

## FOLLOW GOD'S DIRECTION! DEUTERONOMY 31:3-8 SERMON

For the past three years I've selected an annual theme verse for our church. I took last year's verse from **Phil 3:10** where Paul writes, **"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death"**. We post this theme verse on our overhead screens, on our church newsletter and other places that we see frequently.

I've preached on our annual theme verse on the first Sunday of the New Year for the past three years. This year I decided to preach on our new verse for the first two Sundays of January. They won't be identical sermons, so if you're thinking that this might excuse you from attending worship next Sunday, you can remove that thought from your mind!

I selected **Deuteronomy 31:8** for our theme verse for 2010. It reads, **"The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged"**. I want to focus our thoughts this morning on the first part of this verse, which describes God's leading and direction. Next week, we'll look at the second part of the verse, which emphasizes God's eternal presence with us.

We read in the first part of **Deut 31:8**, **"The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you"**. The Biblical author encourages us to **follow God's direction for our lives! Follow God's direction for your life!** Let that word of encouragement sink into your consciousness for a moment. God wants you and me to follow *his* direction for our lives.

The concept of following God's direction for our lives contrasts sharply with the culture in which we live. Our culture emphasizes independence, consumerism, and the worship of self. We're taught to reach for the sky and pursue our dreams! The idea of following someone else's direction for our lives, even God's plan is viewed by many as questionable and less than ideal.

The Jews of Moses' day also struggled with following God's direction for their lives. Remember, the Jews had been held captive in Egypt for over 400 years before God delivered them and set them free. Their journey out of Egypt led them to the border of the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Moses dispatched twelve spies to spy out the land. Ten of them returned fearfully. They had seen large people in the land and were convinced they would never defeat them. They advised Moses to turn back because they would surely be defeated! But two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb filed a minority report. They insisted that the people move forward on faith, following God's direction and leading.

Fear often prevents people from following God's direction and plan for their lives. We fear many things: we fear making bad decisions, lack of acceptance from family and friends, lack of adequate provision if God asks us to tithe or give generously, we fear being overwhelmed if God asks us to serve in a certain ministry, we fear rejection, commitment, we fear many different things!

I remember being afraid of tithing many years ago. I was afraid of giving away too much money and not having enough for my family to live. God used some very

interesting events in my life to teach me the importance of faith and trusting and following him. After I obeyed God and started tithing, I found that I had more money for my family, not less! God taught me a very important lesson!

God wants us to **follow his direction for our lives!** I hope as we enter this New Year that you will make every possible effort to discover and follow God's direction for your life. Follow God's direction with your relationships, time, commitments, family life, job, money, everything! As we consider following God's direction for our lives, consider:

### **1. God goes before us to show us the way.**

Turn back in your Bible to **Exodus 13:21-22**: **“By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people”.**

God went before the children of Israel in a pillar of cloud and pillar of fire to lead them by day or night. God led them in a very visible and tangible way. He showed them the way to go! It's interesting that after such a visible and clear way of leading the Jews, God reminded them through Moses that he would continue to lead them. Look again in **Deut 31:8**, **“The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you”.**

How does God show us the way today? First, those of us who have a real and authentic faith in Christ have the Holy Spirit living within us. A few weeks ago I mentioned the fact that for many Christians, the Holy Spirit seems to be a dormant presence. He's there in our lives but we often fail to acknowledge his presence! God and Jesus gave us the Spirit to be our counselor, teacher, helper and guide. We have the inner witness of the Spirit to help guide us and direct us. He will lead us as we seek him! Second, we follow what's clearly revealed in God's Word. God gave us his word to communicate with us; to show us the way He wants us to live! Third, God expects us to use our own intelligence and common sense. The Psalmist writes in **Psalm 32:8-9**, **“I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you. Do not be like the horse or the mule which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you”.**

Many years ago before I came to Jacksonville I interviewed to become the pastor of a very small church in California. When Sally and I met with the Pastor Nominating committee, we were shown the parsonage, or church manse, where the pastor was expected to live. As we were walking through the residence we discovered that every single person on the Pastor Nominating committee for that church, seven people all had their own keys for the parsonage! Common sense dictated that there wouldn't be much privacy in that residence for the pastor and his family! We quickly decided we couldn't minister in that environment! God has given us the gifts of intelligence and common sense and he wants us to use them!

Fourth, God opens doors in his perfect time and according to his perfect will. Sometimes God keeps doors closed because he has a different plan for our lives. But other times, the doors remained closed temporarily because of sovereign delays in his plan and direction for our lives. When this happens, we have to wait and trust God. I've told you before about being unemployed after I graduated from seminary. I had to wait four months before finding a job. I used that time to visit my dying father-in-law. Sally and I were able to take him to his radiation treatments and had extended time to visit with

him. Later, when he died God showed us that my delay in getting a job was directly related to having quality time with my father-in-law.

Finally, we must beware of telling God *how* he must guide us! Do you insist on your own way with God? Do you say things to God like, “God, I must get that sales job! It was created just for me!” or “God, I must marry Ryan, cause I know you made him just for me!” God wants us to surrender the direction of our lives to him because he knows what’s best for us. God has a sovereign plan for your life and we must seek that direction for our lives!

## **2. God stays with us to give direction as we follow him!**

Look again in our theme verse, **Deut 31:8**, “**The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you**”. In addition to God going before the Israelites to show them the way, God will also stay with them. God will stay with them as they move into the Promised Land!

Turn over a few pages in your Bible to **Joshua 3:3-4**. In this passage of scripture the leaders of the Jews give them instructions about moving forward into the Promised Land. They said, “**When you see the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God, and the priests, who are Levites, carrying it, you are to move out from your positions and follow it. Then you will know which way to go, since you have never been this way before**”.

Apparently, God had removed the pillar of cloud and fire, which had served as direction beacons before the Jews entered the Promised Land. He replaced the pillar of cloud and fire with the Ark of the Covenant, which represented the very presence of God. The Jews were instructed in this passage to follow the Ark and the Levitical priests who carried it.

Fortunately, we too have the very presence of God to help direct us. Jesus told us in **John 14:16**, “**And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever, the Spirit of truth.**” We have the Holy Spirit abiding with us to help direct us and show us the way to live our Christian lives.

Many people today have GPS or global positioning system units. People have them in their cars, trucks, and on their phones. When Mark Portrait and I visited the Presbytery of the West last May we flew to Denver and rented a car. We used the GPS unit on Mark’s I-Phone to find the exact location for our presbytery meeting.

Imagine having a permanent GPS system attached to your body. It could survive wet, cold, humid, very hot and sticky conditions and still work! It never needed new batteries as your cardiovascular system kept it recharged permanently. Its coordinates for various locations were constantly being updated so you didn’t have to worry about outdated directions or roadwork or anything else, which might interfere. That’s how the Holy Spirit wants to function in our lives: as a GPS system permanently attached to our bodies!! God, in the person of the Holy Spirit stays with us always to direct us as we seek to follow him. Seek the Spirit of God to help direct you! Simply ask him in prayer to lead and guide and direct you!

Do you need God’s direction in your life today? Perhaps you’ve been dating someone that you have become very fond of and wonder if God wants you to move more deeply into the relationship. Or, you retired recently and have been seeking God’s

direction regarding how He wants you to spend your time. Seek God's direction in prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you the way and He will!

### **3. God never leaves us as he directs us.**

Look again in our theme verse, **Deut 31:8**, "**The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you**". Isn't that good news! God leads us, stays with us and never, ever leaves us.

Many years ago when I attended seminary I worked part-time in a church as the youth minister. One weekend we made arrangements to take our Junior High youth to a camp at Forest Home Conference Center, located in Forest Falls, California. I had never been to Forest Home before and I told one of the dads who was driving that I needed to follow him. When we got on the freeway he just took off and must have forgotten that I was following him. So, instead of going to Forest Home, I ended up with my carload of kids in Victorville, California. Since cell phones did not exist at that time, I stopped at a pay phone and called Forest Home for directions from Victorville. We eventually made it but we were several hours late.

Unlike the dad I was supposed to follow, God doesn't take off when we need his guidance and direction. He never leaves us! God stays with us and remains with us always.

Centuries after Moses and Joshua, the Jews were carried off into exile in Babylon for seventy years. God punished them for their stubborn and unrelenting sin. But even as they lived in far off Babylon, God stayed with them. Eventually, he allowed the Jews to return to Israel, rebuild the wall around the city and the magnificent Temple in Jerusalem.

Maybe you've made some poor decisions concerning your direction in life. Perhaps during the course of this message this morning you have thought about some of those mistakes. Here's the good news: even though you might feel far from God, he never leaves you. Further, it's never *too* late to start following God's direction for your life! You can begin today, making a conscious choice to start seeking God's direction for your life.

Remember, in the story of the Prodigal Son, after the Prodigal had wasted his life in debauchery, he eventually came to his senses and decided to return home. His father ran out to greet him and reconciliation took place between father and son. As this story illustrates, it's never too late to turn your back on your mistakes and decide to follow God's direction.

What a great way to begin the New Year! Make a conscious decision to start **following God's direction** for your life! Stick with it! Keep following God's direction, regardless of the cost and consequences. Refuse to make decisions based on purely selfish motives and interests. Determine to put God first and his direction for your life. Let us pray.