

The Guiding of the Spirit

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[0 : 00] This is a sermon from King's Church West William. Good afternoon, everyone. Today, we're going to be thinking about how the Holy Spirit leads us.

I'm really excited about this topic. But, to be honest, I think this is quite complex to navigate. And it's way out of my comfort zone to stand up here and try to talk about it.

So, a couple of months ago, as I was praying about this discomfort that I was feeling, one of my friends sent me a text from her home in Africa. She told me that she had a picture of me being like an astronaut, hiding in a crater of the moon, keeping in my comfort zone, and not wanting to put my head out of the crater in case I floated off, in case I got it wrong.

She said that God wanted me to take the risk to climb out of my crater, my comfort zone, and that he wouldn't let me float away, but he had me secure on a rope, and he wanted me to trust him that he is in control.

And this was a timely and good example of how the Holy Spirit can lead us. It was a prophetic word picture given to my friend in order to encourage me to continue to seek the Spirit, to get on and prepare for this talk, and to let God take me out of my comfort zone.

[1 : 31] And today, I just want to encourage everyone here that even if you feel a bit like me, maybe you feel that seeking the Spirit's guidance in our lives is quite tricky, or maybe you've had confusing experiences in the past, or maybe you feel that, for whatever reason, you don't qualify for this kind of thing, I want to encourage all of us, if we have turned away from our sin and decided to follow Jesus, then the Holy Spirit is already at work in us.

Following the Spirit can be dramatic, and if he prompts you to take the Gospel to Antarctica, or to give up your stable job and do something radically different, then you should absolutely pray, test and follow.

But for most of us, being led by the Spirit is more about each day submitting in our small decisions, and less about God's will for our entire life. If you look at characters in the Bible who God used to do massive things, like Noah, Daniel, Mary, Paul, then you will see that God revealed his plan to them bit by bit.

He never gave them the full plan in advance. They were just obedient to God day by day. My gran was one of my heroes. I remember once she told me when she left school she wanted to be a full-time missionary.

She left home, she went away to Bible college, and afterwards she asked God where in the world she should go. She was terribly disappointed when the Holy Spirit clearly told her to go home, get married, and become an ordinary housewife.

[3 : 15] As I watched her funeral a few years ago, I was astonished how many people stood up to share their stories of how my gran had been involved in their journey to faith in Jesus.

Someone said she'd been in my gran's Sunday school class as a kid. Another one was in her painting class. One was in her walking group. One was in a Bible study that gran had set up in her sheltered accommodation in her 90s.

Every day she prayed for every single member of our family by name, and almost all of her very large family would say that they follow Jesus now. She was obedient to the Holy Spirit, and even though her life was ordinary, it was immensely fruitful, owing to her daily submission to God and walking in step with the Spirit.

And this is the message that I would really like us all to take home from today. Following the Spirit day to day leads to the fruitfulness that God has for us.

The best place to learn about this topic is in the book of Acts in the Bible. I would really recommend everyone this week to commit yourselves to reading it or listening to it.

[4 : 26] This is the version that we've been reading with our boys. It's quite similar in style to the Diary of a Wimpy Kid, if you're interested, but much more exciting. So what difference does the Spirit make to the early church in Acts?

When Jesus was with the disciples, he said that they were not to leave Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit had come. Jesus had told them that it would be actually better for them when he had gone back to heaven so that they could receive the Spirit.

And the book starts with a room full of frightened disciples. Then the Spirit arrived. It was like an indoor windstorm, and the disciples get these visible, fiery headdresses, and then they all start to speak new languages, and they spill out of this closed room and onto the streets.

And these new Spirit-filled people are completely unrecognisable from the people who followed Jesus before. Many of them had no formal training in studying the Scriptures, and yet they start to preach boldly.

They seem to be able to recall Scripture and prophecies and connect it to what happened to Jesus. They become devoted to prayer, to fellowship, and to living as a united community who share all their possessions and serve each other.

[5 : 49] They become joyful in spite of experiencing persecution, and they praise and worship God day and night. They're courageous, defying authorities who try to imprison them or even kill them.

And they have moments of supernatural knowledge and wisdom. The apostles are able to perform amazing miracles, healings, resurrections, deliverance from evil spirits, prison breaks by angels, and Philip even teleports.

And the Holy Spirit gives the apostles clear geographical directions on which areas to travel to next. Sometimes they say the Spirit led them to a certain place, and other times they say the Spirit blocked them from going to another place.

It is so amazing to read about the presence and power of the Holy Spirit during these first 30 years of the Christian church. And the purpose of the supernatural stuff was fruitfulness.

Huge numbers of people at that time were persuaded to repent, be baptized, and to follow Jesus. So why is it important that we are a church led by the Spirit today?

[7 : 00] If those disciples who had physically been with Jesus on a daily basis for a couple of years and have been eyewitnesses of Jesus' miracles and teaching, if they needed the Spirit to kickstart the church, then how much more do we in 2025 need the Spirit to be able to say or do anything worthwhile?

If we want to follow Jesus' way, then we're going to need the Spirit's help to do this. If we want to be fruitful, we need the Spirit. It says in Galatians 5, verse 16 to 17, that we are to walk in step with the Spirit.

I think that means that we are to follow, sorry, we are to allow the Spirit to shape our thoughts, words, and actions, which in turn leads to a life of obedience, holiness, and fruitfulness, rather than being led by our own desires.

It is a deliberate and active humility in seeking God, listening to God, and being quick to respond to Him. Francis Chan, in this book, which I'd also recommend, *Forgotten God*, says, we can choose to depend on ourselves, live safely, and try to control our lives, or, we can choose to live as we were created to live, as a temple of the Holy Spirit of God, as a people who depend on Him, people who dare to let God take the lead in our lives, and let God, the Spirit, make a difference.

Every day, we have this choice to make. While we're waiting in the shopping queue at Lidl, when we're considering how to spend our money or how to save our money, and when we're having a difficult day at home or at work, and it's not good enough just to read the Bible and know the Bible stories.

[8 : 57] The scriptures need to be interpreted with the aid of the Holy Spirit. Look at the example of Saul in Acts. He was a Pharisee, a teacher. He knew the Old Testament scriptures better than anyone, yet before he had the Spirit, his life didn't reflect the heart behind the scriptures.

He hunted Jesus' followers, put them in prison, and approved of them being murdered. Saul then had a dramatic encounter with Jesus, and the Holy Spirit helped him to understand the scriptures and to change.

He was completely transformed. He changed his name to Paul, and he became one of the most courageous and passionate followers of Jesus ever. The Holy Spirit also led the early Christians to change the way they interpreted scripture.

In the Old Testament, God gave his people laws about all sorts of things, including food, circumcision, how to associate with non-Jews. But in Acts, the Holy Spirit led them into a new era because Jesus' death marked the ultimate fulfillment of these laws, and so the new Christians no longer had to abide by the strict eating laws, and the non-Jewish believers no longer had to be circumcised.

They were all now allowed to worship Jesus together. And in a similar way, we have decisions that we need to make in 2025, for which there's no clear directions from scripture alone.

[10:25] For example, the Bible doesn't tell us whether our church should meet here in Uphall or in Livingston or somewhere else in West Lothian. The Bible doesn't tell us where to live or what job to do or which school to send our children to.

The Bible doesn't tell us how we should best manage phones and online gaming and social media. So to make these decisions, we need to take the principles from the Bible and interpret them with the Spirit.

So how do we actually do it? I think God wants us to pray about all of the things going on in our lives and to ask him to direct our steps.

In Acts, the Holy Spirit directs people in different ways. Sometimes they have dreams and visions. Sometimes real-life strangers knock on their doors and bring them messages or prophecies. Sometimes physical circumstances direct them, such as riots or shipwrecks. And often we read that they had an inner feeling of personal conviction.

[11:27] And I think the Holy Spirit leads us similarly now in the same way that he used in Acts. I want to speak briefly about the prophetic today because it's different from the Old Testament prophets like Samuel and Isaiah.

In Hebrews 1, it talks about how God has changed the primary way he communicates with his people over time. In the Old Testament, God gave prophets great authority and used them as his own loudspeakers such that they could confidently say, thus saith the Lord.

The Lord is saying this. When Jesus came, God spoke primarily through him, the spoken and living word of God. After Jesus now, the Bible is the primary way God communicates with us, the written word of God.

So when we move in the prophetic today, it is not with the same authority as the Old Testament prophets. We prophesy in part and we know in part.

It's not perfect. It's just a reflection or a glimpse rather than fully seeing. And this comes from 1 Corinthians 13, verse 9 to 12. So, it is only a glimpse, but we should still actively seek to move in the prophetic.

[12:44] It says later on in 1 Corinthians 12, verse 31, and 14, verse 1, that we should eagerly desire, eagerly desire, the greater gifts of the Holy Spirit, especially prophecy.

So if it's only partial, how is it helpful? Well, I'm going to quote John Piper. He says that prophecy is when the Holy Spirit brings something to mind that you would otherwise not have thought of for the use of encouraging, strengthening, or consoling.

So the example I shared earlier about me being a scared astronaut hiding in the crater of a moon, well, that was a prophetic picture that God brought to my friend's mind, which she would otherwise not have thought of, which was specifically to strengthen me in this situation.

The Spirit moves in this way all the time in the life of our church. Sometimes when I'm sitting, listening to someone preach, the Spirit uses the speaker's word to pierce metaphorically into my heart.

It's as if the preacher knows my very situation and reaches right into it. And the same thing happens when we're singing in worship. Often words of knowledge that the Spirit gives to a person in the church complements the songs that have been chosen in advance by the worship leader, which fit exactly with what the preacher is speaking about.

[14:05] And Rebecca gave us a great example of that earlier. Of course, the Holy Spirit is active in the rest of our lives as well. Often when I'm praying on my own, the Holy Spirit will put a person, a certain person in my mind who I hadn't otherwise thought of.

I try to pray for them straight away and I get a glimpse or a reflection of what specific area I need to pray into. And many times I found out later that the person I was praying for was in some kind of trouble or difficult situation at the exact time I was praying for them.

When I'm driving to work in the mornings, I pray that the Holy Spirit will help me to see clearly what is making my patients feel ill. Specifically, I pray that I will have special knowledge to understand the person in front of me and that he will help me to communicate clearly and compassionately. I could give you lots of examples of where the Spirit has helped me by giving me insight in my job. And then there's that inner feeling of conviction. It's quite difficult to define what this means exactly, but as we get to know Jesus, it gets easier to distinguish between intuition or instinct and what is the Spirit.

It's a bit like tuning a radio. The more listening we do, the more we recognise and tune into the Holy Spirit. And Luke and I have felt that inner feeling of conviction a number of times when we've made big decisions.

[15:37] Like when we just felt it was the right thing to move to West Lothian and be part of this church plant. Or like when we just felt it was the right thing to move house, even though we weren't even looking for a new house. How do we know if we're truly here in the Spirit or if we're just making it up?

I've experienced confusion in times in my life when I've thought that God has spoken to me about something and then it didn't work out the way I expected it to. I've also experienced false prophecy. People have said they felt God had told them something about the future and it turned out not to be true. I've also known a person who abused the name of the Holy Spirit in order to try to manipulate the church and I suspect that many of us here have had experiences like this.

I remember one of the first times I ever wanted to step up and share a prophecy with someone. I had a sense of God wanting me to say something, can't remember what it was about.

I had my Bible with me, I thought it would be good if I had a scripture to back up what I was thinking so I thought maybe if I just open my Bible God would show me the scripture. So I opened my Bible put my finger down true story put my finger on Ezekiel 3 verse 13 which reads woe to you you false prophets.

[17:01] this gave me such a fright that I scurried away and never shared what I thought God was saying to me. Even now sometimes I am held back in sharing a tongue at church or sharing a word with a person because I am so afraid that I will be a false prophet or get it wrong and I'm worried I might unduly influence someone one way or the other.

What if I'm just making it up? However I think if we feel we have a prophecy it is our responsibility to get on with it and share what we think the Holy Spirit is saying.

Before we speak we can quickly vet it to check that it's consistent with scripture and consider whether it's encouraging strengthening or consoling and if we're satisfied that it meets these criteria then we should just be courageous.

We should share what we think God is saying. We can do it with humility because we only know in part and prophesy in part. We could use a phrase like this I think God has told me this please weigh it up test it and if it seems to help then wonderful.

After that we've done our bit we'll leave the next stage of testing up to the person who has received the prophecy. And if we're on the receiving end then we must hear the person out with an open mind.

[18:31] The Bible says that we must not resist the spirit or despise prophecy. That's 1 Thessalonians 5 verse 20. Pray with others about it.

This is where the church family is so vital for our spiritual growth as calibration. Seek confirmation. Test it to check that it aligns with God's character and what the Bible tells us and then pray and receive it in faith.

And if we are in the church family as we are and someone comes to us and says that they feel the Holy Spirit has spoken to them then we must listen carefully and seek the spirit with them.

I was really challenged to read this in Francis Chan's book because God brought to mind times in my past when friends have told me of the radical things they felt the Holy Spirit had told them to do and I let my cautious rational personality speak before seeking the spirit.

I might have had good motives to try and protect my friends from burnout or from financial sacrifices but I've spoken too quickly about my reservations. We must be so careful not to quench the spirit and not to stand in the way of others being fruitful for God.

[19:54] So what are the challenges? We don't want to ignore the spirit leading us but if we attribute every little thing that ever happens to us in our daily lives to the Holy Spirit's guidance then it is likely that we are reading into things more than we ought to.

In psychiatry they have a word for this it's called salience. it means we put too much influence on coincidence. Similarly every supernatural sounding thing is not necessarily of God.

Just this week someone I met was telling me how she could predict when bad things are going to happen. She said she could also tell the instant she saw a person whether that person was good or bad with a supernatural sense of the other person's soul.

In the book of Acts there are a couple of examples of people involved with fortune telling. There's this guy called Magic Simon he wanted to buy the Holy Spirit off Peter and Peter put him firmly back in his place.

That's not to say that God can't use fortune tellers however. In the book of Numbers God uses a fortune teller called Balaam to prophesy multiple times to bless his people.

[21 : 08] What if I think I'm hearing God on one thing and it seems to clash with what someone else is hearing? Well towards the end of Acts Paul feels in his spirit that he needs to go to Jerusalem.

Then we read that the other apostles felt a warning in their spirits about Paul going to Jerusalem because he was going to suffer. So they tried to stop him from going. Why would the spirit lead Paul to Jerusalem and warn him from going at the same time?

I think the reason we find it difficult is because we might only be thinking about our own life whereas God is seeing the overall picture which concerns many more people and places than just little us. Some things that happen to us are not the Holy Spirit guiding us but actually just consequences of our sin or of our own selfish plans. God stopped me from getting that job.

actually I didn't prepare hard enough for the interview. The Holy Spirit called me to work in Las Vegas. Actually I just want to live in Las Vegas for other reasons.

[22 : 19] Those are some examples. But equally just because something is difficult it doesn't mean that God isn't in it. I want to read you an excerpt from a book by a missionary called Hudson Taylor who felt called by God to go to China.

I'm sure some of you will have heard of him. He obeyed the Holy Spirit and got on a boat in 1853 and this is what happened. I'll read it. Our voyage had a rough beginning but many had promised to remember us in constant prayer.

No small comfort was this for we had scarcely left the Mersey when a violent equinoctial gale caught us and for 12 days we were beating backwards and forwards in the Irish Channel unable to get out to sea.

The gale steadily increased and after almost a week we lay to for a time but drifting on a lee coast we were compelled again to make sail and endeavoured to beat on to Windward.

The utmost efforts of the captain and crew however were unavailing and Sunday night the 25th of September found us drifting into Carnarvon Bay each tack becoming shorter until at last we were within a stone's throw of the rocks.

[23 : 33] About this time as the ship which had refused to stay was put round in the other direction the Christian captain said to me we cannot live half an hour now what of your call to labour for the Lord in China?

I had previously passed through a time of much conflict but that was over and it was with great joy to feel and to tell him that I would not for any consideration be in any other position that I strongly expected to reach China but that if otherwise at any rate the master would say it was well that I was found seeking to obey his command and following the master's lead.

Hudson Taylor did make it to China and the rest of his story and how God led him into fruitfulness is one well worth reading. Encountering difficulty is to be expected on the journey following the lead of the spirit.

God's goals are not necessarily the same as our goals. He may ask us to do something, say something, go somewhere but his agenda is on a different time scale or he wants to develop our character.

There are lots of examples of this in the Bible. Take Moses. God called Moses to bring the people out of slavery in Egypt. into the promised land.

[25 : 01] This journey should have taken 11 days. In fact, as we know, it took 40 years and Moses himself died before they crossed over into the promised land. God always knew it would be a long prophetic journey of testing and he used the time to teach the people and us lessons.

He gave them the Ten Commandments. He also drew close to Moses. He refined Moses' character such that he was known as the most humble man on earth.

That's Numbers 12, verse 3. So, conclusion. Got to the conclusion for you. If we want to truly follow Jesus, if we want to be fruitful, if we want to carry out God's purposes, then we desperately need the Spirit.

The Bible encourages us to walk in step with the Spirit and this means following his lead in the small, everyday decisions just as much as the big, life-changing ones.

The Bible encourages us to earnestly seek the Spirit and especially to ask for the gift of prophecy. We should be open to prophecies and we must not resist the Spirit or quench the Spirit.

[26 : 23] However, because we only see in part and prophesy in part, we must test everything and hold on to what is good, remembering that God's end goals may look different to our own.

and continue to