

STEP BY STEP

DIVINE GUIDANCE FOR
ORDINARY CHRISTIANS

JAMES C. PETTY



P U B L I S H I N G

P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

© 1999 by James C. Petty

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—except for brief quotations for the purpose of review or comment, without the prior permission of the publisher, P&R Publishing Company, P.O. Box 817, Phillipsburg, New Jersey 08865-0817.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Printed in the United States of America

Composition by Colophon Typesetting

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Petty, James C., 1944–

Step by step : divine guidance for ordinary Christians / James C.

Petty.

p. cm. — (Resources for changing lives)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN-10: 0-87552-603-9

ISBN-13: 978-0-87552-603-4

1. Spiritual life—Christianity. 2. God—Will. I. Title.

II. Series.

BV4501.2.P432 1999

248.4—dc21

99-31303

*To Dr. Cornelius Van Til,
who pointed me to fear the Lord
as the beginning of wisdom*

INTENTIONAL BLANK

CONTENTS

Preface 9
Acknowledgments 13

Part One: The Promise of Guidance

1. Does God Guide Us? 17
2. How Does God Guide Us? Three Views 29
3. Guidance and the Promises of God 37

Part Two: Understanding Guidance

4. Guidance and the Plan of God 55
5. Guidance and the Word of God 79
6. Guidance and the “Individual Will” of God 95
7. Guidance and Christian Liberty 119

Part Three: Experiencing Guidance

8. Guidance and the Wisdom of God 135
9. Experiencing Guidance 155
10. Providence: The Left Hand of God’s Guidance 169
11. How to Become Wise 177

Contents

Part Four: Seeking Guidance: The Seven Elements of Biblical Decision Making

- 12. Consecration 193
- 13. Information 199
- 14. Supplication 213
- 15. Consultation 221
- 16. Meditation 229
- 17. Decision 239
- 18. Expectation 251

Appendix: The Assessing My Priorities Worksheet 263
Works Cited 277

PREFACE

“WHAT is the will of God for my life?”

If you had asked Christ that question when he was here on earth, what would he have said? He would have answered, “Love God and then love others as I have loved you” (see John 15:1–17). Paul the apostle answers the question in a different way in 1 Thessalonians 4:3: “This is the will of God, even your sanctification” (KJV). The point is that, at one level, it does not take a lot of discernment to know the will of God for your life.

Yet currently there are about thirty-five evangelical books in print on this topic (this one makes thirty-six) because we all struggle to know how those profound statements apply *practically* to our everyday decisions. How do we know the will of God for entering into marriage? For educational and vocational decisions? For guidance in conflict, family, and ministry situations? (For example, should I presume to write a book on guidance?)

Most of us will make five to ten of these life-shaping decisions in our lifetimes. Beyond that, we make dozens of smaller ones every day. Shall I stop writing and eat lunch—to avoid becoming grumpy? How shall I begin this book so that folks will want to read it? Shall I buy lunch or make it from the bounty of the fridge—saving lots of money?

Preface

The difficulty of knowing when and how to make connections between the great commandments and these kinds of decisions have led many to give up trying. Instead, they seek some other way to know the will of God. They suggest looking for signs, “fleece,” “open doors,” promptings, peaceful sensations, audible voices, or perhaps even inaudible ones. Others suggest looking to spiritual directors, disciplers, church elders, prophecy, or “words of knowledge.” From one angle, such approaches seems rather tame compared to the extraordinary and sometimes bizarre ways (casting lots, Balaam’s donkey) God revealed himself to people in the Bible. Which way is right?

Just yesterday a friend and I were talking about this writing project. The first thing he wanted to know was what I thought about Christians who claimed to hear the audible voice of God offering them guidance. Evidently a famous missionary was quoted as hearing such a voice, and he based his calling to missionary service upon it. My friend, a committed Christian, wondered if he should ask for that kind of direction in his life. To date, God had never addressed him that way.

Millions of Christians are asking that question in one form or another. They agree with Jesus, “I have come to do your will, O God,” but are not sure what that will is, much less how to discover it. That is why I have written this book. It will not reveal what God’s will is for you in specific situations, but it will help you to understand how to pursue it in godly and fruitful ways.

But before any of us approaches the topic of how to know the will of God, we must answer this question: “Why do we want to know it?” What is our purpose in seeking guidance from God, and what is God’s purpose in providing it? God does not offer wisdom from above in order to help us secure success on earth. Some success may be a by-product under certain conditions, but it should not be our goal. If God (and his guidance) is just a means to some other goal, we are (consciously or unconsciously) using God. In that case, the goal we seek

PREFACE

functions as our “god” and competes with the true God for our allegiance and trust. No matter how good the goal is (family, ministry, marriage, education, or job), James 4:4 calls it “friendship with the world” and equates it with “hatred of God.” But if your motive is to glorify, enjoy, and serve God, he says, “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you” (Ps. 32:8).

With that said, it is the purpose of *Step by Step* to systematically examine what the Bible says about knowing the will of God. I hope we will be encouraged to discover that godly saints through the years have identified and tested a foundation of powerful theological truths that can guide our way. The biblical doctrines of providence, revelation, inspiration, and illumination carry within them the answers our theologically unaware generation needs. Saints since the early church have longed to know and do the will of God. They asked questions of Scripture and sought answers there. That, very simply, is what theology is, and that is what we shall attempt to do with the subject of discerning the will of God.

We will be looking at both biblical and contemporary examples of guidance, but our primary focus will be on what is actually taught in Scripture about the subject. In Parts One, Two, and Three we will look at the theology of guidance. Part Four is a case study, showing you how to apply the principles to a real life situation. This case study embodies many of the most pressing questions on guidance that I encounter as a counselor.

The appendix contains exercises and material relevant to guidance questions about time management and priorities.

As I’ve said, this book cannot provide specific answers for your guidance decisions. I believe that guidance comes when you learn to apply the Word of God to your life in the wisdom provided by the Holy Spirit. However, I hope that this book will encourage and practically

Preface

direct you to the fountain and source of all wisdom and guidance, Jesus Christ (Col. 2:2). It is also meant to answer questions you may have about the process of guidance, thereby increasing your confidence in God to provide it.

As I have wrestled with these questions, I am reminded of the limitations of our minds to truly comprehend the relation of the infinite God to the finite creation. When seeking to understand guidance theologically, we bump into that limitation often. For example, what is the relationship between human free will and God's control? I hope we are not so foolish as to insist on totally comprehending that relationship and others like it—especially as we begin to appreciate the majesty of the true God and his management of the cosmos.

I mention this because when it comes to guidance, there is a strong temptation to look so hard for a consistent biblical formula that we ignore Scripture passages that do not fit into our views. That, of course, is a subtle form of intellectual idolatry. Someone once said, “God made man in his image, and we returned the favor.” May God deliver us from that practice.

Instead, I pray that we may humble ourselves and prove teachable as we handle God's Word, particularly in this difficult and controversial area. May God protect us from the seductive trap of twisting or ignoring any part of Scripture to bolster an outcome that supports our views.

Rather, I hope we will gain a sense of wonder at what God has done in giving us such a vital, inexhaustible revelation of himself. The Word of God is more than equal to the challenges of the twenty-first century! It sheds a brightening light into the church, equipping God's people to be salt and light in a changing world. I pray that this will continue to be the case as the church sits at the feet of Christ to learn more clearly the theology of guidance and the practice of a Spirit-led life.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

AT several points in this book, I question a specific view or identify it as erroneous. In most cases I have chosen not to list proponents of the view, for the sake of charity and Christian unity. An earlier form of this work was submitted to Westminster Theological Seminary for the Doctor of Ministry Degree. It contains a complete annotated bibliography for those interested in more information on the views held by various writers. In cases where there is sufficient reason to deal more extensively (and therefore more fairly) with a divergent view, or where I have needed to quote a passage, I have named the author. These authors are professing Christians with a high view of Scripture. I gladly acknowledge them as my brothers and sisters in Christ despite any differences of approach. I confess that I have much to learn from all of them.

I want to thank Ed Welch and Susan Lutz, my colleagues at the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation. Their encouragement and suggestions, and Sue's extensive editing, have been critical to the successful completion of this book.

I am deeply grateful to God for Marsha Petty, my wife; for her encouragement, companionship, and cheerful help with reading this work in various forms during the last two years.

Acknowledgments

I would also like to acknowledge the influence of many former parishioners, family members, and current students who have encouraged me to write down these thoughts.

PART ONE

*The Promise
of Guidance*

INTENTIONAL BLANK

CHAPTER 1

DOES GOD GUIDE US?

A clear and vivid thought entered my head. “Slow down! Let the boy on the path behind you catch up; then tell him about Christ.” I was an eighth grader walking on my well-worn path home from school when that distinct thought captured my mind. For about a hundred yards I tried to resist the idea but was, of course, afflicted with guilt. Finally, I knelt down and pretended to retie my Keds tennis shoes (circa 1956). The boy caught up to me. I don’t remember what I said to him, but somehow, fifteen minutes later he was praying to receive Christ.

That was the first time I thought I had received guidance from God. Boy, was I relieved! At last I had some concrete evidence that God knew who I was. As an added bonus, I had fulfilled my obligation to “witness” and even had an evangelistic notch in my belt. I quietly took comfort in that incident during my spiritually bleak high school career. And I waited for God to “speak” again. After all, I thought, a word from God every five or six years seemed like a reasonable minimum for any kind of meaningful relationship.

Were my expectations too high? Were they too low? Was I, in fact, missing God’s efforts to communicate with me? I didn’t know. And I suspect that many Christians have wrestled with such questions.

Does the God of the Bible, in fact, reach down and specifically, per-

Chapter One

sonally direct us? Does he communicate direction and information to us that we would not otherwise know? And if he does, how does he do it? How can I enjoy the benefit of such direction? These are the questions we will seek to answer in this book.

Library or Airplane Cockpit?

We will be looking for our answers in the pages of the Bible, but not because I view these as abstract theological questions. The answers we find will profoundly affect the real life choices we make. When we seek guidance from God, we are not like a student pondering the great questions of life safely seated in a library carrel. We are more like a pilot seeking to land a commercial airliner filled with passengers. For a pilot, even the best of them, the pressing need is for current information on position, weather, visibility, and local air traffic. The thought that communication with the control tower might not be possible, predictable, and clear is more than unsettling—it is the stuff of horror films.

In a sense, all of us are like pilots in flight. The decisions we make will affect many others, and many things can go wrong. Our relationships, our jobs, our health and safety can be compromised by a single bad decision.

It is amazing to stop and think about the life-changing consequences of certain decisions. For example, we make decisions in early childhood about how to cope with the bully down the street. Those decisions then become patterns that affect the way we handle conflict today.

For the unmarried, the decision to seek a second date with a member of the opposite sex can be among the most important decisions in life. Whether or not to seek medical advice regarding a pesky rash could be a life-or-death decision.

Should you confront your boss with what you believe is an error or moral breach on his part? If you do, you will either be a hero or a new

DOES GOD GUIDE US?

face in the unemployment line. Should you bring up your suspicions of your son's homosexuality? With that kind of question, it is impossible to "get the toothpaste back in the tube" once it is out.

Should you replace a worn tire now with money you don't have (using a credit card) or save up and buy it with cash? You could either look like a budgeting whiz or wind up dead when your car skids on a wet street. Pursuing a new, out-of-town job opportunity could turn out to be the key to your career or a stressful disaster that leaves you depressed and bankrupt.

If communication from God on these kinds of issues is available, we do not want to be tuned to the wrong channel! Nor do we want to be unaware that such communication is even possible. Life offers us abundant opportunities for crash landings and precious few years, and so it is not surprising that Christians have always addressed the issue of divine guidance with great energy.

However, until the industrialized age, most Christian writings on guidance emphasized guidance *to* God, not guidance *from* God. Writers such as John of the Cross (1542–91), Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), Francois Fenelon (1651–1715), Richard Rolle (1290–1349), and a host of others provided direction on how to experience God's presence and character.

In those days many of the pressing problems of guidance (Whom should I marry? What should I do with my life?) did not have much prominence. Marriages were largely arranged by family and community. Job opportunities were usually related to the occupation of one's parents. Hope of significant upward mobility was considered the stuff of dreams—not the way of the real world. The biggest decision for the Christian probably revolved around whether or not to join a spiritual order (and a monastery or nunnery) to seek God "full time" or to remain on the outside and support those who were vocationally "religious."

I believe that today's lack of interest in guidance to God has resulted

Chapter One

in a lot more questions about how to seek guidance from God. We simply don't know God as well as previous generations of believers did and, as we shall see, guidance from God is rooted in our knowledge of him. The more one knows of God's character and desires, the better one can live to be conformed to the image of Christ—and make the many daily decisions that must be made.

A Decisión a Minute

And how the pace of decision making has changed—at least in the industrial and postindustrial West! Now there are decisions to be made minute by minute. For example, a married couple today must answer, in a few short years, questions that most Christians in the 1600s did not even have to ask. Here is a sample list:

- How many children should we have?
- When should we have those children?
- Should we bottle-feed that baby?
- Should we adopt?
- Should both partners leave the home and enter the work force?
- Should I divorce or adjust to the evils of my spouse?
- Should we use a public, private, or Christian school?
- How hard should we push our child in music, sports, computers?
- Which church or youth group should we choose?
- How many lifestyle “risk factors” are acceptable?
- Should we change careers?
- How much should we invest in a child's higher education?

DOES GOD GUIDE US?

- How much debt should we incur for school, home, or car?
- What back-up plans should we have for potential job loss?
- How much auto, liability, and hospitalization insurance should we carry?
- How much should we set aside now for retirement?
- How should we invest those retirement funds?

All these decisions and dozens more are made within a space of ten to twelve years after marriage. And many of these decisions are remade almost daily. Along with these, of course, are all the decisions about balancing the priorities these issues reflect. The increasing pace of change only increases the frequency of such required decision making.

Changes in the World of Work

The rising number of decisions is not something encountered only in marriage and the home. It happens too in the world of work. The labor market is undergoing dramatic structural change because of the transition from the postwar industrial boom to the information age of global competition. Entire industries (steel, textiles, electronics, etc.) have moved to developing nations with twelve million jobs lost in American manufacturing communities.

Though most of these jobs were with large companies, global competition is no longer something that only confronts Ford Motor Company. With the Internet, you can search the entire world for the best price on a CD recording, a brand of shoe, or an electric drill—and all in less time than it takes to use the yellow pages. Few businesses are safe from the competition and change that this information explosion brings. In the midst of this change we long for guidance from God in situations that seem outside our control.

The Empty Wallet

Connected to the changing world of work are tectonic shifts in distribution of income. Employed Americans fear substantial loss of earning power as they face the prospect of a shrinking middle class. *The Economist* magazine reports a University of Michigan study that tracked the same families since 1968. The study found that 65 percent of white American men who turned twenty-one before 1980 had reached the middle class by age thirty. Yet only 47 percent who turned twenty-one after 1980 achieved middle class by age thirty. For black males the comparable statistics were 29 percent and 19 percent respectively (*The Economist*, February 24, 1996, 30).

This same article reported a study by New York University economist Edward Wolff, who found that in 1979 America's richest 1 percent held 21 percent of our national wealth. By 1992 the top 1 percent held 42 percent of the assets. While Wolff did not include the value of pensions and benefits (which would moderate the statistics), the trend is striking. Although the U.S. economic pie is growing, there is going to be less of it for the middle class to divide. Statistics for the poor are even more dramatic.

This sense of uneasiness is illustrated daily in the lives of those seeking to re-enter the work force after being "downsized" (laid off). The average American worker re-entering the work force today takes a 20 percent pay cut (*The Economist*, February 24, 1996, 31). Those who are keeping up are those who have developed the specialized skills needed in the information age. Those skills are developed through education but, unfortunately, educational costs have risen at a rate much higher than the rate of inflation. This forces prospective students to weigh the value of education against the economic consequences of graduation with substantial debt.

For all these reasons we have enormous numbers of people expe-

riencing crisis or ongoing anxiety about their work. Large numbers quite properly seek guidance from friends, family, and professionals. Yet, it seems, sometimes we seek a road map through a world that is changing so quickly that the maps have not yet been printed.

Knowing the Right Hand from the Left

There is an even greater sense in which our society suffers a lack of guidance. It was said of Sodom that morally the citizens could not tell their right hands from their left. While we may have a way to go to compete with Sodom and Gomorrah, the parallel is appropriate: values obvious to previous generations within the Judeo-Christian world have little acceptance among today's cultural gatekeepers. Instead, there is an almost total individualism that seeks first its own personal peace and affluence (to use Francis Schaeffer's phrase).

Today's college freshmen are normally given a briefing (in the name of tolerance) about how to determine whether one is heterosexual, bisexual, or homosexual. They are told that "sexual orientation" is a personal, nonmoral issue. Instead of a required course in ethics or religion, many colleges today require a course in "pluralism," which is really a course in relativism. It undermines any notion of absolute values that might be morally binding on all. Instead, morals are viewed simply as one's personal psychological reactions to outside situations. Guilt is only psychological, as is moral rightness.

To be sure, there is still behavioral and emotional momentum from our Christian past. But the powerful words of a bygone Christian ethic (justice, love, tolerance, liberty, oppression, peace, and liberation) are now usurped to provide emotional force for the propaganda of groups as pagan as the American Nazi Party and Queer Nation and as everyday as television advertising. The concepts are stripped of any Godward reference and true moral force. Instead, they are used as weapons to promote an agenda. Consequently, our young people can-

Chapter One

not rely on our society's corporate wisdom for boundaries and direction. There really isn't any.

What remains is only the momentum of the Christian past. Our culture is like a great ocean liner of the nineteenth century sailing confidently toward the lighthouse in the harbor, only to encounter a dense fog bank. The captain knows the general direction in which to head but is unable to fix or correct his course. The longer he sails under zero visibility, the greater the combined error caused by wind, tide, and currents.

The people of the nineteenth century were just as sinful as we are today, but they tended to have moral categories to remind them of that fact. Twentieth-century morals have no condemning or justifying power at all; they do not really even qualify as morals. Today we are engulfed in a fog bank of blindness that few nineteenth-century folks (except the intellectual elite) experienced.

Our culture therefore cannot understand the divinely instituted moral bond that undergirds the family, marriage, civic community, and the workplace. These relationships and structures are portrayed as products of our biological and social evolution. They are merely means for achieving individual personal goals, with no intrinsic value or transcendent validity. This blindness is demonstrated in our high rate of divorce and incarceration, increased domestic violence, and the growing confusion about the institution of marriage and the family.

If guidance comes from wisdom and wisdom is the application of values to life, then our culture—despite its great technological knowledge—cannot provide real guidance. Our society can only offer instruction in cleverness, self-interest, self-esteem, and ways to gain power for the self. Self-help motivational books like *Think and Grow Rich* (Hill 1960) are classics of our age just because they reflect, in rather crass terms, the guiding wisdom of our time.

To Meet the Need

Against this background, God's reputation for providing guidance to his people corporately and personally has a particular appeal. The hope of divine guidance strikes a deep chord in the soul of the Christian as well as in many confused and directionless non-Christians. A true and living God who knows the beginning from the end, a God who is willing to guide those who will follow, looks as good to us as he did to David, King of Israel. David sang,

*If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me. (Ps. 139:9–10)*

Such a promise offers new opportunities for the Christian church to witness to a culture where the American dream has died and no one knows another way.

The need for guidance has been aggressively addressed in popular Christian books. Pastors frequently address guidance issues in their sermons. Conferences such as InterVarsity's Urbana Missions Convention are built around guidance. Pastoral counselors are often involved in directing the lives of many Christians.¹

And while it is encouraging to see such a response from today's Christian leaders, it leaves us with a rather profound problem: At the very time when the need for guidance is most obvious, these writers and teachers often contradict each other at key points. To make matters more difficult (with the exception of two or three authors), they

1 In preparation for writing this book, I reviewed some thirty-five Christian books on the subject of divine guidance. An annotated bibliography is available on these books as part of the version of this work submitted for my D.Min. degree at Westminster Theological Seminary, Glenside, Pennsylvania.

Chapter One

address their issues in a nontheological way. That is, their books offer no serious study of Scripture, no in-depth interaction with larger theological principles. We are given stories, illustrations, and references to Scripture, but little or no critical theological reflection. The books usually give the writer's conclusion—period.

There is a place for that kind of pastoral direction, assuming that the deep study of Scripture has taken place. However, it is my concern that such study has not happened, or if it has, it is not presented to the readers. It is ironic that the authors of books on guidance don't seem to be guided themselves to a common methodology or understanding.

Christian theologians have continued to address issues of medical ethics, church and state, inerrancy, charismatic phenomena, and world poverty, but have not yet done much on the issue of guidance, an issue that affects so many Christians. The friend who asked me about the validity of guidance through the audible voice of God really wanted to know. He wondered if he needed more faith to pursue real guidance, as opposed to just using his God-given brain. If God is speaking, the stakes are very high that we listen. Yet confusion reigns about what the Bible teaches. This volume attempts to address that problem.

My goal is to help you understand the issues of guidance from a systematically biblical perspective. You will then be able to decide prayerfully what God has said about seeking to know his will. Through this study I hope that you can come to a confident decision about how to seek guidance from God. I hope to give you the confidence to say, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life."

For Review and Reflection

1. Have you had one or more experiences that you would consider divine guidance? Describe them.
2. Were there any biblical passages that came to mind to help you understand the experience(s)?
3. Were you taught that guidance comes by God revealing part or all of his specific plan for our lives?
4. What Scriptures did you associate with that teaching?
5. Have you ever sought divine guidance? What was the outcome?