

The Initiatives of Heaven

by John Edmiston

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The phrase 'the initiatives of Heaven' is one I have borrowed from Dennis Walker of Dunamis ARC ministry in Las Vegas Nevada. It is a way of describing the reality that spiritual ministry proceeds from the heavenly realms and is 100% God's initiative not ours. Our task is to cooperate with God in the work of the ministry.

Almost by definition, God takes the initiative in spiritual ministry. The Holy Spirit is in charge before, during, and after the ministry session. It is not up to us to make the plans or to take the initiative. It is up to us to wait on God in prayer to see what He wants us to do – then move forward in obedience to that prompting. We see this principle operating in Paul's ministry in Acts 16:

Acts 16:6-10 MKJV *And coming through the Phrygian and the Galatian region; and by the Holy Spirit being forbidden to speak the Word in Asia; (7) having come to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia. But the Spirit did not allow them. (8) Then passing by Mysia, they came down into Troas. (9) And a vision appeared to Paul in the night. A certain man of Macedonia stood, begging him, saying, Come over into Macedonia and help us! (10) And after he saw the vision, we immediately tried to go into Macedonia, gathering that the Lord had called us in order to preach the gospel to them.*

The Holy Spirit stopped them ministering in Asia at that point (they would do so later on) and blocked entry in Bithynia, until at Troas Paul got the night vision about the Macedonian Call. This is an initiative of Heaven – God has made the ministry plan and He calls Paul and Silas in to join in it.

We see similar examples with the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8), Ananias being sent to heal the blind Saul / Paul (Acts 9), Peter going to Cornelius' house (Acts 10), Agabus' warning about the famine and the church response (Acts 11:28ff), and Peter escaping from prison (Acts 12) and so on. In fact the ministries of the apostles and disciples seem to be entirely Spirit-led. They let God do the planning according to His wisdom and then they simply joined in with what God was doing.

They developed their ministry gifts and learned the Scriptures and even has special callings given by God (such as Paul's 'to preach the gospel to the Gentiles'). But they did not snatch up the reins and try to steer their ministries. They became co-participants with God in the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-20). Even the most gifted individual should seek the Spirit's direction as to the specifics of implementing God's calling, such as where to preach and when to travel and even what to say to certain individuals.

The initiatives of Heaven may be things that we would never have thought of, and even may be things quite outside our comfort zone such as Jonah being sent to Nineveh or Ananias being sent to pray for Saul. But whatever God's plan is – it is good!

Now the trouble is that we tend to doubt God at the critical moment. When we feel that nudge in our spirit to say something to an important person we are overcome with shyness, or when we feel led to go to a certain city for ministry we think of the cost.

There is a certain boldness that is required if we are to fully cooperate with God. Satan operates via fear so to overcome these spiritual attacks we must be bold. Satan also operates on us through doubt, skepticism, fear of social disapproval, and poor teaching on the nature of Christian ministry. We must not give in to such things!

Thus following the initiatives of Heaven requires prayerfulness, boldness, zeal and ethical integrity as we minister in the Name of Jesus Christ. We are to be constantly listening to God for the 'next step' and fine-tuning our plans in accordance with His prompting.

Small acts of obedience can have big consequences. Once when I was getting ready for a Christian camp the Holy Spirit said 'pack that black jumper' (a jumper in Australia = a sweater in USA), it was thin, old and ragged and was one I generally only used for fishing. But I put it in my duffel bag and went to camp.

I wore it on the first evening of camp as it was a bit chilly and I found out that black as "in" that year. I was soon adopted as leader by a group of five highly extroverted teenage girls who were not yet believers. They spiked my hair in gel, hung out with me, and got gloriously saved. They all went to Bray Park High so we started a Scripture Union bible club at that school that eventually had 40 members in it.

God's very simple leading led to a whole chain of positive events that resulted in glory being given to God.

Some people deny that such prompting has any place in the Christian life of modern believers. A leading proponent of this is Gary Friesen whose book "Decision-Making In The Will of God" has been a best-seller for many years. Dr. Friesen's book is a reaction against legalism, against the 'dot' theory where people could 'miss God's will for their life' by messing up a small decision. However he has gone overboard and thrown out all spiritual impressions whatsoever and all Holy Spirit guidance along the way. He has 'thrown the baby out with the bathwater'. God does communicate His will to us, personally, and that is a big part of the joy of the Christian life.

However, this does raise a question – what do we do when there is no specific guidance?

There is a place for common sense in routine matters. A friend of mine waited four months to get her car fixed because she was praying for a 'sign' as to which mechanic to use. The car was totally wrecked by the time the four months was up.

You don't need Holy Spirit guidance on which shoe to put on first or on whether you should pay the electricity bill. These things are the simple routines of life that God expects us to take care of. God will speak when He wishes to speak about something special.

So we should not deny the value of the leading of the Holy Spirit and retreat to our own wisdom and intelligence, nor should we become passive and dependent and expect Holy Spirit guidance for every tiny detail of our lives.

One way to think of this is to see yourself as a soldier under orders. God is the General, the Master Planner. He decides who goes where and what the overall strategy will be. Sometimes you will get special orders and you should obey them. Other times you will just be at your guard-post doing routine duties faithfully and that is fine as well. If there is action you will respond according to your training first and listen carefully for any special directions on the radio. When orders come we are to be bold and courageous to promptly carry out the will of the Commander.

Now spiritual ministry is a quite different matter from having your car fixed or packing for camp. Spiritual ministry is initiated by God, empowered by God and directed by God. You really CANNOT do effective spiritual ministry unless you are totally surrendered to His guidance. Let's see what Jesus said about His own spiritual ministry:

John 5:19-20 MKJV *Then Jesus answered and said to them, Truly, truly, I say to you, The Son can do nothing of Himself but what He sees the Father do. For whatever things He does, these also the Son does likewise. (20) For the Father loves the Son and shows Him all the things that He Himself does.*

John 5:30 MKJV *I can do nothing of My own self. As I hear, I judge, and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of the Father who has sent Me.*

When it came to ministry Jesus did nothing out his own initiative, nothing out of His self, nothing from His own judgment and nothing from His own will. Now Jesus had a perfect judgment and will and His thoughts were pure. If anyone could have done His own ministry planning it should have been the Lord! However Jesus sought the will of the Father. He wanted His ministry direction to come from Heaven above.

If Jesus sought out the initiatives of heaven – how much more should you and I!

God creates opportunities for us to minister and then expects us to seize them. On the other hand God also expects us to be systematic – such as when Jesus asked his disciples to go two by two throughout the villages of Israel, or when Paul returned to the new churches to see how they were going and to strengthen them.

Yet as we go about our systematic daily ministry we should also be prepared for God's surprises, God's divine appointments.

There is this dynamic balance between spontaneity and order. For instance in 1 Corinthians 14 there is much teaching on prophecy and tongues and worship but also the admonition that God is a God of order and of peace, and not of confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33).

Let's take this down to the level of preparing a weekly sermon. I always advocate having a 12 month preaching plan (or even longer) so that both the pastor and the church and the worship team all have a good idea of what to expect. For instance you might pray over what to teach for that year and decide to preach on the gospel of John chapters 1-11 for 22 weeks (half a chapter per week) and then add in Mother's Day, Father's Day and a few other occasions, some missions sermons, some devotional material from the Old Testament (say 6 Psalms) and twelve weeks the book of Ephesians (again half a chapter per week).

Now is this excluding God? Not at all – as long as you remain sensitive to His prompting. Preaching God's word faithfully and systematically blesses His people and honors His name. Another thing I recommend is that pastors write out their sermons word for word. This assists with having a well-structured sermon and tends to prevent waffling, repetition and poor logic. After it has been written out then put the main points into PowerPoint and preach from that as the Spirit leads (don't just read the sermon). The fully written out sermon can then be posted to the church website for the whole world to read and to be blessed by, even many years later.

Now the Holy Spirit can create many ministry opportunities out of this systematic presentation and work. The Holy Spirit may use that well-prepared sermon to convict people, or to lead someone to Christ, or to create a counseling opportunity later that week, or an Internet ministry opportunity via email. Thus there is no inherent conflict between 'flowing in the Spirit' and being systematic, orderly and properly prepared in ministry.

There is a dynamic balance between the initiatives of Heaven and your responsibility to be a faithful steward of the grace of God, who accurately divides the Word of God. God may suddenly send you to Nigeria, but when you arrive, you must preach the truth!

On the other hand, order without inspiration can become suffocating. If we are not receptive to the initiatives of Heaven we can miss major ministry opportunities and fail to reap in the more fruitful fields of Harvest. God always wants to send us into areas of maximum effectiveness. He does not want anyone sitting around, going nowhere with a stale, unproductive ministry:

Matthew 10:11-15 ISV *"Whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy in it and stay there until you leave. (12) As you enter the house, greet it. (13) If the house is receptive, let your blessing of peace come on it. But if it isn't*

receptive, let your blessing of peace return to you. (14) If no one welcomes you or listens to your words, as you leave that house or town, shake its dust off your feet. (15) Truly I tell you, it will be more bearable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah on the day of judgment than for that town!"

Since the Harvest is plentiful and the laborers are few (Matthew 9:37), it makes sense that God would want His laborers where they can do the most good! It is also very evident that many of God's servants are NOT where they should be at all.

Huge harvest fields have hardly anyone ministering in them! And some areas are so over-populated with workers that Christians complain that there are simply no opportunities for ministry!

It seems to me that the Church is listening to its own voice instead of God's voice and to its own organizational priorities rather than God's Harvest priorities! We need to unplug ourselves from our agendas and start listening to God's Agenda! When God's people catch the initiatives of Heaven a far greater percentage of Christians will be in the right place, with the right people, doing the right thing, at the right time, and getting the right results.

We just don't see the world the way God does. We cannot see into human hearts and know which ones are ripe and ready for salvation. And we do not know what is about to happen with nations and how a door for the gospel that is now open, may soon be closed, unless we act very quickly. Our judgment is so far from optimal that we simply should not be running the show. Even if we had perfect missions statistics and cultural analysis we would be far short of the mark. Ministry MUST be God-directed. Without the leading of the Holy Spirit we will simply be fruitless and hopeless ministers of the gospel seeing few saved and even less transformed and matured in Christ.

So the question then becomes: "How do we end up in the right place, with the right people, doing the right thing, at the right time, and getting the right results?"

Step One is to give up your own initiative, will and judgment just as Jesus gave up His own initiative, will and judgment in deference to the Father (John 5:30, 8:38, 12:49,50)

Step Two is to actively watch and listen to the Father using your spiritual senses such as your spiritual eyes and ears (above verses plus Hebrews 5:14) which are part of your conscience. Check what you receive against Scripture and general wisdom.

Step Three is, as soon as you are sure it's the Lord, then act on the leading.

Let's see how this applied to the case of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:

Acts 8:26-29 MKJV *And the angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, Arise and go toward the south, on the way that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza, which is a deserted place. (27) And he arose and went. And behold, a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasure and had come to Jerusalem to worship, (28) was returning. And sitting in his chariot he read Isaiah the prophet. (29) Then the Spirit said to Philip, Go near and join yourself to this chariot.*

A great revival in Samaria had just concluded with many saved, delivered, baptized and filled with the Holy Spirit. The apostles were heading back to Jerusalem when an angel taps Philip on the shoulder and tells him to go to a deserted area. In 'the natural' this was a rather bizarre command, but Philip gave up his own will, judgment and initiative and obeyed the angel.

Philip arrives to find a chariot of an important Ethiopian official and the Holy Spirit then prompts Philip to join the chariot. Now given that this important financial official probably had numerous bodyguards there may have been some risk in this! But Philip overcame any shyness and trepidation and obeyed the Spirit. At this point the Ethiopian eunuch asks a question about Isaiah 53 and Philip's well prepared ministry skills take over and he leads the eunuch to Christ, eventually baptizing him in water. The ministry in the deserted place being completed the Spirit moves Philip to more fruitful areas:

Acts 8:39-40 MKJV *And when they had come up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught Philip away, so that the eunuch saw him no more. And he went on his way rejoicing. (40) But Philip was found at Azotus. And passing through, he preached the gospel in all the cities until he came to Caesarea.*

This simple witness to a single individual eventually led to the founding of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church! Spirit-led obedience is like the loaves and the fishes – it seems to have blessing, multiplication and power built right into it.

Philip:

- a) Gave up his own will and understanding of the situation
- b) Followed clear leadings from God without hesitation
- c) Ministered faithfully and biblically and
- d) Ended up being in the right place, with the right people, doing the right thing, at the right time, and getting the right results.

We saw that the initiatives of Heaven are the way that God guides us so that we end up being in the right place, with the right people, doing the right thing, at the right time, and getting the right results.

By being sensitive to God's guidance through our conscience and our spiritual senses we become attuned to God's immediate agenda in that present moment. This helps us to know what to do and how to do it.

Just to clarify, there are three types of guidance that I see in Scripture and they all work together for the glory of God:

- a) Knowledge of the Scriptures is God's macro-guidance and gives us wisdom that we can apply in many different situations. It is Scripture that equips the man of God to minister effectively (2 Timothy 3:16,17). Scripture is primary and authoritative.
- b) A sense of gifting and calling such as "I am called to be an apostle to the Gentiles" is God's medium range guidance. This kind of guidance forms our identity, training, skill sets and outlook. It tells us who we are, and what we can do in the body of Christ and gives us our sense of "role".
- c) The initiatives of Heaven are God's 'micro-guidance' and position us correctly within our role and circumstances so that we end up being in the right place, with the right people, doing the right thing, at the right time, and getting the right results

Let's apply this to the case we saw yesterday of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch.

1. Philip had a calling as an evangelist that he was fulfilling in Samaria.
2. The initiatives of Heaven repositioned Philip so that he was taken out of Samaria and sent to Gaza – this was accomplished via an angel telling him to go to Gaza and the Holy Spirit telling him to join the chariot. This resulted in Philip being in the right place, with the right people, doing the right thing, at the right time.
3. The eunuch was reading Isaiah 53 so Philip used his equipping and knowledge of the Scriptures to be an effective minister of grace who rightly divided the Word of God – and thus led the eunuch to faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

So Philip had to be a) moving in his calling and b) equipped with the Scriptures so that he could be c) repositioned by God's micro-guidance into a highly strategic and effective situation. There are many faithful men and women of God who are well-equipped with Bible training and who are definitely called and moving in their calling but who are seeing very little fruit in their ministry. They need God's micro-guidance!

God's micro-guidance, which we are calling the initiatives of Heaven, are daily downloads of God's priorities for action. They are short-term and immediate and the apostles acted on them pretty much straight away (except for Peter who let the men from Cornelius stay overnight before heading out with them possibly because they needed the rest – Acts 10:23).

Again let's look at some incidents in Acts chapter 5:

Acts 5:15-21 MKJV *So as to carry out the sick into the streets and place them on cots and mattresses, so that at least the shadow of Peter passing by might*

overshadow some of them. (16) And also a multitude came from the cities around Jerusalem, bringing sick ones, and those being tormented by unclean spirits, who were all healed. (17) And rising up, the high priest, and all those who were with him (which is the sect of the Sadducees) were filled with anger, (18) And laid their hands on the apostles and put them in the public custody. (19) But the angel of the Lord opened the prison doors by night and brought them out, and said, (20) Go! Stand and speak all the words of this Life to the people in the temple. (21) And hearing, they went into the temple about dawn, and taught.....

Peter and the apostles are having a mighty healing ministry and this enrages the envious High Priest who then throws the apostles in prison. An angel brings them out by night and says to them: *Go! Stand and speak all the words of this Life to the people in the temple.* They obeyed the angel's instructions immediately. And so at dawn they went right back into the territory of the High Priest (the Temple) and preached and taught the gospel.

This instruction was for all the apostles, on that day, in order for them to bear witness to Christ. Later they would travel all over the Roman Empire, but on this day they were to be in the Temple teaching. This was the right place at the right time for the purposes of the Kingdom of God. However this 'Temple preaching' was not to be the pattern for all time. It was an immediate instruction for 'that hour' and was understood as such. Later they would preach in synagogues and marketplaces and houses and on desert roads.

The initiatives of Heaven are God's daily guidance, His tactical operations to defeat the enemy of our souls. God might wake you up in the middle of the night to pray for someone – don't go back to sleep! Obey the prompting and pray through to victory! God might prompt you to warn a co-worker about an inappropriate relationship that could wreck her marriage – speak up before it is too late!

The initiatives of Heaven are not complex. They are generally just a few words, a sentence or a short paragraph at most such as: "Join the Chariot" "Go, stand and speak ..." etc. They are God's quick touch on our life telling us to do (or in some cases not to do) a certain thing.

Not obeying a prompting can be costly. Rick Renner tells the story of his time in Moscow when he was supposed to attend a farewell function but felt very strongly that the Spirit was telling him to stay in his hotel room. He went to the function but returned after a while due to the urgency of the feeling, only to find the room trashed and burgled at a large loss to themselves and the ministry. He wrote saying that if he has obeyed the nudge from God then this would not have occurred.

I have had experiences where not listening to a prompting about consuming certain food has made me ill, and even one where I was burgled under very similar circumstances!

If we want to be a blessing to others, avoid danger and have optimal effectiveness in ministry we need to be incredibly sensitive and obedient to these leadings of the Holy Spirit.

Now this leads to the question: What about those goofy people who claim to be led by the Spirit but just seem to be rather irresponsible and self-centered individuals? Are you asking us to be like them?

No, of course not. People take advantage of every teaching of Scripture and some claim a new leading from God every time life gets difficult. Just because a few people abuse this doctrine or make it very legalistic, it does not mean that we should throw it out altogether!

God leads! God guides! And God speaks to his children about many aspects of their lives! In the next study we will look at how to hear the initiatives of Heaven for our own life and ministry.

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