

How God Uses Joy to Direct You

Some people need 10 Bible verses and 14 prophecies before they can hear God speak. Stop making guidance so complicated!

Recently the host of a radio talk show posed a question we had not discussed in our preshow briefing. “Dr. Stanko,” he asked, “how would you define success?”

I could almost hear the radio audience inhale and hold their breath, waiting for the response. I didn’t have much time to think, so I responded, “I think success is doing what gives you joy.” After I said that, the telephone lines lit up like fireworks-and my 20-minute interview lasted for more than an hour.

Do you know that God uses joy to direct His people? As I’ve traveled and talked to thousands about clarifying their purposes, I’ve found that many people are afraid of their joy, claiming: “You can’t always do what you love. That’s not realistic.” Others tell me that joy is a feeling and can’t be trusted. I maintain, however, that joy is an important barometer in determining the will of God in your life.

You don’t need a word from the Lord, confirmation or permission to follow your joy. You just need to trust God that He is with you and that He is the author of your joy.

Some people may have joy when they paint, others when they sing, and still others when they counsel, travel or speak. Who gave us this joy for certain activities? Isn’t it the Lord who made us, who knit us together in our mothers’ wombs (Ps. 139:13)? And if God gave us the joy, why would He want us to neglect or ignore it?

The well-known verse Nehemiah 8:10 states, “The joy of the

Lord is your strength.” If you don’t have joy, then you don’t have supernatural strength. And if you don’t have God’s strength, then whose strength are you functioning with?

I see so many people who are concerned about doing God’s will, yet they ignore their joy and consequently are like an airplane parked next to a runway. They are close enough to take off but remain grounded because they don’t recognize that the heavenly control tower has released them for takeoff.

I’ve been in ministry for 30 years. In that time, I’ve come across many common fallacies and misunderstandings concerning guidance.

1. We assume that most or all thinking is wrong or dangerous.

Many people are waiting for God to speak or direct because they don’t trust their own thinking. Yet Paul wrote, “And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Rom. 12:2). This verse indicates that once your mind is renewed, you can use it!

On at least two occasions, Luke used his renewed mind to determine the will of God. The first is described in his gospel: “Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us ... it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed (Luke 1:1-4).

Luke was a scientist who obviously enjoyed research and writing. I’m convinced he experienced joy in his work.

Notice what he didn’t write in the passage above: “The Lord led me; the Lord spoke to me; I felt impressed by the Spirit to write.” The Lord does lead, speak and impress, certainly-

but in this case, Luke simply had a good idea.

Do you have any good ideas? I believe God can use them to direct you into what He wants you to do.

The second occasion is described in the book of Acts: "And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A man of Macedonia stood and pleaded with him, saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' Now after he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go to Macedonia, concluding that the Lord had called us to preach the gospel to them" (Acts 16:9-10, emphasis added).

After they examined all the evidence, Paul and his team came to the conclusion that God wanted them to go to Macedonia. What conclusions have you come to after you've examined all God's evidence? I would advise you to pursue that course until God shows you another one.

2. We confuse thinking with speculating. I talk to hundreds of people every year and I hear many say, "I thought maybe God wanted me to do this" or "I prayed and then felt perhaps the Lord wanted me to do that." Usually it is connected with something they don't want to do (or don't have joy doing), but they try to use a lot of circumstantial evidence that leaves them unsure and groping for direction.

God doesn't deal in "maybe" or "perhaps." He is a big God, and He has no trouble communicating His will. Did Paul and Luke speculate in the passages quoted above? They came to a conclusion, but they had been praying and seeking God's will. They put their trust in God and what He spoke. Notice that they "got ready at once" and left. There was no doubt in their minds.

Several years ago, I received an invitation to go to Afghanistan during a period of tremendous violence and upheaval in that country. I deliberated and debated, but every time I said no, someone came and told me I should reconsider.

When that happened three times, I concluded that God wanted me to go.

At no point did I say “maybe” or “perhaps.” If I had used those words, I would have stayed home. Where guidance and purpose are concerned, eliminate those two words from your vocabulary. And if you are using them, be careful before you proceed with your determined course of action.

3. We put our faith in the wrong place when it comes to guidance. People ask me regularly, “How do I know if I heard the Lord?” So many people are afraid of doing the wrong thing that they do nothing. They are so concerned that they may miss the Lord that they actually do miss Him!

A few years ago, I realized I had this same tendency. I was so zealous to hear God that I was putting all my guidance through a filter.

It was at this point that I stopped putting my faith in the wrong place. Previously I had put my faith in my ability to hear God’s voice and understand His will. Now I put my faith in God’s ability to speak to me and make it clear.

Think about it: God speaks every language. He can guide you using the Bible, other people or circumstances. If your heart is positioned to hear God, then God’s heart is to speak, and to speak clearly.

When I was deliberating over my invitation to Afghanistan, I was straining under the weight of figuring out what to do. That’s when I said: “God, I’ve told You I will go wherever You want me to go. I don’t believe that if I ask You for bread, You will give me a stone.

“I don’t believe that the enemy speaks to me when I pray to You. Therefore, I have faith that You are speaking to me, and I’m going.”

I love traveling; it gives me joy. So I put all this together and determined to go. I can honestly say that the trip changed my life and the course of my ministry. I put my trust in God's ability to speak to me and He did. He is a good God who isn't out to trick or confuse us.

4. We are often waiting for God to reveal His will, when He's already revealed it. When I speak at missions events and conferences, I often deliver a message titled, "What Part of Go Don't You Understand?" The message is based on the Great Commission, which states: "And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age'" (Matt. 28:18-20).

I've seen many Spirit-filled believers who believe that the gifts are for today act as if the Great Commission ended with the death of the apostles. I've also had people tell me, "I'm praying about what to do"—but they really aren't. They are using prayer as a smokescreen and delay tactic.

There has never been a better or more exciting day to serve the Lord. Travel to anywhere in the world is easier and cheaper than ever before. People are more open than they've ever been to the message we preach. Yes, there is danger—but when you commit your life to the Lord, you give it to Him; you don't lend it.

If you can't travel, why not have a personal Web site and put your testimony on it? Do a simple Bible study there. You never know; someone in Africa or China might see it, read it and meet the Lord.

Do you really think you need a "word" to have permission to do that? I don't think so. I believe you need to think, have

faith, act and trust the Lord for the results. If God wants to shut it down, He can and will. The key is for you not to shut it down before it ever starts.

5. We don't know our values or follow them. Paul was a man of values. He went to the Jew first, he always traveled with a team, he never took financial support from the people among whom he ministered, and he tried to be all things to all men to win some to Jesus.

Paul knew what was important to his life and leadership and he lived out those values on a daily basis. Values are something you don't have to pray about; they are non-negotiable principles that God has worked in your life.

One of my personal values is foreign missions. My church recently announced a partnership with other churches to start a dental clinic in Syria. Believers will start and staff the clinic.

I got out my checkbook and wrote a check, and I will do so every month from this point forward. I can't say that the Lord told me to write those checks, but I know He worked in me the value of missions.

Another one of my values is racial reconciliation. So when I get an invitation to go to Africa, I accept! Why? Because I want my actions to be consistent with the values God gave me. I go because I want to be a source of healing among people who don't look like me. Since Africa has many such people, I go.

Directed by Joy

I want to leave you with three things you can do to enhance your ability to hear and do the will of God. If you do these things, you will learn how to use joy as an indicator of God's will for you in your daily walk.

1. Pray. I pray this prayer regularly: "God, I'll do whatever

You want me to do, wherever You want me to do it.” And then I have faith that God is going to direct my interests, using my joy as an important factor.

2. Have faith. If God wants you to do His will-and He does-then He must reveal what His will is. If you are asking God to reveal His will, then He will answer your prayer. You must have faith that you are receiving the answer.

Jesus said that our heavenly Father is no different from earthly fathers who know how to respond to the requests of their children (Luke 11:11-13). After I’ve prayed, I don’t expect God to trick me. Nor do I put my trust in my ability to figure things out. I am learning how to trust my God more and more to reveal His will to me.

3. Write down your values and act. James wrote, “Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead” (James 2:17). If you are praying and believing, then you must also be doing. Do something, allowing God to use even your missteps to direct you in the path He has for you.

Here’s how to start. Spend 10 minutes writing down what’s important to you. If nothing else, write down what you do that gives you joy. Then determine to do something about each one of the things you wrote down.

If the unborn are important to you, pick up the phone and call a pregnancy center to volunteer your services. Write a check, no matter how small, toward a pro-life publication or cause. If cooking gives you joy, then how can you cook more often? Can you bake and donate your baked goods to the poor? Have faith and act.

In John 7:16-18, Jesus says in essence, “If you commit to do God’s will before you know what it is, then God will reveal His will to you and you’ll know it.” Some refuse to believe it is that simple, but I believe it is. Doing God’s will-not finding it-is the hard part.

If you do nothing other than follow your joy, you will be well on your way to fulfilling God's will for your life. If you have made a sincere commitment to doing His will, He will show you what it is-perhaps by no other way than your having joy in what you do.

Don't over-spiritualize the guidance process and don't ignore the answers when they come. Pray, have faith, determine what is important to you and then take action. Do what you can do and God will do the rest.

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