

CHAPTER 11

MAKING RIGHT DECISIONS

*what about sickness and death?
...and how about healing and life!*

Before reading this chapter, how would you answer the question,
How do I find out what God wants me to do?

Lord, what do you want me to do?

What does God want us to do? Many will ask this question when they first get to know Him. Paul asked it when Jesus appeared to him.

Acts 9:6 So he, trembling and astonished, said, “Lord, what do You want me to do?” Then the Lord said to him, “Arise and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.” (NKJV)

Although God knows everything about us, we will know very little about Him. We probably won’t know how to hear from Him and we will not know for sure what pleases Him. One of the first things we should appreciate about God is that He is perfectly righteous and always does good. If we let Him guide us, we can be sure He will lead us in a good way.

Deuteronomy 32:4 He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he. (NIV)

God has a purpose for us

God has a purpose for us and the more we let Him be Lord in our lives, the more He can use us. He initiated our relationship with Him and He has continuing plans for us.

John 15:16 You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you. (NKJV)

(See also 2 Timothy 1:9.)

God told Paul something about his future ministry the moment he got saved (Acts 9:15–16). This shows us that He already had plans for him.

Understanding God's will

In order to find out what God wants us to do, we should consider three things: firstly, His general will; secondly, His specific will for us; and thirdly, how much we should seek His will for our lives and how much initiative, if any, we should take.

When we say 'general will' we mean those actions which are morally right and which apply to everybody. 'Specific will' refers to those things God want us to do which are particular to our own lives.

We need to point out that the terms 'general will' and 'specific will' do not occur in the Bible but are used here to help us understand the different approaches we take to find God's will.

God's general will

God wants us to be like Him—to do good and not sin (Micah 6:8). In order to help us achieve this, He has given us the Bible which contains much teaching on righteousness.

Psalm 119:105 Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. (ESV)

(See also Proverbs 4:20–22). He has also formed the church so we can benefit from the teachings and experiences of others (Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 3:10). Furthermore, He offers us the benefit of the Holy Spirit, who can guide us into truth (1 John 2:27).

We should place a very high importance on learning the difference between right and wrong.

Matthew 6:33 But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. (NKJV)

If we neglect to seek righteousness, we will find ourselves making unnecessary errors in our decisions. Making the right decision can be costly, and if we are not sufficiently sure of our convictions, we might default to the wrong choice.

God's specific will for our lives

Proverbs 3:5–6 Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. (ESV)

God's specific will is something personal to us and our close families. Although God can reveal some part of it to others, generally He will want to communicate it directly to us. In order to find God's will, we need to ask Him and then trust Him for the answer. If it concerns something particularly important, we may need to get away somewhere alone to hear from God (Habakkuk 2:1; Luke 22:42).

In the verse shown above, God says if we trust in Him, He will direct us, but He omits to say exactly how He will do this. We cannot therefore be too particular on how He will guide us.

In the Bible, we can see God speaking to people in many different ways. He used a still small voice to speak to Elijah (1 Kings 19:11–13) while He showed Joseph a future event through a dream (Genesis 37:5–11). Abraham's servant sought God's leading through the response of a stranger (Genesis 24:12ff). Gideon asked a sign from God (Judges 6:36–40), but sometimes God refuses to give signs (Luke 11:29). He speaks to His prophets through visions and dreams (Numbers 12:6) and He uses them as His spokesmen (cf Exodus 7:1–2). The Holy Spirit can confirm truth to us and warn us of error with an inner anointing (1 John 2:20). We see this demonstrated when two of His disciples said their heart burned as Jesus spoke to them (Luke 24:32). God uses many methods to communicate His will.

We can get things wrong

Some things hinder us from hearing God speaking to us. Sometimes Satan impersonates God and tries to deceive us (2 Corinthians 11:14) and men also may try to mislead us for their own motives (1 Kings 13:15–18). Furthermore, our own beliefs and desires can

make things difficult for us. We need to learn to put away our selfish desires so we can hear from God.

Romans 12:1–2 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. (NKJV)

As we seek God's will, we need to remain humble and recognise we can get things wrong. We will be particularly vulnerable to being misled if we do not have a good understanding of God's general will.

Problems can occur when we need to make urgent and important decisions and if we read the Bible quickly in order to find advice from God. An extreme example of this is to open up the Bible at random and point on a word for guidance. While God can speak to us this way, it is not advisable to do this, because we may get the wrong answer. Also, He may want us to wait a while before speaking to us and we will therefore force an answer. Our decision making is so much easier if we have already amassed a knowledge and understanding of God.

Can we make our own decisions?

Can we make decisions ourselves, or should we always hear first from God? When Jesus becomes Lord in our lives, does this mean that we have to let Him make all future decisions for us? This sort of question can be answered by looking at our relationship with God.

Jesus describes His relationship with us in several ways. One time, He used the analogy of the good shepherd and his sheep (John 10:1ff). However, it is not appropriate to use this analogy for finding God's will for our lives because we are completely different to sheep.

Psalm 32:8–9 I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding, which must be curbed with bit and bridle, or it will not stay near you. (ESV)

In many places Jesus encouraged His disciples to consider God as being their Father (see for example John 20:17). We are born of the Holy Spirit (John 3:3–8; Romans 8:14–17), therefore, the relationship of a father to his son is an appropriate one to follow when considering how our will and God's will should interact.

However, this does not mean we should consider ourselves as being little children in order to find God's will. Although Jesus teaches our need to humble ourselves like little children (Matthew 18:1–4), He does not mean we should act as little children but rather that we should trust Him and avoid being proud (1 Corinthians 14:20 and 1 Corinthians 13:11).

God can use animals (Numbers 22:28–31) and children (Matthew 21:15–16), however they can only follow Him passively in response to His leading. God does not want us to have a relationship with Him where we constantly ask Him what we should do. If He did, He would have created us as robots without the ability to think for ourselves. He created us with our own independent will and so we can and should make our own decisions, but we should be prepared to let God override every decision we make. We can use our independence and initiative to glorify Him. God wants us to learn His ways, make our decisions, and at the same time commit our paths to Him.

Proverbs 23:26 My son, give me your heart, And let your eyes observe my ways. (NKJV)

How much should we seek God's will?

When should we wait to hear from God before making a decision, and when should we make a decision and trust God is with us? The answer to this is simply, it depends on the situation. To help us think this point through, we will consider five types of decisions:

(i) Decisions for righteousness' sake

Sometimes we might wonder whether to tell the truth about a situation. Is it right to tell a 'white lie' in order to avoid getting into trouble or offending someone? These sorts of decisions are ones based on morality. God always has an opinion on decisions of morality—whether something is right or wrong.

If we have been walking with God for some time, we will probably already know the right thing to do as we learn the difference between right and wrong by reading the Bible (see Psalm 119).

Romans 3:20...by the law is the knowledge of sin. (NKJV)

If we have neglected reading the Bible and have not sought after righteousness, then we will probably find it difficult to know what to do (consider the Ninevites in Jonah 4:10–11). The Bible is not written in the style of a dictionary where, on demand, we can look up a particular action we want to take to see if it is sinful or not. God wants us to understand it sufficiently that we will know instinctively the difference between right and wrong (Jeremiah 32:31–34). To do this, we need to read it often and think about it frequently.

(ii) Decisions for our own or others' well-being

Sometimes we need advising over what course of action we should take. We maybe for example, thinking of moving to a different country, changing a career, buying a house or marrying someone. None of these actions will be necessarily wrong in themselves, but they are important decisions which will affect our life and so it is right to ask God for advice. What we might be thinking to do might hinder His plans for us.

(iii) Where God does not have an opinion

Sometimes God will not have an opinion on a matter and He will remain silent if we ask Him for it. The thing we are asking about maybe trivial and will not affect God's plans for the Kingdom.

It is unlikely God will have an opinion over our choice of meal. If we have a choice of working for two different supermarkets, it might

not make any difference to God which one we choose. In all probability, He could use us in either job. When we seek God's will, we should bear in mind there are times when He will remain silent, simply because He has nothing to say. Sometimes He may keep quiet to see how we handle the situation ourselves.

(iv) When we ought not to ask God for His opinion

Academic or professional examinations are a test of our knowledge and understanding of a particular subject. We should carefully examine our motives if we ask God for help with them. Asking God for the answers when we have not learnt them ourselves is a similar thing to someone quietly asking their teacher for the answer. It is a form of cheating. Our relationship with God is a very precious thing and we can place it under strain by using Him for our own gain. We are His servants and we should not expect Him to serve us. He will indeed guide us in what we do (Psalm 73:24), but it should be for His glory and not our own. A better approach is to spend the necessary time preparing for the exam and then committing the outcome to God (Psalm 37:5).

(v) When we actively work for God

When we work for God, we become soldiers in an army (2 Timothy 2:3; Ephesians 6:11–18) in the middle of a great battle. There are many other individuals in this battle, often much more influential than ourselves (Ephesians 6:12; Jude 8:10). We cannot therefore dictate the battle according to our terms—we are simply too insignificant to do this. For us to be an effective soldier, we need to obey the commands of our Lord Jesus Christ, even if this means giving up our lives in the process (Romans 8:36).

Jesus told the disciples to wait for the baptism of the Holy Spirit before doing anything else (Acts 1:4–5). This came on them on the day of Pentecost. Afterwards, God used them mightily to promote the Kingdom of God (Acts 2:14ff). We need the Holy Spirit to guide us in our battles. We see the Holy Spirit prompting the disciples to do certain things (Acts 8:29; 10:19–20; 11:12), He spoke through

them (Acts 4:8; 4:31; 6:10) and He also performed miracles and healings through them (Acts 19:6; Romans 15:18–19).

How much guidance can we expect from God?

Romans 8:14 For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. (NKJV)

We can learn a lot from the way God guided Israel. At times God clearly led them and other times He apparently withdrew into the background.

Numbers 9:15–19 On the day the tabernacle, the tent of the covenant law, was set up, the cloud covered it. From evening till morning the cloud above the tabernacle looked like fire. That is how it continued to be; the cloud covered it, and at night it looked like fire. Whenever the cloud lifted from above the tent, the Israelites set out; wherever the cloud settled, the Israelites encamped. At the LORD's command the Israelites set out, and at his command they encamped. As long as the cloud stayed over the tabernacle, they remained in camp. When the cloud remained over the tabernacle a long time, the Israelites obeyed the LORD's order and did not set out. (NIV)

God supernaturally guided Israel every day when they went through the wilderness using the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. He showed them exactly when to start walking, where to go and when to stop.

God's guidance: clear, not so clear and sometimes 'I haven't a clue'

As time went on, God reduced the level of guidance He gave Israel. When the Israelites entered the promised land, the Lord spoke to Joshua and said that as long as he obeyed the law, He would be with him all the days of his life (Joshua 1:1–9). This indicates that God withdrew the pillar of cloud and expected Israel to trust that He was still with them. From this point onwards, we see God inter-

vening in particular situations rather than guiding each day (see for example Joshua 6:1–5).

We can infer from this that sometimes God will guide us in an obvious manner and other times less clearly. If we have experienced clear guidance from God and then He chooses to guide us less clearly, then the change may trouble us. We might wrongly think that He has forsaken us for some reason. We also may become passive, unaware that He is expecting us to act.

In general God does not want to lead us using supernatural signs (Matthew 12:38–39). When God led Israel into the wilderness, the Israelites had little faith and needed a lot of encouragement. Moses had to use supernatural signs to convince them that God was with Him (Exodus 4:1–9). Gideon was wary about asking too many signs from God (Judges 6:36–40). Having said this, the disciples did ask for supernatural signs to accompany their preaching of the gospel (Acts 4:29–31). Also God spoke very clearly to His disciples on various occasions (Acts 8:26–29; 9:4–6; 10–16). God wants to lead us by faith (Hebrews 11:8) and He corrects those who seek physical proof (John 20:26–29), instead wanting us to trust in Him.

Taking the initiative

Sometimes, because of the urgency, we make important decisions even though we have not heard from God. Other times we may not have to make a decision but we choose to anyway. This is what we mean by ‘taking the initiative’. It is when we make a decision, when we do not have to, and when we have not heard from God what His will is. Some call this ‘taking a step of faith’, or ‘going ahead of God’ or perhaps ‘moving God’. We take an action we feel is right but we do not know for sure.

Some people find it difficult to take the initiative because of the uncertainty of the outcome. They confuse this uncertainty with a lack of faith in God.

Romans 14:23... whatsoever is not of faith is sin. (KJV)

Some identify it as doubt in God and so refuse to make any decisions they don't have to without first hearing expressly from God. This uncertainty is not a lack of faith in God, but rather a lack of faith in our own judgment. It is healthy to have it so long as it does not get overwhelming and paralyzes our decision making. Without it we would become arrogant.

Our judgment is imperfect for various reasons. We lack understanding whereas God knows all things. We do not know the hidden motives of people or even the motives of our own heart (Psalm 139:23–24). We may even be deceived and not know it (2 Corinthians 4:4; 1 Timothy 4:1). In addition, we cannot plan for the future with any degree of certainty (Proverbs 27:1; James 4:13–16). Our decision making will therefore be flawed, but this does not mean we should avoid taking the initiative.

Our faith in God should encompass any doubts in our own abilities. We should have that relationship with God where we can make decisions and at the same time committing the outcome to Him.

Psalm 37:5 Commit your way to the LORD, Trust also in Him,
And He shall bring it to pass. (NKJV)

(See also 1 Corinthians 4:19; 16:7; James 4:13–15; Hebrews 6:3.)

Making wrong decisions

Sometimes we regret ever taking the initiative. We look back and see the decision we made was not the best one. However, this does not mean that we sinned when we made the wrong decision. Neither does it mean we have missed God or are out of His will in some way.

A person developing a skill may make many mistakes before mastering it. Likewise, we should not be surprised if we make mistakes in our decision making. Because we have limitations in our knowledge and wisdom, it is inevitable that we will occasionally make wrong decisions.

When Jesus was on the earth, He worked as a carpenter (Mark 6:3). If He ever made a door, it would not have been better than any other door ever made. It would have contained blemishes and marks as a result of His human limitations. It is not a sin to be imperfect, and likewise it is not necessarily a sin when we make a wrong decision.

Conclusion

There are two things to avoid when we seek God's will for our lives. Firstly, we need to avoid taking the position of Lord in our own lives and blocking God out of our decisions (Romans 10:1–3; Isaiah 64:6). Secondly, we need to avoid being passive and expecting God to make all the decisions. In the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14–30), the man who was given one talent did not use his initiative and consequently did not inherit the Kingdom of God.

Both God and ourselves have a role to play in our decision making. If we have listened to a lot of Christian teaching which emphasises God's sovereignty, we will probably struggle with being passive because we are waiting on God to direct us. Conversely, if we have been subjected to an emphasis on man's responsibility, we are more likely to be headstrong.

Questions to consider

1. What skills or knowledge do we need to have in order to work for God?
2. Why doesn't God appear to each one of us and tell us what we should do?
3. Will God ever show us what He wants someone else to do?
4. How true is it, that the more clearly God has to guide us, the less we are able to trust Him and the less we can please Him?

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