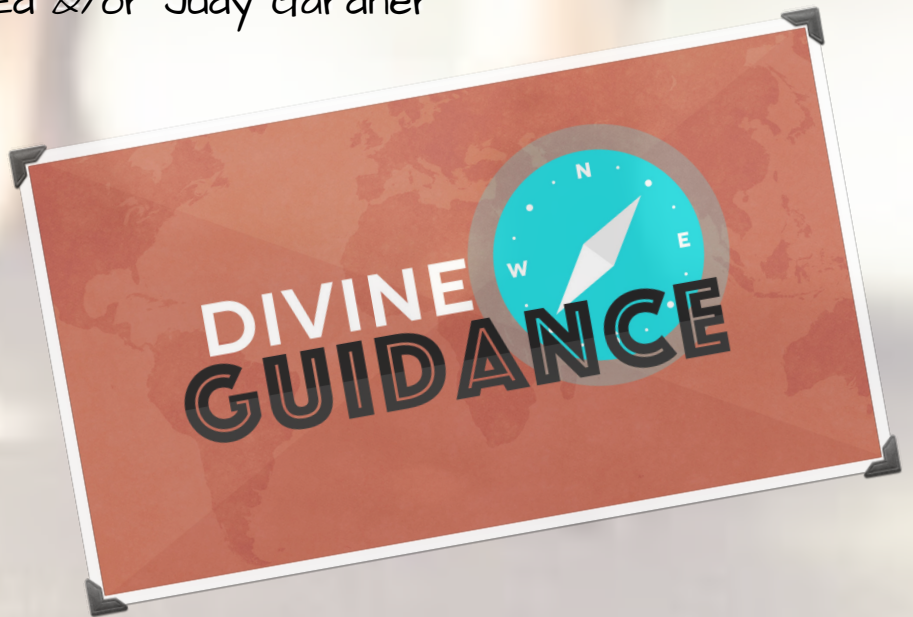


June 23-27, 2025 Edition

Following
The Year^(s) Of Jesus Part 181
Guidance

By: Ed &/or Judy Gardner

June 21/22, 2025



When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well yuo knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday:

Jesus looked at them intently and said, "Humanly speaking, it is impossible. But not with God. Everything is possible with God." Mark 10:37 (NLT)

Reflection: As much as Hannibal (the guy from the A-Team) liked it "when a plan comes together", we tend to like it when things make sense. Clarity feels good. Paradox feels less good. For example, God existing as one being but with three distinct aspects – the Father, Jesus, and the Spirit of God. That's a brain bender. As I start trying to work out what the deal is with the "Trinity" with other people I start to feel like I'm in the middle of an Abbott & Costello skit (if you don't know what I'm talking about google, "Who's On First" by Abbot & Costello and watch it... you'll see what I mean). It's one God. It's three "personalities." Does God have a multiple personality disorder? Somehow I can't make the math line up. For my finite brain $1=1$, not 3. Case closed.

But somehow God, in His infinite wisdom understands that things that seem mutually exclusive to our linear brains can actually compliment each other. It isn't just yes. It isn't just no. It's yes/no. Sometimes, when I feel like I have to understand something in order for it to be correct, I think I hear God whisper, "Don't sweat it, kid. It'll all make sense on the other side. For now just know that I will make it all work together. Whatever I do, I do because I love you. You'll see." In my impatience I am reminded of those times I told Jonathan, "You'll understand when you're older." I still remember that look that said, "If you weren't looking right at me mom... I'd be rolling my eyes."

It's hard to understand the paradox that we are saved by grace alone, but we're still expected to get stuff done. Paul tells the church in Ephesus that we are saved when we trust in Jesus to make us right with God. Period. That's all folks. The gift of salvation is 100% grace. We don't (can't) earn any of it. We receive it by faith. Faith alone saves us:

God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it. Ephesians 2:8-9 (NLT)

But then James comes along a few books later and says we need to get off our sofas and do stuff:

What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone? Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing, and you say, "Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well"-but then you don't give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do? So you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless. James 2:14-17 (NLT)

Faith that does nothing isn't actually faith as it turns out. It's dead faith. In other words, faith without action is no faith at all. The reality is that if we put our trust in Jesus to make us right with God it will change us. Once we're adopted into God's family we inherit family chores. There's work to do. The work is a blessing more than an obligation, but work is still

expected, and sometimes we need to follow through on our commitments even when we don't feel like it.

Don't misunderstand me. There isn't a list of things we have to do to "stay saved". We aren't saved by faith and then expected to work in order not to be kicked out. Our efforts don't save us. We serve and act because that's what people in a healthy/thriving family do. If we have enough faith to receive the gift of salvation, we have enough faith to want to help out. It isn't faith or works. It's 100% faith-that-works. We don't have to do any work to EARN heaven, leaving us plenty of energy to get on with our chores that express the faith that saved us. How's that for a paradox?

This week we'll be looking at one of the more mind-boggling paradoxes – somehow we have free will and yet God is the author of our destiny. Does God already know how it's all going to work together? Absolutely. Do we have meaningful choices then or are we just puppets? As it turns out we've got choices... and our choices matter. And as it turns out, God owns the outcome. We have 100% free will. God isn't forcing His plan on anyone. In a world that says destiny or free will, take your pick, God says why not have both? We say, "that's impossible" and Jesus says, "Humanly speaking, it is impossible. But not with God. Everything is possible with God." Mark 10:37 (NLT)

And that's the can of worms we open tomorrow ;o)

Prayer: Father, so much of life with You is a paradox. We have such a tough time understanding You and how You work in our lives and in human history. Teach me this week how to understand a little bit better exactly Who You are and what part we both play in my life. In Jesus' Name, amen.

Tuesday:

And we know that all that happens to us is working for our good if we love God and are fitting into his plans. Romans 8:28 (TLB)

Reflection: Many cultures throughout the ages have believed in predestination. Even some modern astrologers would say that all the important events are already written in the stars. You see this concept played out in the Greek tragedy of Oedipus. The oracle gives a prophecy at Eddy's birth (for some reason it's tough for me to type "Oedipus" so I'm going to give him a nickname that makes it easier on me- sorry if that bothers you but just know God already knew I was going to do that and is using your reaction to bring about the best good in both you and me ;o) that he will kill his own father and then marry his mother. Because that didn't sound like a good time, Eddy spent his whole life trying to do everything in his power to prevent that fate. He did whatever he could to avoid his destiny. But in the end, the very choices he made to outwit fate brought him exactly where he didn't want to be. At the close of the drama he has killed his father and married his mother (that'll make it hard to sleep at night, huh?). Destiny can be a bummer if fatalism is how you view the world.

The average American has the opposite belief – that the future is what we make it. Forget fate. We are not pawns of the gods. We make our own destiny. What counts is not the

position of the stars but the choices that we make. We build our lives one choice at a time. If we want to make better choices we put some intentional energy into planning. With good advice or a little research, we can stack the deck in our favor when it's time to make the call. With proactive choices we can build better habits so we don't even need to try so hard anymore. We can condition ourselves to behave closer and closer to our values and ideals. So are we self-made? Yes... and no.

What do Christians believe? Well that seems to vary. One church will use words like destiny or predestination to emphasize the great power and plan of God. Another church, or even another sermon in the same church, will emphasize our free will in response to God. Jesus died to offer salvation to all, but not everyone is going to take Him up on that offer. So when the question is asked, "how much is destiny and how much is free will?"; there's puzzled looks and lots of feet shuffling and plenty of hemming and hawing (what a strange phrase I now realize that is as I type it for the first time- but having looked up its origins I now see that's exactly what so many of us do when asked that question- we hem and haw. No time to explain the origins here just go google it). It's gotta be somewhere in the Bible, right? God has a job, and we have a job. God has ultimate authority over eternity and we have authority over our choices. So is that 50/50, or is it 60/40? What exactly is the math? What I've noticed is that when someone is completely sure of the answer it's because they've seized on one particular set of scriptures which seem to give the verdict on this question and ignore the scriptures that seem to contradict their chosen view. Happens all the time. And yet as far as I can tell the Bible seems to tell us that we have 100% free will and God has 100% say over how it all works together:

We can make our plans, but the LORD determines our steps. Proverbs 16:9 (NLT)

It's not 50/50. It's not one or the other. It's both. I am responsible for making my plans but God is the One Who plots our steps. It's like those commercials that are out these days talking about how much better "and" is than "or". What if there weren't any "and". What if you got sweet or sour chicken? What if you had to choose between nuts or bolts. The result in being stuck with only one is never a good one. I think it's the same way with God.

We absolutely have the freedom and power to choose for ourselves. God doesn't take away our free will, even if the negative consequences are going to spill over on the innocent people around us. He doesn't take away the choices of serial killers or mobsters... or ex spouses (not that I'm trying to correlate serial killers with ex-spouses [although some of you are suddenly understanding the concept of free-will in a way you never did before, aren't you?] but you get the picture... other people's choices can hurt us and God won't stop that).

But God also already knows how it's all going to play out. He has already worked everything together for the benefit of those who are trying to fit into His plans. But what happens when I do the wrong thing? What happens when someone else does the wrong thing and that impacts how or even if I can do the right thing that God had planned? The mind boggles. Our minds boggle- but not God's.

We have a destiny. He has a unique plan for each of us. God already knows what it is. But He won't bring it about without our cooperation. In this moment, where you and I live within the confines of time bound, sequential human history, we have a choice. We can say "yes" or

“no,” turn left or right, turn toward God or away from Him. Free will means we always have a choice. So how does that work exactly? Tomorrow grasshopper. We’ll talk on that tomorrow. But know this- this question has been a source of division in Jesus’ church for almost 2,000 years and there are a lot of very smart people (WAY smarter than me to be sure) who would disagree vehemently on both sides of the spectrum (free-will vs God’s sovereignty) so take what I say with a grain of salt and think about this stuff for yourself because it’s pretty important.

Prayer: Father, Open my eyes to the fact that my life is 100% in Your hands and yet how I choose to live is extremely important. Thank You that I can relax because You hold the future in Your hands but don’t let that relaxing turn into laziness or inaction. In Jesus’ Name, amen.

Wednesday:

*In their hearts humans plan their course, but the LORD establishes their steps.
Proverbs 16:9 (NIV)*

Reflection: 100% free will. 100% destiny. It’s sort of like how Jesus was both 100% human and yet somehow 100% God. In God’s math $100\% + 100\% = 100\%$. Wait, my head hurts. Is this like new math? I mean, how exactly does that work? Well I’ve been meditating on this for many years and I’ll tell you this... I have no idea! If you’re looking for a tutor in God’s math I’ve got no qualifications to recommend me. I don’t get it either. But what I can tell you is that even though I don’t know how it works, I have seen it happen. It may sound intellectually impossible, but in the trenches of day to day life, it totally works. Free will + destiny = peace of mind. Gotta love that. Let me see if I can paint you a picture where my own logic and reasoning fail me.

God has a plan for each of us. I totally believe that to be true. But with our free will we have complete veto power. God does not force anything on us, even for our own good - not salvation or His love or His plans for our lives. God says - love each other the way Jesus loved you. In my kingdom you are to love others and be generous to those who can’t make it on their own. This is my plan, my will. Just do it. Trust me, you won’t regret it.

And then the ball’s in our court. We have opportunities. We have a destiny. We have a unique contribution that fits perfectly into God’s plans. But what we do is up to us. We can say no, or tomorrow, or next time, or anyone but him Lord. God plays out the melody but we are not forced to play in harmony. He won’t force us do our part. Like I pointed out yesterday- there are a lot of people who will disagree with me on this. Those opposed to the idea of free will would point to Luke chapter 15 where there’s a story of a “lost sheep” that the shepherd pursues- leaving the flock of 99 sheep who didn’t wander away and when he finds the lost sheep he simply brings it back home. No choice on the part of the sheep- you’re coming with me and nobody asked you your opinion. But in the same chapter Jesus tells another story about a lost thing- a lost son. The prodigal son wants to leave his father’s house and the father lets him leave- even helps him leave. Every day the father waits for the lost son to return but doesn’t force him to come home. But when the lost son does come home

turns out the father has been watching and runs to meet the son who Jesus says was “lost and now is found, dead and now is alive.”

What does that mean? One group uses the first story in Luke chapter 15 to argue for the position that we have no choice in the matter of whether we follow the shepherd and another uses the third story to argue that the father won’t force us to come home. So which is it? Neither. And both:

We can make our plans, but the final outcome is in God’s hands. Proverbs 16:1 (TLB)

The final outcome is in God’s hands. I don’t know about you but that gives me great peace. However, when we fail to fulfill God’s purpose for our lives the world is a lesser place (including my own). There are consequences when we choose not to live in cooperation with God’s plans. There are consequences for neglect. There are consequences when others (or we) choose violence or hate. The holocaust didn’t have to happen. Jesus didn’t give His permission for the Spanish Inquisition (I know Monty Python fans... you weren’t expecting the Spanish Inquisition... God was because He can see the future but He didn’t plan it Himself... that was all on us). God didn’t create cancer any more than He created Twinkies. We make choices but we can’t always see the scope of the consequences.

We will never be as satisfied as we can be when we’re fitting perfectly into God’s plans. But perfect just isn’t our game. That’s okay. God gets that. We don’t have to be more than we are. We just have to make a stab at our best guess at fitting into God’s plans. We don’t have to be right all the time. We get to learn from our mistakes. We own our choices/actions but God owns the destination.

God nudges us toward His plan A, but doesn’t spell it all out for us. Where’s the joy of discovery in that? How could that possibly build a strong faith? We’re on an adventure. We get to make predictions and take risks. But even when we guess wrong, God just moves on to plan B and takes our mistake and redeems it and makes something beautiful out of our future in spite of our mistake.

It’s in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for... part of the overall purpose He is working out in everything and everyone. Ephesians 1:11 (MES)

We get grace and the world still gets everything it needs for everyone to have their chance. We may not see it, but God does. You see, God loves each of us uniquely and unconditionally. He is sovereign over a human history that cultivates the opportunity for everyone to have their best chance at knowing His love, despite all the conflicting (and sometimes horrific) choices that we make.

From our limited perspective, right here in the messy flow of human history, life is never going to be fair. Which can really stink! We SO want to be in on the big picture plan just to make sure it meets up with our approval. God doesn’t seem to share our simplistic notion of what’s fair, and that can be frightening. But when we attempt to work ourselves into God’s will, He’s the author of generosity. What we learn, what we become in the trenches of this messy life is going to be a gift. Some moments we may find ourselves saying, “Are you kidding me!?! How could this possible result in anything good?” But when we stand next to

God and look at the final screening of our lives we'll say, "Wow! You really did know what You were doing! Go figure!"

Prayer: Father, teach me to trust You enough to do what You are asking me to do and leave the outcome in Your hands. In Jesus' Name, amen.

Thursday:

I say this because I know what I am planning for you," says the Lord. "I have good plans for you, not plans to hurt you. I will give you hope and a good future. Jeremiah 29:11 (NLT)

Reflection: To look at it from another angle, let's go back to ancient history. In the garden Eve could have resisted the fruit. But it didn't seem like such a big deal.

The serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild animals the Lord God had made. One day he asked the woman, "Did God really say you must not eat the fruit from any of the trees in the garden?" "Of course we may eat fruit from the trees in the garden," the woman replied. "It's only the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden that we are not allowed to eat. God said, 'You must not eat it or even touch it; if you do, you will die.'" "You won't die!" the serpent replied to the woman. "God knows that your eyes will be opened as soon as you eat it, and you will be like God, knowing both good and evil." The woman was convinced. She saw that the tree was beautiful and its fruit looked delicious, and she wanted the wisdom it would give her. So she took some of the fruit and ate it. Then she gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it, too. Genesis 3:1-6 (NLT)

She just wanted to be like God. Surely He wouldn't hold that against her. After all, who among us hasn't ever wanted to be better than we are? Who among us hasn't thought we knew better than God how to run our lives? Adam certainly didn't put up any argument. How can we know that we'd do any better?

But oh the consequences of having both evil and good available in this world! They didn't get it. How could they? They just couldn't see how it would be that bad. I imagine Eve didn't really grasp what she had done until that night her son Abel never came home. Did she go and search for him? Did she hold his limp body in her arms? Did she suspect Cain? Could her mind even go there? I don't know. But I imagine she would have done anything to go back and make a different choice. The cost of eating the fruit wasn't the death she expected, it was worse.

So could there have been an alternate reality where Eve didn't eat the fruit? Did God hold His breath and hope that they would choose His way knowing the beauty that would lead to, and then have to rewrite history when she gave in? Or is God so omniscient, so much beyond the scope of what our minds can grasp, that He has measured every choice, counted every grain of sand, and roots for each of us in every decision even though He already knows what we're going to do? Does He stand outside the timeline of history and weigh each human choice to decide if the most loving thing to do is step in and intervene or to let us learn from the natural consequences of our actions?

I have felt Him lighten my load. I have seen Him pull off miracles. I have watched a person turn to God and have the consequences of their previous choices evaporate. But I've seen others who still had to pay the cost. And I can't seem to predict God's decisions or reason them out. We just don't have all the information we need to predict what will ultimately be the most generous path. We don't see into the hidden motives of human hearts. We can't anticipate the twists of fate where something ugly can give birth to something beautiful that just couldn't have happened any other way.

For Bill W (founder of AA), one fervent prayer and God takes away his craving for alcohol and heals him completely. Ta da! But then it's AA for everyone one else. I don't knock it, it's a life building program. But it takes a lot of sweat and effort. It only works when you work it. There are steps to take and amends to make. What's the reasoning for so many have to work so hard when Bill W just got the – poof! To tell you the truth, I rarely understand why God allows things to unfold as He does. Thank God I don't have to get it. I just do my best to hold on to the hope that it's all about love. Whatever God does or doesn't do, it's because He loves us- He proved it by entering into our pain, living the life we should have lived and dying the death that would have been our future had He not intervened so that we could share in the reward that rightfully belongs only to Him:

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. John 10:10 (NLT)

What the story of the Bible teaches me is, Jesus can be trusted- even if there's a ton of stuff I still just don't get. So I will do my best to follow Him and make the choices that will make Him proud to be my father knowing that if (when) I mess up His grace will/does cover me. So how about you? How about today? God has a plan for your day. He's waiting to see if you'll step into that plan and live the way He designed you to live or if you'll decide (like Adam & Eve did) that you know better than He does how to design your life. So which will it be?

Prayer:

Father, forgive me for the times I've gone my own way. Forgive me for the times I've believed I knew better than You how to run my life. Today I want to follow Your lead. What do You want to do today? In Jesus Name, amen.

Friday:

The LORD works out everything for his own ends- even the wicked. Proverbs 16:4 (NIV)

Reflection: We've spent quite a bit of time this week wrestling with the paradox of how God could own the end result/destination of our lives and yet we own the choices/actions that we make and the consequences that go with those actions/choices. Are you as confused as I am yet?

Maybe it will help to look at the story of Joseph. He was his dad's favorite. Out of 12 boys Joseph only seemed to dote on one. It made his other sons murderously angry and it made Joseph into a spoiled brat. So what happened? Did God step in and orchestrate everything that happened to Joseph and his family or did He just use their actions to accomplish His plans? Is there really a difference? Now maybe you're truly confused.

Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery and tell Jacob that Joseph was killed by a wild animal. Joseph is taken to Egypt where he is sold to one man and then falsely accused of attempted rape and ends up in prison. While in prison Joseph makes some friends but it takes a REALLY long time for Joseph to get out and for his life to start looking up again. Do you ever wonder how often Joseph felt like God wasn't doing anything? Year after year Joseph expects God to do something but I imagine Joseph felt like God had forgotten him. Ever feel like Joseph? We want God to be quick and take care of our problems fast but that's not how God works and it's not how you and I (and Joseph as it turns out) are changed.

Joseph continually called out for God's intervention. Think about the day he sat in a pit (that his brothers had tossed him into) waiting for God to do something. What he gets is that instead of being killed by his brothers they are swayed to sell him into slavery instead. What a bonus! Do you think Joseph thought God was on the job that day? Fast forward to the very same geographical spot about 1,000 years later and Elisha is in the city of Dothan (it wasn't a city when Joseph was there but it is now) surrounded by an enemy army that wanted to kill Elisha and all the people in the city. Elisha's servant is terrified and so Elisha prays that God would open the eyes of the servant's heart and the servant sees thousands of angels protecting the city from the army and the city is saved.

I don't know about you but when it comes to answered prayer that's-what-I'm-talking-about! Right? 1) I'm in trouble. 2) I pray for God to save me. 3) God does something miraculous that is along the lines of what I consider to be "saving" me.

But what happens when God doesn't work in the way I think He should? What happens when I'm in a pit and I'm crying out for Him to save me and the way He does that is by me being bought by slave traders and carried away from my home into Egypt and sold? How do we handle those instances? And there's a ton of them in the Bible. I never counted but my anecdotal research tells me there are just as many (if not more) unanswered prayers (at least not answered in the way we think they should have been answered if it had been us in the same situation) as there are answered prayers in the Bible.

It would be nice if life was like the TV show *Touched By An Angel*, wouldn't it? An angel would show up and tell everyone what they were doing wrong and in about an hour everything would be fixed. But life isn't like that, is it? Why not? Because you (and I) can't just be told where we're going wrong... we have to experience it for ourselves. If all it took was someone telling us what's wrong with us most of us who are married would be perfect by now ;o)

But we're not perfect... are we? God couldn't just show up at Joseph's house before all the drama happened and say, "Jacob... stop favoring one boy over the others... you're creating a dangerous and toxic situation. And Joseph... stop being such an unfeeling jerk to your brothers. And brothers... stop with the jealousy... it's only going to lead to heartache and pain." Nobody would have believed it was true about them. So God leaves them to the consequences of their actions and choices but uses those consequences and choices (along with a whole lot of time passing) to bring about the changes that all of them needed:

You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. Genesis 50:20 (NLT)

By the end of the story Joseph has become a man of greatness, his family is emotionally and relationally healed and that part of the world is saved from a great famine that would have wiped out a large percentage of the population... probably including Jacob's family. And at the end of it all Joseph would say to the brothers who sold him into slavery... you intended to hurt me, but God intended it for good. In other words we're back to the scripture we started out with today:

The LORD works out everything for his own ends- even the wicked. Proverbs 16:4 (NIV)

There's your paradox again. We own our choices and actions but God owns the outcome. I still don't fully understand it. But one thing that I am getting from this is that I can relax. If I do my best then even if I make a mistake, God will make something good come out of it. So I leave you at the end of this very confusing week with a verse that gives me great peace:

Since the Lord is directing our steps, why try to understand everything that happens along the way? Proverbs 20:24 (TLB)

It's become a life verse for me and a description of how I live my life and how we plan at Riverside. And the better I get at it the more peace I experience in my own life and the better things seem to work out for me and the church. I can't explain it. A lot of people would have a HUGE problem with it. But it works for me. So now the real question is, how will you live your life?

Prayer: Father, I am going to stop trying to understand everything that happens in my life. I am going to stop letting my lack of understanding rob me of my peace. Today I commit my entire life to You, knowing that as I do that You have promised that all my plans will succeed and that more and more I will become a person of wisdom. In Jesus' Name, amen.