

# God told me

who to marry,  
where to work,  
which car to buy . . .  
and I'm pretty sure  
I'm not *crazy*



learning to listen for guidance from God

JIM SAMRA

“Ever wonder about how God guides? Ever wonder if he guides? Then *God Told Me* is for you. In this book Jim Samra sensitively and carefully guides you through the maze of what can be said about God’s guidance, using a myriad of examples. It will push you to rely more on him. And that is a very good thing.”

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“Listening is more than an art . . . it is a necessity. Just ask my wife, who often wonders if I have lost my hearing. Part of mastering the necessity of listening is to recognize the important voices in your life and train your heart to listen intently to them. For those of us who are followers of Christ, listening to his voice and the voice of God our father is critically important to a flourishing relationship with him. My friend Jim Samra has unraveled the often tangled mystery of recognizing God’s voice and learning to follow it, to the joy of a deeper, more rewarding life as we walk according to the beat of his voice.”

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“Evangelicals are comfortable talking about their personal relationship with God, but decidedly uneasy when it comes to saying ‘God told me so.’ Jim Samra boldly contends that God speaks to people today to provide concrete guidance, and he is careful to root his argument in Scripture rather than personal experience, though the latter, his own and others’, provides plenty of colorful illustrations. *God Told Me* is an important contribution to debates about decision making and the will of God, a practical guide to the process of seeking divine guidance, and, more importantly, a testimony to the extraordinary shape of the ordinary Christian life.”

**Kevin J. Vanhoozer**, Blanchard Professor of Theology,  
Wheaton College Graduate School

“If you desire to hear and recognize the voice of God in the flow of your daily life, you will love this book. If you believe God

speaks, but are not sure how to be confident you are receiving heavenly direction, this book will bring clarity to your listening process. If you hunger for a life guided by God, this book will fill you with biblical and practical food for thought. *God Told Me* is a valuable tool for anyone who wants to hear and follow the voice of God.”

**Kevin G. Harney**, pastor of Shoreline Community Church  
and author of *Reckless Faith*

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**BakerBooks**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Baker Books  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Samra, James George, 1972–

God told me : who to marry, where to work, which car to buy . . . and I'm  
pretty sure I'm not crazy / Jim Samra.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p. ).

ISBN 978-0-8010-1411-6 (pbk.)

1. Discernment (Christian theology) 2. God (Christianity)—Will.

3. Listening—Religious aspects—Christianity. I. Title.

BV4509.5.S253 2012

248.4—dc23

2012005943

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12 13 14 15 16 17 18 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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To Lisa



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## acknowledgments

**T**his is a book that has been fashioned and formed over many years, and there are many people for whom I am grateful.

First, there are the Christians throughout history who willingly listened to God and told their stories. Sometimes I've thought I was crazy, but when I read about George Müller, Charles Spurgeon, Hudson Taylor, Francis of Assisi, Polycarp, or Darlene Rose, I am reminded that it is crazy to think God *wouldn't* speak words of guidance to his children.

Likewise, I am grateful to all the people who allowed their stories to be shared in this book. It is impossible to learn to recognize God's voice without having examples to learn from. Thank you for being willing to share what God told you. In the same way, I am thankful for Calvary Church, a gathering of brothers and sisters in Christ where I have been able to listen to God's voice and share that with the congregation. Calvary is also a church where God is regularly speaking to others—and they are listening. What a great church!

I am grateful to my parents, who listened intently for God's leading in raising me and in doing so taught me to expect God to answer. My father, especially, set the example with this. What a blessing to grow up in a family led by a man who sought God's guidance for the decisions of life!

Thank you to the people at Baker Books. You will not be surprised to know that God told me to publish this book with them. God used a noon lunch with Jack Kuhatschek to guide me into working with Baker, with Jack as editor, to publish this book. The choice of Jack was not accidental. He, like me, had attended Dallas Theological Seminary, where a different model of making decisions was in vogue, despite the fact that the school was founded through men of God listening for God's guidance as presented here. Jack was a wonderful discussion partner who sharpened much of what is written here. So, too, I am thankful for others at Baker, including Ruth Anderson and Mike Cook, who sought God's guidance with regard to marketing this book. Thanks to Lindsey Spoolstra and others who carefully read through the book making valuable editing suggestions.

Others have read the book and provided great encouragement and help, including the pastoral staff at Calvary, Kevin VanHoozer, Kent Snoeyink, Mike Dokter, the guys at SAET, and others. This book wouldn't be nearly what it is without them.

To my four children: George, Grace, Abigail, and James. Thank you for all the joy and love you bring to our family. Your mother and I are working diligently to hear God's voice for you, but our prayer is that you will grow up to recognize God's voice for yourselves and learn to love him as your Good Shepherd.

And what can I say about my amazing wife, to whom this book is dedicated? The story of God arranging our marriage is a beautiful testament to God's guiding power, but it is also a testament to Lisa's willingness to trust God's guidance and direction—willingness that she has continued to display for our children to see. Seeking God's leading has been the much more difficult road: the waiting, the uncertainty, the faith-stretching paths God has taken us down, and the strange looks and comments from others who don't understand. Through it all she has been a model of godliness. I am only beginning to recognize the wisdom of God in selecting her for me. Even if there were no other examples of God's guidance in my life, this one alone would be sufficient for me to believe our God is a guiding God.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Most of all, I am thankful to God. He has been my Guide every step of the way. He has taught me to hear his voice. Faithfully, time and again, he has spoken into my darkness and confusion and brought the light of clear direction. I look back at where he has taken me and I am awed by his incredible wisdom and love. The reason I have written this book, and my earnest prayer, is for every Christian to know the joy of hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd leading them to still waters.



## introduction

**G**od told me to write this book.  
And I'm pretty sure I'm not crazy.

People regularly claim that God communicates specific guidance to them. In our church alone, I think of Joan, who claims God told her that her husband was going to live, despite the life-threatening situation he was facing. Chad and Paula believe God told them to buy the house they now live in. Kay believes God told her he had just taken her beloved, elderly mother to be with him, reassuring and comforting her before the phone call came. Toran and Brenda think God told them to adopt a special needs child named Max. The worship planning committee one Sunday felt God specifically told them to sing the song “Great Is Thy Faithfulness” during one of the worship services, which spoke words of comfort to a young father struggling with a child teetering on the brink of death. Bruce believes that, within days of his meeting her, God revealed to him he would marry Debbie, who has now been his wife for thirty-four years.

These claims are not limited to our church, or even to our period of history. In the second century Polycarp believed that God told him he was going to die a martyr's death.<sup>1</sup> In the

fourth century Augustine recorded that God told him to pick up the Bible and read the first section he opened to, Romans 13:13–14, which caused him to come to faith.<sup>2</sup> In the thirteenth century Edmund of Abingdon switched from studying math to theology on the basis of a dream from God.<sup>3</sup> In the nineteenth century Hudson Taylor claimed that God told him to be a missionary to China. Holman Hunt stated that God guided him in his painting.<sup>4</sup> Charles Spurgeon maintained that God tells people with whom to share the gospel and gave him the texts on which he was supposed to preach.<sup>5</sup> George Müller often stated that God told him to start orphanages.<sup>6</sup> In the early half of the twentieth century Francis Schaeffer believed God told him to go to college and train to be a minister despite his father’s ardent opposition.<sup>7</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer testified that God told him to start Dallas Theological Seminary.<sup>8</sup>

These examples could be multiplied a thousand times over, and not just from my life, our church, this century, or the history of the church. The Bible relates hundreds of examples of such things: God told Joshua that Achan’s sin was the reason Israel was unsuccessful in their battle at Ai (see Josh. 7). God not only told Israel that Saul was to be their first king, but also that he was hiding among the baggage (see 1 Sam. 10:22). God told Daniel how long Israel was going to be in captivity and what was to happen after that period of exile (see Dan. 9). God the Father told Jesus which disciples to choose as apostles (see John 17:6–12; Luke 6:12–15). God told Philip to go to the chariot of the Ethiopian eunuch and stay near it (see Acts 8:29). God told Paul to stay out of Bithynia and work in Macedonia (see Acts 16).

What are we to make of these claims that “God told me”? We have no problem recognizing that God spoke to people in the Bible, and we might be willing to concede that God has spoken at unique times in church history, but what about today? Does God speak to people today about such things? How can someone listen to God’s guidance? How do we know when we have heard from God?

## God Speaks

Clearly God has spoken in the past, and he did so for a variety of reasons. God spoke to create life (see Gen. 1), he spoke to make covenants (see Gen. 12:1–3), he spoke to communicate his moral demands (see Exod. 19), he spoke to rebuke and encourage his people (see Jer. 1:1–9), and he spoke to communicate the future (see Matt. 24).

And clearly God continues to speak today. God speaks through creation to declare his glory (see Ps. 19:1–4). The Holy Spirit speaks to the world, convicting men and women of sin, righteousness, and judgment (see John 16:8). The Holy Spirit speaks to Christians, testifying that we are children of God (see Rom. 8:16). God speaks through his Word (and by the Holy Spirit) to teach, rebuke, correct, and train (see 2 Tim. 3:16) as well as to convict and judge (see Heb. 4:12).

But there is one particular purpose for which God spoke in the past and, I believe, still speaks today that is far too often neglected: to provide guidance. Not guidance as to what is right and wrong (he does that too), but guidance for the decisions of life such as where to live, whom to marry, what job to take, the best way to endure suffering, with whom to share the gospel, and the like. This is an aspect of God speaking.

## Warning!

At this point, for some, warning bells may be going off in your heads. The idea of God's guidance conjures up an image of a seemingly pious person sitting in their car at a stop sign fervently fasting and praying, asking God to please tell them whether they should turn right or left in order to get to work, immobilized by their refusal to choose until they have received a word from the Lord.

Let me say up front that there are thousands of decisions all of us make on a daily basis for which the guidance of God is subtle and unnoticed. A neighbor's child knocks on our door

selling wrapping paper for a school fundraiser. Hoping to be a good witness for Christ and a good neighbor, we decide then and there to purchase the wrapping paper. God has allowed us as Christians to have the mind of Christ, and in that moment we make a Christ-honoring decision without even stopping to think about it. Likewise, God has given us the ability to learn our driving route to work. When we pull up to a stop sign we immediately access our God-given wisdom and turn right without a moment's hesitation.

The Bible is filled with examples of this sort of implicit decision-making process. For example, when Paul arrived in Thessalonica he didn't stop at the city gate and ask God, "What am I supposed to do?" Instead, he went into the synagogue and started preaching the gospel, "as was his custom" (Acts 17:2). This is not to say that God didn't lead him to preach in the synagogue. God's leading and guiding were seamless and unconscious, coming through Paul's intimate relationship with the Spirit dwelling within him.

However, there are many examples in the biblical narrative and the witness of history where the process of God's guidance in non-moral decisions is much more deliberate, noticeable, and conscious, with God either initiating the communication or responding to a request for guidance. In Acts 16, God spoke to Paul in a vision, directly guiding him to go to Macedonia and preach the gospel. Paul didn't just go "as was his custom," but because God took the initiative and told him in a more tangible and conscious process to go to Macedonia. Likewise, earlier in Acts the eleven apostles needed help in selecting a replacement for Judas Iscariot. Bathing their decision in prayer, the apostles took the initiative and asked God to select for them the twelfth apostle (see Acts 1:24–26). This process of seeking God's guidance was deliberate, intentional, and explicit.

It is these more explicit and deliberate times of being guided by God that I am focusing on in this book. While the vast majority of decisions made in the Bible and throughout history are those where God's Spirit works subtly with our spirit to lead us

in ways that we may not even be aware of, there are a significant number of times when God's guidance is much more explicit and the process of choosing much more deliberate. Examples of these include situations such as when Hudson Taylor wanted to know where to be a missionary, when Rebekah wanted counsel on why she was having such trouble with her pregnancy (see Gen. 25:22–23), or when we want to know what house to buy.

The differentiating feature, however, is not the magnitude of the decisions. After all, the eternal consequences of Paul choosing to go into the synagogue at Thessalonica were just as great as him choosing Macedonia over Bithynia. Rather, the differentiating feature is our need or desire for specific, explicit guidance from God. We might long for (or God might determine we need) more explicit guidance for a variety of reasons. Perhaps God wants us to follow an unusual path. Perhaps we need more tangible assurance of God's leading. Perhaps we are more conscious of our inability to know what to do in a particular area.

Whatever the reason, there are times when we need more explicit guidance from God, and in such situations we need to know: Why should we go to God for guidance and how do we do it? How do we recognize when God is responding? How can we inquire of God and be able to say with confidence "God led me"?

## **My Personal Story**

Listening for explicit guidance from God for certain decisions has been a process for me over a twenty-year period, and as we begin, I want to give you a sense of the period of my life during which these ideas first began to germinate.

The first time I was conscious of hearing God's guiding voice, I was eighteen years old and, like many, clueless as to what I should do with my life. Although I became a Christian at a young age, and God was present in my life behind the scenes, guiding many of the decisions I made, it never crossed my mind to ask God what he thought I should do with my life. Wasn't

God only interested in whether or not I obeyed his rules? When I prayed it was to ask him to help me not be such a coward in sharing the gospel or to help me get through stressful situations. It never dawned on me that God might actually be interested in guiding the path of my life.

But at eighteen, having just shared a testimony in my church about God's faithfulness for graduation Sunday, I found myself being asked by a complete stranger what I was going to be studying in college. Embarrassed because I had no answer and sure I would never see him again, I did the only rational thing. I lied. My older brother was an engineer and always got positive feedback when he told adults that, so I told the man I was going to be an engineer, even though it was the one thing I had vowed never to do (the academics scared me to death, as did the social life).

A few months later, I went to my orientation session at the University of Michigan. When I arrived, I was in a group with all engineering students and an engineering advisor, even though I most certainly was not in the college of engineering. This advisor urged me to sign up for basic math and science classes, reasoning that they would transfer to any degree, including engineering. At this point I began to wonder if God was trying to tell me something.

Midway through my freshman year, while still enrolled in my liberal arts program, that complete stranger to whom I had lied about being an engineering major sought out my parents at church one Sunday. He oversaw the engineering internships at Steelcase and wondered if I wanted to apply for one. Faced with the alternative of returning to my local grocery store and again working the dreaded bottle return counter for minimum wage, I applied for the engineering internship, praying for God to show me if this was from him. And miraculously, I was hired.

Knowing that this was not coming from me, I began to sense God was guiding me to transfer to the engineering school and major in mechanical engineering. This was my first experience with consciously recognizing God's leading.

My fear of the academics associated with engineering was not without cause. Not surprisingly, I soon found myself in way over my head. Failing was a very real option—and I was petrified of failure. So, as only an eighteen-year-old could, I made a deal with God. If I didn't study enough and flunked out, I would take the blame. If I studied a reasonable amount of time, but still failed, I was going to blame God. If, however, I studied enough and God got me through, I would give him all the glory for it. And, when I graduated, I would use my engineering degree in whatever way he wanted.

Four years went by and graduation loomed. It was clear God had held up his end of the deal. I was not only making it through the program, but actually thriving and loving it. Now I needed to fulfill my promise. But how was I supposed to find out what God wanted me to do with this engineering degree? God had gently pushed me into engineering by opening doors and arranging circumstances, so I decided to pursue four different options at once, confident that God would close all the doors but the one he wanted.

It didn't happen. All four doors opened. Now what? For months I had been praying generally, now I began to pray specifically, "Lord, which of these do you want me to choose?" No answer. I was confused and frustrated. Maybe God wasn't going to answer. I was tempted to just use human wisdom, make what I thought was the best decision, and call it good, even though this wasn't exactly what I had promised God. It was at this point I made one of life's fateful decisions.

Rattling around in my mind were the stories of the patriarch Jacob, who wrestled with God and refused to let him go until he blessed him, and the missionary Hudson Taylor, whose biography had impacted me deeply. In Jacob's case, I could identify with a "deceiver" whom God still guided and directed. In Hudson Taylor's case, I saw a man completely reliant on God for direct guidance in the decisions of his life. I wanted to live that way too, so I made my fateful decision. There would be no "Plan B" if God didn't answer my requests for guidance. I

was not letting God go until he guided me, even if all four opportunities passed me by.

By then it was March. I was facing deadlines for the different opportunities and I needed to decide by March 16. As of March 12, I had not heard a peep from God. I was scared, but resolved.

On March 13, the phone rang. It was Texas Instruments inviting me for an interview. I tried to tell them no, but something in me said yes. I found myself on a plane to Dallas. Over the next two days in Dallas, God suddenly began to speak. The darkness melted away and I became completely convinced that God was telling me to move to Texas, begin working at Texas Instruments, and attend Dallas Theological Seminary. At this point, I was beginning to realize that while God was always faithful, listening for his guidance was not always straightforward or for the faint-of-heart. Little did I know that this was all just preparation for what was next.

Up until this point I had been essentially a bystander watching the whole boy-girl dating process. Reflecting on my very limited experience, and especially the experiences of others, I had become completely disillusioned with dating as a means of selecting a wife. During this time in Texas, I came across two Scriptures that would change my life forever. The first was in Genesis 24, where Isaac marries Rebekah, a bride whom God specifically chose for him. I remember thinking to myself, “Why couldn’t God do that for me?” Of course, he *could*, but I wasn’t sure if he would. After all, weren’t Isaac and Rebekah part of a unique Bible story not to be repeated today? Being of Arab descent, the idea of an arranged marriage was not completely foreign. On occasions in the past my parents had half-jokingly offered to select a wife for me. As intriguing as an arranged marriage sounded at times, on the whole I was rather leery of entrusting this decision to my parents. But then I came across the passage in Matthew 7, where God says:

Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone?  
Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though

you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him! (vv. 9–11)

Suddenly those words came alive to me. If my earthly father was even remotely interested in helping me find a spouse, then surely my heavenly Father would guide me if I asked him to. If the story of Isaac and Rebekah told me that God *could* choose a spouse for me, Matthew 7 encouraged me that he *would* if I asked. Inspired by this word from the Lord, I decided to ask God to arrange a marriage for me. My only request was that he choose someone I didn't know and tell me whom he had chosen before I saw her, because I didn't want my desires getting in the way of genuinely hearing from God.

Amazingly, he did just that. At the age of twenty-three, I found myself sitting in a graduate class listening to a professor offer a prayer request regarding his daughter, whom I had never met before and knew nothing about—I didn't even know her first name. Yet at that moment God gave me the strangest, most indescribably subjective impression that this mystery person was his choice for my spouse! I could not have been more surprised. Surely, this was some crazy notion I had dreamed up. But how could it be? I hadn't even known this professor had a daughter.

This impression stayed with me. Every time I thought I had dismissed the notion as irrational craziness, it would come back. Six months later I actually met her, first on the phone and only later in person. (I never mentioned anything to her about God arranging marriages though!) Over the next ten months God graciously confirmed his guidance in a number of remarkable and clear ways. By the time we got engaged, I was 100 percent positive God had chosen Lisa to be my wife. A year later we were married.

From that point on, Lisa and I have experienced God's guidance and direction in a myriad of different ways. God called us into ministry; guided us to a specific church for training; told us to sell our possessions and move overseas; selected a school

and a supervisor for me; directly gave me a PhD topic; told us to stay in England and trust him when our son developed health problems; told us to move somewhere we never expected to live; told me to take a job I was horribly ill-prepared for; selected sermon series for me; guided me in staffing decisions; chose a house for us; led us on various trips and adventures; gave us guidance on how many children to have; and provided counsel and advice about ministry decisions, finances, schooling for our children, and so much more. Each one of these examples has its own story, some of which I'll talk about more later.

As I look back on this small sample of the times God has guided me, there is radiant joy in my heart. Although they are just words on the page to you, for me each story represents a personal encounter with the living God. Yet the darkness is greatest right before the dawn, and honestly, many of these experiences were incredibly hard. They represent periods of darkness and confusion, tearful agonizing and pleading with God for guidance, even enduring ridicule from other Christians who thought listening for guidance from God was misguided. Some represent debilitating fear as the realization of what God was saying dawned on me. Some recall long periods of waiting. Like the psalmist I often felt, "When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you" (Ps. 73:21–22). But each one of these stories also represents a dawning moment when the light of God's guidance shone. Incredibly, the living God spoke personally to me in my specific situation! He showed me where to go and gave me glimpses of what he was doing. And so with the psalmist, I can also proclaim, "Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. . . . My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (Ps. 73:23–24, 26). There is almost no greater joy than to be in darkness and to hear God speak words of light, to be confused and to hear his voice of clarity. Peace is the best way to describe it.

Yet far too many Christians miss out on this. Some Christians are being led by the Spirit only in subconscious ways. To be led at all is wonderful, but sadly they have missed the overwhelming joy of actually hearing God speak to them, providing specific, explicit guidance. The problem is that we are in many ways children of the Enlightenment. Many of us are deists in practice, if not in theology.<sup>9</sup> We act as if God created the universe, handed us the instruction manual, and now doesn't want to be bothered with us again, as if he is some sort of absentee father. We do our thing; he does his. As long as we obey, he's happy. He's even willing to bail us out of a few fixes we might find ourselves in along the way.

But the Bible presents a far different picture: a warm, loving Father who is intimately interested in all aspects of our lives, actively making himself available to counsel and to guide. I want to share him with you.

The experiences and truths offered here are those of a fellow traveler. Even after twenty years of exploring God's guidance, I have not finished understanding it. While I learned in my arranged marriage that God can be trusted in the big decisions of life, I am still learning how to actively listen in smaller decisions. I am trying to become better at being open to his guiding at all times, even when I am not actively seeking it. No matter how many hundreds of times he has spoken specific guidance, I am still trying to learn not to be afraid that this time he won't. Most of all, I am still experiencing new ways in which God communicates his guidance to us. But I have learned enough from God's Word, my own experiences, and the experiences of others to share with you some things that will help you either start on this path or encourage you along the way.

## The Plan

I have revealed a little of my own journey in hearing God speak, as well as hinted at the experiences of others. But I have not yet explained what exactly we mean when we say, "God guides,"

nor have I shared how we knew it was God and not our own voices, society, parents, or something else.

This book is broken up into two halves. The first half of the book explores the notion of receiving guidance from God by answering four big questions: What is guidance from God? (chapter 1), why should we seek guidance from God? (chapter 2), how does God provide guidance? (chapter 3), and how do we know when it is God who is speaking? (chapter 4).

In the second half of the book, I'll shift focus to explaining the process of listening for guidance from God. We'll talk about what we need to do to prepare to hear from the Lord (chapter 5), pointers on how to actively listen to God (chapter 6), lessons learned about the process of listening for guidance from God (chapter 7), and the issue of telling the stories of God's guidance to others (chapter 8). Then we'll finish with an appendix of some frequently asked questions.

Before we begin, let me make a comment about the stories in this book. I have included many stories throughout the book because there is no way to explain how God guides without illustrating it. That is why so much of what we learn about seeking guidance from God comes from the narrative sections of Scripture. I have also taught this material on many occasions, and people have commented that it is the stories that make all the difference.

These stories fall into four major groups. First, there are a large number of biblical stories. A majority of these stories come from the Old Testament simply because there is so much more narrative material in the Old Testament. Yet no one should infer that God's guidance is something confined to the Old Testament, because the highest percentage of examples comes from the book of Acts. (Examples of such guidance can also be found in the Gospels, as well as the narrative portions of epistles such as Galatians and 2 Corinthians). Second, there are many stories from missionaries, pastors, and Christian leaders in the church both today and throughout history. This is not because God guides only those who are in "full-time ministry."

Rather, it is simply because we don't have a lot of Christian businessperson biographies from the seventh century! Third, I have included many stories of everyday people with whom I am familiar. These stories come from people of all ages, in all walks of life, and with varying degrees of spiritual maturity and experience at hearing God's voice. Fourth, I have included a number of my own stories. This is not because I have done a better job of seeking God's guidance than others. Rather, I am most intimately familiar with my own stories. Part of the value of sharing stories is the ability to share the struggles and confusion of the process of hearing God's voice. For others' stories, I am often not privy to the details of the process of the decision, whereas with my own examples, I am.

The discovery of the truth that God graciously provides guidance and counsel for our lives has been among the most significant things to ever happen to me. I am excited to share that with you.