

NO MAP, BUT A GUIDE

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I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth.
These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them." -Isaiah 42:16 (NIV)*

Hello and welcome to "The Well", a spiritual formation podcast from Saddleback Church. My name is Brandon Bathauer and I'm excited to journey with you into words of truth.

Think of this as your own personal retreat. This is your opportunity to spend the next few minutes with your loving Creator and restorer, to find health and rest for your soul.

SLOW DOWN:

To start, find a quiet place, get away from the noise and busy, take a deep breath, and get settled. If you need more time at any point, feel free to hit pause along the way.

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Imagine the chains being removed from your dirt-encrusted arms, the feel of fresh air against suffocated skin. Step by step into what is ahead, imagine the feeling that would rise up in you as you began to see the temples and palaces of Egypt getting smaller over the horizon. The Hebrew people were being set free after generations of slavery at the hands of their Egyptian oppressors, and for the first time since their great grandparents or beyond, their feet walked towards freedom. What hope, excitement, worry, wondering, and joy must've been felt as they looked into the vastness of the world ahead of them.

What was 'reality' is now becoming 'past'. And ahead is something completely new.

The God of New Creation is leading us, His people, into a new day. I hope you are sensing this. He is leading us, He is leading you, into a place we do not know. We are walking into a future we don't have control over, a world that we have not yet been. The way ahead is through unfamiliar paths.

(PAUSE)

As the Hebrew people began their journey out of their chains in Egypt and into the land of promise, there's something important to realize: He didn't give them a map. God did not lay out the pathway in the desert from a bird's eye view, a path and plan they could have control over. How nice it would have been to know the path ahead, to plan each step and be fully prepared. We love to be prepared, don't we? When I'm driving somewhere, I prefer the broad map view on my phone so I can then plan my route. That way, I know what's coming.

In God's grace, we have some general guardrails that make up some kind of map. We have the Word of God, the revelation of God through the Bible that lays out for us the clear places to NOT go, and the character of Jesus gives us a north star. BUT, throughout the grand narrative of Scripture, God doesn't seem particularly interested in offering us up front a set of step-by-step directions from point A to point X. Instead, God decides not to give us a map, but a guide.

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For the Hebrews, God stood in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Each day, they got up from their tents, packed up, then followed wherever God was leading. While the fire illuminated what was right in front of them (as He says 'I will turn darkness into light before them'), the cloud only allowed them to see as far as the cloud, and not beyond. Not planning their own journey, they simply followed. Like sheep following a shepherd.

Now, this can be infuriating to us modern, logical Westerners. We want the whole picture, the entire plan. Getting one puzzle piece at a time is no way to build a successful process. Why would God choose to work this way?

Well...because it requires relationship. God is personal. He wants us to walk and work WITH Him (for in Him, we live and move and have our being¹). A map is objective, impersonal, individual, and unrelatable. A guide is personal, builds healthy dependency, communal, and requires relationship. This is the way of our God: With is His way...no map, but a guide.

We no longer have a literal pillar of cloud and fire, but we have the breath of God, the Holy Spirit, shown in both cloud and fire throughout Scripture. He is our guide. As God's Spirit was guiding the people of Israel then, so God's Spirit is guiding the people of God now. As Jesus said in John 16:13, 'When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth.'²

You may feel like you've been following a map all your life, but you haven't. I'm guessing you did not expect to end up where you are right now, and if you ARE where you planned, I'm guessing that the process to get here didn't look like you expected? God's spirit whispers directions, He opens doors and closes others, He weaves together learnings and experiences and hopes at just the right time to inspire us to take steps we take.

Take a minute now and think about the times you've been guided by God, where you took a step He was leading you to, not certain what was on the other side of the cloud. What ways has God impacted your career, your character, your current reality by His guiding voice? Reflect on a few moments, and then thank the God over all things for loving you enough to be intimately involved with your life.

(PAUSE)

EXAMEN:

"I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, along unfamiliar paths I will guide them; I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth. These are the things I will do; I will not forsake them." -Isaiah 42:16 (NIV)

God is guiding His church by ways we have not known, along unfamiliar paths. This is true here at Saddleback, as well as across our country and our world. This is happening simultaneous to major changes happening on the world stage...new technologies emerging, new geopolitical realities growing, new sociocultural challenges rising. Many of our maps have rightfully gone out the window. Yet in His grace, God is calling us to return, to begin again to rely on Him as our guide.

¹ Acts 17:28

² John 16:13

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How do we do this? How do we change from being a people who sought to extract out of God a map to the good life, and instead, begin to rely on Him daily as our guide into His will for us? His will for the world?

It seems to be the same as with a trail guide...listen, observe, and respond.

The primary difference between a map and a guide is that being guided requires listening. You cannot have your earbuds in, blasting music, or be busy talking. To be guided by someone means giving them the quiet and the space to speak. A guided tour of a museum is a period of time you give to someone else, your guide, to bring light to all that is in front of you. If we, the people of God, are going to be led well by God's Spirit into unknown paths ahead, our pace and our space will look different than it has.

We don't take the first step, our guide does, and we respond.

Are you creating enough space to listen? In the unknown paths of your life, do you pause before acting and let God speak? One simple place I've begun doing this is before praying for someone, I ask God what HE wants me to pray for...before helping someone, I ask God how HE wants me to help them. As I read through Scripture, I listen to what God would want to bring my attention to. It has been a game-changer. Does your pace allow you pause and listen—even for like three actual seconds?

If not, what needs to change?

To follow a guide, we not only listen, we also observe. As we walk into unfamiliar paths, Scripture says God will turn the darkness into light before us. Are your eyes open, looking for what God is doing? Or, like many of us, are your eyes focused elsewhere, blinded by the lights of your device, the pocket billboards of our day? The mark of a guided people is a hopeful curiosity about the actions of the guide. God is doing a new thing, do you see it? Observe what He is doing, in your life and in His world.

What characteristics of His Spirit are emerging around you? What themes are being highlighted?

What gifts are being left by Him for you? How is He working in your church? Be in a posture of observation.

Finally, after cultivating the space and pace of listening, a posture of observation, we are meant to respond. A guide is only a guide if we follow them. But they are the first to act. So much of a map-style religiosity looks at God as a set of general principles, by which we take our direction and take the first step. But the relational, guided spirituality of the people of God sees God as the first mover. He speaks, we listen. He acts, we observe. He calls, we respond.

This is not always easy. But it gets easier with practice. Relying on the Spirit of God as our guide will mean sometimes having to take brave steps into the unknown. He will bring a certain person to mind and ask you to pray for them. Easy when they're far away and it's just in your mind, way harder and weirder if they're standing right in front of you and it needs to be outloud. But we become more used to being guided as we practice. Take that step He's calling you to. Write that person a card. Send that person that text. Set up that conversation He's asking you to set up. Pause and go on that prayer walk He's asking you to take. This is what it looks like to walk into the unknown, but remember. He is our guide. He will not forsake us. 'For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God'³.

Take a moment now...where do you need to make more space to listen? How can you cultivate a posture of curious observation around you at the work of His hands? What calls from God do you need to respond to, even now? Talk with God about these things.

³ Romans 8:14

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Father, you have not left us alone, but have given us your Spirit to guide us. There is no greater gift than that the Lord of all things would decide to personally and continually guide us.⁴ Thank you for not systematizing or delegating this task to a set of easily mastered principles. Instead, you have decided to shepherd your church personally. May we be a people who do not lean on our own understanding,⁵ but that we, your sheep, would know your voice,⁶ and walk in it rather than by sight. As David cries out, ‘Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all the day long.’ May it be so among us, your people. In Jesus name, Amen.

⁴ Isaiah 58:11

⁵ Proverbs 3:5

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