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The Disciple-Making Minister

Biblical Principles for Fruitfulness and Multiplication

By David Servant

Chapter Twenty-Two

How to be Led by the Spirit

John's gospel records a number of Jesus' promises concerning the Holy Spirit's role in the life of believers. Let's read a few of them:

And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not behold Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you, and will be in you (John 14:16-17).

But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you (John 14:26).

But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper shall not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you....I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, he will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. He shall glorify Me; for He shall take of Mine, and shall disclose it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said, that He takes of Mine, and will disclose it to you (John 16:7, 12-15).

Jesus promised His disciples that the Holy Spirit would abide in them. He would also help them, teach them, guide them and show them things to come. As Christ's disciples today, we have no reason to think the Holy Spirit would do any less for us.

Amazingly, Jesus told His disciples that it was to their advantage that He go away or else the Holy Spirit wouldn't come! That indicated to them that their fellowship with the Holy Spirit could be just as intimate as if Jesus were physically present with them all the time. Otherwise it wouldn't be to their advantage to have the Holy Spirit with them rather than Jesus. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus is always with us and in us.

In what ways should we expect the Holy Spirit to lead us?

His very name, *Holy Spirit*, indicates that His primary role in leading us will be in leading us to be holy and obedient to God. So everything that pertains to holiness and the accomplishing of God's will on earth is within the realm of the Holy Spirit's guidance. He

will lead us to obey all of Christ's general commandments as well as in Christ's specific commandments that pertain to the unique ministry God has called us to. So if you want to be led by the Spirit in regard to your specific ministry, you must also be led by the Spirit in general holiness. You can't have one without the other. Too many ministers want the Holy Spirit to lead them into great ministry exploits and miracles, but don't want to bother with the "smaller" aspects of general holiness. That is a great error. How did Jesus lead His disciples? Primarily by giving them general instructions in holiness. His specific leadings for their ministerial responsibilities were rare by comparison. So it is with the Holy Spirit who indwells us. So if you want to be led by the Spirit, you must first of all follow His leadings to be holy.

The apostle Paul wrote, "For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God" (Rom. 8:14). It is our being led by the Spirit that marks us as being among those who are God's children. Thus all of God's children are being led by the Spirit. It is up to us of course, as free moral agents, to obey the Spirit's leadings.

All of this being so, no Christian really needs to be taught how to be led by the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit is already leading every Christian. On the other hand, Satan is trying to mislead God's children, and we still have the old nature of the flesh within us that attempts to lead us contrary to God's will. So believers do need to learn to discern the Spirit's leading from those other leadings. That is a process on the road to maturity. But the foundational fact is this: The Spirit will always lead us in line with God's written Word, and He will always lead us to do what is right and pleasing to God, what will bring Him glory (see John 16:14).

The Voice of the Holy Spirit

Although Scripture tells us that the Holy Spirit may sometimes lead us in spectacular ways, such as through visions, prophecy, or the audible voice of God, the more usual way that the Holy Spirit communicates to us is in our spirits by "impressions." That is, if the Spirit wants us to do something, He will "tug" at us—in our spirits—and we will sense a "leading" to follow a certain direction.

We could call the voice of our spirit our "conscience." All Christians know what their conscience sounds like. If we are tempted to sin, we don't hear an audible voice within us saying, "Don't give in to that temptation." Rather, we simply feel something within us *resisting* that temptation. And if we do yield to a temptation, after a sin is committed, we don't hear an audible voice saying, "You sinned! You sinned!" We simply sense a conviction on the inside, now leading us to repent and confess our sin.

In the same manner the Spirit will teach us and lead us into general truth and understanding. He will teach us by imparting a sudden revelation (always in line with the Bible) within us. Those revelations may take ten minutes to describe to someone else, but they can come by the Holy Spirit in a matter of seconds.

In the same manner the Holy Spirit will lead us in the affairs of ministry. We must simply make a conscious effort to be sensitive to those inner leadings and impressions, and we will slowly learn (by trial and error) to follow the Spirit in regard to things pertaining to ministry. It is when we allow our heads (our rational or irrational thinking) to get in the way of our hearts (where the Spirit is leading us) that we find ourselves making errors in regard to God's will.

How the Spirit Led Jesus

Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit by inward impressions. For example, Mark's Gospel describes what happened directly after Jesus was baptized in the Holy Spirit following His baptism by John:

And immediately the Spirit *impelled* Him to go out into the wilderness” (Mark 1:12, emphasis added).

Jesus didn’t hear an audible voice or see a vision that led Him into the wilderness—He was simply *impelled* to go. That is how the Holy Spirit normally leads us. We will sense a drawing, a leading, a conviction, within us to do a certain thing.

When Jesus told the paralyzed man who had been lowered through the roof that his sins were forgiven, Jesus knew that the scribes who were present thought He was blaspheming. How did He know what they were thinking? We read in Mark’s gospel:

And immediately Jesus, *perceiving in His spirit* that they were reasoning that way within themselves, said to them, “Why are you reasoning about these things in your hearts?” (Mark 2:8, emphasis added).

Jesus perceived in His spirit what they were thinking. If we will be sensitive to our spirits, we too can know how to answer those who oppose the work of God.

The Spirit’s Leading in the Ministry of Paul

After at least twenty years of serving in ministry, the apostle Paul had learned well how to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. To some degree, the Spirit showed him “things to come” relative to his future ministry. For example, as Paul was concluding his ministry in Ephesus, He had some conception of the course that his life and ministry would follow for the next three years:

Now after these things were finished, Paul purposed in the spirit to go to Jerusalem after he had passed through Macedonia and Achaia, saying, “After I have been there, I must also see Rome” (Acts 19:21).

Notice that Paul didn’t purpose this intended direction in his *mind* but in his *spirit*. That indicates that the Holy Spirit was leading him in his spirit to go first to Macedonia and Achaia (both located in modern day Greece), then to Jerusalem, and finally to Rome. And that is precisely the course he followed. If you have a map in your Bible showing Paul’s third missionary journey and his journey to Rome, you can follow his path from Ephesus (where he purposed his route in his spirit) through Macedonia and Achaia, onto Jerusalem, and several years later, to Rome.

More precisely, Paul traveled through Macedonia and Achaia, then he backtracked through Macedonia once again, circling the coast of the Aegean Sea, and then he traveled down the Aegean coast of Asia Minor. During that journey he stopped at the city of Miletus, called for the elders of the church of nearby Ephesus, and delivered a farewell address to them in which he said:

And now, behold, *bound in spirit*, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me (Acts 20:22-23, emphasis added).

Paul said he was “bound in spirit,” meaning he had a conviction in his spirit that was leading him to Jerusalem. He didn’t have the complete picture regarding what would happen when he arrived in Jerusalem, but he stated that in every city in which he stopped on his journey, the Holy Spirit testified that bonds and afflictions awaited him there. How did the Holy Spirit “testify” of those bonds and afflictions that awaited him in Jerusalem?

Two Examples

In the 21st chapter of Acts, we find two recorded incidents that answer that question. The first example is when Paul landed at the Mediterranean port city of Tyre:

And after looking up the disciples, we stayed there seven days; and they kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem (Acts 21:4).

Because of this one verse, some commentators conclude that Paul disobeyed God by continuing on his way to Jerusalem. In the light of the rest of the information given to us in the book of Acts, however, we cannot rightly make that conclusion. This will become clear as we progress in the story.

Apparently the disciples in Tyre were spiritually sensitive and discerned that trouble awaited Paul in Jerusalem. They subsequently tried to convince him not to go. William's translation of the New Testament bears this out, as it translates this same verse: "Because of impressions made by the Spirit they kept on warning Paul not to set foot in Jerusalem."

The disciples in Tyre met with no success, however, because Paul continued his journey toward Jerusalem in spite of their warnings.

This teaches us that we must be very careful not to add our own interpretation to revelations we receive in our spirits. Paul knew full well that trouble awaited him in Jerusalem, but he also knew it was God's will for him to journey there regardless. If God reveals something to us by the Holy Spirit, that doesn't necessarily mean we are supposed to go and tell it, and we must also be careful not to add our own interpretation to what the Spirit has revealed.

Caesarea Stop Over

The next stop on Paul's journey to Jerusalem was the port city of Caesarea:

And as we were staying there for some days, a certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. And coming to us, he took Paul's belt and bound his own feet and hands, and said, "This is what the Holy Spirit says; 'In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles'" (Acts 21:10-11).

Here is yet another example of the Holy Spirit testifying to Paul that "bonds and afflictions" awaited him in Jerusalem. But notice that Agabus didn't say, "Therefore, thus says the Lord, 'Do not go to Jerusalem!'" No, God was leading Paul to Jerusalem and was simply preparing him through Agabus' prophecy for the troubles that awaited him there. Notice also that Agabus' prophecy only confirmed what Paul already knew in his spirit months before. We should never be led by prophecy. If prophecy doesn't confirm what we already know, we shouldn't follow it.

Agabus' prophecy is what we might consider to be "spectacular guidance," because it went beyond just an inward impression within Paul's spirit. When God grants "spectacular guidance," such as a vision or hearing an audible voice, it is usually because God knows our way is not going to be easy. We will need the extra assurance that spectacular guidance brings. In Paul's case, he was nearly going to be killed by a mob and spend several years in prison before his journey to Rome as a prisoner. Because of the spectacular guidance he received, however, he could maintain perfect peace through it all, knowing the outcome would be favorable.

If you don't receive spectacular guidance you shouldn't be concerned because if you need it, God will see that you get it. We should, however, always strive to be sensitive to and be led by the inward witness.

In Chains and in God's Will

When Paul arrived in Jerusalem, he was seized and incarcerated. Once again he received some spectacular guidance in the form of a vision of Jesus:

But on the night immediately following, the Lord stood at his [Paul's] side and said, "Take courage; for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem, so you must witness at Rome also" (Acts. 23:11).

Notice that Jesus did not say, "Now Paul, what are you doing here? I tried to warn you not to come to Jerusalem!" No, Jesus actually confirmed the leading that Paul had perceived in his spirit months before. Paul was in the center of God's purpose in Jerusalem in order to testify on behalf of Jesus. He would eventually proclaim Christ in Rome as well.

We must keep in mind that part of Paul's original calling was to testify not only before Jews and Gentiles but also before kings (see Acts 9:15). In the course of Paul's imprisonment in Jerusalem and later in Caesarea, he was given the opportunity to testify before Governor Felix, Porcius Festus, and King Agrippa, who was "almost persuaded" (Acts 26:28) to believe in Jesus. Finally, Paul was sent to Rome to testify before the Roman Emperor himself, Nero.

On the Way to See Nero

While on board a ship that was carrying him to Italy, Paul once again received God's guidance by being sensitive to his spirit. As the ship's captain and pilot were trying to determine at which port they should winter on the island of Crete, Paul received a revelation:

And when considerable time had passed and the voyage was now dangerous, since even the fast was already over, Paul began to admonish them, and said to them, "Men, I *perceive* that the voyage will certainly be attended with damage and great loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives" (Acts 27:9-10, emphasis added).

Paul *perceived* what was about to occur. Obviously his perception was though an impression given by the Spirit.

Unfortunately, the captain didn't listen to Paul and attempted to reach another harbor. As a result, the ship was caught in a violent storm for two weeks. The situation was so perilous that the ship's crew jettisoned all the cargo on the second day, and on the third day even threw the ship's tackle overboard. Sometime later, Paul received further guidance:

And since neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small storm was assailing us, from then on all hope of our being saved was gradually abandoned. And when they had gone a long time without food, then Paul stood up in their midst and said, "Men, you ought to have followed my advice and not to have set sail from Crete, and incurred this damage and loss. And yet now I urge you to keep up your courage, for there shall be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For this very night an angel of God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood before me, saying, 'Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and behold, God has granted you all those who are sailing with you.' Therefore, keep up your courage, men, for I believe God, that it will turn out exactly as I have been told. But we must run aground on a certain island" (Acts 27:20-26).

I think it is obvious why God granted Paul more “spectacular guidance” in light of his present predicament. Beyond that ordeal, Paul would soon face the plight of shipwreck. Shortly after that he would be bitten by a deadly snake (see Act 27:41-28:5). It’s nice to have an angel let you know in advance that everything is going to be OK!

Some Practical Advice

Begin to look to your spirit for those perceptions and impressions that are the Holy Spirit’s leadings. You will probably make some mistakes at first thinking that the Holy Spirit is leading you when He isn’t, but that’s normal. Don’t be discouraged; just keep at it.

It also helps to spend time in a quiet place, praying in tongues and reading the Bible. When we pray in other tongues, it is our spirit that prays, and we naturally tend to be more sensitive to our spirits then. By reading and meditating in the Word of God, we also become more sensitive to our spirits because God’s Word is spiritual food.

When God leads you in a certain direction, His leading won’t diminish. That means you should continue praying about major decisions for some time to be certain that it is *God* who is leading you and not your own ideas or emotions. If you don’t have peace in your heart when you pray about a certain direction, then don’t take that direction until you do have peace.

If you receive spectacular guidance, that is fine, but don’t try to “believe” to see a vision or hear an audible voice. God hasn’t promised to lead us by those means (although He does at times according to His sovereign will). We can, however, always trust that He will lead us by the inward witness.

Finally, don’t add to what God says to you. God may reveal to you some ministry He has prepared for you in the future, but you may assume the time of fulfillment is weeks away when it may be years. I know this from experience. Don’t make assumptions. Paul knew a little bit of what his future held but didn’t know everything, because God didn’t reveal everything. God wants us to continue to walk by faith always.