Abraham resisted this guidance, and on God's continued grace and faithfulness.

Respond

Continue using the prayers of questions 10 and 11 each day this week. Acknowledge to a trusted friend or mentor what guidance you sense God is providing for your life.

6. Walking in God's Guidance Study

God's guidance is not designed only to get us through the difficult times in life. It is not just to provide a road map for life's choices. It is these things, certainly, but it is more. God's guidance is designed to lead us home to ourselves, as God created us to be—people who are loving and faithful. And home to God—who is always and forever loving and faithful.

Prepare

What guidance have you received from God during the time you have been participating in this study?

What impact has this experience of receiving guidance had on your life?

Read

[3] Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. [4] Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man. [5] Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; [6] in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.

Proverbs 3:3-6

1. What would say are the key words of wisdom in this text?

2. When our lives are guided by God, we are always guided into greater love. How have you found this to be true in your life?

3. This text calls us to love and to faithfulness (trustworthiness). These are words often used to describe God. How does the image of God as loving and faithful compare with your image of God?

4. Reflect on the image of “binding” love and faithfulness around your neck. Reflect on the image of writing love and faithfulness on the tablet of your heart. In a few minutes of quiet, use one of these images and picture God’s Spirit causing love and faithfulness to become stronger and deeper realities in you. Write about whatever you sensed in this time of prayer.

5. What thoughts and feelings do you have about love and faithfulness as the goal of God’s guidance in your life?

6. The text encourages us to trust God fully and not rely on our own understanding. This does not mean we should ignore our thoughts, feelings and common sense. It does mean that even with these gifts we need to remember that there is much we do not understand. We are not God. We have limited understanding and perspective. We need, again, to let God be God. What experiences have you had with relying on your own understanding and finding it to be inadequate?

7. The text encourages us to acknowledge God in everything—to seek God’s guidance, wisdom and direction in all that we do in life. What practical strategies might help you to do this more?

8. Read the passage aloud slowly, putting your name in the text wherever you can. What thoughts and feelings do you have as you hear these words of wisdom addressed to you?

9. What situations do you need to seek God’s wisdom and guidance about—rather than relying on your understanding alone?

Reflect

Write a prayer of gratitude for the guidance you have received from God.

Respond

Ask God each day to deepen your trust in him. Acknowledge God’s loving, guiding presence with you in all things each day.

Leader's Notes

You may be experiencing a variety of feelings as you anticipate leading a group using this study guide. You may feel inadequate for the task and afraid of what will happen. If this is the case, know you are in good company. Many other small group leaders share this experience. It may help you to know that your willingness to lead is a gift to the other group members. It might also help if you tell them about your feelings and ask them to pray for you. Realize as well that the other group members share the responsibility for the group. And realize that it is the Spirit's work to bring insight, comfort, healing and recovery to group members. Your role is simply to provide guidance to the discussion. The suggestions listed below will help you to provide that guidance.

Preparing to Lead

1. Develop realistic expectations of yourself as a small group leader. Do not feel that you have to "have it all together." Rather, commit yourself to an on-going discipline of honesty about your own needs. As you grow in honesty about your own needs, you will grow as well in your capacity for compassion, gentleness and patience with yourself and with others. As a leader you can encourage an atmosphere of honesty by being honest about yourself.
2. Pray. Pray for yourself. Pray for the group members. Invite the Spirit to be present as you prepare and as you meet.
3. Read the text several times.
4. Take your time to thoughtfully work through each question, writing out your answers.
5. After completing your personal study, read through the leader's notes for the study you are leading. These notes are designed to help you in several ways. First, they tell you the purpose the authors had in mind while writing the study. Take time to think through how the questions work together to accomplish that purpose. Second, the notes provide you with additional background information or comments on some of the questions. This information can be useful if people have difficulty understanding or answering a question. Third, the leader's notes can alert you to potential problems you may encounter during the study.
6. If you wish to remind yourself during the group discussion of anything mentioned in the leader's notes, make a note to yourself below that question in the your study guide

Leading the Study

1. Begin on time. You may want to open in prayer, or have a group member do so.
2. Be sure everyone has a study guide. Decide as a group if you want people to do the study on their own ahead of time. If your time together is limited, it will be helpful for people to prepare in advance.
3. At the beginning of your first time together, explain that these studies are meant to be discussions, not lectures. Encourage the members of the group to participate. However, do not put pressure

on those who may be hesitant to speak during the first few sessions. Clearly state that people do not need to share anything they do not feel safe sharing. Remind people that it will take time to trust each other.

4. Read aloud the group guidelines listed in this guide. These commitments are important in creating a safe place for people to talk and trust and feel.
5. Read aloud the introductory paragraphs at the beginning of the discussion for the day. This will orient the group to the passage being studied.
6. If the group does not prepare in advance, approximately ten minutes will be needed for individuals to work on the "Prepare" section. This is designed to help group members focus on some aspect of their personal experience. Hopefully it will help group members to be more aware of the frame of reference and life experience which we bring to the text. This time of personal reflection can be done prior to the group meeting or as the first part of the meeting. The Prepare questions are not designed to be for group discussion but you might begin by asking the group what they learned from the prepare questions.
7. Read the passage aloud. You may choose to do this yourself, or someone else may read if he or she has been asked to do so prior to the study.
8. As you begin to ask the questions in the guide, keep several things in mind. First, the questions are designed to be used just as they are written. If you wish, you may simply read them aloud to the group. Or, you may prefer to express them in your own words. However, unnecessary rewording of the questions is not recommended.

Second, the questions are intended to guide the group toward understanding and applying the main idea of the study. The authors of the guide have stated the purpose of each study in the leader's notes. You should try to understand how the study questions and the biblical text work together to lead the group in that direction.

There may be times when it is appropriate to deviate from the study guide. For example, a question may have already been answered. If so, move on to the next question. Or someone may raise an important question not covered in the guide. Take time to discuss it! The important thing is to use discretion. There may be many routes you can travel to reach the goal of the study. But the easiest route is usually the one the authors have suggested.
9. Don't be afraid of silence. People need time to think about the question before formulating their answers.
10. Don't be content with just one answer. Ask, "What do the rest of you think?" or "Anything else?" until several people have given answers to the question.
11. Acknowledge all contributions. Try to be affirming whenever possible. Never reject an answer. If it seems clearly wrong to you, ask: "Which part of the text led you to that conclusion?" or "What do the rest of you think?"

12. Don't expect every answer to be addressed to you, even though this will probably happen at first. As group members become more at ease, they will begin to interact more effectively with each other. This is a sign of a healthy discussion.

13. Don't be afraid of controversy. It can be very stimulating. Differences can enrich our lives. If you don't resolve an issue completely, don't be frustrated. Move on and keep it in mind for later. A subsequent study may resolve the problem.

14. Stick to the passage under consideration. It should be the source for answering the questions. Discourage the group from unnecessary cross-referencing. Likewise, stick to the subject and avoid going off on tangents.

15. Periodically summarize what the group has said about the topic. This helps to draw together the various ideas mentioned and gives continuity to the study. But be careful not to use summary statements as an opportunity to give a sermon!

16. End each study with a prayer time. You will want to draw on the themes of your study and individual prayer and meditation as you now pray together. There are several ways to handle this time in a group. The person who leads each study could lead the group in a prayer or you could allow time for group participation. Remember that some members of your group may feel uncomfortable about participating in public prayer. It might be helpful to discuss this with the group during your first meeting and to reach some agreement about how to proceed.

Listening to Emotional Pain.

These Bible study guides are designed to take seriously the pain and struggle that is part of life. People will experience a variety of emotions during these studies. Part of your role as group leader will be to listen to emotional pain. Listening is a gift which you can give to a person who is hurting. For many people, it is not an easy gift to give. The following suggestions will help you to listen more effectively to people in emotional pain.

1. Remember that you are not responsible to take the pain away. People in helping relationships often feel that they are being asked to make the other person feel better. This is usually related to the helper's own anxieties about painful feelings.

2. Not only are you not responsible to take the pain away, but one of the things people need most is an opportunity to face and to experience the pain in their life. They may have spent years denying their pain and running from it. Healing can come when we are able to face our pain in the presence of someone who cares about us. Rather than trying to take the pain away, then, commit yourself to listening attentively as it is expressed.

3. Realize that some group members may not feel comfortable with other's expressions of sadness or anger. You may want to acknowledge that such emotions are uncomfortable, but say that part of growth process is to learn to feel and to allow others to feel.

4. Be very cautious about giving answers and advice. Advice and answers may make you feel better or competent, but they may also

minimize people's problems and their painful feelings. Simple solutions rarely work, and they can easily communicate "You should be better now" or "You shouldn't really be talking about this."

5. Be sure to communicate direct affirmation any time people talk about their painful emotions. It takes courage to talk about our pain because it creates anxiety for us. It is a great gift to be trusted by those who are struggling.

The following notes refer to the questions in the Bible study portion of each study.

Study 1. God's Promise to Guide. Psalm 32:8-11

Purpose: To hear God's promise to be our Guide

Question 1. The purpose of this question is to help group participants get an overview of the text. Encourage a wide range of possible titles.

Question 2. God promises to instruct us, to teach us the way we should go, to counsel us, and to watch over us.

Question 3. The horse and the mule do not understand that their master is leading them, they resist and may even set off on their own course—all of which makes things worse. The contrast is with God's guidance which is trustworthy. God knows the way and we do not. The text is an invitation to trust God's guidance, to look for it, to expect it, and to respond to it.

Question 4. The promise is that God's loving kindness surrounds us. God's guidance can be trusted to be loving and good. God's plea to us is that we not resist this guidance—that we not pull away from God's loving will for us.

Question 5. Encourage group participants to think of a time when they were afraid to trust God's guidance—afraid that it was not in their best interest. You might want to open this up by sharing a personal example from your own life.

Question 6. Experiencing these promises from God in a direct and personal way can be very powerful. You might want to give each person a turn to read the text aloud to the entire group, or you might want to split up into pairs to do this.

Question 7. You may want to ask participants to share their prayers. You may want to use these prayers in your closing time of prayer.

Question 8. Seeing God's hand of guidance increases our joy because it means that we are loved in personal, intimate, and practical ways. Encourage participants to think not only of times when they have sensed God's guidance, but the meaning which this guidance had for them and the emotions they experienced as a result.

Study 2. Resisting God's Guidance. Isaiah 30:8-21

Purpose: To explore our resistance to God's guidance.

Question 1. Encourage a variety of approaches to this summary statement. The people are saying they don't want to hear about God—that they want to live life on their own, without God.

Question 2. God is saying that if they choose to flee, they can flee, but it is going to end up in disaster (like a child running through traffic). God is ready and eager to guide the people and help them as soon as they are ready to ask for help.

Question 3. The text says of God, "He longs to be gracious; he rises to show you compassion." The text reveals God's eagerness to help us—and God's compassion and grace. It shows us God's response of love to our resistance and rejection. It reveals God's patience.

Question 4. Encourage participants to reflect on what they expect of God. Some may expect God to be harsh and punitive rather than eager to show compassion.

Question 5. You might want to open this discussion by sharing from your own life. We often resist God's guidance because we do not trust God's love for us. Or because we think we are suppose to be able to manage life on our own. Or because we are afraid if we don't get it exactly right, God will punish us.

Question 6. Give participants time to reflect on their own lives. Participants may or may not want to share what they sensed in their time of prayer. Allow for privacy but also allow for an opportunity to share if it seems appropriate to your group.

Question 7. *Repentance* means "to return". As used here, it means to return to God. Our strength and salvation in life come from returning to God and resting in God's presence. Trusting God's love, wisdom and guidance creates a place of peace, of quiet, of great strength.

Question 8. The people in this text do not understand their need for God. They have forgotten that they are creatures in need of the wisdom and guidance of their Creator. The desire to let God be God is what motivates us to accept God's guidance.

Question 9. This text tells us we can expect God to be gracious, compassionate and eager to help even after we have refused guidance. It does not matter how long or how hard we have been resisting God's guidance. The moment we ask for God's help, God will respond with compassion and guidance.

Question 10. Be sure to allow a few minutes of quiet for participants to spend time praying. You may want to allow group members time to share from their time of reflective prayer.

Study 3. Praying for Guidance, Psalm 25

Purpose: To pray for guidance.

Question 1. Encourage your group to get a sense of the psalmist's various emotions in writing this psalm.

Question 2. The psalmist says he trusts God, his eyes are always on

God, that he takes refuge in God and that his hope is in God.

Question 3. The psalmist says a great deal about God in this psalm. It can be a helpful exercise to list as many of these statements as possible, to see that these things really are being said about God. The psalmist calls on God's great love and mercy. He says that God is good and upright. He says that God instructs sinners and guides the humble. He says that God's ways are loving and faithful. He says that God confides in us.

Question 4. The list is long. Don't let me be put to shame. Show me your ways. Teach me your paths. Guide me in your truth. Remember your great love and mercy. Do not remember my sins. Remember me in love. Forgive my sin. Turn to me. Be gracious to me. Free me from my anguish. Look on my affliction and distress. See my need. Guard my life. Rescue me. Redeem Israel from all her troubles.

Question 5. Encourage participants to think about how they relate to these requests. Which of these requests are they wanting to make of God? Encourage them as well to reflect on the number of requests that the psalmist is making, and what it might be like to ask for God's help so urgently.

Question 10. You may want to allow participants to share their prayers if they choose to do so.

Study 4. Relying on God's Guidance. Psalm 37:1-9

Purpose: To see that God's guidance is trustworthy.

Question 1. The themes here are 1) the apparent injustice of life as a source of anxiety and anger, or 2) trusting God with our lives and with the ultimate outcome of all things.

Question 2. The anxiety and anger and envy here are in relation to people who do evil and, seemingly, get away with it. The psalmist is feeling the unfairness of this. He is also distressed by the fact that people of integrity—people who seek God—are suffering.

Question 3. You might begin this time of sharing by talking about yourself. We may not all experience anxiety and anger about people getting away with evil, but there may be other things that cause us to fear that God is not paying attention, that God doesn't care, or that God is not powerful.

Question 4. The psalmist calls us to: trust in the Lord, do good, delight ourselves in the Lord, commit our way to the Lord, be still before the Lord, wait patiently for the Lord and hope in the Lord.

Question 5. Encourage participants to share honestly. They may have experienced deep struggle with doubt and fear. They may have had a surprisingly positive experience of being able to rely on God. It might be helpful to open this discussion by sharing from your own life experience.

Question 6. We are told here that as we seek God's guidance we will be given the desires of our hearts so that our just cause will shine for all to see.

Question 7-9. Allow at least fifteen minutes for individual prayer time based on Questions 7-9. Encourage participants to work on each question, one at a time.

Study 5. Letting God Guide Us. Acts 22:1-21; 23:11; 28:17-20, 30-31

Purpose: To explore the experience of receiving guidance from God.

Question 1. Encourage creativity and variety as participants suggest titles.

Question 2. Spiritual rigidity, spiritual judgmentalism and spiritual arrogance all have their roots in fear—fear that we will fail or fear that God is not trustworthy. Rigidity, judgmentalism and arrogance are attempts to calm these fears. If we know all the right answers to all the right questions then we can take comfort and find some security in our spiritual superiority. The superiority is a defense against the fear. This is the master plan Paul had for his life. He was going to get it right—to be right, to not make mistakes. He did not need guidance from God about what to do with these Christians and their Jesus. He assumed he knew that they were heretics and deserved death. He was doing God a favor by killing them.

Question 3. You might want to open this discussion with an example from your own life. Examples may vary widely from assuming that people of other denominations were heretics, to judging someone without knowing their story, to judging oneself and even emotionally punishing oneself for not keeping some religious law or for not meeting someone's impossible or unhealthy expectation.

Question 4. Jesus speaks to Paul in a vision. He sends Ananias to him. He speaks to Paul while Paul is praying. And he fulfills the promise to send him to the Gentiles through a series of events.

Question 5. Most of us have not seen Jesus in a vision. But do not assume that this never happens. Many of us have sensed God's guidance through other people, through God speaking to our hearts and minds, and through life circumstances. Encourage people to share stories of the means God has used to guide them.

Question 6. Encourage honest discussion. Some people may have trouble believing their circumstances are part of God's guidance, some may have trouble trusting that they sense God's voice, others may have trouble trusting input from other people.

Question 9. Guidance is not always dramatic. Growth, change and guidance may be more steady and consistent. Whether guidance has come suddenly in a crisis or gradually over time, it can be helpful to share our experiences.

Question 10-11. Allow time for participants to spend in individual prayer. Allow time for sharing if people feel comfortable doing so.

Study 6. Walking in God's Guidance. Proverbs 3:3-6

Purpose: To seek God's guidance as a way of life.

Question 1. The key words here are some of the most basic in life. Love faithfully. And trust God. If we take it a bit further, it might be always love—always be trustworthy. And always turn to God in trust, seeking his guidance for your life.

Question 2. You might want to begin this discussion by sharing a specific example from your own life. Encourage participants to think of specific examples of how they have seen God guiding them toward greater love.

Question 3. Most people believe that God is loving and faithful. We affirm doctrinal statements to this effect. Our actual experience of God may, however, be quite varied. Often deeply distorted images of God lead us to respond to God as if God were angry, vindictive or untrustworthy.

Question 4. Allow participants 3 to 5 minutes for prayer. Invite group participants to share if they feel comfortable doing so.

Question 5. This perspective gives a larger meaning and purpose to our daily lives and experiences. God's guidance is, at root, the guidance by love, in love, toward love. The choices God guides us to make are loving choices, faithful (trustworthy) choices.

Question 6. You might want to open this time by sharing personally from your own life. Encourage honest sharing about times when people thought their wisdom and understanding were enough—only to be reminded that their understanding was limited and that they needed God's help.

Question 7. Encourage the group to share what has helped them and what might help them. This can help to generate ideas for putting this wisdom into practice.

Question 8. You might want to break into pairs to do this. Allow participants time to write about their responses to hearing these words addressed directly to them.

Question 9. You might want to encourage group participants to write for a minute or two, listing all the situations in which they need God's wisdom and guidance. Spend time in prayer to continue to seek God's guidance. Celebrate all God has been doing in guiding, teaching and leading you.

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