

Noticing Guidance: A Brief Guide to Discerning God's Will in the Midst of Big Decisions

by Evan B. Howard

When I was choosing a topic for my doctoral dissertation, one of my advisers said, "Choose a topic that you find both interesting and important, because you will be living with that topic for the rest of your life." I ended up choosing the topic of discernment. The question of how we distinguish what is from God and what is not from God is truly a fascinating topic. And is it important? Oh, yes! I think of discernment as the *every person* issue. We all struggle with discerning things. It may be a dream, or a spiritual experience. You may be searching for a devotional strategy or wondering about taking a step in a relationship. You may be evaluating a religious trend or a Christian ministry. Your family may have just moved into town and you are deciding where to "do church." Whether we are appreciatively noticing where God was present at the end of our day or we are grueling over a career decision, every Christian seeks to know the will of God in the midst of their everyday life. But how to summarize? **Here I will offer a few basic principles especially as they apply to making big decision in life.**

First, you must realize that God wants to be known. The God of the universe desires that you know his will. Not, however, as the Department of Taxes wants you to know their regulations, but as loving parents long for you to learn to know their heart. When a child is young a loving parent gives clear and precise instructions. And the parent expects obedience to these instructions. This is the character of guidance when we are young. But over time, the specific instructions are meant to lead the child to learn the values underneath. As a child matures, loving parents reveal their "will" less and less through commands and more and more through letting the child decide, allowing them to apply their sense of their parents' desires in the specifics of their life and then talking with mom and dad after. Hopefully, when the child becomes an adult it naturally "knows the parents' will" in given situations. It all depends on the situation and on the maturity of the child. So let's stop and think for a moment, remembering how God wants to be known:

- **What situation is on your mind right now? What situation are you discerning about?**
- **How old are you in the faith? How do you think God might want to communicate his will to you in this situation?**
- **What does this mean for your process of discernment?**

God is not like a parent, though, in that God does not die and leave us to guess "I think this is what Dad would have wanted." Rather God shares life with us through the Holy Spirit even as we grow to know God's heart as we mature. The Spirit of Christ is present with us, reminding us of the things of Christ even as we deliberate about life. Through our meditation on Scripture, through times of sharing with other Christians, through thoughts or feelings that appear, through many different ways, God is actively present with us, communicating back and forth. Not necessarily "telling us what to do" (though God does at times give specific commandment and invitations) but just probing us, or perhaps revealing a bit of Truth in the situation. Thus, really, discernment is about learning to have a fruitful relationship with God. Discernment is not a matter of a precise formula, but rather of a beloved person. Ask yourself:

- **Where or when have I noticed God sharing something with me? Do I find God in Scripture, in times with people, in worship gatherings, in solitary prayer, while walking in nature? Where does Truth show up for you?**
- **What kinds of things have I noticed already about this particular situation?** Depending on where you are at in your discernment you may already have a set of thoughts, feelings, conversations with others and so on to observe.
- **What is the condition of my fruitful relationship with God right now? Why?**

As a discernment grows, we begin to collect a set of what I call “impressions.” There is one impression we got from a conversation with a close friend. There is another impression we got from that dream two nights ago. There is still a slightly different impression we get when we examine the situation strictly rationally. The voices of our culture, of our natural personality, of our spiritual enemies, and of the Holy Spirit all have their say. We can get lost trying to identify the exact “source” of every thought in our head; and while sometimes this can help, I find it wise to sort through our impressions with a few simple principles. **Try them out on your own situation.**

- **Examine the *content* of the impressions** – Are they in line with the Scriptures and the teachings of the faith? Are they oriented toward the beauty of God? What to those who know you and love you most think of them? Are there pieces of the impressions you recognize as clearly being “of the flesh”?
- **Examine the *spirit* of the impressions** – Do they come with the conviction of God? Do they communicate a humble and Christlike character? Do they have some recognizable meaning in your situation and community or are they really off the wall?
- **Examine the *fruit* of the impressions** – Have you known impressions of this sort (in your life or others) to produce growth in Christlikeness? Are the impressions accompanied by the peace or conviction of Christ as you have known it? What might be new about this and why? Do the impressions carry the power of God with them?

In discernment we notice, and we evaluate. But mostly we just wait. Sometimes in the midst of our waiting God addresses aspects of our life we did not expect. We go through “little conversions” along the journey. I think this is frequently why God guides us these ways. Just like a wise and loving parent. Often, when it comes to the decision itself, we are really looking for the right time to take the next step with regard to the decision. This “right time” has been summarized neatly (by Ignatius of Loyola) in terms of *three* separate times:

- **The First Time – Blasted** I call the first time being *blasted*, because this is when something happens and you simply know that you know. During the course of a train ride, Mother Theresa just *knew* that she was going to start a ministry in the midst of the people on the streets. Even in these times, it is still wise to seek the counsel of others and to examine other elements of our discernment. But when the blast comes, perhaps it is time to take a big step forward.
- **The Second Time – Led** I call the second time being *led* because while the sense of “this is the time to step forward” does not have the certainty of being blasted, there is still indication that the various impressions line up sufficiently to encourage us to take some “next step.” After a time of seeking God and waiting, what do you find yourself drawn to when you are at your spiritual best? Why? What do you find yourself drawn to when you are at your spiritual worst? Why? Sometimes, we need to take one small step, which itself may lead to further guidance.
- **The Third Time – Ignored** I call the third time *ignored* because that is often how it feels. We wait and we wait. We collect and evaluate impressions. But nothing happens. And for one reason or another we simply can’t wait any longer. Sometimes God trusts us to just weight up the pros and cons and do what we think might bring God the greatest glory.

So, now that you have read these three “times,” ask yourself: **Where am I in my situation? Perhaps you are not even to the stage of waiting yet. You are still clarifying the question or collecting impressions. But perhaps you are moving toward a “waiting” time. Or perhaps you can see one of the three right times to take the next step. Reflect on your own discernment as see what you think.**

When it is time, we choose, with the confidence that we can make God happy with our choice. And in the end, the choices that make God happy will also make us happy as well.