



Turning Lost Students into Christ-Centered Laborers

THE PSALMS AND GUIDANCE • Philip Yancey

If someone asked me for a recommendation of a biblical text on the doctrine of guidance, I would quickly suggest the psalms. Yes, that's right, all 150 of them. I learned to appreciate the Psalms on a trip to Colorado, in the midst at the busiest and most anxiety-filled year of my life. I had to go somewhere to escape office pressures in order to concentrate on one last editing of a book manuscript, and I chose Colorado in the month of May. I also needed to seek out guidance on some major decisions about my future.

I determined to arise early each morning, drive or walk to a scenic setting, and begin the day by reading in order straight through ten psalms. Those mornings still stand out with all the bracing clarity of cool morning mountain air. Clusters of bright green aspen trees were coming into leaf, staining the sheltered folds of the still-wintery mountains with a gash of life. I would stare around for a long time before reading.

Previously, I had dipped into the Psalms one at a time, finding a familiar one here or there, I found the technique of reading ten in sequence jarring. Some of them offered praise to God in jubilation and thanksgiving. They extolled his everlasting love, his deliverance, his clear guidance in daily affairs. Others, often sandwiched in between the most triumphant ones, blasted God for his seeming absence, his failure to guide clearly, his apparent forgetfulness of the promises he had made. At first the discord seemed bizarre, almost as if the Hebrew canonizers had arranged the order with a streak of mocking irony.

After a few days of unresolved dissonance I began to change my perspective on the Psalms. I stopped looking to them for specific advice and instead viewed them as spiritual journals, accounts of a few people who took seriously the intimate relationship between God and man. The authors were brutally honest, chronicling the full benefits of that love relationship, but also the outrageous disappointments. (Martin Marty, in his book "A Cry of Absence", characterizes one-half of the psalms as "wintry" ones and only one-third as summery ones. You must read all 150 to get the full picture, the welter of emotions and faith and doubt.)

The putative author of some of those psalms was called "a man after God's own heart." I now understand why. In his life, David always took God seriously. He intentionally involved God in every minor and major triumph and every minor and major failure. He railed at God, exalted him, doubted him, praised him, feared him, loved him. But regardless of what happened, God was never far from David's thoughts. David practiced the presence of God in daily details, and then took the time to keep a revealing poetic record of the intimacy between them. The repetitive, even tedious, prosody of the psalms is perhaps their main point. They primarily communicate not concepts, but rather the record of how a relationship is maintained.

Not Magic, but Faith

I confess that I have shifted tracks in the middle of an article, but I have done so because I believe most of the questions about guidance, the "how-to's", are misdirected. They are the typically impatient demands of us Americans who want a short-cut to the "magic," the benefit of relating to Almighty God. There is no short-cut, no magic – at least not that anyone can reduce to a three-point outline. There is only the possibility of a lifetime search for intimacy with a God who, as the psalmists discovered, sometimes seems close and sometimes far, sometimes seems



loving and sometimes forgetful. We have little sympathy, as Lewis said, for the “problems” of Omnipotence. But God does not want sympathy. He wants love and a lasting commitment to take him seriously, everyday, regardless. And if there is a formula for guidance, it would have to be that.

Does God guide? Yes, I believe that he does. Most times, I believe, He guides in subtle ways, by feeding ideas into our minds, speaking through a nagging sensation of dissatisfaction, inspiring us to choose better than we otherwise would have done, bringing to the surface hidden dangers of temptation, and perhaps by rearranging certain circumstances. (He may also still guide through visions, dreams, and prophetic utterances, but I cannot speak to these forms as they lie outside my field of experience.) God’s guidance will supply real help, but in ways that will not overwhelm my freedom.

And yet, I cannot help thinking this whole issue of divine guidance, which draws throngs of seekers to seminars and sells thousands of books, is powerfully overrated. It deserves about as much attention as the Bible devotes to the topic.

The sociologist Bronislaw Malinowski suggested a distinction between magic and religion. Magic, he said, is when we manipulate the deities so that they perform our wishes; religion is when we subject ourselves to the will of the deities. True guidance cannot resemble magic; a way for God to give us short-cuts and genie bottles. It must, rather, fall under Malinowski’s definition of religion. If so, it will occur in the context of a committed relationship between a Christian and his God. Once that relationship calms, divine guidance becomes not an end in itself but merely one more means God uses in nourishing faith.

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