

There You Are
Part Seven: Our Wise Guide Going Before Us
Psalm 32.8-9
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How do I experience more of God in my life? Have you ever found yourself wondering that?

Yes I believe in God. I believe Jesus died for me. I've put my trust in him.
But how do I experience more of his involvement in my day to day life?

How do I get my life to be more about him?

How do I get my life to line up better with his design for it?

How do I actively follow Him?

Some people seem to talk about God in a way that makes it seem like God is so involved in their lives – part of their *whole* life, not just during worship, but each day, and all through the day.

That he's leading them into the life he has for them, showing them the way to go, what to do, how to live each day

Sure, he's in my life. But I want more than that, I want more of an active sense of God being *involved*, leading me, shaping my life. I want to *experience* God in my life. I want to live my life in a way where he is actively leading and shaping it. How does that become a reality?

Does that register with you? Do you ever feel that way? If so, I think this morning's message might speak to you.

This morning we are exploring an image, one that we find all through the Psalms, of God as a guide who actively leads us along the path he intends for us.

Listen to these captivating words of invitation from Psalm 32. God says to his people:

Psalm 32.8

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.

What a beautiful picture of the deep involvement of God in a person's life.

I will instruct you:

I'll give you insight and make you wise and discerning

Yes, but – what if we didn't bring ourselves into existence? What if we aren't the ones who made up the rules? What if our lives can be traced back to a source, outside of ourselves, to a holy and loving Being who thought us up and gave us life?

Isn't it reasonable to conclude that the way he thought was best for us to live as human beings really was best?

I will instruct you and teach you in *the way you should go*;
I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.

The God who created us knows the best way for us to live.

And we have a choice: the right way, or our way? The best way, or our way? His way, or our way?

David in Psalm 1.6 For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

David in Psalm 139.23-24 Search me, O God, and know my heart; See if there
be any crooked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Jeremiah in Jeremiah 6.16 Ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you
will find rest for your souls.”

Jesus in Matthew 7.13-14 Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the
way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. And
the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are
few.

You know we get down to Charlotte fairly often to see our kids and grandkids, and we've gotten to know the road pretty well after driving it a couple dozen times.

One time last year, on a trip to Charlotte, it was near midnight, and we were driving east along Route 74 about an hour away from Charlotte.

I was listening to the wonderful audio version of *The Lord of the Rings* that's narrated by Andy Sirkus – the best narrated book I've ever listened to – and I was completely absorbed.

Suddenly, in the pitch black in the middle of absolutely nowhere, the highway just came to an end. Huge orange signs blocked the road that said, “End of Highway” and “Road Closed.” On the other side of the signs there was no road. Just open fields.

What? I pulled over and pulled out my phone, baffled. Where are we? So I Googled our kid's address and pushed “Search,” and back came a big red triangle with an exclamation point and a message that said, “Can't find a way there.” We just laughed.

I eventually climbed out of the world of Middle Earth and figured out I had missed a fork in the road a few miles back, and was able to do a jog over to the highway and get us back on track without too much trouble.

Life presents us with lots of different possible paths.

How would you describe the life path you're on?

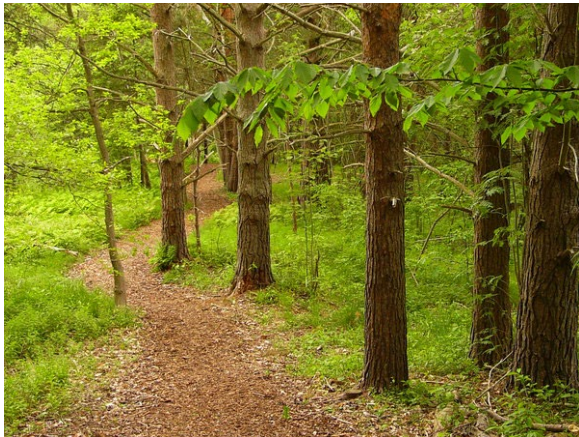
How confident are you that it is the right path?

That the path you're on will take you where you want to go?

I will instruct you and teach you *in the way you should go*;
I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.

2. The second implication of this passage

is that the Christian life is meant to be a dynamic process, not a static existence.



The metaphor of a path implies movement, progress, continuing, advancing, with new developments, and new views, and new challenges, and new successes along the way.

I will instruct you and teach you *in the way you should go*;
I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.

It's not a way we enter. It's a way we walk along.

The imagery of a path or a way is at the heart of biblical imagery related to what it means to live our lives for God.

God is the great Way Maker, the pillar of cloud and fire who goes before his people, leading them out of slavery and through the wilderness and into the promised land.

Scripture is the great guidebook.

One of the more unfortunate translation traditions in from Hebrew into English is the choice to translate the word Torah, the word for the guidebook God gave his people about how to live, as “law,” when the root of the word is actually direct rather than command. Torah is God’s direction, the guide, the path

And in the Book of Acts we learn that before it was called anything else the Christian faith was called the Way. That’s how it’s described five different times in Acts. (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14)

The Christian faith is meant to be understood as a dynamic and adventuresome journey, a way that we journey along. What new things will God be showing me or teaching me or revealing about himself or inviting me into with each new bend of the trail?

But over the past several generations, at least in the evangelical church here in the US, in an effort to make the gospel clearer and more accessible, we have inadvertently shrunk it down to something less than what it really is

Rather than a way we walk, the primary metaphor since the 1950s has been a room we enter

I was in the room called lost, then I walked through the door that called Jesus
and now I am in the room called saved

This passage stretches our thinking about the Christian life back out to biblical size and proportion.

The Christian life is not a room I occupy, but a path I walk, along which I make progress and learn and grow, there is progress I can look back on, there are places to grow that are still in front of me entering into new stretches all the time, and active and vibrant process that engages and requires everything of me

God’s path should be experienced in this way

Proverbs 4.18 The way of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines
brighter and brighter until full day.

How do you think about the Christian life you are living?

Is the Christian life a room you occupy, or is it a path your follow?
Is it static, a place you sit and wait until you go to be with Jesus?
Or is it dynamic, a path you follow, moving ever further, drawing ever nearer?

As you look at your Christian life, do you see growth and movement? Is your life more yielded to Jesus? Do you look more like him? Can you point to places in your life where he is at work today?

I will instruct you and teach you in *the way you should go*;
I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.

3. The third implication of this passage

is that we need to rethink the path we're on in more relational and less impersonal terms.



It is so easy for us to fall into thinking of God's way in fixed and impersonal terms. God's way is a paved and unforgiving path that we need to find and then work hard to stay on, and if we get off it we need to backtrack and go back and find it.

But listen again to this passage, and how profoundly personally God describes the way he leads us.

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.

Three different times God says, "I will." I will make you wise and discerning. I will get you going the right direction. I will give you good advice

We are not led by the path. We are led by a *person* along the path, a person who takes us by the hand and leads us, a person who goes before us and walks beside us.

It is a living way, along which we are led by God whose loving eye is on us, a God who is actively involved with us and concerned for us.

How will he instruct and teach and counsel us? In a relational way.

A lot of people talk about God opening and closing doors, and leading us that way, through our circumstances. And it's true. That is a way that God can lead us, especially as we are first beginning to following him.

But God ultimately intends something much more intimate and relational than that.

Listen to the verse that comes just after this one.

Psalm 32.9

Do not be like the horse or the mule,
which have no understanding
but must be controlled by bit and bridle
or they will not come to you.



Think about how a bit and bridle work. A horse isn't capable of having a conversation with its rider in which the rider expresses his desires and the horse responds.

The rider needs to communicate its intentions in a different way. It doesn't communicate *with* the horse, it communicates *to* the horse, directing it through the circumstance of the bit in its mouth.

When it says a horse and mule have no understanding, it actually says they have no discernment – they are not capable of discerning which of the two paths the rider would prefer, to it needs to be controlled.

Dallas Willard, in his exceptional book *Hearing God's Voice*, which I highly recommend, makes the distinction between *mechanical guidance*, where someone is steered from outside, through circumstances, and *personal guidance*, where someone is steered through conversation, in the context of a conversational relationship.

So what does that look like?

Let me give you a picture of what that can look like from two really moving conversations I had with two different men over the past couple of weeks.

In both cases, they described their feelings going this way – feeling some hurt, frustration, wanting to respond in a defensive or self-protective way – and then God showing them his path, giving them his counsel – in one case, what felt like a nudge, in

the other case, what seemed like a spoken word, that sent them in the opposite direction in the opposite spirit, in a posture of grace, humility, openness, selflessness.

That's how God instructs us and leads us in the way we should go without having to use a bit and bridle. And the key to that? In both cases, they were willing to listen, and willing to be led.

The way God leads us along his way is profoundly personal.

The summer after we got married, while I was still in seminary, Sharon and I spent the summer doing ministry in West Africa. At one point we were walking to the bus station in the inner city of Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire. We were cutting through a shanty town, weaving through endless rows of corrugated metal houses, the only whites and the only Americans within miles, no one speaking a language we understood. No signs. No map. But we walked along with confidence because Kofi, our delightful and gentle Ivoirian guide, was leading the way.

I love the way God's intimate and personal way of leading was captured by King George VI in his 1939 Christmas speech, in which he quoted from a poem by Minnie Haskins called "God Knows."

And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: "Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."

And he replied: "Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way."

So I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night.

Following God's path should always be thought of in this intimate and personal way:

God taking us by the hand and leading us.

Us taking God by the hand and letting him lead us.

As Psalm 73.23 says,

I am always with you;

you hold me by my right hand.

You guide me with your counsel.

On the last night Jesus spent with his disciples,

John 14.6

Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. [No one comes to the Father except through me.]"

What could be more personal than that?

How do you think about the path you're on, and how to stay on it? Do you think of it in impersonal terms, as a fixed path laid out that you have to struggle to find and stay on yourself, or do you think of it in personal terms, as God taking you by the hand and leading you each day in the life he has for you?

4. The fourth implication of this passage

is that every path leads somewhere, but God's path leads to God himself.



Here's one of the wonderful mysteries of the Christian faith.

Every path that God leads us on, wherever else it may lead us – to holiness, to love, to ministry, to service – will always lead us to him.

“God directs all things,” says Thomas a Kempis, “that direct us to him.”

I love the unexpected twist at the end of our passage in Psalm 32.9.

Psalm 32.9

Do not be like the horse or the mule,
which have no understanding
but must be controlled by bit and bridle
or they will not come *to you*.

We expect David to say, “or they will not go where you want.” But when God leads us along his path, it will always lead us to him.

The writer of the book of Hebrews speaks of the Christian faith as “a new and living way opened for us” that allows us to “enter the Most Holy Place” – that is, the presence of God himself. (Hebrews 10.19-20)

Jesus speaks of himself in the same way.

John 14.6

Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Wherever else God's path may take us, it will always lead us from wherever we are *to him*.

And what could we want more than God himself? As Julian of Norwich prays, in the one prayer that God will always answer:

God, of your goodness, give me yourself; you are enough for me And if I ask anything that is less, I shall always lack something, but in you alone I have everything.

Where is your path leading? What's waiting for you at the end of the path you're on?

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In each of these messages this summer we are wanting to focus on a prayer practice that can help us experience this dimension of the presence of God.

Our prayer practice this morning will be to answer God's invitation in God's own words. To use God's words to ask God to lead us, and to listen for his leading, and to say yes to his leading.

Inviting God to lead us along his path is so much more than just asking for advice when we get to the occasional intersection that requires a choice.

This is a practice that God invites us to take part in all along each day of life – inviting him to take us by the hand and lead us into the life he has for us. And this is the key to experiencing more of a sense of God's deep involvement in your Christian life.

In his book *The Imitation of Christ*, Thomas a Kempis imagines Jesus saying to his followers:

Above all, commit all things to Me, and entrust yourself wholly to Me, saying, 'Lord, You know what is best; let everything be in accordance with Your will. Give what You will, as much as You will, and when You will. Do with me as You think good, as pleases You best, and is most to Your glory. I am in Your hand; guide me according to Your will. I am indeed Your servant, (Ps.119:125) and .. I wish to live, not for myself but for You alone!'

God has placed an amazing invitation in front of us this morning.

We'll respond by praying God's words back to him from Psalm 25 and Psalm 143, portions of Scripture I would encourage you commit to memory.

Then we'll close by going straight into our closing worship song.

Would you pray with me?

God says to us this morning . . .

Psalm 32.8

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.

And we say back to God . . .

Psalm 25.4-5 NIV

Show me your ways, LORD,
teach me your paths.
Guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my Savior,
and my hope is in you all day long.

Psalm 143.8-10 NLT

Let me hear of your unfailing love each morning,
for I am trusting you.

Show me where to walk,
for I give myself to you.

Rescue me from my enemies, LORD;
I run to you to hide me.

Teach me to do your will,
for you are my God.

May your gracious Spirit lead me forward
on a firm footing.