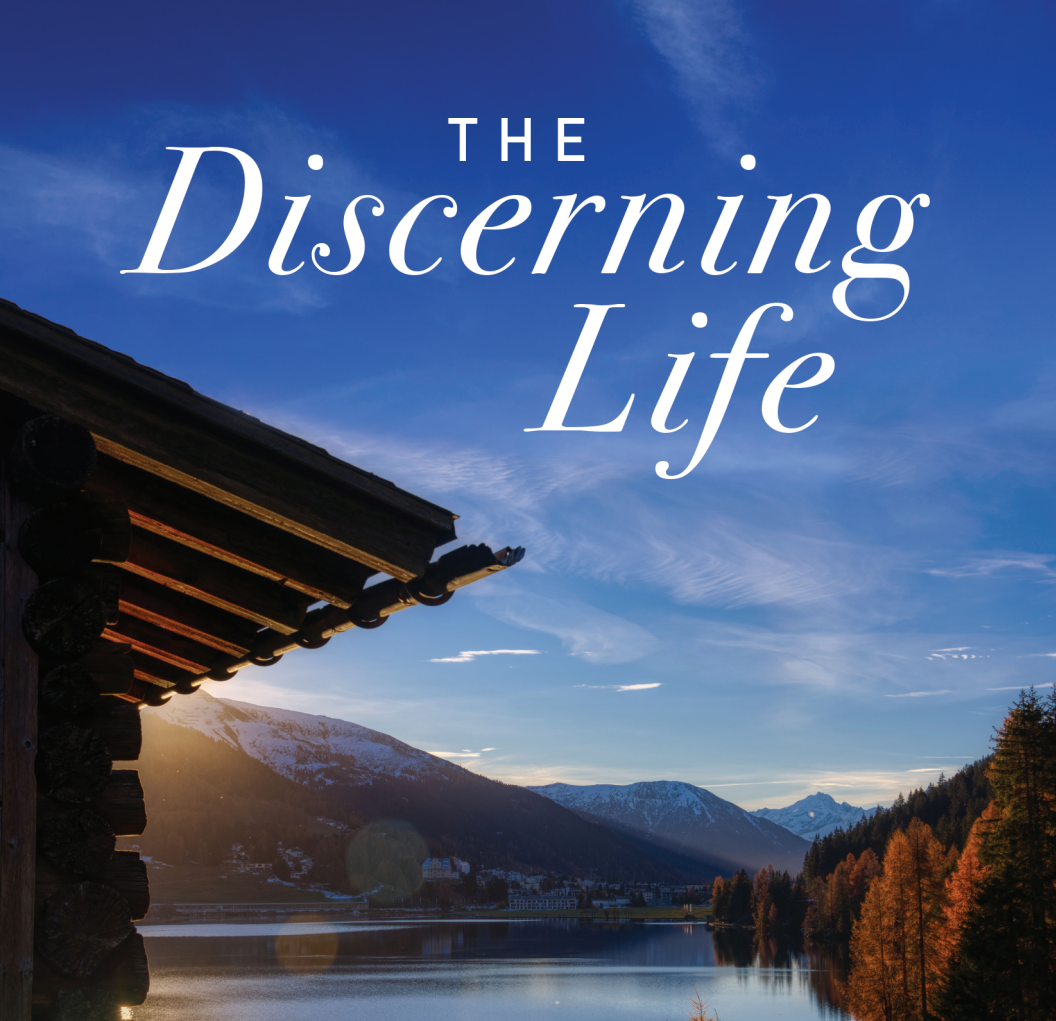




THE *Discerning Life*

An Invitation to
NOTICE GOD IN EVERYTHING



STEPHEN A. MACCHIA

A PDF COMPANION TO THE AUDIOBOOK

ZONDERVAN REFLECTIVE

The Discerning Life

Copyright © 2022 by Stephen A. Macchia

Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, 3900 Sparks Dr. SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49546

Zondervan titles may be purchased in bulk for educational, business, fundraising, or sales promotional use. For information, please email SpecialMarkets@Zondervan.com.

ISBN 978-0-310-12792-5 (audio)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Macchia, Stephen A., 1956- author.

Title: The discerning life : an invitation to notice God in everything / Stephen A. Macchia.

Description: Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 2022.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021042976 (print) | LCCN 2021042977 (ebook) | ISBN 9780310127901 (paperback) | ISBN 9780310127918 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Discernment (Christian theology) | Desire for God. | Christian life.

Classification: LCC BV4509.5 .M25325 2022 (print) | LCC BV4509.5 (ebook) | DDC 235—dc23/eng/20211004

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021042976>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021042977>

The use of the content of Rueben P. Job's material from *A Guide to Spiritual Discernment*, compiled by Rueben P. Job, Upper Room Publications, 1996, is used by permission.

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.Zondervan.com. The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.®

Scripture quotations marked ESV are taken from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®). Copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked THE MESSAGE are taken from *THE MESSAGE*. Copyright © 1993, 2002, 2018 by Eugene H. Peterson. Used by permission of NavPress. All rights reserved. Represented by Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Scripture quotations marked RSV are taken from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Copyright © 1946, 1952, and 1971 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Any internet addresses (websites, blogs, etc.) and telephone numbers in this book are offered as a resource. They are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement by Zondervan, nor does Zondervan vouch for the content of these sites and numbers for the life of this book.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Cover design: Tammy Johnson Design

Cover photo: © Genz Twins / Shutterstock

Interior design: Sara Colley

Printed in the United States of America

22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 /TRM/ 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

APPENDIX A

The Discernment Process

Ten Questions for Leaders and Teams

Stephen A. Macchia

Phase 1. Frame the question.

What is the question we are discerning together?

Phase 2. Gather the team.

Who are the appropriate members of the discernment team?

Phase 3. Release all biases, preconceived conclusions, and
predetermined assumptions.

*Are you willing to release or hold loosely your preconceived
ideas for the outcome?*

And PRAY

How is God inviting you to pray?

Phase 4. Assemble the facts.

What are the facts as we currently know them?

And PRAY

How is God inviting you to pray?

Phase 5. Critique and review options.

What are the options as we know them today?

And PRAY

How is God inviting you to pray?

Phase 6. State reasons why NOT.

One option at a time—why should we NOT pursue it?

And PRAY

How is God inviting you to pray?

Phase 7. State reasons why YES.

One option at a time—why SHOULD we pursue it?

And PRAY

How is God inviting you to pray?

Phase 8. Deliberate openly, honestly, without judgment or conclusion.

Taking one option at a time—which ones stay, and which ones go away?

And PRAY

How is God inviting you to pray?

Phase 9. Decide and proceed.

What is our final decision—which of these choices is for the greater glory to God, and what are the steps to achieve what we've discerned together?

And PRAY

How is God inviting you to pray?

Phase 10. Review, evaluate, and start again.

What have we learned, what's working well, what needs our attention, and/or when will discernment recommence?

And PRAY

How is God inviting you to pray?

APPENDIX B

Practicing a Preference for God

A Forty-Day Prayer and Reflection
Resource Based on *A Guide to Spiritual
Discernment* by Rueben P. Job

Overview, Edits, and Compilation by Stephen A. Macchia

*“Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and
knowledge of God!*

*How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!*

Who has known the mind of the Lord?

Or who has been his counselor?

Who has ever given to God,

that God should repay them?

*For from him and through him and for him are
all things.*

To him be the glory forever! Amen.”

Romans 11:33–36

*“Holy, holy, holy
is the Lord God Almighty,
Who was, and is, and is to come.”*

Revelation 4:8

As was mentioned at the outset of the book, this appendix is devoted to a soul-care exercise for individuals and teams. Taking forty days to reflect alone or together on the meaning of spiritual discernment over a six-week time frame will deepen your practice of a preference for God.

A good part of the following material was originally published in *A Guide to Spiritual Discernment*, which was written and compiled by one of my spiritual mentors, Rueben P. Job, and published in 1996 by Upper Room Publications. Rueben has since gone home to be with the Lord, but in his incredible lifetime was a devoted husband, father, grandfather, Methodist pastor (and later, Methodist bishop), and was one of the most gracious, kind, and humble men I’ve ever met.

Over the years, Rueben and his friend Norman Shawchuck compiled four incredibly rich, yearlong, Christian-calendar-adhering prayer books. They originally sought to compile some of their favorite readings on various spiritual-formation topics for a group of friends. Rueben firmly believed that as spiritual friends engage in a common reading and prayer practice, their walks with God and one another will deepen. This has proven to be true for thousands of their readers over the years. I’ve been reading their *Guides to Prayer* since the mid-1980s, when I was first introduced to *A Guide*

to *Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants*. For nearly two decades, our Leadership Transformations team and ministry associates have been reading through the yearlong *Guides to Prayer* as an ongoing spiritual practice for our ministry community.

When Leadership Transformations was formed in 2003, I invited our founding board to read and pray through Rueben's forty-day guide, *A Guide to Spiritual Discernment*. Our team received a rich understanding of spiritual discernment, the heartbeat of our ministry to leaders and teams. As a result, I'm convinced that our foundational years of flourishing came from our board's commitment to become more prayerfully discerning about our shared ministry to leaders and teams. Over the years, I've invited several leadership teams to do likewise, with similar results.

May these Scripture passages, prayerful readings, and meditative reflections usher you into God's presence, deepen your understanding of spiritual discernment, and renew your soul. All the daily Scripture passages are newly collected as "Fifty Biblical Reflections for Noticing God." What follows also includes short excerpts from a handful of the meditations that were republished with permission in *A Guide to Spiritual Discernment*, and their original sources are duly noted in the endnotes.

A Guide to Follow

This appendix is designed to give an individual, a small group, a leadership team, or a congregation a useful tool to assist in the process of understanding and living out spiritual discernment. All persons of faith want to know God and do God's will. Yet in our busy and noisy world, it is often hard to hear God's voice. While

we all walk by faith, we desire some special means of listening to God. Perhaps the greatest work any person of faith is called to is to learn to pay attention to God. To learn how to see God at work in the everyday events of life and to hear God's voice in the sacred Scriptures and the life of another is of enormous significance to the person who seeks to live a life of faithfulness. This simple yet profound process is designed to slowly and prayerfully transform us into the image of God.

The guide below is designed to be used every day as a way of listening and noticing God more intimately, and to perhaps prepare you for a discernment process and decision-making that will come near the end of this forty-day period. The resource includes a structure for daily prayers, a liturgy for covenant groups in which you may gather for discernment and support, and a handful of readings for each week. In each case, you will need a Bible and your hymnal to make the most of this resource. Since busyness is one of our most persistent problems, it will be important for you to determine the time and place for this forty-day experience. Set aside some time every day to listen to God's voice, to ask for God's guidance, and to offer your life to God in fidelity, trust, and love.

Each of the liturgies in this guide offers suggested Scripture readings and hymns to be sung or read. You may wish to select additional or other hymns or Scripture passages for your time of prayer and praise. Feel free to adapt this resource to your individual or corporate needs. Listed below are some brief suggestions and comments about the liturgy for Daily Prayer and Praise.

Prayer of Invitation. Begin this time of prayer and praise by giving full attention to God and by inviting God into your life anew. Use the prayer daily as one way in which you become present to God and invite God to be present to you.

Hymn of Praise. You will need a hymnal for this portion (or the internet to look up the words and music). Sing or read the hymn every day. Next to the Bible, our hymnbooks are our most helpful resource in listening to and hearing God speak.

Scripture Reading. Read the Scripture at least once, and always listen for what God is saying to you during the reading. Perhaps follow the *lectio divina* practice introduced earlier in this book. We will walk through the Old and New Testament, noticing God's initiatives toward his beloved family of followers.

Reflection and Response. Keep a time of silence to permit the Scripture to be God's message for you and for your life for this day. Ask frequently, "What is God saying to me through this passage? What response is he calling for from me?" Use a journal to record your insights and questions.

Sacred Reading. Use one or more of the readings in this resource, your hymnbook, or some other source for spiritual reading. There are a plethora of options to consider here. Don't feel like you have to read extensively. Instead, read meditatively and prayerfully.

Reflection and Response. Once again seek to listen to the material as a letter from God to you seeking to give guidance to your process of discernment. Record your findings for later reference. Writing down your insights and questions often brings clarity to your thought.

Prayer. Each week, there are suggestions for your prayers of gratitude and your prayers of petition or intercession. Again, you will want to make this list more specific and add to the list those special areas of thanksgiving and petition that you bring to this time of prayer. Be sure to offer your prayers and spend time listening to God's Spirit as you pray.

The Lord's Prayer. To pray this prayer is to remember that we are

not alone. When we come into the presence of God, we come into the presence of God's people. This prayer that Jesus taught us saves us from simply praying selfish prayers, gives us a glimpse of a reality larger than our own concerns, and binds us once more to God's vision for all creation.

Closing Prayer of Consecration. In this prayer, we declare our willingness to be led by God throughout the activities of the day. It is a time of surrender on the one hand and of picking up our directions and promised sustenance for the day on the other.

Many are praying with you and for you as you prepare to be an instrument in God's hand in the deliberation and decision-making of your congregation, which always begins with *practicing a preference for God* in your personal life. If you are using this resource as a guide to personal discernment and decision-making, ask others to join in prayer with you. May God's grace and peace be yours in abundance as you seek to know God and do his will.

Introduction: Discerning God's Vision

Forty Days of Preparation and Reflection

By Rueben P. Job

The time frame of forty days has special significance for Christians. We remember Moses and the children of Israel wandering in the wilderness for forty years in search of the promised land. We are especially aware of the forty days Jesus spent in the wilderness facing the subtle and yet hard decisions of life. And we annually complete the forty-day Lenten journey from Ash Wednesday to Easter and then from Easter to Pentecost. Exodus

and promised land are a part of the reality of the church year and of each of our lives.

Thus, it is fitting that as Christians seeking to know God and do God's will we spend forty days in watching, listening, and reflecting as we seek to discern God's way for us. Our relationship with Jesus Christ can grow stronger and our responsibility to Jesus Christ can grow clearer as we practice methods of discernment as old as Christianity. We will also discover that our relationship to one another is strengthened as together we seek God's will above all else. Congregations often discover a new unity, faith, vitality, mission, and sense of God's nearness as they fervently seek God and God's will.

The exodus we are called to make is to leave the land of self-centered and self-serving living and decision-making for the promised land of seeking and finding and preferring God, and doing God's will in all things. To enter the promised land of living in the center of God's will, we must leave behind the sin that so easily captures and controls us; that is, the desire for our will to be done. Instead we are invited to reach out for the "upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14 ESV). This requires a radical renunciation of sin and a radical declaration of faith in the God for whom all things are possible. For when our faith in this God without limits is strong, we begin to recognize that our way may not be the best way and God's way is always the best way.

We as the children of Israel have embarked on a journey toward the promised land of God's will in the affairs of our lives and within our congregation. Our faith is not in our prayers, our process of discernment, or a forty-day time frame. Our faith is in the living God who comes to guide and companion those who seek to walk in God's way. While there may be many ways to the promised land of God's

full and complete reign, and we as individuals and as a congregation may face many options, we can be sure that there is one most desirable way for us to follow. What is it? Which way is God calling us to go? What is the right decision for us to make? How will we decide the important questions before us? How will we face the temptations of the wilderness and remain faithful and true? With God's help we can be led to discover answers to these and other questions that confront us as we move toward decision-making as an individual or as a community of faith from a context of preferring God in all things and at all times.

The people of God are always on the way to the promised land. To be a follower of Jesus is to be a pilgrim, and it is to be on a journey that always leads us toward God and God's goodness. The Scriptures remind us that God loves us and seeks to sustain us in all of life. Therefore, we can ask for guidance in the confidence that God's way, the very best way, will be made known to us.

The vision of the promised land comes from God. The direction and strength to get there also come from God. But if we are to see the vision and to make the journey, we must be willing to give up what we have for that which is not yet fully realized. We need a willingness and openness to discern, to see God's way, and finally, a yearning to be led in that way alone.

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you" (John 14:15–17 RSV).

This is the road of spiritual discernment, practicing a preference for God.

Week 1: Discernment: A Listening Community

Prayer of Invitation

Almighty God, you who have made yourself known to all humankind and to us in times past, make yourself and your way known to us in this time of prayer and reflection. In the name and Spirit of Christ. Amen.

Hymn of Praise

“Great Is Thy Faithfulness”

Scripture Reading

Sunday — Genesis 1:1–31, God creates

Monday — Genesis 2:1–3, God rests

Tuesday — Genesis 2:4–25, God forms man and woman

Wednesday — Genesis 6:9–22, God calls Noah

Thursday — Genesis 12:1–9, God calls Abram

Friday — Genesis 18:1–15, God appears to Abraham and Sarah

Saturday — Genesis 22:1–18, God tests and blesses Abraham

Reflection and Response

Sacred Reading

Reflection and Response

Prayer

Thanksgiving for God’s sustaining grace and goodness.
Petitions for the following:

Peace in the world, especially . . .

All the churches of God, especially . . .

Our pastors and congregational leaders, especially . . .

All who suffer and are oppressed, especially . . .

All who are prisoners of addiction, especially . . .

All who seek to walk in faithfulness, justice, and righteousness,
especially . . .

My own life and witness and for those in my care, especially . . .

The Lord's Prayer

Closing Prayer of Consecration

Loving Creator, we place our lives into your hands with confidence in your love and fidelity. We know that you will lead us into your will and so we ask in confidence, do with us what you will and lead us this day in truth and righteousness. We offer our prayers and our lives in the name of Jesus. Amen.

READINGS FOR REFLECTION



A Listening Community

Christians at their best are good listeners, and the Christian church, when most faithful, is a listening community. To live with God in this world that God loves requires some intense and intentional listening. So many competing voices are calling for our attention that without concentrated effort and determination

we may easily miss what God is saying to us. We may even miss the way and will into which God is trying to lead us.

I wear two hearing aids, and even with them discover that I often mistake one word or phrase for another and often answer questions never asked and take directions never given! Sometimes, even when I remember to listen carefully, have both hearing aids on, and take my time, I still need to ask someone for clarity on the message that I am trying to understand. We all need help to hear clearly and completely the truth of God for our lives and for our world. The Christian community is one of those helps or aids to our hearing clearly the voice and direction of God. The events of the world around us, the events of our lives, the natural world, the Scriptures, prayer, worship, sacred reading, a spiritual guide or friend, all can help us to hear.

Faithful guides who have gone before us have suggested that there are several prerequisites to hearing clearly the voice and direction of God. First of all is faith in a God who communicates with us. Our willingness and our effort to listen will be conditioned by our faith in a God who speaks and gives guidance. The wise and faithful leaders of the past also believed that we listen for and to God's voice and direction only when we are intensely dissatisfied with things as they are. It is unlikely that we will hear God's voice calling us to risk, to move out in new mission or with new vision, if we are very comfortable and settled with things the way they are. And perhaps the most important of all is a great love for God and a passion for God's will. When these elements of faith in God, desire for God's way (dissatisfaction with our way), and great love for God and God's will are present in a solitary

life or a community, the possibility of one hearing God's voice of guidance is greatly multiplied.

I used to believe that everyone mumbled. My family, my friends, telephone callers, even radio personalities seemed to have lost the ability to speak clearly. Then I was fitted with hearing aids. What a surprise! Everyone spoke with clarity. What had changed? I had accepted help in hearing. Trying to listen and hear clearly the voice of God is not an easy task nor a casual undertaking. Ask God to guide you today and always to the help you need so that you may hear clearly even the slightest whisper of the One who spoke you into being.

—Rueben P. Job¹

True discernment calls us beyond the well-tended gardens of conventional religious wisdom to the margin between the known and the unknown, the domesticated and the wild. We incur risk any time we place ourselves in the presence of that which exists beyond our control. How crucial, then, that our efforts to sift and sort the forces shaping our spiritual life be undertaken with some bedrock assurances. King David provides one which cannot be surpassed. We are guided through narrow paths and led to spacious vistas because God delights in us. Deep in the layers of history, beneath the great upheavals of infidelity that reshape the landscape of our life with God, there abides a divine pleasure in the human creature. In the fullness of time this delight overflowed the bounds of worldly prudence and swept God into our very midst, one with us in suffering and hope. It is always in the gladsome company of this God that our discernment occurs.

—John S. Mogabgab²

O God, by whom the meek are guided in judgment, and light riseth up in darkness for the godly: Grant us, in all our doubts and uncertainties, the grace to ask what thou wouldest have us to do, that the Spirit of wisdom may save us from all false choices, and that in thy light we may see light, and in thy straight path may not stumble; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

—The Book of Common Prayer

Watching and waiting have been observed by the church from the most ancient times down to the present. The purpose of vigil, the purpose of watching, is to bring us to reconciliation with God and with all creation, allowing us to be ready for the coming of Christ. Daily contact with the word of God guides us in keeping watch. With openness of heart, with obedience to the deepest call of God in our spirit, we listen to what God is saying to us, through others and through the church, about how to be born and brought back to the fullness of the image of God.

—Timothy Kelly³

In his gentle way Jesus comes into the company of two walking to Emmaus. He presumes nothing, but simply joins them since safety in numbers was common for travelers. When occasion presents itself, Jesus shares his good news. At village edge, he hints at going on but accepts their offer of hospitality. Luke gives no indication that Jesus is yet recognized (see Luke 24:13–35).

The economy of details leaves a lot of the story to our imagining. We depend on studying translations and commentaries for details. J. B. Phillips translates the key event by giving this

emphasis in verse 31: “Then it happened!” When Jesus was at table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and handed it to them. In that most common of daily privileges—breaking bread—their eyes were opened.

Whatever the reason for their recognizing that Emmaus moment, Jesus became present. Then they understood why it had been like fire burning within them as he had explained the Scriptures to them.

—Robert K. Smyth⁴

Week 2: A Broken World

Prayer of Invitation

Tender shepherd, make your way and yourself known to me in this time of prayer and praise. Bring healing to the brokenness in my life and help me to be an answer to another's prayer for healing, mending, and reconciliation. In the Spirit of Jesus. Amen.

Hymn of Praise

“Holy, Holy, Holy”

Scripture Reading

Sunday — Genesis 28:10–22, God appears to Jacob in a dream

Monday — Genesis 32:22–32, God wrestles with Jacob

Tuesday — Genesis 41:1–40, God selects Joseph to interpret Pharaoh's dreams

Wednesday — Genesis 50:15–21, God protects Joseph from his
jealous brothers

Thursday — Exodus 3:1–15, God appears to Moses in a
burning bush

Friday — Exodus 5:22–6:12, God promises deliverance for his
people

Saturday — Exodus 20:1–17, God provides the Ten
Commandments

Reflection and Response

Sacred Reading

Reflection and Response

Prayer

Thanksgiving for God's lovingkindness and petitions for:

Those who suffer: the addicted, homeless, poor, hungry,
imprisoned, sick, despairing, sorrowing, and dying.

Those who work with the suffering: social workers, doctors, nurses,
counselors, chaplains, pastors, and volunteer workers.

The broken places in our community.

Faithful congregations and individuals who reach out to bring
healing and hope to the brokenness of our world;

My own life and witness as a follower of Jesus.

The Lord's Prayer

Closing Prayer of Consecration

Crucified One, we bind our lives once more to you with all of the faith and commitment we have to offer. We ask you to hold us close to yourself throughout this day and to lead us in faithfulness all day long. Show us your will and help us to walk in it. We offer our prayers and our lives in the name of Jesus. Amen.

READINGS FOR REFLECTION



Discernment in a Broken World

We live in a broken world. Even a casual survey of last week's headlines is enough to convince us of the fractured nature of our human family. The pain that many of our sisters and brothers bear seems almost unbearable. We want to reach out and help, but the need is so enormous that we find it easier to shut out the cries for help that come from every point of the compass, lest we ourselves be overcome with the burden of it all.

We need not look to the other side of the world or country or even the other side of our town to find signs of brokenness. Careful self-examination reveals the fractures deep in our own lives. These wounds, old and new, also cry out for healing.

The cries of the broken world are all around us and within us. How can these cries be heard as the voice of God? How can

the world's brokenness be a sign of God's vision for a new heaven and a new earth?

Those who have gone before us along the pathway of discernment, seeking only God's will and way, remind us that *dissatisfaction with things as they are* is one essential element in discovering God's will. When we are settled and very comfortable, it is hard to listen for and respond to God's voice calling us to move out, over, up, beyond, or even to new ministry where we are.

The pain of our world is almost beyond our ability to bear. Because it is, we find ourselves more willing to face the possibility for radical and rapid change of things the way they are for things as they can be when God's reign is fully come. Dissatisfaction with things as they are is one of the ways that we invite the coming of God's reign in our midst.

A second characteristic of those who are able to discern God's will is *a passion for God's will*. Along with dissatisfaction with things as they are is the yearning for what can be. The vision of the reign of God is not yet complete. The vision is not altogether clear, but we believe that the One who is the truth and who promised to give us the truth will make God's vision known to each of us and to all of us together as we seek to listen and then respond in faithfulness. As followers of Jesus Christ we are all pilgrims on a journey toward God. To turn away from seeking this shared vision is to turn away from Christ.

Another quality of the person or community that is able to hear God's voice and to see God's vision is *the capacity to remain open to God*. To read the Scriptures, to listen to the cries of the world, including our own hearts, to immerse ourselves in prayer,

and to act quickly when we sense God calling us to some simple or profound witness or service. Discerning God's vision for a denomination, congregation, organization, family, or solitary life is not a simple or easy endeavor. The One who promised never to leave us also promises to assist us, and therein is our hope.

—Rueben P. Job

Guide me, O thou great Jehovah, pilgrim through this
barren land.

I am weak, but thou art mighty; hold me with thy
powerful hand.

Bread of heaven, bread of heaven, feed me til I want
no more;

Feed me til I want no more.

—William Williams, "Guide Me, O Thou
Great Jehovah," 1745 (public domain)

There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole;
There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.
Sometimes I feel discouraged, and think my works
in vain.

But then the Holy Spirit revives my soul again.
There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole;
There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.
Don't ever feel discouraged, for Jesus is your friend,
And if you look for knowledge he'll ne'er refuse
to lend.

There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole;

There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.
If you can't preach like Peter, if you can't pray like Paul,
Just tell the love of Jesus, and say he died for all.
There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole;
There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sin-sick soul.
—“There Is a Balm in Gilead,” an African-American
spiritual based on Jer. 8:22 (public domain)

Down in the human heart, crushed by the tempter,
Feelings lie buried that grace can restore;
Touched by a loving heart, wakened by kindness,
Chords that were broken will vibrate once more.
Rescue the perishing, care for the dying;
Jesus is merciful, Jesus will save.

—Fanny J. Crosby, “Rescue the
Perishing,” 1869 (public domain)

Christ has no body now on earth but yours; yours are the
only hands with which he can do his work, yours are the only feet
with which he can go about the world. Yours are the only eyes
through which his compassion can shine forth upon a troubled
world. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

—Teresa of Avila (1515–1582)

Week 3: A Broken Body

Prayer of Invitation

God of healing and wholeness, I invite your presence into the midst of my own incompleteness. Show clearly the reality of my brokenness and lead me now and always into your way of healing and wholeness. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

Hymn of Praise

“Be Thou My Vision”

Scripture Reading

Sunday — Numbers 22:21–41, God speaks through
Balaam’s donkey

Monday — Joshua 1:1–18, God selects Joshua as leader to
succeed Moses

Tuesday — Joshua 3:1–17, God parts the waters of the Jordan

Wednesday — Ruth 4:1–22, God provides a guardian-redeemer

Thursday — 1 Samuel 3:1–21, God calls Samuel

Friday — 1 Samuel 16:8–13; 17:1–58, God calls and
empowers David

Saturday — 1 Kings 3:1–15, God gives Solomon wisdom
and discernment

Reflection and Response

Sacred Reading

Reflection and Response

Prayer

Thanksgiving for God's redeeming and healing presence.
Petitions for the following:

For all denominations and especially for the denomination where
God has called me to live out my discipleship.

For the congregations, members, pastors, and all volunteer workers;

For boards and agencies, colleges and seminaries, hospitals, care
centers, and all ministries that offer the healing love and justice
of the risen Savior;

For my congregation and for burning desire to know God's will and
for desire and faith to follow God's will alone.

The Lord's Prayer

Closing Prayer of Consecration

*Tender shepherd, we offer to you all that we are, aware of our
incompleteness, and ask for your healing presence in our lives
and in the life of this congregation and of every congregation.
We are ready to take the next step toward completeness. Show
us the way. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.*

READINGS FOR REFLECTION



Discernment in a Broken Body

The church is not perfect. Sometimes we wish it were. Sometimes we even think it is. There are those moments of Christ in action through the church that move us to joyous thanksgiving. There are also those moments that painfully remind us that the church is made up of persons like ourselves. We are the body of Christ, the church. And we are persons who are a mixture of motives, hopes, faith, fears, anxiety, and who have been shaped by family, culture, education, and the church itself. And we carry all of who we are into the church. So it should not be surprising to us that the body of Christ is broken and fractured. The conflicts, halting discipleship, fragile faith, timid witness, and qualified commitment are a natural outgrowth of who we are as individual Christians.

While we may look at the church in its various expressions with joy at times and dismay at others, we must remember that new life is possible. Transformation can begin today. Resurrection power is available to us and can be invested in the church this very moment. With God's help we can initiate change this very day!

This is true because our first line of defense against further brokenness is within each of us. My efforts to stop the brokenness and to take the first step to reform and transform the church must begin with me. My prayer for a holy church marked by righteousness and love can be answered only as I yield my life to the way of Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit. The transformation begins with me. What a liberating thought! I am not

powerless and without options. With God's help I can surrender my life to the transforming, life-giving power of the Holy Spirit and in that very moment begin the journey toward the wholeness and faithfulness I want to see in the church.

Discernment for the Christian community begins with the individual Christian. Do I want to know God and God's will more than anything else? This question is the entryway into discernment. And it can be answered with affirmation only by those who love God and have learned to trust God. If we have any higher priority in our search for God's guidance, we will not be able to trust our discernment. I must spend enough time in prayer and faithful listening to the voice of God to be brought to that moment of trust and surrender when I can give up my preconceived ideas and become open to God's idea. My first concern is not my desired result. My first concern is always God and the fidelity of our relationship, and then the result of my discernment efforts will come quite naturally. We know that God is completely faithful, and we must be alert, prayerful, open, and ready to respond in obedience if we are to be led toward greater faithfulness on our part.

Obedience is the next essential step in seeking God's will. The word obedience has a bad reputation in our time but a very positive record in humankind's relationship with God. Those who were ready to follow God's direction received the guidance needed. The biblical record suggests God's desire to lead a faithful people. And yet it seems that God is reluctant to make clear the road to faithfulness to those who are not willing to walk along that road. Many who have gone before us have declared that we

cannot know God's will unless we commit our way to that will, even before we ask for clarity on what that will is for us.

Can Christians know God's will? Can the church know God's will? Can our congregation know God's will? Nearly two thousand years of experience shout a resounding yes! But it will not be easy to know God's will because such knowledge begins with us. We first must offer our lives to God in all of the completeness we can bring and then listen in all the ways we know for the voice of the One who alone can transform our lives, our congregations, our denomination, the entire body of Christ, and even the world. As we listen, hear, and respond, we will discover transformation occurring within and around us, and perhaps even to our surprise, we will begin to see clearly God's will. May it be so!

—Rueben P. Job

Thanks be to thee, O Lord Jesus Christ, for all the benefits which thou hast given us; for all the pains and insults which thou hast borne for us O most merciful Redeemer, friend, and brother, may we know thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, and follow thee more nearly, for thine own sake. Amen.

—Richard of Chichester, 13th century

Read 1 Samuel 17:19–23, 32–49.

The army of Israel stood in despondent fear before the might of Goliath. The saying goes that it is darkest before the dawn. That is often the time when, at the end of our rope, God's deliverance surprises us. And what an unlikely source provided God's

deliverance for Israel—a lad, a keeper of sheep. Young David faced Goliath with fuzz still on his cheeks and an innocent trust in God in his heart. Hearing the taunting of Goliath, he offers himself as Israel’s champion. At first Saul rejects the offer as ridiculous. Then he listens and finally agrees. Perhaps something in the lad’s passion, in his confidence in God, won Saul’s consent.

So David goes to face the giant. He has no heavy armor, no great spear—only a sling and five smooth stones from the brook. The giant roars in disbelieving laughter, as David’s sling begins to circle. Then the Philistine champion falls, and the rest is history.

—Ron James⁵

The discerning community of faith is undergoing God. God beckons. God draws forth. And as the community responds, even haltingly, God sustains. God permeates. God shapes. All this comes of God at once.

Such undergoing, as I have seen it, dawns where there is a gentle and graced willingness at the heart of the community of faith. This willingness is not wrapped in the expectations of instant change. It is not encased in tight mechanisms of control that would force a community in some direction already selected by its leaders. The willingness arises utterly unadorned. It is a modest, “Here we are.” It is a “Let it be with us according to your will.” It is a deep “Yes” to the new patterns of prayer, attentiveness, and communal understanding that emerge.

And the “Yes” to undergoing God invariably gives rise to patterns of living where love becomes incarnate. The changes are fresh and deep. A community of faith that consciously discerns

the fresh beckonings of God is also a community that undergoes God.

—Stephen V. Doughty⁶

Direct us, O Lord, in all our doings with thy most gracious favor, and further us with thy continual help; that in all our works begun, continued, and ended in thee, we may glorify thy holy name, and finally by thy mercy, obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

—The Book of Common Prayer

Week 4: God Made Visible

Prayer of Invitation

God made known in the face of Jesus, come and reveal yourself to me in this time of prayer and reflection. Help me to come before you in openness so that I may receive you more fully into my life and to receive your guidance in all that I do and am. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Hymn of Praise

“Praise to the Lord, the Almighty”

Scripture Reading

Sunday — Psalm 1, God watches over the righteous

Monday — Psalm 16, God makes known the path of life

Tuesday — Psalm 23, God is our Shepherd

Wednesday — Psalm 42, God is our Rock

Thursday — Psalm 51, God forgives and restores

Friday — Psalm 62, God offers rest for our soul

Saturday — Psalm 103, God is compassionate and gracious

Reflection and Response

Sacred Reading

Reflection and Response

Prayer

Thanksgiving for God's presence and guidance in your life and in the church. Petitions for:

Leaders and all who join you in seeking only God's will;

All who this day face decisions that must be made;

The suffering and dying;

Those who long for the new life that only God can bring.

The Lord's Prayer

Closing Prayer of Consecration

Living and present God, we thank and praise you for your presence with us in all of the experiences of life. We seek your guidance in every decision of life, and even as we ask for your help, we offer our lives to you anew and ask you to do with us what you will. Our promise to you today is to follow wherever you may lead us. We are yours. Amen.

READINGS FOR REFLECTION



Hearing God's Voice: Seeing God's Way

We do not see God up close, face to face every day. Or do we? Could it be that God is with us at all times, seeking to be our guide and companion as well as our Lord and Savior? Our Scripture readings for the week suggest that the answer is yes. We are never outside the care and loving gaze of God, and we can learn how to live more fully in the awareness of and surrender to that presence. To do so is to open ourselves to guidance and direction in all of life.

You have been given responsibility for decision-making. It is a large responsibility, and the issues are complex and seldom clearly one way or the other. Even when we have gathered all the facts and looked at and listened to all the evidence, the answer may still be unclear. We bring our best thoughts and all of our previous experiences to the decision-making process, and still we find that prejudice, half-truths, insufficient evidence, and lack of wisdom leave us uncertain about God's way in the matter.

At times like this we long for the assurance of God's presence with us. We yearn to ask Jesus, who always reflected God's will, what our decision should be, what really is God's will in this matter. We would seek to know how we can discern that our decisions are not our own, not where the popular opinion is, not what is easy or cheap, not even what will please the most persons or defeat someone we don't like. Rather, one might ask, "What is God's will? What does God desire around this concern I have? What

decision would I make if I were to block out all other interests and seek to please only God?"

To ask these primary questions is to begin to open ourselves to God's guidance and gradually to lower the volume of all the other competing voices that seek to influence our decision-making. It is to place ourselves in a position where we can receive God's guidance in our personal and corporate decision-making process.

Competing voices are always around us, and some of them loudly proclaim that they are hearing or have heard the voice of God, and consequently we should follow them. How to decide which voice to listen to is an essential step to discerning God's will. In other words, which voice are we to follow? Faithful Christians want to follow the way of and do the will of the God made known through Jesus Christ, the Scriptures, our own experiences, and the experiences of those faithful persons who have gone before us. In other words, preparation for decision-making began a long time ago, and we can bring the experience of a long-time companionship with God to our decision-making.

Added to our experience of walking with Jesus and daily seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit is our listening to the Scriptures for God's voice addressing us in our daily reading and reflection. We can place ourselves under the Scriptures, and let them address us rather than placing ourselves over the Scriptures, seeking to use them to fortify our own position. Our time of prayer can become a time of listening for an answer to a simple petition of "show me your way." As a matter of fact, those who seek to walk with God in the world are always praying "show me

your way” and face every event of their lives with the question, “What is God saying to me though this experience?”

The Gospels and book of Acts give a glimpse of the dependence upon God for guidance that marked every decision the early church was called upon to make. The promise to the individual Christian and to the church has always been that wisdom and guidance were available for the asking to those who sought only God’s will. We have nearly two thousand years of testimony declaring that such an earnest request will be heard and answered. Therefore, you may ask for guidance with assurance and respond with confidence as God guides your decision-making.

—Rueben P. Job

Grant me, O Lord, to know what I ought to know, to love what I ought to love, to praise what delights you most, to value what is precious in your sight, to hate what is offensive to you. Do not allow me to judge according to the sight of my eyes, nor to pass sentence according to the hearing of my ears; but to discern with a true judgment between things visible and spiritual, and above all things, always to inquire what is the good pleasure of your will.

—Thomas à Kempis

Discernment is like the turning of the sunflower to the sun, or the intuitive hunch of the scientist seeking new and creative solutions for unexplainable, contradictory observations, or the restless seeking of a heart longing to find its way home to an estranged lover, or the artistry of the musician, sculptor, or

choreographer delineating in sound, stone, or the human body the emergent, self-propellant, rightful line that says “yes.”

Discernment is about feeling texture, assessing weight, watching the plumb line, listening for overtones, feeling the quickening, surrendering to love. It’s being grasped in the Spirit’s arms and led in the rhythms of an unknown dance.

—Wendy M. Wright⁷

God be in my head
and in my understanding;
God be in my eyes and in my looking;
God be in my mouth and in my speaking;
God be in my heart and in my thinking;
God be at my end and at my departing.

—Sarum Primer (1514)

I have certainly had those times in my life when I wanted to make sure God heard me clearly—the times when I was in some crisis, had a loved one very ill, or cared deeply about something. I tried to figure out some way to let God know these requests were especially urgent.

Yet as a parent, I want to listen carefully to all the joys, concerns, feelings, and requests of my own children in whatever state they are. Surely God is even more attentive than I as a human parent am able to be (though, of course, God has many more children than I). Perhaps the real issue here is my ability to trust that God hears and responds appropriately. Sometimes what I need is

simply a chance to pull out feelings and thoughts and to look at them in God's presence.

—Susan Ruach⁸

Week 5: A Time of Hope

Prayer of Invitation

Loving teacher, come and make your home in my heart this day and always. Dwell within me to save me from error and foolish ways. Teach me how to avoid doing harm this day and how to be an answer to another's prayer and help me today to be one of your signs of hope in the world. Stay with me always I pray, in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Hymn of Praise

“A Mighty Fortress is Our God”

Scripture Reading

Sunday — Psalm 121, God watches over you

Monday — Psalm 139, God knows and loves his own

Tuesday — Ecclesiastes 3:1–22, God makes everything beautiful

Wednesday — Isaiah 6:1–13, God commissions Isaiah

Thursday — Jeremiah 1:4–19, God calls Jeremiah

Friday — Ezekiel 37:1–14, God brings dry bones to life

Saturday — Daniel 3:19–30, God protects his own in a fiery furnace

Reflection and Response

Sacred Reading

Reflection and Response

Prayer

Thanksgiving for the signs of hope in the world and in the church. Petitions for:

All leaders, especially those who seek to follow the path of
righteousness, justice, and love;

Persons in all walks of life, young and old, in every part of the world
who seek to be obedient to the vision of God's reign and the
unity of all humankind.

Those in this congregation who seek only God's will in all the
decisions we must make.

The Lord's Prayer

Closing Prayer of Consecration

*Gracious guide and giver of life and hope, I give you thanks
for your steadfast love that has sustained me from before my
birth and has brought me to this moment. I offer my life to you
this day and invite you to guide, direct, and uphold me all day
long. In the name of Jesus. Amen.*

READINGS FOR REFLECTION



A Time of Hope

Hope has always been a dominant quality in the life of the Christian community. From the time of the resurrection of Jesus until today, individual Christians and the Christian community have been full of hope. In the face of fierce opposition and persecution, followers of Jesus never lost hope. Even when failure interrupted their journey, hope was the undercurrent that swept them to repentance, forgiveness, and companionship with the living Lord once more.

The source of this resolute hope was never found in the surroundings or how things were going for the church. Rather, hope was found in God and the assurance that God was at work in the church and in the world. The disciples felt a calm confidence that God's work and will would ultimately be completed and fulfilled. And they were assured that every Christian was invited into a partnership with God that moved toward the fulfillment of God's grand design for all creation. Such assurance is fertile ground in which the seeds of hope can flourish and bear the fruit of faithful living.

This week's readings give evidence of God's active presence within the Christian community. The church is seen as the body of Christ in the world, and individual Christians are seen as essential members of Christ's body in the world. God is described as a near and present partner in all of life's experiences.

At times the near and present partner was rejected, and the

church became the crucified body of Christ all over again. There were times in the past and may be times for each of us when we think it too risky to be in partnership with God. We don't want to be the body of Christ. We don't want to be too close to Jesus. Sometimes we are just too shy, and sometimes we are reluctant to ask God to enter our decision-making because we already know that our will must be surrendered to God's will. When we strongly hold a position that we think may not be God's will, we find difficulty asking God to enter our lives.

At times we may be like the child who wrote a letter to Jesus saying, "Please come to our house, we need you." Yet at other times we are not so sure we want to expose our motives, our desires, our wishes, and even our acts to the loving scrutiny of God. We quickly forget that God already knows and, even now, waits for our invitation to join with us in the work of personal and social transformation that leads to righteousness—righteousness that is a sign of God's reign and a sign of hope.

To remember that God's will shall be accomplished completely and that we are invited to be a part of the fulfillment of that will gives a new perspective to life. We lose some of our fear of the risk of seeking and doing God's will. We know that sometimes doing God's will does get us into trouble, and at other times it saves us from trouble. Most of all we know that, when we seek to know and do God's will, we have set our feet upon a pathway of companionship, joy, and fulfillment. Our journey becomes one that holds challenge, excitement, meaning, assurance, and deep peace. Our journey gets richer day by day and will never end. Our journey begins in this life and continues into the next. Our

journey is made possible by the One who walks with all those who are faithful.

A Christian or a Christian community eagerly and sincerely seeking God's companionship and direction is a wonderful sign of hope. With God's help and our desire, we can be that sign of hope to others today.

—Rueben P. Job

Some years ago a friend decided to take photography lessons. After several inquiries, she learned of a highly regarded teacher who was about to start a new class. Without hesitation, she signed up. . . .

One day toward the conclusion of the course, I asked my friend what special tricks she had learned about lighting, filters, and printing. Much to my surprise, she replied that she had learned nothing about such things. Indeed, her teacher had spent no time on technical subjects. . . . The most important thing . . . was teaching his students to develop an eye for the picture. . . . Unless they learned to develop this "eye," no level of technical sophistication would make them good photographers.

Developing an eye for the "picture" calls us daily to accept the invitation offered by a gracious, surprising God: "I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" (Isaiah 43:19).

—John S. Mogabgab⁹

My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus's blood and
righteousness.

I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on
Jesus's name.

On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is
sinking sand;
all other ground is sinking sand.

—Edward Mote, “My Hope Is Built on
Nothing Less,” 1834 (public domain)

Read Psalm 139:7–12.

What a blessing it is to know that the discerning of God's presence is not left simply to our own ability to find God. I am painfully aware of moments in my own life when I felt that God was absent and nowhere to be found. But always there has been a creature of God's handiwork who has helped me in my times of disbelief, bringing God close to me. I recall . . . a bright sunlit morning that broke through the shadows of death with God's love, and a cool dusk that helped me to know God's presence. Sisters and brothers, sometimes unbeknownst to them, have also at important moments provided just the right word of expression of care to affirm God's presence in my life. Yes! In all things, in all places and spaces under God's creation, God is present!

—Minerva G. Carcano¹⁰

Read Acts 4:32–35 and Psalm 133.

The risen Christ is never just for us to receive; we must also do our part by sharing with others out of the foundation of that experience. . . .

The internal component that motivated the sharing of

property was the sharing of themselves. When individuals gather with their identities based on individual achievements and possessions, the result is people hiding their needs or pretending to be something they are not. When a community gathers with its identity found in the well-being of the entire group, then people are more willing to share themselves, to be vulnerable, and to express their needs.

Christian communities are drawn together in the experience of the risen Christ. The risen Christ unites us heart and soul, enabling us to overcome our isolation as individuals and become the people of God.

—Phyllis R. Pleasants¹¹

Week 6: A Living Companionship

Prayer of Invitation

God of all wisdom and truth, come to fill my life with your presence. Dispel the dark clouds of doubt and depression, reveal and remove that which is false from my life, help me to cast out all other gods and to live in loving companionship with you this day and always. Amen.

Hymn of Praise

“Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart”

Scripture Reading

Sunday — Luke 1:5–25, 67–79, God speaks to Zechariah

Monday — Luke 1:26–38, 46–55, God speaks to Mary

Tuesday — Matthew 1:18–25, God appears to Joseph in
a dream

Wednesday — Luke 2:1–22, Jesus the Messiah is born

Thursday — Luke 4:13–22, 38–44, Jesus proclaims and fulfills
his mission

Friday — Luke 11:1–13, Jesus teaches on prayer

Saturday — Luke 24:13–35, Jesus appears to his disciples

Reflection and Response

Sacred Reading

Reflection and Response

Prayer

Thanksgiving for God's leadership during all of life and especially during these past weeks of more intense efforts of discernment.

Petitions for:

All who seek the light of Christ for their darkness;

All who suffer the evils of addiction, oppression, and injustice;

All who are this day making decisions, especially the leaders of the
church and the world who this day seek your will;

All who suffer and those who are dying, that none will suffer or
die alone;

All who seek to live out their prayers and live into a closer walk
with God.

The Lord's Prayer

Closing Prayer of Consecration

Holy Spirit, guide and comforter of all who turn to you for help, thank you for your sustaining presence in the life of the church and in my own life. I offer my life once more to your direction this day. Lead me wherever you will and sustain me wherever you lead me. Grant to me the necessary strength to walk in faithfulness and to live in company with you all day long. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

READINGS FOR REFLECTION



A Living Companionship

Discernment at its best is the consequence of a daily and lifetime walk with God. A lifetime of such companionship produces profound results that range from guidance in decision-making to transformation of one's life. Living a life of discernment, then, is a simple process of staying attentive to and open to God in all of the active and contemplative times of our lives.

Practicing preference for God has always been the first commandment and the first step toward faithful living. From this stance we seek God and God's companionship first. And as we do so, we will learn how to surrender our will to God's will. We will learn that God's presence and direction can be trusted. From this vantage point we learn that God's will is good and to be

desired. When these truths begin to become a part of our very lives, discernment becomes a natural consequence of our daily walk with God.

When our preference is for God and God's will alone, we can begin to see the possibility of "indifference" in our own decision-making. "Indifference" is the Ignatian term for the capacity to be free from prior commitments, to be genuinely open to God's will and God's leadership. This kind of freedom, essential to discernment and faithfulness, is very hard to discover in our own lives. We bring so many preconceived ideas and so many strongly held prejudices that must be removed before we can be open to receive some new word or direction from God. To further complicate our movement toward indifference is the constant bombardment of other views. Some are well intentioned, believed to be God's will by those who promote them. Others may have fallen into the unhealthy and unholy world of political power plays that result in winners and losers.

Therefore, to have a way of living with God that serves to remind us again and again who we are and who God is in our lives is important. Such a rhythm of life will include time and space for listening to the Word, periods of deep and intimate prayer, a sensitive listening to the cries of God's people, and an action cycle that leads to reconciling, healing, and saving deeds. This kind of living becomes an answer to our prayers.

Another reason a lifetime of companionship with the living God is the way to discernment is the time that it takes to develop relationships of trust. Time is necessary for such a relationship with God to develop and mature. We learn by practicing this life

of companionship just as we learn how to seek and receive God's direction in all things. When small and seemingly insignificant decisions flow out of this companionship, we will find it natural for us to practice discernment and obedience to God's direction in the major decisions for our lives. "Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much" (Luke 16:10).

We know from experience that those who live together for long periods of time begin to think and act alike. Workers on an assembly line, team members of highly trained sports teams, or work teams with complex assignments often can anticipate the thoughts and actions of one another. We even learn to "read" our children, spouse, or siblings and know what they will do in any given situation. When we live with God in daily companionship and declare our first preference for God and God's will, we develop our natural capacity to know, live with, and follow God in all of life. Out of this kind of companionship true discernment arises most easily.

I suspect that your life, as mine, may not yet be at this ideal place of discernment. We may find lapses in our "indifference" and see our own will or that of another displace God as central in our lives. When we become aware of such lapses, we should not scold ourselves or give up on the concept of companionship with the living God. Rather, we must return once again to God, ask for help to walk faithfully, and go on confident that God understands our weakness, is pleased with our desire for companionship, and will offer assistance equal to our need.

Each of us has the capacity to discern God's will. The capacity

to do God's will is developed as we practice a way of living that keeps us in companionship with God and faithful to God's direction in our daily lives. Gradually we learn to hear, see, and know God's direction more and more until our individual and corporate decision-making flows out of our companionship with and clear preference for God.

—Rueben P. Job

But when he leaves their sight, they wonder together why they had not recognized him earlier. "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road?" (Luke 24:32).

As we study closely the [Emmaus Road] account, we see clearly delineated the nature of the fire that burned in their hearts. Peace was spoken in their midst. Authentic clarity was given. Redemptive meaning was given to pain. Fear was healed, and joy was released and increased. Empowerment from God was promised rather than demands for their will power. Above all, the whole encounter was drenched with the spirit of tenderness, the burning love which is released from fear. And this is the supreme sign, the authentic, unmistakable presence of the Spirit we call Holy.

—Flora S. Wuellner¹²

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God. . . .

If we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. . . .

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment. . . .

We love because he first loved us.

1 John 4:7, 12–13, 18–19

Spiritual discernment asks us to pay attention. We need to attend to both what goes on around us and within us. Ideally, this attentiveness goes on much of the time, a sort of low level, constant spiritual sifting of the data of our experience. But there are times when discernment becomes much more focused, when a crossroad is reached or a choice called for. At times like these the cumulative wisdom of tradition tells us to pay attention on many levels: to consult Scripture, to seek the advice of trusted advisors, to heed the collective sense of the faithful, to read widely and deeply the best ancient and contemporary thinking, to pray, to attend to the prick of conscience and to the yearnings and dreamings of our hearts, to watch, to wait, to listen.

—Wendy M. Wright¹³

O Master, let me walk with thee in lowly paths of
service free;
tell me thy secret;
help me to bear the strain of toil, the fret of care.
Teach me thy patience, still with thee in closer, dearer
company,
in work that keeps faith sweet and strong, in trust that
triumphs over wrong.

In hope that sends a shining ray far down the future's
broadening way,
in peace that only thou canst give, with thee,
O Master, let me live.
—Washington Gladden, “O Master, Let Me
Walk with Thee,” 1879 (public domain)

A Liturgy for a Prayer or Covenant Group Meeting

Optional: for group use during the forty-day window or at the conclusion of a specified discernment season, as a way of living out collective discernment as an ongoing priority. Sharing in prayerful attentiveness with members of your team, ministry, community, or congregation enhances the practicing of a preference for God for all.

Prayer of Invitation

God of all holiness and love, we invite your presence into our lives and into our gathering. Knit us together in mind and heart and lead us in faithfulness always. We pray in the strong name of Jesus. Amen.

Hymn or Chorus

“Amazing Grace” and “Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us” or
other selected song(s)

Scripture Reading

Choose from one or more of these Scriptures, or take time reading all of them together. They complete the readings through the Old and New Testament that were read throughout your forty days of prayerful reflection. Reading all or portions of the following passages bring to completion a summary of the whole counsel of God as we notice the Lord initiating lovingly toward his beloved disciples.

John 13:1–17, Jesus washes the feet of his disciples

John 17, Jesus prays for his disciples

John 19:17–30, Jesus dies for his disciples

John 20, Jesus is raised from the dead and appears to his disciples

Acts 2:1–47, God's Spirit comes at Pentecost

Acts 9:1–19, God converts Saul

Revelation 1:4–20, God gives John a vision

Silent Reflection

A time of silent reflection on the selection of the day. What is God saying to me/to us through this passage? What does this text prompt me/us to pray for? What does this text prompt me/us to do?

Mutual Sharing of Insights and Promptings

Make certain every person has an opportunity to share his or her individual insight. What common themes or promptings arise? Are there insights we should explore further? What action is suggested? What are the directions for prayer?

Mutual Sharing of Concerns and Joys

All of us carry joys and burdens. To share our joys is to multiply them. To share our concerns is to divide them as together we bear one another's burdens. My joy today is . . . My concern today is . . .

A Time of Mutual Prayer

This time of prayer may include confession, petition, offering, and thanksgiving.

Silent prayer.

Spoken prayer.

The Lord's Prayer.

Next Steps

What steps are we being led to take?

Prayer of Covenant

Loving God, who keeps covenant with us, we offer ourselves anew to you in this hour. Do with us what you will, lead us where you will, send us to the task you will, and grant us grace to follow you more faithfully every day. In the Name of Jesus. Amen.

Conclude or Remain in Fellowship

APPENDIX C

A Collection of the Fifty Biblical Reflections for Noticing God

Compiled by Stephen A. Macchia

Sunday — Genesis 1:1–31, God creates

Monday — Genesis 2:1–3, God rests

Tuesday — Genesis 2:4–25, God forms man and woman

Wednesday — Genesis 6:9–22, God calls Noah

Thursday — Genesis 12:1–9, God calls Abram

Friday — Genesis 18:1–15, God appears to Abraham and Sarah

Saturday — Genesis 22:1–18, God tests and blesses Abraham

Sunday — Genesis 28:10–22, God appears to Jacob in a dream

Monday — Genesis 32:22–32, God wrestles with Jacob

Tuesday — Genesis 41:1–40, God selects Joseph to interpret
Pharaoh's dreams

Wednesday — Genesis 50:15–21, God protects Joseph from his
jealous brothers

Thursday — Exodus 3:1–15, God appears to Moses in a
burning bush

Friday — Exodus 5:22–6:12, God promises deliverance for
his people

Saturday — Exodus 20:1–17, God provides the Ten
Commandments

Sunday — Numbers 22:21–41, God speaks through
Balaam's donkey

Monday — Joshua 1:1–18, God selects Joshua as leader to
succeed Moses

Tuesday — Joshua 3:1–17, God parts the waters of the Jordan

Wednesday — Ruth 4:1–22, God provides a guardian-redeemer

Thursday — 1 Samuel 3:1–21, God calls Samuel

Friday — 1 Samuel 16:8–13; 17:1–58, God calls and
empowers David

Saturday — 1 Kings 3:1–15, God gives Solomon wisdom
and discernment

Sunday — Psalm 1, God watches over the righteous

Monday — Psalm 16, God makes known the path of life

Tuesday — Psalm 23, God is our Shepherd

Wednesday — Psalm 42, God is our Rock

Thursday — Psalm 51, God forgives and restores

Friday — Psalm 62, God offers rest for our soul

Saturday — Psalm 103, God is compassionate and gracious

Monday — Psalm 139, God knows and loves his own

Tuesday — Ecclesiastes 3:1–22, God makes
everything beautiful

Wednesday — Isaiah 6:1–13, God commissions Isaiah

Thursday — Jeremiah 1:4–19, God calls Jeremiah

Friday — Ezekiel 37:1–14, God brings dry bones to life

Saturday — Daniel 3:19–30, God protects his own in a
fiery furnace

Sunday — Luke 1:5–25, 67–79, God speaks to Zechariah

Monday — Luke 1:26–38, 46–55, God speaks to Mary

Tuesday — Matthew 1:18–25, God appears to Joseph in
a dream

Wednesday — Luke 2:1–22, Jesus the Messiah is born

Thursday — Luke 4:13–22, 38–44, Jesus proclaims and fulfills
his mission

Friday — Luke 11:1–13, Jesus teaches on prayer

Saturday — Luke 24:13–35, Jesus appears to his disciples

Sunday — John 13:1–17, Jesus washes the feet of his disciples

Monday — John 17, Jesus prays for his disciples

Tuesday — John 19:17–27, Jesus dies for his disciples

Wednesday — John 20, Jesus is raised from the dead and
appears to his disciples

Thursday — Acts 2:1–47, God's Spirit comes at Pentecost

Friday — Acts 9:1–19, God converts Saul

Saturday — Revelation 1:4–20, God gives John a vision

Notes

Introduction

1. Rueben P. Job, ed., *A Guide to Spiritual Discernment* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1996). This six-week guide to spiritual discernment has been used several times over the years by Leadership Transformations, Inc., whenever we are seeking to help leadership teams embrace the concept of spiritual discernment. With permission from Rueben's widow, Beverly, and the team at Upper Room Books, we have been granted permission to share this out-of-print material as an appendix to *The Discerning Life*. It is the author's hope that this material will be used by many teams seeking to understand spiritual discernment as a lifestyle and not simply during times of decision-making. Rueben's definition of discernment as "practicing a preference for God" is a guidepost for us throughout this text.

Chapter 1: What Is Spiritual Discernment?

1. Leadership Transformations, Inc., is the ministry founded in 2003 by Steve and Ruth Macchia. It started with a dream; God woke Steve up with words and phrases and a clear image for leaders and teams to engage in for personal and collective discernment. Discerning God's presence and calling led to the founding of LTI several months later. Today LTI is a national ministry focused on the spiritual formation, discernment, and renewal needs of leaders and teams. More information can be found on their ministry website, www.LeadershipTransformations.org.

2. Paul Anderson, project director, The George Fox University Congregational Discernment Project (Newberg, OR, 2009), from documents shared with the national team serving as part of the National Discernment Initiative. For more, see “Congregational Discernment Project,” George Fox University, <https://www.georgefox.edu/discernment/index.html>. As of the time of the publication of this book, this project is currently on hiatus.
3. Dan Graves, “John Wesley’s Heart Strangely Warmed,” Christianity .com, May 3, 2010, www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1701-1800/john-wesleys-heart-strangely-warmed-11630227.html. At Aldersgate, 8:45pm: “Someone read from Luther’s *Preface to the Epistle to Romans*. . . . While he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed.”
4. Evan B. Howard, “Christian Discernment,” in *Brazos Introduction to Christian Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008), 379–80, 397.

Chapter 3: Listening

1. As I write this story of “snowmageddon,” I’m aware of those who have lost their homes due to extreme hurricanes, massive wildfires, destructive tornadoes, and other natural disasters. Any form of destruction like this is disquieting and disrupting, and I certainly don’t want to equate my story with any of these tragedies. Our hearts can hardly fathom what it would be like to endure such hardship. Prayer becomes all the more important in these situations, for without God we simply cannot face the sufferings and sadness of life.

Chapter 6: Empathy

1. Since 1999 I have been researching and writing about the vitality of the local church, as recorded in my first book, *Becoming a Healthy Church: Ten Traits of a Vital Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999) and subsequently through Leadership Transformations’ online Church Health Assessment Tool (CHAT), which helps churches listen to one another as they discern God’s direction for their shared

life and ministry. For more information visit www.HealthyChurch.net.

2. Stephen A. Macchia, *Becoming a Healthy Team: Five Traits of Vital Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Baker/LTI, 2005) was written to help ministry teams work toward greater effectiveness together in service to others. In this book, and its accompanying handbook of noncompetitive exercises, teams are invited to consider the five key principles for their health: trust, empowerment, assimilation, management, and service (for which the acronym is TEAMS). In addition to the book, LTI also has an online Team Health Assessment Tool (THAT) available for leaders and teams.
3. Danny E. Morris and Charles M. Olsen, *Discerning God's Will Together: A Spiritual Practice for the Church* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1997), 56–63.

Chapter 7: Focus

1. David L. Fleming, *Draw Me into Your Friendship: A Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola* (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996), 138–45.
2. Leadership Transformations offers a myriad of services for leaders and teams who are seeking to shift toward the discerning life as individuals, teams, and communities. Become familiar with the resources made available to you and your team at www.LeadershipTransformations.org.

Chapter 8: Process

1. There are excellent resources available for those who want to learn more about how other Christian movements and denominations practice discernment. For more information about Benedictine discernment, consult “Belmont Abbey Discernment Guide,” Belmont Abbey.org, <https://belmontabbey.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Belmont-Abbey-Discernment-Guide.pdf>; for Augustinian discernment, see the article “2236 Spiritual

Discernment,” Augnet, www.augnet.org/en/works-of-augustine/his-spiritual-tradition/2236-spiritual-discernment/; for Franciscan discernment, see “Discernment,” Franciscan Friars: Province of Saint Barbara, <https://sbfranciscans.org/be-a-friar/discernment/>; for the Quaker’s Clearness Committee, see “Clearness Committees—What They Are and What They Do,” Friends General Conference (FGC), www.fgcquaker.org/resources/clearness-committees-what-they-are-and-what-they-do; for the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, see “Glossary: Wesleyan Quadrilateral, the,” The People of the United Methodist Church, May 26, 2015, www.umc.org/en/content/glossary-wesleyan-quadrilateral-the.

Chapter 9: Lifestyle

1. Stephen A. Macchia, *Crafting a Rule of Life: An Invitation to the Well-Ordered Way* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012). Written as an interactive workbook, this resource walks the reader through the process of articulating a personal rule of life.

Appendix B: Practicing a Preference for God

1. All of Rueben P. Job’s writings in appendix B are taken from the introduction to *A Guide to Spiritual Discernment* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1996), as well as the introductory article for each week of readings. Used here by permission.
2. John S. Mogabgab, “Editor’s Introduction,” *Weavings: A Journal of Christian Spiritual Formation* 10.6 (Nov/Dec 1995).
3. Timothy Kelly, “A Spirituality of Watch,” *Alive Now*, Nov/Dec 1994.
4. Robert K. Smyth, “Meditation for April 21,” in *The Upper Room Disciplines 1993* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1992).
5. Ron James, “Meditation for June 14,” in *The Upper Room Disciplines 1994* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1993).
6. Stephen V. Doughty, “Glimpsing Glimpses: A Quest for Communal Discernment,” *Weavings: A Journal of Christian Spiritual Formation* 10.6 (Nov/Dec 1995).
7. Wendy M. Wright, “Passing Angels: The Art of Spiritual

- Discernment," *Weavings: A Journal of Christian Spiritual Formation* 10.6 (Nov/Dec 1995).
8. Susan Ruach, "Meditation for May 7," in *The Upper Room Disciplines 1993* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1992).
 9. John S. Mogabgab, "Editor's Introduction," *Weavings: A Journal of Christian Spiritual Formation* 7.5 (Sept/Oct 1992).
 10. Minerva G. Carcano, "Meditation for July 14," in *The Upper Room Disciplines 1993* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1992).
 11. Phyllis R. Pleasants, "Meditation for April 5," in *The Upper Room Disciplines 1991* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1990).
 12. Flora S. Wuellner, "Were Not Our Hearts Burning within Us?," *Weavings: A Journal of Christian Spiritual Formation* 10.6 (Nov/Dec 1995).
 13. Wright, "Passing Angels."