

# OpenTheo

## Should Feelings Have Any Epistemological Weight in Our Decision Making?

December 28, 2023



### #STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about whether feelings should have any epistemological weight in our decision making and how to interpret several verses in Acts in light of Greg's views on being led by the Spirit.

\* Should feelings have any epistemological weight in our decision making? For example, should a pastoral candidate who has a "check in his spirit" reject a church job even if there are no objective biblical or wisdom reasons to do so?

\* In light of your views on being led by the Spirit in your decision making material, how would you interpret the following verses: Acts 8:29, 10:19-20, 11:12, 13:2, 13:4, 16:6, and 20:22? Are we to follow these by example, and what does that look like?

### Transcript

This is Amy Hall. I'm here with Greg Cokel and you're listening to Stand to Reason's hashtag STRSPodcast. Let's get to it.

Of course. Here's a question from Trent Blake. Should Feelings Have Any Epistemological Weight in Our Decision Making? For example, should a pastoral candidate reject a church job because of a quote, check in his spirit, even if there are no objective biblical or wisdom reasons to do so? Well, this is a good question.

It goes to the broader issue of decision making in the will of God. I think we had a show on that, two shows back to back where my teaching was given, because I was away for some reason. On the other podcast? Oh, that's right.

On the other podcast. He was a couple months ago. He was a couple months ago, yeah.

I've got a lot of response from that. If you listen to hashtag STRS, not to the Stand to Reason podcast, you might want to listen to that as well in general, but also for that particular teaching. My response here is, I have two thoughts.

The illustration given, should a pastoral candidate reject a church job because of a check in his spirit, even if there are no objective biblical or wisdom reasons to do so? The language check in his spirit is language a lot of people use. I just felt a check in my spirit, and my sense is when I hear that is what they are communicating is they feel a resistance and they attribute it to the Holy Spirit. Even though it's a check in my spirit, they think it's a spiritual awareness that God has given me that something's not right about this.

I'd rather put it like a check in my soul. It's in the person's spirit. In other words, something about the project that they're looking at that they're considering doesn't seem right.

Now, I wouldn't assign any, in a sense, divine authority to that or divine significance. This is why I'm a little concerned by the language check in the spirit in his spirit. But at the same time, and I do mention this in my decision making material, I'm not sure if it's in the talk that we included online, but rather on the STR broadcast.

But in my writings on this, I do point out that sometimes for some reason we don't feel particularly right about this decision, even though we can't put our finger on it. I think that's a good reason to pause because it may be subconsciously you're picking up something, you're aware of something that doesn't sit right, even though you can't, as I said, put your finger on it. So pause, reflect, ask for more counsel.

And if you can't avoid that feeling that this isn't right, I mean, it might be a good time just to put that entire project on hold. Now, of course, you can get a so-called check in your spirit for lots of different reasons. Sometimes it's the weight of the responsibility of the thing that you're undertaking.

Sometimes it's the demand of doing the right thing to do the right thing here. Like that's, wow, that's really inconvenient. It's easy to read that as a check in your spirit and then take the next step and say, well, God must be telling me not to go there.

When I think that's a misstep, I would suggest that you take a closer look. If there's something that bothers you about the decision, try to figure out what it is, but don't over-spiritualize it. Don't read into it some kind of subtle message from God that he's trying to communicate to you.

And the reason I say don't communicate, don't read into it some subtle message from God is because biblically God doesn't give subtle messages that we have to kind of interpret to figure out whether it's from him or not. What I'm saying is you don't have to interpret these kinds of things to figure out what God is telling you to do. I mean, I had a desire to go to Thailand.

I had a lot of personal reasons to move to Thailand, okay? And I moved to Thailand and I

worked in a Commodity refugee camp in 1982 for seven months, okay? I wasn't like thinking, is this desire I have in my heart a way that God is telling me he wants me to go to Thailand? I wasn't trying to divinize that desire in some way to legitimize my trip. I felt, look, I've got a lot of good reasons to do what I'm doing. They're personal reasons and they're spiritual reasons.

There was a definite need there that I could meet, blah, blah, blah. And so I went and did it. It was a magnificent experience.

But I wasn't trying to second guess my emotions as some kind of hint from God. That's what I think you should be careful of. If you're facing a decision and you've done all your due diligence, wisdom due diligence, moral due diligence, this is the kind of thing that I talk about in this decision making model that I think is the biblical one as opposed to getting these hints from God.

And you're still unsettled, okay, then pause and try to figure out what it is that is bothering you. Pray about it, get some more counsel, still want it a little bit, you know, and see what happens. Because it may be that you're picking up something, your soul is picking up something that's troubling you, but you're not sure what it is.

And it might be legitimate, it may not be legitimate, just it's good to try to figure out what that is. It doesn't have to be from God in order to have some sort of weight. Because like you said, Greg, we are picking up things all the time.

We pick up cues from people's behavior, from their demeanor. We might see something in passing that didn't really register with us, but it's kind of in the back of our mind. Or maybe we're trying to ignore something we saw in the past because we really want to say yes, but it's still nagging at us.

There are all sorts of reasons why you might be hesitating. And so I agree, Greg, you have to kind of think about that a little more. Now, are we going to be able to interpret it perfectly? I don't know, sometimes yes, maybe not every time.

Maybe like you said, it is just fear of stepping, you know, into something that's unusual or difficult. Or it could be that you have noticed something about the other person who maybe will be hiring you or you'll be working with that gives you pause. And I've known a lot of people who have picked up on certain things where they couldn't put it into words, but they didn't feel right about it until someone else came along and explained to them, okay, here's the problem.

And they said, oh, that's exactly what it was. I just couldn't put it into words. So it might be an opportunity to ask more people about why you might be feeling that way.

Maybe someone else can help you with that. That's great. All right, so the next question, Greg, is also about decision making.

This one comes from David. Okay. I recently listened to your two podcasts on decision making.

You touched briefly on following the spirit through obedience to the Bible. How would you interpret the following verses? Are we to follow these by example? And what does that look like? And then he lists a bunch of verses from Acts that I gave you that right. Okay, yeah, and I have the list here and I'll go through them, but I want to make an observation.

Well, here's a predicate to the observation. It's amazing how deeply influenced we are by a received tradition in Christianity about how to make decisions. When I say received tradition, it's not really taught.

It just seems to be talked about and exemplified the way people go about doing things. And that is the very thing that I'm taking exception with biblically in the talk on decision making. Is it the case that God makes our decisions for us and then kind of puts little hints out there in different ways that we might call the leading of the spirit in order to, well, in order to indicate what is will is if we cobble them together just so.

And when you think about it, that's the way people function. Well, I felt led to do this. I feel called to do this.

I have some confirmation. I have a piece about it and all these other things that people mention that turn out not to be biblical means of making a decision when we look at the passages that talk about those things. And even in this question, you touched briefly, David says, on following the spirit through obedience to the Bible.

Well, yes, if we're obeying God, I guess you could call that following the spirit, but what that suggests to me is this old system. Oh, here's the way we hear from God. We have to obey the scripture.

Well, yes, you have to obey scripture. This is really critical of making a decision. Everybody agrees to that, but that isn't a way of following the spirit.

I think that wouldn't be the right way to put it. So I'm just making the point that this, even the way it's worded here seems to have remnants of that other way of looking at it. And then when you look at the texts here that he raises legitimate questions about, you see some interesting patterns.

Okay. So before I get to these passages, there's about six of them in the book of Acts. I know every single one of these passages, okay, and have pondered them in light of this decision-making model.

What I do in this model is I emphasize that it's not up to God to make our decisions for us and then give us little hints that we cobble together to figure out what to do, which we

call finding the will of God. But rather, the scripture gives us a different pattern. There are general commands and directives that are given to us and gifts that are given to us and wisdom that is available to us that allows us to make good decisions.

The decision-making task is up to us using the tools that God has given us that I just mentioned. Are there occasions when God intervenes and he says, no, don't do that. Would you plan to do this instead? And on my understanding of scripture, my decision-making model, the answer is yes.

God does intervene, but when he intervenes, there's a couple of characteristics. First of all, they are not being sought for. It isn't like people are sitting around waiting for God to tell them what to do.

Paul says, redeem the time in Ephesians 5. And so we're not to be sitting around waiting when we have commands that are meaningful of things that we're to be doing, okay? But we may be pursuing that and then God intervenes. So first of all, it's not being sought for. It's a surprise, so to speak, and there's possibly one exception.

And we'll talk about that in a moment. Secondly, it is supernatural. And so far as we are given details in the text about the nature of it, the phenomenology of it, it is supernatural.

And third, because it's supernatural, it's clear. Why is that important? Because you can't follow a command that's not clear. Yet this is what a lot of people are committed to in their decision-making model following commands that are not clear.

And if you want clarity on that particular point, just go to 1 Corinthians 14, and then Paul is talking about tongues without interpretation. And he gives an illustration of a bugle which was used in warfare to signal troop movements, attack, retreat. And he says, if the bugle produces an indistinct sound, how will we know what we're supposed to do? Okay, but it's not clear.

And then he says, in the same way, unless we speak what the mouth words that are clear, we're not going to be understood, all right? And this other method seems to be trading on words that are not clear, which is a violation of the lesson of the bugle, which is what I call it there in 1 Corinthians 14. And that's dealing with revelation. And this specific case is dealing with tongues, okay? So my view is that we have a pattern to follow in Scripture, and they make the biblical case for that.

But there are times when God will intervene. He'll say, hey, time out. I've got something different for you, something specific I want you to do.

And in those occasions, you're going to have a supernatural manifestation that is not really being sought for. It's an intervention into the circumstances, and because it's supernatural, it's clear, all right? So let's go and take a look at these passages. Here, the

first one is Acts 8 and verse 29.

And this is the example of Philip in the Ethiopian eunuch, okay? Actually, you can start at verse 26. But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, saying, get up and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza. Okay? Notice what it says.

An angel of the Lord spoke to Philip, all right? So you have a supernatural intervention in a miraculous way with a clear communication. It fits exactly the pattern. And then we can just read down further to the verse in question, verse 29.

And then the spirit said to Philip, go up and join this chariot. So these are all part of the same event, and the spirit is speaking directly to Philip. In a clear way, not a hunch, not a nudge, nudge, hint, hint, but a very clear and supernatural way.

And even the angel of the Lord is invoked here as the agent of the communication, at least in the first verse. And the next one says the spirit. I think probably it was the same communication that is one attributed to the angel of the Lord and the other one coincidentally attributed to the spirit.

Both are involved there. Okay? Okay, what about Acts 10 and verse 19? It's another occasion. While Peter was reflecting on the vision, the spirit said to him, behold, three men are looking for you.

Now, this is the precursor to the meeting of Peter with Cornelius. And God speaks to Peter and speaks to Cornelius. But notice we have a supernatural revelation in both cases.

We have a vision, and we also have, I mean, more detail. You can read next 10 of what Peter saw. And then there's a communication as part of that supernatural intervention.

He's up there praying and bang. Here comes this vision regarding something is no understanding of it all. These people coming to visit his house as a result of a vision given to Cornelius.

So once again, we have a supernatural event that is very clear and is not being sought for. Let's look at chapter 11 verses 12. And these are all the verses that are being offered as, how does this fit into your program, Greg? And my answer is it fits perfectly into my program.

Chapter 11, verse 12 says, the spirit told me to go with them without misgivings. Now, this is Peter talking to Cornelius in his crowd, just referring back to the earlier circumstance. So we already covered that.

He's just making reference to that supernatural revelation. Chapter 13 and verse 2. And here we have, while they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said,

set apart for me, Barnabas and Saul, for the work to which I have called them. So this is Barnabas and Saul being directed by the spirit to go on the first missionary journey.

They did not have directions for the second missionary journey or the third missionary journey. That was a totally different process of making that decision. In this case, you have the Holy Spirit speaking a sentence, not a nudge, nudge, hint, hint.

Gee, how did that happen? Well, why don't we read the verse before we make it a hint as to how that took place. Chapter 13, verse 1. Now, there were at Antioch in the church that was there, prophets and teachers, Barnabas and Saul, and Simeon, who are called niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Menaean, who had been brought up with Herod the Tetraken. So here's a group of people.

And among the group of people are specific people who are prophets. And the next verse said, and the Holy Spirit said, set apart Barnabas and Saul. How do you think that happened? Now, it doesn't say directly here, but it certainly seems the most reasonable conclusion is it was a prophetic word given by the prophets that were there.

And, which is why prophets are mentioned here. Okay, now this is an occasion where they might, it says they were ministering before the Lord. It's not clear there are seeking direction and guidance, but they might have been.

Okay, so this might be possibly an exception to the pattern of the intervention. Here they're seeking, but in any event, the communication by God was a clear communication that appears. The best explanation is that the prophets offered a prophetic word, which we have a quotation of in chapter 13, verse 2. What about verse 4? So being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down on the mission to solution from there.

They sailed to Cyprus. Okay, so they take off. But notice this verse is just referring to what happened to verses before.

So clearly the spirit is speaking in that particular intervening with a clear word. Through a prophet. Through a prophet.

Well, the conclusion is through a prophet, but that seems to me the most reasonable assumption. Now we've got 16, verse 6, and that is they passed through. The Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.

Now, this is a little bit of an unusual passage because we don't have the phenomenology. We don't know how this information was communicated to a Barnabas and Saul. Okay, or this is the Macedonian.

This leads to the Macedonian vision. I don't know if this is the first missionary journey or not, but no, this is the second one. But in any event, we have very strong language that the Holy Spirit forbade them.

It isn't that he was keeping them. There's another passage that says the Holy Spirit was not allowing us to go. And that could be like circumstantially not allowing it.

But here the language is forbidden. That strikes me as a direct word from the Spirit regarding the disposition of their travels. Okay, though it doesn't give any information there.

But that would also fit in with my general scene that the Holy Spirit is speaking. My view isn't that God can't do whatever he wants. He can.

And if he wants to intervene, he can do that. And he does so by a certain pattern. So there's no confusion by the Christians about what he wants to do.

This bears no resemblance at all to the way most Christians are operating. Nudge, nudge, hint, hint. I think I'm not sure maybe the Lord is leading me in this direction or whatever.

And without, by the way, the proof text there is Romans 8 being led by the Spirit. There's our sons of God. But when you read the context, Paul isn't talking about what they're talking about in being led by the Spirit.

And in Galatians 5 the same language as being used. He's talking about overcoming sin and the power of the Spirit. So I don't see any liability here.

We have one more in that chapter 20 verse 22. And I think it follows the same pattern that I've been describing. 20 verse 22, it says, and now behold, bound by the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there.

This is a bit ambiguous as to what Paul means here. Bound by the Spirit. Now it has a capital S here in the translation.

Let me see. It's got a marginal reference to verse 21. What? Bound by.

Oh, that's 20 verse 22. My version says bound in spirit. Bound in spirit.

Yeah. So I thought that there's an ambiguity here. And the reason they capitalize S is the translators here thought this is referring to the Holy Spirit.

And it's not capitalized in my version. In which one are you reading? This is the NSB the later one. Oh, okay.

Okay. So it's not clear that what's going on here is the Holy Spirit is doing something, but rather bound in spirit. And this could just be referring to his own commitment to be going on to Jerusalem because actually I think he says later that the Spirit is.

Oh, here it is. Verse 23, except that the Holy Spirit solemnly testifies to me in every city



saying that bonds and afflictions await me. So it would be unusual for Paul to say I'm bound in this by the Holy Spirit to go there, but then the Holy Spirit is saying these other things because one of the prophets who testify says Paul don't go there.

Don't do this because this is what's going to happen. You're going to be bound like that's agabus. You're going to be on like I've just bound your hands with this belt.

Okay. And so that would be a conflict. I think it's Paul has a plan to go to Jerusalem.

And it's a good plan. And it's not God isn't saying you can't do that, but he's letting Paul know through the prophetic words of the places he's going. The Spirit is saying through these prophets, man bonds and afflictions await you.

And he also tells this is say goodbye to the Ephesian elders there on the beach. He's he's also says you'll never see me again. So he knows this is he's heading for the end of the road here.

But nevertheless, this is what he's committed to doing. And even though it costs him and that's what he says, I know it, but I'm willing to even die if I have to do for the sake of the gospel. So having laid that whole foundation, Greg, to answer specifically this part of the question, are we to follow these by example? And what does that look like? If the Holy Spirit, if God intervenes in a circumstance with a supernatural revelation, if you have a bona fide vision from God, if there's a bona fide prophetic word that is offered to you, if the angel of the Lord appears to you and tells you to do something.

And in the case of Philip, supernaturally transfers him out of that circumstance. Well, then you're obliged to obey it. This does not seem to be the standard motif of decision-making for Christians today.

These are exceptional circumstances. And I believe things like this do happen, but in very rare circumstances. And we don't have to worry about them because they find us.

We don't have to find them. And on that note, Greg, we have just finished the last show of the year. Oh, is that right? December 28th.

Thank you so much listeners. You, too, Greg. Thank you so much for listening to us this year.

And we hope you'll join us again next year. And we hope you have a happy new year. This is Amy Hall and Greg Cogle for Stand to Reason.