

Charles Stanley: Tips for Being Led by the Holy Spirit

One of the world's most beloved Baptist pastors shares how to walk in step with the Holy Spirit's promptings

Several years ago during a photographic trip, my group had been traveling up a trail for almost three hours, and I began to have a funny feeling that we were going in the wrong direction. I asked the guide about it, and he assured me that everything was fine. Not wanting to be presumptuous, I kept walking. After a few minutes, I noticed that my sense of uneasiness persisted; in fact, it was growing stronger. I pulled out my compass and looked at the map. Sure enough, we were headed away from our intended destination.

It took us close to an hour and a half to return to where we had taken the incorrect turn off the trail. Sadly, this meant that by the time we got to the site, our window for taking photographs was cut short.

The event helped me to realize two valuable lessons. First, when we sense an internal witness encouraging us to take a certain course of action, we should listen. Second, when you and I choose people to guide us, we must be certain they know the path ahead better than we do.

Have you ever felt something alerting you to pay attention or pulling you in a particular direction? Perhaps you were listening to a sermon and you sensed God telling you to follow Him in obedience. Or maybe you walked into a restaurant and were filled with dread, as if you should leave quickly.

If you are a believer, then most likely these feelings were the prompting of the Holy Spirit, who always guides you to understand and accept the Father's will. He is the One speaking to your heart, warning you about danger and

encouraging you to submit to God's purposes.

Unlike the fellow who accompanied us on that photographic trip, the Holy Spirit is a trustworthy guide who will never lead us astray and knows the path ahead much better than we do. Apart from Him, you and I cannot live a godly life. Galatians 5:16 instructs, "Walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh" (NASB). The Holy Spirit empowers us to resist sin and obey God. But He does so much more: He also helps us to understand Scripture and enables us to fellowship with the Lord. He will never advise us to do anything that contradicts Scripture.

In fact, of all the professors I had in college, none ever matched the personal instruction I have received from God through the Holy Spirit. In John 14:26, Jesus promised the disciples: "The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you."

I remember how powerfully the Lord communicated this to me one night on my knees when I was in graduate school. I was about halfway through the three-year program at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, and I was beginning to think about my future. I wasn't certain yet what I would do and deeply wanted advice.

It was one of those nights when I longed to pick up the phone and call the father I never knew (he passed away when I was 9 months old) and tell him what I was thinking. Little did I know how God would use that void in my heart for a father over and over again to draw me to Himself.

That night as I knelt to pray, I had a very strong sense of the Lord's presence. I did not hear His voice audibly, but His message to me could not have been clearer. He said: "Whatever you accomplish in life will not depend upon your education, your talent or your skill. I have a plan for you, but you will

only accomplish it on your knees in complete surrender to Me.”

I have never forgotten that night. And throughout my 55 years of ministry, I have started and ended my days on my knees before God to talk to Him and to listen to what else He has to say.

Our Helper's Role

What the Father communicated to me that night was the same message that we read in Zechariah 4:6: “‘Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,’ says the Lord of hosts.” The Holy Spirit’s presence with us is especially important as we engage in the ultimate conversation of prayer with the Father because He is God’s own Spirit. He teaches us the Lord’s will, how to listen to Him, how to discern His truth and how to have an intimate relationship with Him. He also trains and empowers us to fulfill God’s plans for our lives with the “wisdom from above” (see James 3:17; also 1 Cor. 2:9-13, 16).

The Helper is like an ambassador who unswervingly represents the policies of His homeland and also serves the host nation by translating its messages into the appropriate language. The Holy Spirit faithfully conveys to us the Father’s will in a way we understand, and He represents us before God in a manner worthy of His righteous name.

The apostle Paul wrote, “The Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God” (Rom. 8:26-27, NASB).

What is our weakness in prayer? At times we do not know how to express the full depth of our desires or feelings; nor do we realize what we need. Sometimes we are so exhausted—in spirit, mind and body—that we can hardly muster the energy to open our mouth. There are instances when discouragement has taken such

a strong hold of our heart that we cannot imagine a way out of our painful circumstances, and all we can ask is for the Father to help us.

Perhaps this is where Paul found himself. In 2 Corinthians 1:8-9 he confesses: "We do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; indeed, we had the sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead."

With the lashes, imprisonments and dangers Paul experienced, it is not surprising that he would feel this way (2 Cor. 11:23-29). The apostle faced terrible difficulties during his missionary journeys, including being stoned almost to death at Lystra (Acts 14:19), finding himself at the center of a riot in Ephesus (Acts 19:23-41), and having to leave the beloved churches he had planted to suffer in Jerusalem (Acts 20:17-24). In constant peril, separated from his loved ones, threatened on every side and buffeted by innumerable trials, he had good reason to be disheartened.

Have you ever felt this way? Have you ever been so encumbered by troubles that hopelessness takes over? You struggle to find a reason to keep fighting, but you are so tired and overwhelmed that you just want to give up?

Despite all his adversity, the apostle Paul continued to trust God, and you should too. Be assured that the Helper sees the depths of your difficulties. He translates your feelings more accurately than you can articulate them yourself. And He comforts you with the knowledge that He understands what you need. He also guarantees that your tribulations are not in vain but will build you up in the faith if you respond to Him in obedience.

Obeying His Promptings

Do not miss this truth: *Responding to the Holy Spirit in obedience is key*. This part of the conversation is yours—your willing submission to what the Holy Spirit tells you. He teaches you how to listen to the Father, communicating the truth in a way you can receive. According to your spiritual maturity, He shows you how to apply biblical principles to your life. Your part is to obey Him, and as you do, He strengthens you (1 Pet. 5:10).

It is not a mystery how Paul was able to endure such heartache and persecution. The apostle had learned to listen closely to the Holy Spirit and had drawn the encouragement he needed from His constant presence. How did Paul do so? He learned to walk by the Spirit (as he described in Galatians 5:16-25).

Paul learned to deal with his troubles in God's way, rather than the ways of the world. When we experience difficulty, our human nature tries to express or quench it in ungodly ways: through possessions, addictions, immorality or other ways. However, Paul realized that if he listened to the Spirit—handling his adversity as Christ would—he would be liberated from the worries and discouragements of this life.

You can be freed, too. You can crucify the desires of the flesh—those things that are subtly destroying you and causing you heartache day by day—by learning to walk by the Spirit.

Perhaps you are wondering what the phrase “walk by the Spirit” means for your life. How do you do that? How can you live each moment in dependence on the Holy Spirit, sensitive to His voice and obedient to Him?

To walk in the Spirit means obeying His initial promptings. You do it by going through each day aware of the Holy Spirit's presence with you. You submit to Him as you feel Him pulling you in a certain direction or tugging at your heart to take a particular course of action, even if you don't quite understand why.

For example, you may be convicted to drop a conversation, turn away quickly from a television program or leave a place that is questionable. Whatever it is, do so immediately—the Spirit is warning you about a temptation to sin that you may be unable to resist unless you obey Him instantly.

Perhaps there is someone who comes to your mind during the day. You know he or she has been going through a difficult time and could use some support. Call or write that person. The Spirit will give you the right words to encourage him or her. He wants to minister to that person through you and is sure to bless you as you do so.

The Holy Spirit may guide you to pursue a route or a risk that you never imagined you would take. The wisest thing to do is to submit to His plan regardless of whether it makes sense to you. The Spirit of the living God knows all things, including the future, and His direction is always for your benefit.

The Ultimate Conversation

This is the way the ultimate conversation becomes real in your life—you obey the initial promptings of the Holy Spirit. And as you do, the voice of God becomes stronger and more prevalent in your life. Eventually, you begin to see spiritual realities that only a person who is in constant communion with the Father can perceive (Ps. 25:14).

Elisha was just such an individual (2 Kings 6:8-19). When the Arameans gathered against Israel and surrounded the city of Dothan, the prophet was unafraid and unmoved. His servant, on the other hand, saw the multitude of soldiers, horses and chariots and was terrified. He cried: “Alas, my master! What shall we do?” (v. 15).

Elisha remained calm. “‘Do not fear,’” he replied, “‘for those who are with us are more than those who are with them.’” Then Elisha prayed and said, ‘O Lord, I pray, open his eyes that he may see.’ And the Lord opened the servant’s eyes and he saw;

and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha" (vv. 16-17).

While the servant saw that the enemy had encamped around the city, Elisha perceived the greater spiritual reality: that God was fighting the battle for them. Because of this, he remained confident and secure. Likewise, the more you obey the Spirit and the closer you grow to the Father, the stronger your faith and assurance.

You can see this truth demonstrated throughout Scripture:

- "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me" (Ps. 23:4).
- "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the defense of my life; whom shall I dread? ...Though a host encamp against me, my heart will not fear; though war arise against me, in spite of this I shall be confident" (Ps. 27:1, 3).
- "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change and though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea" (Ps. 46:1-2).
- "Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord and whose trust is the Lord. For he will be like a tree planted by the water, that extends its roots by a stream and will not fear when the heat comes; but its leaves will be green, and it will not be anxious in a year of drought nor cease to yield fruit" (Jer. 17:7-8).

This does not mean that if you walk by the Spirit you'll never be afraid. Nor does it signify that you will automatically see the Lord's angelic host, as Elisha and his servant did. The point is, when you engage in the ultimate conversation of prayer with the Father in a real and living way, you begin to know and understand things that are apparent only to those who understand the deep truths of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:6-16).

As God Himself says, "Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know" (Jer. 33:3, NIV). You experience more of the Father's faultless character and grow more confident in His provision for you.

Therefore, I challenge you to begin each morning with a prayer that goes something like this: "Father, I want You to guide me and lead me today. Speak to my heart. Make me sensitive to Your promptings and to what is happening around me in the lives of those I meet. Fill me with Your supernatural joy, and use me today for Your purposes. I surrender fully to You."

If you yield to the Holy Spirit and depend on His ability rather than your own, He will enable you not only to live a life that is pleasing to Christ but also to experience God in ways you never thought possible.

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