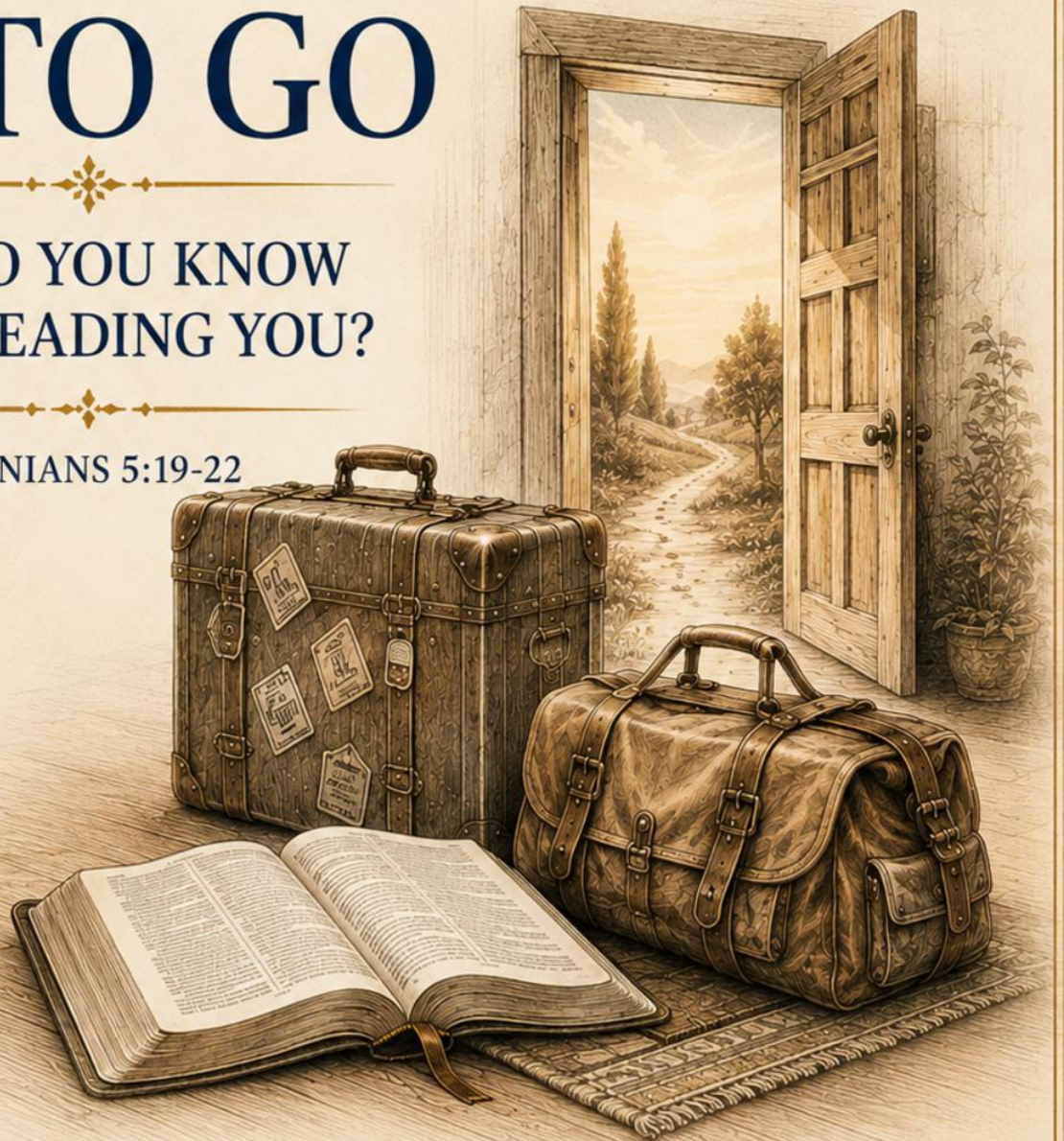


REASON TOGETHER STUDY

PREPARING TO GO

HOW DO YOU KNOW
GOD IS LEADING YOU?

1 THESSALONIANS 5:19-22



DR. THOMAS W. HAWKSLEY

REASON TOGETHER CHURCH

www.ReasonTogether.Church

Aloha.

Welcome to Reason Together Church.

Whether this is your first time with us or you have been part of this conversation from the beginning, I am glad you are here.

We are especially honored by every guest who has joined us today.

If you would like us to stay in touch, our guest card asks for only your first name and email address.

There is no pressure and we will not overwhelm you with messages.

Our Keiki Kids Center is also available for families who would like to use it.

You are not expected to arrive with all the answers.

Neither am I.

We come with questions.

We open the Bible.

And we reason together from the Word of God.

That is why our invitation is simple.

Bring your questions.

Open your Bible.

Let's Reason Together the Word of God.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, thank You for allowing us to gather in the name of Jesus Christ.

Quiet the distractions around us and within us.

Give us ears to hear what You have truly spoken.

Give us wisdom to test what we merely think we have heard.

Protect us from unbelief that refuses Your leading and from pride that places Your name behind our own desires.

Open the Scriptures to us.

Lead us into truth.

And help us leave this place more willing to obey You than when we arrived.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Our Scripture reading is found in 1 Thessalonians chapter 5, beginning with verse 19.

The Bible says:

"Quench not the Spirit.

Despise not prophesyings.

Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.

Abstain from all appearance of evil."

That is 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22.

Four short verses.

But inside those four verses is a balance that Christians desperately need.

Do not quench the Spirit.

Do not despise what may be from God.

But prove all things.

Test them.

Examine them.

And only then hold fast to what is good.

Before we begin our study, let me briefly mention giving.

If you are our guest, we do not expect you to give anything.

We are grateful that you gave us your time by being here.

If you are a member of another church, we encourage you to give through your home church.

Reason Together Church does not pass a plate.

If this is your church and the Lord has led you to give, there is a giving box in the back.

Give only as you are led.

Give cheerfully.

God loves a cheerful giver.

And that language leads us directly into today's question.

We often say that we feel led to give.

We feel led to call someone.

We feel led to apply for a job.

We feel led to move.

We feel led to begin a ministry.

Sometimes we go even further.

We say, "God told me."

But before we put God's name behind our conclusion, we should ask a serious question.

How can we know whether God is really leading us?

Many years ago, before I became a missionary, I had been blessed with a successful business.

Some of my friends were people with recognizable names.

There were sports figures.

There were television and movie personalities.

There were people whose names appeared in the financial section of the newspaper.

My own life was comfortable.

I had money.

I had prestige.

I had material things.

I had many friends.

I was active in church.

I did not have much stress.

And if I am being completely honest, I was happy.

I was serving God and I was enjoying my life.

On one particular day I was helping at an event where some of these recognizable people were speaking.

While they waited in the Green Room for their scheduled time, I told them that I believed I was being led to become a missionary.

They supported the cause of missions.

But many of them could not understand why I would leave the life I had to become a missionary in a third world country.

Some asked whether I really thought one person could make a difference.

Some asked why I would bother when other people and organizations were already doing that work.

Some told me that I could accomplish something similar without leaving America.

Some suggested that I write a generous check and let someone else go.

To be fair, I also received encouraging comments.

Two Christian friends were excited and offered to pray with me.

But the Green Room was not the only place where people expressed an opinion.

Neighbors had opinions.

People at church had opinions.

Associates at work had opinions.

Everyone seemed willing to tell me what they thought I should do.

I discussed this possible calling with more than one hundred people.

Only seven of them asked whether I had prayed and asked God for guidance.

Think about that.

More than one hundred opinions.

Only seven questions about prayer.

Some people evaluated the money.

Some evaluated the danger.

Some evaluated the likelihood of success.

Some evaluated whether I could accomplish the same thing without surrendering my comfortable life.

Only a handful began with the most important question.

What does God want?

When I eventually went to the Philippines, I believed that the message was clear.

I believed God was telling me to go.

I also knew that I had sensed His prodding before and had chosen not to act.

The truth was that I wanted to stay where I was.

I liked my life.

I was comfortable.

I was already serving in church.

I could give money to missions.

I could pray for missionaries.

I could encourage other people to go.

But I believed God was asking me to leave what I knew and go myself.

Since then, many people have asked me how they can know whether God is calling them to do something.

They ask about ministry.

They ask about a new job.

They ask whether they should buy a house.

They ask whether they should move.

They ask whether the desire in their heart came from God or from themselves.

Those are sincere questions.

But today I want to ask an even sharper one.

I said that I knew God was telling me to go.

How did I know?

How does anyone know?

How do we distinguish the leading of the Holy Spirit from personal ambition?

How do we distinguish conviction from fear?

How do we distinguish a burden from guilt?

How do we distinguish an open door from an attractive opportunity?

And before any of us says, "God told me," how did we test it?

There are three statements that sound similar but carry very different levels of authority.

The first statement is, "God has said."

When we say that God has said something and we can open the Bible and read it in its proper context, we are standing upon the authority of Scripture.

God has said that all have sinned.

God has said that the wages of sin is death.

God has said that Christ died for our sins, was buried and rose again.

God has said that we are saved by grace through faith.

God has said that we should tell the truth.

God has said that we should forgive.

God has said that we should love our neighbors.

God has said that we should care for those in need.

God has said that we should go into all the world and preach the Gospel.

Those truths do not depend upon my feelings.

They do not depend upon a dream.

They do not depend upon whether a door opens.

They do not depend upon whether my friends agree.

God has spoken in His Word.

The second statement is, "I believe God is leading me."

That statement expresses a sincere conviction while leaving room for examination.

It leaves room for prayer.

It leaves room for counsel.

It leaves room for someone to show us a Scripture we have overlooked.

It leaves room for the possibility that our interpretation may need correction.

The third statement is, "God told me."

That statement carries much more weight.

It places God's authority behind my conclusion.

If I tell you, "I believe the Lord may be leading me," you can pray with me.

You can ask questions.

You can help me test it.

But if I tell you, "God told me," I may make it sound as though you have no right to question me.

If you disagree, you are no longer disagreeing with Tom.

You are supposedly disagreeing with God.

That is why the stronger our claim becomes, the greater our responsibility is to test it.

Our controlling passage does not tell us to reject every spiritual impression.

It says, "Quench not the Spirit."

God's Spirit is active in the life of a believer.

The Holy Spirit convicts us of sin.

He illuminates the Scriptures.

He develops His fruit within us.

He gives wisdom.

He works within the Body of Christ.

He can place a burden upon a believer's heart.

We should not become so suspicious that we refuse to follow God anywhere unless our name and destination appear together in a Bible verse.

But the same passage that says, "Quench not the Spirit," also says, "Prove all things."

Faith is not gullibility.

Discernment is not unbelief.

God is not offended when we test a spiritual claim according to the instructions He gave us.

Paul does not tell us to accept everything.

Paul does not tell us to reject everything.

He tells us to test everything.

Then he says, "Hold fast that which is good."

Testing is not merely a way to tear something apart.

It is how we identify what is worth holding tightly.

Do not despise it.

Do not blindly believe it.

Prove it.

Then hold fast to what is good.

One of the most helpful stories for understanding this is found in 2 Samuel chapter 7.

David was settled in his house.

God had given him rest from his enemies.

David looked at his beautiful house of cedar and thought about the Ark of God remaining within curtains.

David wanted to build a house for God.

It was a good desire.

It was a spiritual desire.

It was generous.

It was sacrificial.

David was not asking how to enlarge his palace.

He wanted to honor God.

So David spoke to Nathan the prophet.

Second Samuel 7:3 says:

"And Nathan said to the king, Go, do all that is in thine heart; for the LORD is with thee."

If the story ended there, we would probably say that David had received confirmation.

David was a man after God's own heart.

Nathan was a genuine prophet.

The desire was good.

The project would honor God.

The king and the prophet agreed.

What else could possibly be needed?

But the story does not end there.

The Bible says:

"And it came to pass that night, that the word of the LORD came unto Nathan."

God corrected the prophet.

Nathan had answered too quickly.

David would not be the man to build the temple.

His son would build it.

God did not condemn David for wanting to honor Him.

God later acknowledged that it was good for the desire to be in David's heart.

But a good desire was not the same as a Divine assignment.

That gives us our first major discovery.

A Godly person can have a good desire, receive sincere pastoral encouragement and still misunderstand God's particular assignment.

David was sincere.

Nathan was sincere.

The project was good.

The answer was still no.

Good does not automatically mean assigned.

Sincere does not automatically mean correct.

Sometimes the burden is right but the timing is wrong.

Consider Moses.

Acts 7:25 says:

"For he supposed his brethren would have understood how that God by his hand would deliver them: but they understood not."

Moses apparently understood that God would use him to deliver Israel.

But his first attempt came through his own strength.

He killed an Egyptian.

He fled into the wilderness.

Forty years passed before God spoke from the burning bush and sent him back.

Moses may have recognized the calling while misunderstanding the timing, the method and the preparation required.

So we must ask more than, "Did God tell me to do this?"

We should also ask, "Did God tell me to do it now?"

And, "Am I attempting it in a Biblical way?"

The right burden can be pursued at the wrong time.

The right assignment can be attempted by the wrong method.

There is another distinction we should make.

We must separate the information we receive from the interpretation we place upon it.

In Acts chapter 21, Paul was traveling toward Jerusalem.

The Holy Spirit revealed that suffering and imprisonment awaited him.

The believers who loved Paul heard the warning and concluded that Paul should not go.

Paul understood the warning differently.

He believed it was preparing him for what obedience would cost.

The information could be accurate while the human interpretation added to it was mistaken.

We do something similar.

"I feel deeply burdened for this person" becomes, "God told me that I will marry this person."

"I am concerned about this church" becomes, "God told me to leave."

"I have a desire to preach" becomes, "God told me that I should become this church's pastor."

"An opportunity appeared" becomes, "God opened this door, so I must enter it."

The initial concern may be genuine.

The burden may deserve prayer.

But we can add our own conclusion and then attribute the entire package to God.

How, then, do we test a leading?

The first test is Scripture.

Does the proposed leading agree with what God has written?

Isaiah 8:20 says:

"To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them."

God will not privately instruct you to violate what He has publicly revealed.

A married man does not need to pray about whether God is leading him to leave his wife for another woman.

A business owner does not need a sign before deciding whether to falsify the records.

A Christian does not need to put out a fleece to determine whether hatred, dishonesty or sexual immorality is acceptable.

When Scripture has clearly spoken, our responsibility is not to seek another message.

Our responsibility is to obey.

The second test concerns Christ and the Gospel.

First John 4:1 says:

"Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God."

Not everything supernatural is Divine.

Not every fulfilled prediction proves that a person speaks for God.

Deuteronomy chapter 13 warns that even if a sign comes to pass, the message must be rejected if it leads people away from the true God.

The experience does not judge the Word.

The Word judges the experience.

Any leading that diminishes Jesus Christ, corrupts the Gospel or contradicts revealed truth has failed the test.

The third test is uncomfortable because it requires us to examine ourselves.

What do I want to be true?

Jeremiah warned about people who spoke a vision of their own heart.

Sometimes the voice we hear sounds familiar because it is our own desire echoing back to us.

That does not mean every desire is evil.

Philippians 2:13 says:

"For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure."

God can shape our desires.

He can cause us to care deeply about work we had never considered before.

But desire is evidence to examine.

It is not a verdict to obey.

We must ask:

Am I seeking God's will?

Or am I asking God to approve the decision I already made?

Am I searching the Scriptures?

Or am I searching for a verse that sounds like permission?

Am I seeking counsel?

Or am I collecting people who agree with me?

The fourth test is fruit.

Jesus said that false prophets would be known by their fruits.

Galatians chapter 5 describes the fruit of the Spirit as love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and temperance.

Does the supposed leading cultivate those qualities?

Or does it produce pride?

Does it require manipulation?

Does it depend upon secrecy?

Does it excuse greed?

Does it fill us with contempt for everyone who asks a reasonable question?

The Spirit's leading should be consistent with the Spirit's fruit.

The fifth test involves the Body of Christ.

Proverbs 11:14 says:

"Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety."

Godly counsel matters.

But the number of people is not the only consideration.

Rehoboam had plenty of counselors.

He rejected the experienced men and selected the young men who told him what he wanted to hear.

Ahab had hundreds of prophets telling him to go into battle.

Micaiah stood almost alone and told him the truth.

So ask questions about your counselors.

Do they know Scripture?

Do they know you well enough to recognize your blind spots?

Are they willing to disappoint you?

Do they have anything to gain from your decision?

Did you seek counsel or merely seek agreement?

Nathan was a genuine prophet and still answered David too quickly.

Godly counsel is valuable.

Godly counselors are not infallible.

The sixth test is time.

Not every decision permits a long delay.

Sometimes action is urgently needed.

But when time is available, use it.

Psalm 27:14 says:

"Wait on the LORD: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the LORD."

An impression that comes from God does not need to be protected from prayer.

It does not need to be protected from Scripture.

It does not need to be protected from wise examination.

Artificial urgency is often used to stop people from asking questions.

"You must give today."

"You must agree right now."

"You cannot speak with anyone else."

"God told me, so there is nothing to discuss."

Those statements should make us slow down, not speed up.

The seventh test involves circumstances.

Christians often speak about open and closed doors.

Scripture uses that language, but circumstances still require interpretation.

In Acts 16, Paul tried to preach in Asia and was forbidden by the Holy Ghost.

He attempted to go toward Bithynia and was not permitted.

Then the Macedonian vision redirected the missionary team.

God can guide through closed routes and developing circumstances.

But an open door is not always a command.

In 1 Corinthians 16:9, Paul said that a great and effectual door had opened and there were many adversaries.

Opposition did not mean the door was closed.

In 2 Corinthians chapter 2, Paul described an open door but left because he had no rest in his spirit when he could not find Titus.

In 1 Thessalonians chapter 2, Paul said that Satan hindered him.

Not every obstacle means God said no.

Not every opportunity means God said yes.

An open door is an opportunity, not necessarily an instruction.

A closed door is an obstacle, not necessarily a prohibition.

The eighth test is humility.

Am I willing to be corrected?

Can someone ask me a question without being accused of attacking my faith?

Can I admit that I may have interpreted the impression incorrectly?

A person who refuses to permit a spiritual claim to be tested has already departed from the command to prove all things.

Humility does not mean that we never act with confidence.

It means that our confidence in God is greater than our confidence in ourselves.

There are several popular tests that sound Biblical but can easily be misused.

One is Gideon's fleece.

People say, "I am going to put out a fleece."

But Gideon did not use the fleece to discover an assignment God had never mentioned.

God had already told Gideon what to do.

God had already given him a sign.

The fleece confirmed what God had plainly said.

The story reveals God's patience with Gideon's weakness.

It does not necessarily establish a normal decision-making formula for the church.

Another popular test is peace.

Someone says, "I have peace about it, so it must be God's will."

Peace may be meaningful.

But emotional calm is not infallible.

Jesus obeyed the Father in Gethsemane while experiencing agony.

Jonah slept inside the ship while fleeing from God.

Calm does not prove obedience.

Distress does not prove disobedience.

Then there are dreams.

God used dreams in Scripture.

The Bible also warns about dreams that arise from deception and human imagination.

The Biblical existence of genuine dreams does not mean that every meaningful dream carries Divine authority.

Then there is sacrifice.

This one touches my own story directly.

In the original article I suggested that if a leading benefited you personally, you should pray harder and seek counsel.

But if the leading required you to leave comfort, sell something valuable or serve people at personal cost, it was more likely to come from God.

There is wisdom behind that instinct.

Following Jesus involves self-denial.

Obedience can be costly.

But cost cannot prove the source.

First Corinthians 13:3 says:

"And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing."

A person can make enormous sacrifices for pride.

A person can sacrifice for recognition.

A person can sacrifice for a false religion.

A person can sacrifice because of guilt.

A person can sacrifice because he wants to be seen as important.

My willingness to leave a comfortable life supported the sincerity of my testimony.

It did not, by itself, prove that God issued the instruction.

Sacrifice may accompany obedience.

But sacrifice cannot certify revelation.

Visible success cannot certify it either.

A good outcome does not retroactively prove that God told us to begin.

And hardship does not prove that we missed God's will.

Paul obeyed God and encountered beatings, opposition, imprisonment and eventually death.

If ease proves obedience, then much of Paul's ministry must have been a mistake.

Faithfulness must be measured first by truth and obedience, not by visible results.

There is also a spiritual danger that we must address.

A private leading does not automatically bind another person.

Someone says, "God told me that you are supposed to marry me."

Someone says, "God told me to begin this ministry, so God wants you to finance it."

A pastor says, "God gave me this plan, so anyone who questions it is resisting God."

A spouse says, "God told me, so your concern no longer matters."

That is not humble discernment.

That is spiritual pressure.

If God places a burden upon me, that burden initially obligates me.

It does not automatically obligate everyone around me.

If God led me to begin a ministry, I must obey.

That does not mean God commanded you to finance it.

You must be allowed to pray.

You must be allowed to search Scripture.

You must be allowed to exercise your own Biblical discernment.

Perhaps the safest language is also the most honest.

"I believe the Lord may be leading me in this direction."

"Will you pray with me?"

"Will you help me test it Biblically?"

That is not weak faith.

It is strong humility.

It distinguishes confidence in God from confidence in our interpretation.

But what happens if we pray, study, seek counsel and still get it wrong?

Some Christians become so afraid of missing God's will that they are unable to make any decision.

They worry that one wrong choice will remove them forever from God's plan.

They imagine God's will as a narrow line painted across the floor.

One step to the side and everything is ruined.

But Proverbs 16:9 says:

"A man's heart deviseth his way: but the LORD directeth his steps."

God is not defeated by the imperfect discernment of a surrendered believer.

We may pray sincerely and still misunderstand.

We may receive good counsel and still make the wrong choice.

Nathan did.

We may recognize a real burden and move too quickly.

Moses did.

We may receive accurate information and attach the wrong interpretation.

The believers around Paul did.

When we discover that we were mistaken, we do not have to pretend that we were right.

We can admit it.

We can confess any sin involved.

We can correct our course.

We can learn.

And we can continue following Christ.

Discernment is not a test in which one mistaken decision forever removes us from God's care.

God remains able to redirect a surrendered life.

When I look back upon preparing to go to the Philippines, I still believe that God led me.

But the sacrifice alone did not prove it.

The fact that I left a prosperous life did not prove it.

The opinions of my friends did not prove it.

Even the good that followed did not become an infallible certificate attached to every judgment I made.

The direction was consistent with the Great Commission.

It centered upon the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

It survived prayer.

It was examined in community.

The burden remained.

Doors developed over time.

And eventually I had to act upon the best Biblical discernment I had.

I can testify that I believe God led me.

But I cannot place my personal experience on the same level as Scripture.

The Bible is infallible.

My interpretation of an impression is not.

There are people here today asking God for direction.

Perhaps you are considering a job.

Perhaps you are considering a move.

Perhaps you sense a burden to begin something.

Perhaps you are preparing to go.

Pray about it.

Compare it with the Word.

Examine your motives.

Seek Godly counsel.

Watch the fruit.

Give it time when time is available.

Interpret circumstances carefully.

Remain willing to be corrected.

But before we become consumed with discovering a hidden assignment, we must respond to what God has already revealed.

People ask, "What job does God want me to accept?"

"Where does God want me to live?"

"What ministry does God want me to begin?"

Those questions matter.

But there is a more important question.

What have you done with Jesus Christ?

God has already spoken clearly about Him.

The Bible says that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.

That includes me.

That includes you.

The wages of sin is death.

But God did not leave us without hope.

Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God, died upon the Cross for our sins.

He was buried.

On the third day He rose again.

Salvation is not earned by becoming religious.

It is not earned by giving money.

It is not earned by going overseas as a missionary.

It is received by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

Before you ask God to reveal your next assignment, respond to what He has already revealed about His Son.

If you have never accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Savior, you can do that today.

You do not need special words.

Prayer does not save you.

Jesus saves you.

But you can call upon Him in faith.

If that is the desire of your heart, pray with me.

Lord Jesus,

I know that I am a sinner.

I believe that You died upon the Cross for my sins.

I believe that You were buried and rose again.

Please forgive me.

Come into my life and save me.

I place my faith in You alone.

Help me to follow You from this day forward.

In Jesus' name,

Amen.

If you prayed that prayer and trusted Jesus Christ today, please speak with me before you leave.

We want to pray with you, answer your questions and help you begin your walk with Christ.

For every believer who is trying to discern the next step, return once more to our opening passage.

"Quench not the Spirit."

Do not become so cautious that you refuse to follow God.

"Despise not prophesyings."

Do not automatically reject what may deserve examination.

"Prove all things."

Do not give an untested impression the authority of Scripture.

"Hold fast that which is good."

When it has been tested, do not remain paralyzed forever.

Obey the light God has given you.

Does it agree with Scripture?

Does it honor Jesus Christ?

Have you examined your motives?

What fruit does it produce?

Have you welcomed Godly counsel?

Can it survive prayer and time?

Have you interpreted the circumstances carefully?

Are you willing to be corrected?

God genuinely leads His people.

But before we place God's name behind our conclusion, we must test it.

Sometimes the most faithful thing we can say is:

"I believe the Lord is leading me."

"Will you help me pray about it?"

And when the direction has been tested, the time for analysis eventually becomes the time for obedience.

You cannot prepare to go forever.

At some point, you must take the next faithful step.

Not because your feelings are infallible.

Not because every door will remain open.

Not because everyone will agree.

But because you have placed your decision beneath the Word of God, surrounded it with prayer, welcomed wise counsel and surrendered the outcome to Christ.

After our service, I invite you to continue the conversation at Reason Together Café.

The coffee is free.

And there are free refills on conversations.

If you are carrying a decision and need someone to pray with you, please do not carry it alone.

Let us reason together.

Let us pray together.

Let us test everything by the Word of God.

And then let us faithfully follow Jesus wherever He leads.

Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, thank You for speaking clearly through Your Word.

Forgive us for the times we have ignored what You plainly commanded while searching for a private answer.

Forgive us for the times we have placed Your name behind our own desires.

Teach us not to quench Your Spirit.

Teach us not to believe every impression without examination.

Give wisdom to those who are facing decisions today.

Surround them with Godly counsel.

Give them patience when they should wait and courage when it is time to move.

Above all, help us follow Jesus faithfully wherever He leads.

In His name we pray, Amen.

Aloha Nui Loa.

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

PREPARING TO GO

**How Can You Know Whether God
Is Really Leading You?**

1 Thessalonians 5:19-22 | 2 Samuel 7:1-17

Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley
Reason Together Church
www.ReasonTogether.Church

"Come now, and let us reason together" | Isaiah 1:18

Commentary in Brief

The story begins in a Green Room. Before Dr. Thomas Hawksley entered missionary service, he had a successful business, a comfortable life and acquaintances whose names were familiar from sports, television, movies and financial news. While several of them waited to speak at an event, he told them that he believed he was being led to leave that life and serve as a missionary.

The opinions came quickly. Could one person really make a difference? Why not remain in America? Why not let existing organizations do the work? Why not write a generous check instead of going personally? Some comments encouraged him and others discouraged him. More than one hundred people offered an opinion, but only seven asked whether he had prayed and sought God for direction.

"Quench not the Spirit. Despise not prophesyings. Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. Abstain from all appearance of evil." 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22, KJV

CENTRAL CONCLUSION: God genuinely leads His people, but our certainty that He is leading us is not the same thing as God's certainty. A sincere impression must never be given the authority of Scripture before it has been Biblically tested.

This commentary does not question the sincerity of the missionary testimony. It asks the question hidden inside it: How can any Christian know whether a perceived direction is truly from God, a wise human judgment or a personal desire dressed in spiritual language?

The answer is neither automatic acceptance nor automatic rejection. Paul commands the church not to quench the Spirit and not to despise prophesyings. In the same breath he commands believers to prove all things. Openness without testing becomes gullibility. Testing without openness becomes cynicism. Biblical discernment requires both.

The Question Behind the Study

Christians often say, "God told me." The sentence may describe a deep conviction, an answered prayer, a passage that became unusually clear, a burden that persisted or a conclusion drawn from several circumstances. The speaker may mean nothing more than, "After prayer, I believe this is what I should do."

Yet the words themselves say more. They place God's name and authority behind the conclusion. If God truly said it, disagreement is not merely disagreement with the speaker. It is resistance to God. That is why the phrase can become spiritually dangerous when it is used casually.

The usual question, "How do I discover God's will?" is broad. The sharper question is: When someone says, "God told me," how can that claim be tested Biblically?

The wording matters because the study is not trying to make every decision equally mysterious. Scripture has already revealed much of God's will. We do not need a private sign before we forgive, tell the truth, love our neighbor, flee immorality, care for the weak, give thanks or proclaim the Gospel. The difficult questions usually concern details Scripture has not named: Which job? Which house? Which place of service? Which opportunity? Which time?

GOVERNING QUESTION: Before you say, "God told me," how did you test it?

1. A Room Full of Opinions

The Green Room

The Green Room is an effective doorway into the Biblical issue because everyone in it evaluated the same possible decision through a different lens. One person considered efficiency. Another considered financial impact. Another considered existing organizations. Another considered the loss of comfort. Two Christian friends offered prayer. The comments were not all foolish and the practical questions were not sinful.

The surprising fact is that only seven of more than one hundred people asked whether the decision had been carried to God. The story exposes how easily Christians can evaluate a calling with the same measures used for an ordinary business proposal. We ask whether it is safe, scalable, efficient, comfortable and likely to succeed. We may forget to ask whether it is faithful.

Prayer Is Essential but Not Isolated

The contrast does not mean that one prayer automatically settles the matter. People can pray while refusing an unwanted answer. They can pray after deciding what they intend to do. They can interpret their own emotional relief as the voice of God. Prayer is indispensable because discernment is relational surrender before God, but prayer works with Scripture, confession, wisdom, counsel, patience and obedience.

The article itself recommended this larger pattern: pray, confess sin, read the Bible, meditate, seek Godly counsel, ask for guidance, wait and listen. This commentary develops that counsel by asking how each part should function and what it cannot prove by itself.

2. Do Not Quench, but Do Test

The Commands Belong Together

First Thessalonians 5 places several short commands beside one another. Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. Give thanks. Quench not the Spirit. Despise not prophesyings. Prove all things. Hold fast to the good. Abstain from evil. The context is the holy life of a worshiping congregation, not merely private decision-making.

"Quench" pictures extinguishing a fire. Christians can become so afraid of deception that they refuse to listen, expect or respond. Paul does not permit that posture. "Despise" means treating something as nothing. The existence of false spiritual claims does not justify contempt for every claim.

Then comes "prove." The Greek word dokimazo refers to examining something so that its genuineness can be recognized. The command does not say, "Believe all things" and it does not say, "Reject all things." It requires examination.

Testing also has an end. Believers are told to hold fast to what is good. Endless suspicion is not maturity. Once a conclusion has survived appropriate testing, a Christian may act without possessing absolute knowledge of every future detail. Faith is capable of responsible movement.

Good and Evil Remain the Final Moral Categories

Verse 22 directs believers away from every form of evil. The passage therefore prevents discernment from becoming a search for whichever option feels most personally satisfying. The first moral question is not, "Do I want this?" It is, "Is this consistent with what God has revealed as good?"

No dream, open door, counselor, emotional peace or visible result can transform evil into obedience. The Spirit who inspired Scripture does not privately authorize a believer to contradict it.

3. When Nathan Answered Too Quickly

A Godly King, a Godly Prophet and a Good Project

"And Nathan said to the king, Go, do all that is in thine heart; for the LORD is with thee. And it came to pass that night, that the word of the LORD came unto Nathan." 2 Samuel 7:3-4, KJV

David looked at his cedar house and then at the tent surrounding the ark. His desire to build a temple appeared noble. Nathan knew David, recognized that God had been with him and gave immediate encouragement. Nothing in the scene initially looks selfish, immoral or foolish.

That night the word of the LORD corrected the plan. David would not build the house. God would establish David's house and David's son would build the temple. The parallel passages later make clear that it was good for the temple to be in David's heart, but the building assignment belonged to Solomon.

The Crucial Distinction

A good desire is not automatically your assignment. David could desire, prepare, gather and encourage. He could not claim the part God assigned to another person.

Nathan also demonstrates that sincere pastoral counsel is not infallible. His first answer was not a deliberate false prophecy. It was a well-meaning conclusion spoken too quickly. Scripture carefully separates his judgment from the word that came later.

This is freeing rather than frightening. God corrected Nathan without discarding him. God redirected David without condemning his love. Correction does not prove that every earlier motive was wicked. Sometimes the heart is right while the assignment, timing or method needs to change.

KEY DISCOVERY: Good, sincere and sacrificial do not automatically mean assigned.

4. Samuel Had to Learn

"And the LORD called Samuel again the third time. And he arose and went to Eli, and said, Here am I; for thou didst call me. And Eli perceived that the LORD had called the child." 1 Samuel 3:8, KJV

Samuel heard a real voice and repeatedly identified the source incorrectly. He went to Eli because Eli was the most reasonable explanation available. Scripture does not ridicule Samuel. Recognition developed through repetition and through the help of a mature believer.

Eli did not tell Samuel what the message would be. He taught the young servant how to respond: "Speak, LORD; for thy servant heareth." The counselor helped create a listening posture without manufacturing the content.

This passage gives the church patience with people who are learning discernment. Confusion at the beginning does not prove that God is absent. At the same time, a real spiritual experience does not mean the person will interpret it correctly without help. Humility, time and Godly counsel belong in the process.

5. Moses Recognized More Than He Understood

"For he supposed his brethren would have understood how that God by his hand would deliver them: but they understood not." Acts 7:25, KJV

Stephen's account suggests that Moses understood something about being used to deliver Israel before the burning bush. Yet his first intervention involved killing an Egyptian, hiding the body and fleeing when his action became known. Forty years passed before God sent him back.

Moses helps separate four questions that Christians often collapse into one. Is the burden genuine? Is this the correct time? Is this the correct method? Is this the next obedient step? A person may answer the first question correctly while answering the others poorly.

A failed first attempt does not always prove that the burden was false. It may expose immaturity, presumption or bad timing. Discernment does not end when someone first says yes. The manner of obedience must also remain under God's Word.

6. Paul Was Guided While Moving

"After they were come to Mysia, they assayed to go into Bithynia: but the Spirit suffered them not... And after he had seen the vision, immediately we endeavoured to go into Macedonia, assuredly gathering that the Lord had called us for to preach the gospel unto them." Acts 16:7, 10, KJV

Paul and his companions already knew the revealed mission. Jesus had commanded that the Gospel be carried to the nations. The unanswered question concerned route and location. The team moved through Phrygia and Galatia, attempted to enter other regions, encountered restraint, reached Troas and then received the Macedonian vision.

Luke says, "we endeavoured" and "assuredly gathering." The team formed a shared conclusion and acted. The passage does not present spiritual guidance as a private performance by one heroic individual. Nor does it portray them as motionless until an entire itinerary appeared.

This is useful for morally permissible decisions. Christians can obey what is already clear, make responsible plans, attempt a route and remain willing to be redirected. Waiting on God is not always inactivity. Sometimes guidance becomes clearer while believers are faithfully moving.

A Door Does Not Interpret Itself

Acts 16 also warns against simplistic language about open and closed doors. Paul elsewhere described an open door accompanied by many adversaries. In another place he said that Satan hindered his travel. An obstacle is not always God's no and an opportunity is not always God's yes. Circumstances matter, but they must be interpreted rather than worshiped.

7. Revelation and Interpretation Are Not Identical

"And when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, The will of the Lord be done." Acts 21:14, KJV

Before Paul went to Jerusalem, believers repeatedly warned that suffering awaited him. Agabus bound his own hands and feet with Paul's girdle and declared that the owner would be bound. The coming danger was not imagined. The disputed issue was what Paul should do with the warning.

Acts 21 has produced more than one responsible interpretation. Some conclude that the Spirit revealed the danger while loving disciples added their own conclusion that Paul should not go. Others understand the warnings themselves as prohibitions that Paul chose to resist. The disagreement should be acknowledged rather than concealed.

The narrower lesson remains secure. Accurate information can be followed by disputed interpretation. A person may correctly perceive that a road will be painful and still need wisdom about whether the warning means "do not go" or "prepare for what obedience will cost."

The believers eventually stopped pressing their conclusion and said, "The will of the Lord be done." That sentence honors both conviction and humility. Love had spoken. Counsel had been given. Paul remained convinced. The community released the outcome to God.

8. Eight Biblical Tests

The Scripture Test

Does the proposed leading agree with God's written Word? Scripture supplies doctrine, moral boundaries, correction and the character of faithful obedience. God will not privately direct someone to commit adultery, deceive a spouse, manipulate a donor or alter the Gospel. Key passages include Isaiah 8:20, Psalm 119:105, Galatians 1:8 and 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

The Christ and Gospel Test

Does the message preserve the Biblical identity of Jesus Christ and the Gospel of His death, burial and resurrection? Deuteronomy 13 warns that even an apparent sign must be rejected if it leads away from God. First John 4 commands believers to test the spirits. Supernatural appearance is not self-authenticating.

The Motive Test

What do I want to be true? What do I fear? What might I gain by using God's name? Desire is not automatically wrong because God works in His people "both to will and to do." Desire is evidence to examine, not a verdict to obey. Even costly desires require testing because pride can enjoy being seen as sacrificial.

The Fruit and Character Test

What kind of person and community does the proposed direction produce? The Spirit's leading is consistent with the Spirit's fruit: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and temperance. A claim producing secrecy, impurity, arrogance, greed, manipulation or contempt for questions has failed an important test.

The Body of Christ Test

Has the conclusion been examined by believers who know Scripture and know the person? Counsel is not a vote count. Rehoboam found friends who agreed with his preference. Ahab gathered hundreds

of prophets who echoed what he wanted while Micaiah stood alone. Good counselors are informed, independent and willing to disappoint us.

The Wisdom and Timing Test

Has the believer prayed for wisdom, counted the cost, honored existing responsibilities and allowed time when time is available? Artificial urgency can prevent testing. Luke 14 commends counting the cost and James 1 promises wisdom to the one who asks God in faith.

The Providence Test

What do circumstances permit or prevent? Providence deserves attention, yet circumstances do not explain themselves. Open doors may include opposition and closed routes may later open. Providence works alongside Scripture, wisdom, responsibility and counsel.

The Humility Test

Can the person state the conclusion without using God's authority to silence examination? Can the plan change if Scripture or wise counsel exposes error? A claim that refuses to be tested has already departed from First Thessalonians 5:21.

THE EIGHT TESTS: Scripture. Christ and the Gospel. Motive. Fruit and character. The Body of Christ. Wisdom and timing. Providence. Humility and correctability.

9. Tests Christians Commonly Misuse

Gideon's Fleece

Judges 6 is not a simple formula for discovering an unknown assignment. Gideon had already received a direct commission and an earlier sign. The fleece sought confirmation of what God had plainly said. The account reveals God's patience with Gideon's fear more clearly than it establishes a normal decision method.

"I Have Peace About It"

Emotional calm may accompany wise obedience, but it is not infallible. Jesus obeyed in Gethsemane while experiencing agony. Jonah slept during a storm while fleeing from God. Calm does not prove obedience and distress does not prove disobedience.

The Still Small Voice

First Kings 19:12 should not be reduced to a slogan about every inward impression. Elijah encountered wind, earthquake, fire and a quiet sound. God then spoke intelligible words, confronted his assumptions and recommissioned him. The passage deserves its own study.

Dreams

The Bible records genuine dreams from God and repeatedly warns about deceptive dreams. The existence of true Biblical dreams cannot authenticate every vivid modern dream. A dream must never revise doctrine, excuse sin or compel another believer.

Sacrifice and Success

"And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing." 1 Corinthians 13:3, KJV

Cost proves that something is costly. It may support sincerity, but it does not prove Divine origin. Visible success also requires interpretation. Moses produced water after striking the rock, yet God judged the disobedience. Results cannot make a non-Biblical method righteous.

10. Counsel Must Be More Than Agreement

The source article rightly encouraged believers to speak with pastors and church members. The Biblical record adds an important qualification: not all counsel is equal. A person can collect agreement by choosing only people who share the same desire or depend on the same outcome.

Wise counsel asks questions that enthusiasm may avoid. Does the plan agree with Scripture? Has the complete cost been counted? What duties would be neglected? Who will be affected? Is the person hearing only supportive evidence? Is the proposed timeline creating unnecessary pressure?

Counselors should know the Bible, know the person and possess enough independence to say no. They should also admit the limits of their knowledge. Nathan's correction reminds pastors that saying, "I answered too quickly," can be an act of faithful leadership.

11. A Private Leading Does Not Bind Another Person

One of the most important safeguards in this study concerns the reach of a personal burden. A believer may become convinced that he should begin a ministry, accept a position, move to another place or give sacrificially. That conviction may create responsibility for him. It does not automatically transfer responsibility to everyone around him.

"God told me to begin this ministry" does not prove that God told someone else to finance it. "God told me we should marry" does not remove the other person's freedom to say no. "God told me our family must move" does not make a spouse's concerns spiritually rebellious.

Leaders carry special responsibility because their words have added weight. A pastor must distinguish Biblical command from personal strategy. Questions should be welcomed, conflicts of interest should be disclosed and people should be free to test a proposal without being accused of resisting God.

PASTORAL SAFEGUARD: A private leading may guide the person who receives it. It cannot automatically command another person.

12. What Early Christians Tested

Noncanonical writings do not establish doctrine for this study, yet they show that careful testing was not invented by modern skepticism. The Didache, an early Christian church manual, expected traveling teachers and prophets while instructing congregations to examine doctrine, conduct, duration of stay and financial motive.

The Shepherd of Hermas warned about a claimant who exalted himself and answered people according to their desires. Its memorable counsel was to test the person by his life. Sirach, used here

only as ancient Jewish wisdom rather than canonical authority, warned about unreliable dreams and counselors whose interests distort their advice.

The historical value is simple. Early communities familiar with spiritual claims did not treat spiritual vocabulary as proof. They examined the message, the messenger and the motive. Canonical Scripture remains the authority, and these writings merely illustrate how seriously earlier communities took that responsibility.

13. Speak With Confidence and Humility

Three Different Statements

"God has said." This language belongs to the faithful presentation of Scripture. The authority rests in God's written Word, not in the personality of the speaker.

"I believe the Lord is leading me." This describes a serious but testable conclusion. It leaves room for counsel, added understanding and correction.

"God told me." This places Divine authority behind the conclusion. Because the phrase can silence disagreement, it should never be used merely to make a personal preference sound final.

Humility Is Not Weak Faith

Saying, "I believe the Lord may be leading me," does not insult God. It distinguishes confidence in God from confidence in one's own interpretation. The believer can still obey courageously while admitting that a noncanonical conclusion remains human.

Christian maturity is not measured by how dramatically a person describes guidance. It is measured by faithfulness to Scripture, willingness to listen, courage to act and readiness to accept correction.

14. What If I Was Wrong?

"A man's heart deviseth his way: but the LORD directeth his steps." Proverbs 16:9, KJV

Some Christians live with the fear that one mistaken choice will permanently remove them from God's plan. Scripture does not encourage carelessness, but it does reveal a God who corrects, redirects and restores His servants.

David accepted that Solomon would build. Nathan returned with a correction. Paul's team changed routes. Samuel learned to recognize the call. Moses spent years being prepared after his first disastrous attempt. None of these examples makes error harmless, yet each prevents error from becoming hopeless.

When a supposed leading proves mistaken, the believer should acknowledge the error without blaming God, repair any harm, receive counsel, change direction and continue obeying what Scripture makes clear. God's faithfulness is greater than our ability to interpret every circumstance perfectly.

PASTORAL ASSURANCE: God is not defeated by the sincere believer's imperfect discernment. Correction can become part of guidance.

15. The Clearest Will of God

Christians sometimes spend enormous energy searching for hidden details while neglecting revealed duty. First Thessalonians 5 itself identifies thanksgiving as the will of God. Other passages plainly call believers to holiness, truth, love, forgiveness, faithful work, prayer and witness.

Before asking for a private assignment, obey what God has already spoken. Before asking whether to go across an ocean, love the person already within reach. Before asking for a new ministry title, serve faithfully in the task already present. Guidance concerning details is never a substitute for discipleship.

The Gospel Is Not a Private Impression

The central Christian message does not rest upon someone's feeling. Scripture declares that all have sinned, that the wages of sin is death and that God commended His love toward us in that Christ died for us while we were yet sinners. Jesus died for our sins, was buried and rose again.

Salvation is the gift of God received by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. A person does not need to interpret circumstances or wait for a private sign before trusting Him. The Gospel has been publicly proclaimed in God's Word.

"For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved." Romans 10:13, KJV

16. A Personal and Congregational Examination

The missionary story does not require every reader to move to the Philippines. It asks whether we submit our convictions to God and whether we test them before placing His name behind them.

- Am I obeying what Scripture has already made clear?
- Have I separated the burden from my preferred timing, method and location?
- What do I want to be true and what am I afraid might be true?
- Does this direction preserve the Biblical Christ and Gospel?
- What fruit is this conviction already producing in my character?
- Have I searched Scripture in context or collected isolated verses?
- Have I invited counsel from people who are free to disagree?
- Have I disclosed the complete cost and contrary evidence?
- Am I treating an open door, a closed door or emotional peace as self-interpreting?
- Would I still call this God's will if the visible results were small?
- Am I using God's name to pressure a spouse, church, volunteer or donor?
- Can I say, "I believe the Lord may be leading me," without needing to claim more?
- If I discover that I was wrong, am I willing to admit it and change course?
- Have I remained motionless when responsible action is now appropriate?
- What is the next faithful step that agrees with Scripture?

The examination returns to the central command: Do not despise it. Do not blindly believe it. Prove it. Then hold fast to what is good.

Final Commentary Conclusion

A successful businessman told more than one hundred people that he believed he was being led to leave a comfortable life and preach in the Philippines. Most evaluated the decision. Only seven asked whether he had prayed.

Prayer mattered, but prayer was not the only test. Scripture had to remain final. Motives needed examination. Counsel needed independence. Timing and method required wisdom. Circumstances needed interpretation. Fruit mattered. The conclusion had to remain correctable.

David and Nathan teach that a good desire can belong in the heart while the assignment belongs to someone else. Samuel teaches that recognition can be learned. Moses teaches that calling, timing and method are different questions. Acts 16 teaches movement with openness to redirection. Acts 21 teaches that information and interpretation are not identical.

Fleeces, peace, dreams, open doors, sacrifice and success may each enter the conversation. None is permitted to outrank Scripture. None should be used to force another believer into agreement.

The Christian does not need perfect knowledge in order to take a faithful step. He needs a Bible-open, prayerful, teachable and correctable heart. He can say, "I believe the Lord is leading me," act with courage and still leave room for God to redirect him.

God genuinely leads His people.

Our conclusions must be tested.

His written Word remains sure.