



Talk 7 – How Does God Guide Us?

Duration 46 Minutes
HTB Transcripts

Key:

Personal Story / Testimony that Nicky Gumbel tells in the classic Alpha talk. These may be replaced with a live speaker's personal story or the speaker may tell the story about Nicky in the same way Nicky tells stories about others.

Story that Nicky tells about someone else (about a friend or a story he heard or read about).

Quotes are key to the talk to emphasise a point and to enable guests to engage and relate to a point made. There is now a way that people can seek permission to omit or replace quotes used in the original talks. A quote should be replaced with something equally effective to maintain the balance of teaching, story, and references to other information sources.

Key Quotes will need approval to change (these will be identified by a comment in the left column). Please email publications@alpha.org with your request.

Key Bible Passages are identified and you may wish to display these visually for your guests.

Red type identifies a part of the key teaching text that may be removed or altered for contextualisation.

Text left untouched is the standard key message content of the Alpha talk.

NOTE: Key elements of this script are: personal stories, humour and reference to media / popular culture to draw the guests in to engage with the talk.

Parts of the talk may need to be contextualised for other contexts or cultures but make sure you maintain the key elements of humour and personal testimony. Notice how quotes, and stories are used throughout to add emphasis to the main points of the talk (theology and testimony).

NOTE: The strength of this talk is the use of stories and personal testimony as you talk through the ways God guides us. Try to use stories that are personal as well as stories about others. Try also to keep a balance between light-hearted stories and more moving stories.

KEY: Personal Story Story Quotes Key Quotes Key Bible Passages

[Either use this story or replace it with an equally impacting story which tells how God guided someone.]

Somebody calls the Samaritans every twenty seconds. The Samaritans is a telephone hotline which helps and supports people who are despairing or even suicidal. It was founded by a man called Chad Varah. And I read recently the story of how he came to found it. What happened was that he was the vicar of a very busy parish near Clapham Junction. And he had this idea of a telephone hotline. But he thought he wasn't the right person because he was so busy. So he said to the Lord, 'Lord, it's a great idea, but I'm not the person to do this.' He said, 'Look, I think the person you need' — he advised the Lord! — 'is a person who has a church in the City' — because churches in the city have very few parishioners, and therefore the vicars there have far more time available.

Well, a few days later he got an invitation to be a vicar of a City church exactly like that, at the Church of St Stephen's, Walbrook, in the City of London. And when he saw the patrons of the church and they asked him what he'd do if he was appointed, he said, 'Well, I'd set up a telephone hotline.' And they said, 'Well, we think that's a great idea.'

So he was appointed. And on the way to visit the church, he was thinking: 'Now, what would be a really great number for this hotline?' He wanted something that would give a kind of sense of urgency, and something that could be easily memorised. And he knew, because it was some time ago, that the first three would be letters: so as it was Mansion House, the first three would be M-A-N. And then he thought, 'Well, what could the rest be to give it a hint of emergency?' — something like 999. He thought, 'Well, perhaps the perfect number which would be easily memorable and give a hint of emergency would be MAN 9000.'

So when he got to the church, actually he found the telephone was buried under a whole lot of rubble in the vestry, and he got it out and he dialled the operator, and he tried to persuade her to give him this number, MAN 9000. And he said, 'Would it be possible for you to change it to that?' And she said, 'It's most unlikely, since nobody having such a good number would be willing to change it for love or money.' Well, he said he had no money but he had plenty of love! And could he please be informed of who it was so he could contact them. And the operator said, 'Well, where are you calling from?' so he licked

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his thumb like that and wiped the middle of the dial, and there he saw: MAN 9000. 'Don't worry,' he said to the operator, 'I've got it already!' And then, he said, 'I addressed God: "Very well, I get the message! You had it waiting for me since the telephone was installed. Now please stop, because it's getting eerie!"'

Not all guidance is as clear-cut as that. But all of us have to make decisions about what we do with our lives — our life work, our life partners, children, use of time, where we live, money; as well as the kind of day-to-day decisions we all face. And discerning the will of God can be quite a tricky business.

But the wonderful news of the Christian faith is that we are not on our own in this life. And guidance is all about this relationship with God. Would you like to turn to John, chapter 10, verse 27? Jesus says this:

'My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.'

Jesus uses a figure of speech, a shepherd with his sheep, to talk about this intimate relationship that he wants to have with us. He knows us, he wants to guide us. And he has a wonderful purpose for your life and for my life.

Verse 10, Jesus says: 'I came that you might have life, and have it to the full.'

And in verse 15 he says: 'I lay down my life for the sheep.'

That's how much God loves you, how much Jesus loves you. He wants the very, very best.

St Paul says that God's purpose for our lives is 'good and pleasing and perfect'. And in order to find out what it is, we need to consult him: 'my sheep listen' — we need to ask him: 'What do you want me to do?'

Whom will God guide? He'll guide those who are willing to do what he wants. Jesus says, they will follow me — those who are willing to follow him. Our attitude should be like Mary, the mother of Jesus, who was such a wonderful example in so many areas, but in this area she said: 'I'm the Lord's servant. I'm willing to do whatever he wants.' That's freedom. And


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the amazing thing is when we say that to the Lord, God is able to use anyone.

Rick Warren writes that ‘Abraham was old; Jacob insecure; Leah unattractive; Joseph had been abused; Moses stuttered; Gideon was poor; Samson co-dependent; Rahab immoral; David had had an affair and all kinds of family problems; Elijah was suicidal; Jeremiah depressed; Jonah reluctant; Naomi a widow; John the Baptist eccentric, to say the least; Peter impulsive and hot-tempered; Martha worried a lot; the Samaritan woman had had several failed marriages; Zacchaeus was unpopular; Thomas had doubts; Paul had poor health; Timothy was timid—a variety of misfits, and God used each of them in his service.’

[If you are translating delete the text in red if the ‘CS’s’ do not correspond to your language.]

So how does God guide us? How does this relationship work? We’ve got five main ways we’re going to look at tonight — **they’re the five CS’s**. And in some cases it might be one of these; in major decisions it might be all five.



Talk Point 1

COMMANDING SCRIPTURE

Number 1: Commanding Scripture. That’s what we looked at last week. In the Bible the general will of God for all of us is revealed. And there we see what all of us are called to. Our primary calling is not to do something, but to be someone. Our primary calling is to live in a relationship with God, to know Jesus. Our primary calling is to become like Jesus — to become free, to become loving, to become peaceful.

And then we’re called to make a difference to the world, to change the world around us.

We saw last week that God has spoken on a whole range of issues. So there’s some things where we really don’t need specific guidance, because it’s absolutely clear from this book what his will is. He’s spoken about marriage and family life and work and money and children and all kinds of things.

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We know, for example, that marriage is for life. So if you're a married man here **tonight** and you see a very attractive woman on the other side of the room, and you're thinking, 'Hmm, I wonder whether God is calling me to leave my wife and go off with that very attractive woman the other side of the room' — the answer is no, he's not. Because we're told in this book: 'Do not commit adultery.' You don't need specific guidance about that.

You don't need to ask every year, 'Should I pay my taxes this year or not?' Because it says 'pay your taxes'.

I came across this letter that was written to the Inland Revenue by someone who'd just become a Christian. He wrote: 'Dear Sir, I have just become a Christian, and I have found that I cannot sleep at night. So here is a hundred pounds that I owe you. PS: If I still can't sleep, I'll send you the rest.'

[If you use this story you might explain that Selfridges is a famous department store in London, England. Or you might choose your own example or story.]

We're called to tell the truth. **I remember meeting a very old man whose nickname was Gibbo.** Actually his grandson was on the last course. And Gibbo told me this story. He said he used to work as a clerk for Selfridges, and he worked with Gordon Selfridge, who started Selfridges. And one time the telephone rang, and he picked it up, and the person said, 'Could I speak to Gordon Selfridge?' And Gordon Selfridge was in the room, and so he called him, and Gordon Selfridge said, 'Tell him I'm out.' And Gibbo handed him the phone and said, 'You tell him you're out!' And Gordon Selfridge apparently was absolutely furious. But Gibbo said to him, 'Look, if I can lie for you, I can lie to you. And I never will.' And that moment transformed Gibbo's career at Selfridges, because from that moment onwards when they needed someone they could trust, they always went to him.

So God's general will is revealed in this book. But this won't tell us which job we should do, or how much we should give. But sometimes as we read this book, because, as we saw last week, not only has God breathed through this book; he still breathes, he still speaks through it. And sometimes he'll bring to light a particular verse: as we're reading, something will come to light.

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[Delete the text in red if you do not use the humorous story.]

Some people have been guided by kind of opening the Bible at random and pointing to a particular verse. But it wouldn't be good to make a habit of it, because it could expose us sooner or later to unhappy consequences.

I heard of one man who tried this. He said, 'Lord, what shall I do?' And he opened his Bible at random, and he happened to land on Matthew 27:5, which says: 'Then Judas went and hanged himself.' So he thought, 'Oh dear, I'd better try this again,' and he went to Luke 10:37: 'Go and do thou likewise.' He thought, 'Oh dear!' So he went to John 13:27, which says: 'What you're about to do, do quickly.'

So that's not really a great idea in the long term. But if we have a kind of regular — and this is what I would recommend to you — a kind of regular, methodical reading of the Bible each day, it's always amazing to me how appropriate each day's reading is. God feeds us, and he also speaks to us and guides us.

[Tell a personal story about a time when God guided you to make a life-changing decision, or you may tell this story about Nicky.]

I'd been practising as a lawyer for some years, and I sensed that God was calling us to ordination in the Church of England. And Pippa and I went off for a weekend together to pray. And during this weekend I wrote down all the ways in which God had been guiding us, on this little piece of paper. And the first thing that I wrote down was the ways in which he had guided us through the Bible. And there were fifteen different occasions where we had sensed God speaking to us through this book.

One of them was through a verse in Romans 10 which says this — and it was on an occasion, again, where I'd been praying for God to guide me: 'What do you want me to do?' And the verse says: 'How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?' (in other words, telling them). And I wondered whether that was God calling me.

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Well, that weekend we went off to Durham to meet with our great friends Nicky and Sila to pray about this. And as we were praying, Nicky read out this verse. When we came back to London that Sunday night, John Irvine was preaching here on that passage. And when he got to this verse — I was sitting up in the gallery and, I don't know, I felt he was looking at me, because he said, 'and God may be calling somebody here to ordination in the Church of England.' And even I sensed that might be God speaking to me!

So that's the first thing: Commanding Scripture — in other words, the Bible.



For the apostle Paul it was almost a definition of a Christian: a definition of a Christian was somebody who was led by the Spirit (Galatians 5:18). And the writer of the book of Acts is of course Luke. Luke wrote two volumes: he wrote Luke's Gospel and he wrote Acts. And in Luke's Gospel you see that Jesus, all the way through his life, is led by the Holy Spirit. And it's almost as if he writes the second volume to show that the same Holy Spirit who led Jesus through his life now leads the church, and so now leads every person who's invited him to come and be part of their lives.

And as Jesus said in John, chapter 10, which we looked at earlier, 'my sheep recognise my voice'. We recognise the voice of the Holy Spirit; at least we begin to — it takes time. It's like any relationship. If we know somebody well, we recognise their voice, for example on the telephone.

[You may personalise this with your own example.]

I rang someone in America this week, and I got through to their office, and I said, 'Hello, my name is Nicky Gumbel.' And they said, 'Oh, good afternoon, Mrs Gumbel!' They assumed — I think in America the name Nicky is a female name, so they assumed I was Mrs Gumbel. That's fine!

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But when I ring my wife I say, 'Hello!' She says, 'Oh, hi!' I don't have to say, 'Oh, hello, my name's Nicky Gumbel'; she recognises my voice because she knows me well. And when we know someone well, we begin to recognise their voice. The same is true of the Holy Spirit. As we develop this relationship, we begin to recognise the voice of the Holy Spirit.

And the Holy Spirit leads us in a number of different ways. First of all, God speaks to us when we pray. In Acts, chapter 13 we read of: 'As they were worshipping the Lord, the Holy Spirit spoke to them.'

Prayer is a two-way conversation — that's what we looked at a couple of weeks ago. It's not just a question of us sort of pouring out our requests to God and then going off without ever listening, because he may want to speak to us when we pray.

[You may reword the text in red for contextual or cultural application.]

It's a bit like, you know, if we go to the doctor. **Supposing I go to the doctor and I say, 'Oh, hello, good morning, doctor! I've got a number of problems today. I've got some fungus growing under my toenails, and I've got this problem with my cartilage in my knee, and I think I'm getting a bit of arthritis in my hips. And, oh, I get this tennis elbow. And I think actually I'm beginning to develop flu symptoms. And I have a problem sleeping at night.'** And I pour out all my problems to him, and I say, 'So, well, it's been very nice to see you, doctor. Goodbye!' You know, the doctor might say, 'Well, hang on a second, do you want to hear what I have to say?'

And sometimes I think God says to us, 'Do you want to hear what I have to say?' And that's why when we pray I think it's a great idea to have a kind of notebook, or I often use my diary, just to jot down things, thoughts that come to mind, maybe what you might call a sort of impression: 'Maybe I ought to ring that person. I wonder whether I ought to write a letter to that person?'

So God speaks when we pray. God also sometimes speaks through giving us a strong desire to do something. In Philippians 2, verse 13, St Paul says that 'God works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.' In other words, if God calls you to do something, he will

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also give you the desire to do that if you yield yourself to him.

[You may use this story or replace it with another story about a time when God impacted someone greatly through guidance, that led them to an amazing work.]

I read about a man called Dr Paul Brand, who was visiting a leprosy sanatorium near Madras, and he was being shown round by a man called Dr Cochrane. And as they were being shown round the hospital, ‘there were patients there who were squatting, stumping along on bandaged feet, following with their unseeing, deformed faces.’ And Dr Paul Brand said this:

‘Hands waved at me, stretching out in greeting. They were twisted, gnarled, ulcerated stumps. Some were stiff, like metal claws, some missing fingers, some hands were missing altogether. Finally I could restrain myself no longer. How did they get this way? What do you do about them? Dr Cochrane said he didn't know; he said he was a skin man — he could only treat that part of the leprosy. He turned to me and he said, “You're the bone man, you're the orthopaedic surgeon!” And he went on to tell me that not one orthopaedic surgeon had yet studied the deformities of the fifteen million leprosy victims in the world.’

‘As they were passing, a young person who had leprosy put out his hand so that he could take his hand, and Paul Brand said to him, “Squeeze my hand as hard as you can.” To my amazement, [he says] instead of a weak twitch I'd expected to feel, this sharp and intense pain raced through my palm. His grip was like a vice, with fingers digging into my flesh like steel talons. He showed no paralysis — in fact, I cried out for him to let go. I looked up angrily, but was disarmed by the gentle smile on his face. He didn't know he was hurting me.’

‘That was the clue: somewhere in that severely deformed hand were powerfully good muscles. I felt a tingling, as if the whole universe was revolving around me. I knew I had arrived in my place. That single incident in 1947 changed my life. It was my moment. I'd felt a call of the Spirit of God. I was made for that one moment, and I knew that I would have to point my life in a new direction. I've never doubted it since.’

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'Dr Paul Brand went on to brilliant pioneering research in the disease of leprosy, and he became a world-renowned leprosy surgeon, receiving the CBE and the prestigious Albert Lasker Award.'

[You may delete this or replace it with a personal example.]

In a much more mundane way, I would say the same has been true for me: you know, that before I was a Christian, if you had asked me what sort of job would I least like to have done, I think I would have probably said being a clergyman in the Church of England. That sounded to me like the most boring thing it was possible to do! But then when I came to faith in Christ and I said to the Lord, 'Lord, I'm willing to do anything you want,' I found I had this strong desire to do exactly what I'm doing now! And I have to say — you know, I was just thinking about it today — I would not want to be doing anything else. I absolutely love my job. I find it the most exciting job in the world. But God has changed my desires.

Sometimes he guides us in more unusual ways — sometimes through a prophecy, or visions, or pictures, or angels, or some people hear an audible voice, or even dreams. Now, obviously, in this whole area of being led by the Spirit we can make mistakes and, certainly, **I've made a lot of mistakes in my life**, because it's not as simple as that. Guidance is a very difficult thing and sometimes we get it right, and sometimes certainly I get it wrong. But there are various tests. St. John says: 'Test the spirits to see whether they're from God.' Is it in line with the Bible? Does it promote love? You know, God is love — if it's not a loving idea, then it won't come from God.

A test in 1 Corinthians 14 is: is it 'strengthening, encouraging, comforting?' Another test is: do we sense God's peace about the decision? St Paul writes: 'Let the peace of Christ rule in your heart.'

So the Bible is one way — Commanding Scripture; the Holy Spirit — Compelling Spirit.

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Talk Point 3

COMMON SENSE

But then a third CS: Common Sense — if you like, our reason. God has given every human being a conscience.

John Stott writes: 'Although our conscience reflects our upbringing and culture and is therefore fallible, nevertheless it remains a guard within us, warning us that there's a difference between right and wrong.'

I sometimes think that conscience is like a very sharp knife that can be blunted if it's misused and ignored. But if it's used in the right way, it can actually become more sharp.

So God has given us all consciences. But God has also given us minds, to think and to reason. And God's promises of guidance are not given to save us the problem of thinking. In fact, thinking and God guiding us often go together. 2 Timothy 2, verse 7 says, effectively, this: 'Think over what I'm saying, and the Lord will give you understanding.'

John Wesley said that the most common way God guided him was by presenting to his mind reasons for acting in a particular way.

And I would say that's the main way God guides us in the ordinary sort of day-to-day aspects of life.

But also in the big decisions, our common sense is very important. I mean, for example, the Bible tells us that marriage is the norm. But what this book won't tell you is whom you should marry. It's no good saying, 'Lord, who should I marry? Oh, Nebuchadnezzar! Oh, I don't know any Nebuchadnezzars — how about Ezekiel?'

[If this does not work in your context you may delete or replace with a similar joke or funny example.]

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I heard of one Cockney from the East End of London, who was not a churchgoer. And he had a real dilemma because he was in love with two very beautiful women. And he couldn't decide. One was called Sharon, and she was blonde and very beautiful, and the other was called Maria, and she was a brunette and also very beautiful. He wasn't a churchgoer, but not knowing whether it was Sharon or Maria, Sharon or Maria, he thought, 'Well, I'll go into a church and pray.'

So he went into a local Catholic church and he knelt down by the altar and he said to the Lord — being a Cockney East Ender, he said: 'oom shall I 'ave?' And he looked up, and he looked at the stained-glass window and he saw in gold letters: *Ave Maria!*

That's not the best way to go about it! But common sense tells us we should ask these questions: are we spiritually compatible? Paul warns us of the danger of marrying somebody who's not a Christian, for example, because inevitably we're going in different directions spiritually, and that can cause tension. So that if we're a Christian we should look to marry someone whose faith we respect.

Secondly, are we personally compatible? Are we good friends? Then are we physically compatible? Does the chemistry work? God is not going to ask you to marry someone to whom you are not physically attracted. That may come as a relief to some of you!

And then our jobs and careers. Again, it's common sense. Sometimes people say, 'Look, I've become a Christian. Should I leave my job?' The answer is given by St Paul in 1 Corinthians, chapter 7. He says: 'Each of you should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to you and to which God has called you. Each of you should remain in the situation which you were in when you were called.'

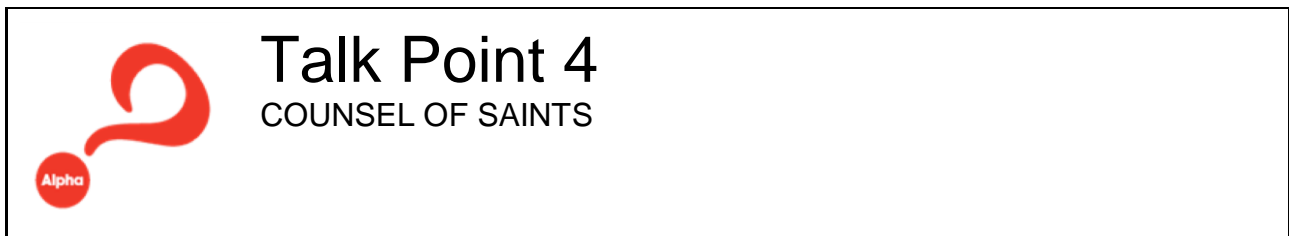
In other words, don't just automatically leave your job, unless of course what you're doing is immoral or illegal — I mean, if you're an armed robber, you know, you can't really just sort of cut down on armed robbery or rob smaller banks! But assuming it's not that, we stay where we are until God calls us into something different. God doesn't call us out of things, he calls us into things.

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And if we're asking the question 'Well, what is God calling us into?' the questions to ask are: 'Well, what's my temperament, what's my personality, what's my education, what are my skills, what am I good at, what do I like doing, what are my gifts?' God hasn't given us gifts in order that they should be wasted but, as John Stott writes:

'to be discerned, cultivated and exercised, so that rather than being frustrated we should be fulfilled.'

And it's never too late. I read recently of a woman in her nineties who now runs ten-kilometre races. She didn't discover that she enjoyed running until she was 78. So it's never too late!



The fourth way in which God guides us is the Counsel of the Saints. The word 'saints' is used in the New Testament to mean 'all Christians' — in other words, the church. The Holy Spirit, for example in Revelation 2, we read of the Holy Spirit speaking to the churches. And this is a recognition that it's not purely subjective, it's not purely what is God saying to me; we need to have the humility to recognise that God also speaks to other people, and has done for hundreds of years.

So, for example, there's no point in sort of thinking, 'Well, I wonder what the doctrine of the Trinity is. Shall I try and work it out for myself?' without looking at the fact that the early Christians spent 400 years working out the doctrine of the Trinity. And the creeds have come out of the church.

The same with anything, any kind of decision we're making, we make it in a community. And that's one of the wonderful things, to be part of a community of other Christians, where we can help one another. Would you like to turn to Proverbs, chapter 12, verse 15?

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'The way of fools seems right to them, but the wise listen to advice.'

Proverbs 15:22 says:

'Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.'

Proverbs 20, verse 18: 'Make plans by seeking advice.'

And of course we seek advice from friends, but from godly Christian people with wisdom and experience whom we respect.

[Replace with your own example of when you sought counsel from a close friend as part of seeking God's will.]

For example, when we were thinking about ordination in the Church of England I went to Sandy Millar, who's the vicar here, for his advice. And he said this to me: he said, 'Take a long-term view.' I was practising as a lawyer at the time; he said:

'Take a view. Long term, supposing you fulfilled all your hopes as a lawyer — think down the line, ten years' time: is that where you want to be? Because if it's not, that raises questions.' And then he said, 'Think about ordination in the Church of England: if that all worked out exactly as you hoped, is that where you'd want to be?' And that was a huge help to me, because I realised that thinking down the line as a lawyer, it wasn't what I wanted to be, even if all my hopes and aspirations had been fulfilled. Whereas the other was what I did want to do.

[Give your own example of where God used the wise counsel of a close friend or family member to guide you to make a decision.]

Another possible source of wisdom is our parents — or now, in my case, my children.

Not only do I go to my wife Pippa as a chief source of advice, but now I've started going to my children. I have two sons and a daughter, and I often turn to them for advice. For example, in April of 2003 Sandy Millar announced that he was retiring in two years' time and he hoped that I would put my name forward to be considered for the next vicar here.

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And I had been trying to persuade Sandy to stay on for as long as possible, and I'd hoped that he would stay on for at least another seven years! But he had said he was definitely leaving, so that raised questions: because I had a sense of call, a vocation, to that job; but the timing I was very uncertain about.

So I went for a long walk with one of my sons, Jonny, and Jonny asked me some questions. He said, 'Do you feel ready to take on the role of being the vicar of HTB?' So I said, 'No, I don't.' And then he said — Jonny's 21, so he's not sort of reading the *Narnia* books normally, but he's got an amazing memory! — he said, 'In the *Narnia* books, when Aslan asked Prince Caspian, "Are you ready to rule the kingdom of Narnia?" he says no. And Aslan says to him, "In that case, you are ready. If you'd said yes, you wouldn't have been ready.'" And that rang a bell with me, because ten years ago probably I would have felt ready, and I wouldn't have been.

So the second question he asked me was, 'Do you feel too young or too old?' And I feel too young because I feel inexperienced, but also I feel too old because I'm going grey and everybody's so young! So I said, 'I feel both.' He said, 'Does that suggest you might be the right age?' So I said, 'But Jonny, you know, the trouble is Sandy has always let me — all my ideas he's adopted, we've worked together, so,' I said, 'I don't think I'd have anything new to offer. And also I wouldn't want to change things, because it would look like I was spitting on the past by wanting to change things.'

And he said, 'Well, G. K. Chesterton said this: "If you want to stay the same, you have to change." You know, it's like with a house: if you don't redecorate, the house doesn't stay the same — it deteriorates. If you want to keep it the same,' he said, 'and HTB should stay the same — but in order to stay the same, it's got to change.' And that was just such a huge help to me in coming to a decision.



Talk Point 5

CIRCUMSTANTIAL SIGNS

KEY: Personal Story Story Quotes Key Quotes Key Bible Passages

[You may personalise or remove the text in red.]

The fifth way in which God guides us, **the fifth CS**, is Circumstantial Signs. The providence of God, if you like. God is sovereign. Proverbs 16, verse 9 says, 'In his heart a person plans their course, but the Lord determines their steps.' **There's a verse which I've found helpful, and I think I've mentioned it already to you, but I want to mention it again because I've found it such a huge help to me during my life. It's a verse in the Psalms, which says this:**

'Commit your way to the Lord. Trust in him, and he will act' — Psalm 37, verse 5.

And what it means is this: if we're faced with a difficult decision, as all of us are from time to time, or sometimes very often, we can go to the Lord and say, 'Lord, I don't know which direction to go. I don't know whether this is right or whether that's right. I don't know whether this relationship is right or whether it's not. I don't know whether this job is right or whether it's not. I don't know whether this decision is right or whether it's not.' 'Commit your way to the Lord' — that's the first thing. Secondly, trust in him, and then his promise is this: 'he will act'. And God can shut doors or he can open doors.

We read in the book of Acts of an occasion where he shut the doors. They were trying to go to Bithynia, but the Spirit of the Lord would not allow them. And he can also open doors. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 16 that 'a great door for effective work has opened for me'.

But we have to be willing to say, 'I trust you with this.'

[You may wish to tell this story about Nicky and Sila Lee (authors of The Marriage Book, The Parenting Book and pioneers of The Marriage Course and The Marriage Preparation Course). Or, you may wish to share another story or testimony that is equally moving which tells of the reward in being obedient to God's guidance.]

Nicky and Sila had been together in a very close relationship for two years around the time that they both came to faith in Christ. And when they did, some questions were raised by people that they talked to and advised them about whether it was really sensible for them to have such an intense, committed relationship when they were so young — they were just students.

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And also they had both just become Christians and they were trying to sort out their relationship with God and whether their relationship with each other was blurring that. In any event, for whatever reason, they decided that they would have a three-month break when they didn't see each other and they didn't even speak to each other.

And Nicky's written about this, and I was reading it again today. He describes what happened. He says, 'So early one Monday morning at the beginning of October, I walked with Sila to the station. We agreed we wouldn't see each other or talk until Christmas. Sila was waving goodbye to me out of the train window, and I wondered if I would ever see her again. I walked back through the still deserted streets of Cambridge feeling as low as I'd ever felt in my life. I decided not to go to London at all during that time as it was too painful to be there without Sila. However, a week later I was playing football with some friends at my old school. As we set off for the return journey, the friend whose car I was in said, "I hope you don't mind us going back via London, but I have to pick something up from home." I was horrified. I didn't say anything to him; I just hoped that it wouldn't take him very long — anyway, Sila lived in another part of London.'

'The friend dropped us in High Street Kensington and said, "I'll pick you up from here in forty minutes" and then drove off. It was pouring with rain and we stood on the pavement trying to decide what was going on. At that moment I looked up, and there, about fifty yards away, walking down the pavement towards me, was Sila. I abandoned my two friends without a word of explanation and ran towards her. Then she saw me. She started running towards me. We flung our arms around each other, and I remember swinging her round and round. I shouted back to my friend not to wait for me. We went to a café and talked for hours. I discovered that Sila had been travelling by bus along High Street Kensington, got stuck in heavy traffic, so she'd decided to get off the bus and walk the last half-mile to where she was going. That was when she saw me. Meeting like that was a chance in a million, and we took it as a sign from God.'

'We both felt that if God could cause us to meet in this extraordinary way when we were doing our best to avoid each other, he was more than able to show us over the next three months whether we should spend the rest of our lives together. We agreed again not to

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see each other until Christmas. This time it felt different. There were still tears, but we believed God would guide us.'

And he did. And they've been very happily married for nearly thirty years. They have four wonderful children. And I was reading from *The Marriage Book*, which is the book they've written together, which forms the basis of The Marriage Course, which has helped thousands of couples through the example of their marriage. And God was giving them a special sign as he opened a door for them.

So we need to watch the circumstances, but not put too much weight on them. Sometimes we need to persevere in spite of the circumstances.

Finally, in conclusion: don't be in a hurry. The writer of Hebrews says that 'after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised'. He spent most of his life waiting for God to fulfil a promise he'd given him when he was a young man and wasn't fulfilled until he was an old man.

And we all make mistakes, all of us do.

I remember speaking to a guy on Alpha who said to me, 'I wish I'd done this course five years ago, because I've made such a mess of my life.'

But, Oscar Wilde said this: 'Every saint has a past, and every sinner has a future.'

And the wonderful thing is that God can redeem the past. In the book of Joel it says: 'I will repay you for the years the locust has eaten.'

And God can use everything — even our mistakes. Would you like to turn to Romans 8:28? St Paul writes this:

'And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose' — in everything, in all the things, including the stuff that perhaps we would regard as not the best things — 'in everything God works for the good'.

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Lord Radstock was staying in a hotel in Norway in the mid-nineteenth century, and he heard a little girl playing downstairs in the hallway, and she was making the most terrible noise — she was going *plink-plonk, plink-plink!* and it was driving him mad. And then he noticed a man come and sit beside her. And this man didn't stop what she was doing, but he started to play in between what she was playing. And he heard this most beautiful music. And he discovered that the man playing alongside her was the girl's father: Alexander Borodin, the composer of the opera *Prince Igor*.

[Delete text in red if you do not use the story (or adapt if you replace it with your own example.)]

And in an even more amazing way, as we go through life, going *plink-plonk, plink-plonk*, what God promises here is if we love him, if we ask him to be our guide, he will come alongside us and play alongside us, so that our lives can be something beautiful.

May we pray.

Lord, we thank you for the amazing promise that you will be our guide. And Lord, I pray for every single one of us here that we may experience this relationship — you coming alongside of us and making something beautiful out of our lives. In Jesus' name, amen.

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Talk 7 – How Does God Guide Us?

Duration 46 Minutes

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Prepared by:
Alpha International, HTB Brompton Road, London SW7 1JA.
Email: publications@alpha.org
Website: alpha.org

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