

Prayer and Guidance

Part 1: Signing the contract

(By Lyndall Bywater)

I'm a practical person by nature, and am absolutely convinced of the power of prayer, so when it came to planning the next step for my life, it should have been the simplest thing in the world. Just carve a decent slot of time out of my busy schedule, and sit down and ask God what he wanted me to do next.

I chose a comfy (but not too comfy) seat in my lounge, put a particularly thought-provoking CD in the CD player, opened my Bible to Jeremiah 29:11 (always a good one when you're thinking about the future), and asked the question which had been obscuring my mind for the past 6 months:

'What do you want me to do next?'

Then I did my best to empty my brain, and waited for a clear, one-word answer. Why is it that when you're trying your hardest to hear God's voice, the weirdest things come into your mind? The first word that came to me was 'wall-paper'. For a moment, I considered whether this might be a directive to become a painter/decorator, but I am not delusional, and I know that no sane, living soul would put their décor in my hands, so I dismissed it. The next word that came to me was 'fish paste', and at that point I gave up!

Unfortunately, it seems it's not quite as simple as just using a prayer time to ask God what he wants you to do, then waiting for a straight answer. So what place does prayer have in seeking the direction for your life?

The Trust Contract

Eventually, after much thinking, praying and talking to people, I did begin to hear God saying things to me about my future. The only trouble was, they all seemed to be a bit beside the point. The first answer he gave me was a question:

'Do you trust me?'

'Yes, of course I do, but what should I be doing next?'

'Do you trust me?'

Once God asks you a question, he'll keep asking till you've really answered. That question didn't seem to be going away, so I knew he was telling me to deal with it at a different level. For the next few weeks, my whole life seemed to be about trust. The Bible readings I read were about God's faithfulness, the sermons I heard were about dependence on God, and my prayer times seemed to be great opportunities for God to put his divinely accurate finger on painful areas of my life which I hadn't really handed over to him. No matter how often I pointed out the irrelevance of all this in regard to my future, the process went on... and on.

God doesn't just have an opinion about our lives; he is involved in them. He isn't an impartial observer; he is a participant, a parent. If I ask an impartial observer for advice, it doesn't really matter whether I trust him/her or not. If I go rock-climbing with my dad, it is hugely important that I trust him with my very life. As we pray, we are daily, hourly, entrusting our lives to our father, and as we pray, he gets the opportunity to prove, over and over again, just how trustworthy he is.

The Change Contract

Some weeks later, there came a time when I really thought I'd cracked it. It felt like my life had been attacked with that wire wool stuff you use to clean saucepans, but I knew I'd reached new depths of faith and trust. Maybe now, the clear answer would come.

'So, what should I be doing next?'

'I want to teach you humility.'

... and so 'detour' number two began. I'd learnt not to argue by now (well, I trusted him now, didn't I?), so I went with it. Suddenly, I seemed to be living through a multimedia experience entitled '100 ways to deflate Lyndall's ego'. Where previously I had thought I was quite good at the job I did, and probably ready for a new challenge, suddenly I couldn't even seem to do the simplest things well, and moving on seemed a forelorn hope. I seemed to be going backwards instead of forwards.

I look back now, and see that the humility lesson was absolutely essential, and that I could never have done the job I was finally directed to without it, but at the time it seemed like a bad play for time on God's part. Prayer is not just about trust, it's also about change. The more time I spend in the sun, the more tanned I become. The more time I spend in communication with Jesus, the more like him I become. Prayer opens us up for the essential refurbishment we need for the future.

The Power Contract

Despite the uncomfortable ego-deflation process, things in my life started to move. To use the old metaphor, it was as though I was surrounded by doors – different things I could move on to next – and what's more, I even had a hunch as to which one was right. So now **MUST** be the time when God would answer my question.

'What should I be doing next?'

'Go for it, and don't be afraid.'

... and I was on the way. Somehow, I knew my hunch was right, and I knew I had God's blessing to give it my best shot. It was more than just knowing, though. It was empowering. My times of prayer became incredibly exciting, slightly scary sessions of day-dreaming about what this new thing was going to look like. I knew where I was going, and I knew God would equip me with everything I would need.

Time in God's presence allows him to empower us; to give us the courage, the confidence and the gifts we need for the next step. Prayer connects us with the life-giving, obstacle-removing, miracle-working power of God, and we shouldn't be taking any new steps in our lives without that power.

How would I sum up what I've learnt about prayer and guidance? I've learnt that God doesn't answer questions, he answers prayer. When I was young, I used to like playing those games where you had to throw balls and get them to land in a bucket. Being blind was a bit of an obstacle, so my dad used to 'aim' me in the right direction, then I'd throw the ball as best I could. I was surprisingly successful, actually!

Often we see guidance like that. God tells us what to do and points us in the right direction, then we just get on with it. But God is far more thorough and committed than that. He doesn't want to tell us the future, he wants to prepare us for it, and prayer is the vital connection he uses to do that. If you don't pray, you may well find out what the next step is, but you probably won't be ready or equipped to take it. When you pray, you enter into a contract with God. You give him your life, and he commits to preparing and empowering you for everything you will ever face.

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