

Decision-Making in a Determined World

In December and January, we become aware that another year has passed, which is the sum total of many decisions we took, and the progress or the regress we made is the net result of the choices and decisions we made.

So it is not uncommon for people to make New Year's Resolutions, which are ways of concentrating on our decisions, focussing on what we want to do differently in the New Year. We think a bit more deliberately about direction, planning, purpose.

When it comes to our decisions and our direction and our future, we often wish that God would just write these things in the sky for us. We wish we would have a dream at night and the answer would be there. When it comes to decisions, many Christians are waiting for God to guide them in some extraordinary way before they make any decision. Some Christians, in fact, expect that God must guide us in extraordinary ways. They expect that a supernatural God must always guide in supernatural ways.

So, amongst believers, we have all kinds of ways that people think God is guiding them. First, some people wait for an audible voice from God. Some believers think that God speaks to people directly through a dream, a vision, or what they call the gift of prophecy. So such people will tell you, God told me you must marry so-and-so. God told me that I must come to this church and preach. They are sure that God guides people with dreams, visions, prophecies and heavenly voices. The problem is, very often, the voice turns out to say something wrong, or untrue, or unwise, or just plain silly.

Second, some people look for 'a word' from the Bible. In other words, they do not read the Bible to know the mind of God and then apply it to life, they are looking for 'a word'. So, they are trying to decide if they should move, and they read the words in Acts "go into the city" and they conclude, this is a specific word from God that I should move into the city. Young Mikey has a crush on Mindy, and he open his Bible at random, and it is the chapter on Rebekah becoming Isaac's wife, and he says, this is a word from God God is telling me to marry Mindy! Or even, you are praying about how to reconcile with someone else, and the verse comes to mind "Stand still, for the Lord your God will fight for you." "It's a word! I don't have to do anything! God will do it!"

Third, some people put out fleeces. If you remember the story from Judges, Gideon wanted to know if God would deliver Israel through his hand, so he asked God to make the fleece wet and the ground dry in the morning; and, when that was done, he reversed the order and God did it again. Now I don't think Gideon is a perfect example to follow, and remember that Gideon didn't have the Bible. But Christians all over are doing that kind of thing. "Lord, if you want me to finish this degree, then let one of my professors phone me in the next hour." "Lord, if you want me to go to church tomorrow, then let me wake up with no pain in my body whatsoever." "Lord, if you want me to take this job, then close all the other doors." In other words, we set up all kinds of conditions that God must meet for us to make another decision.

Fourth, many Christians look for open and closed doors. That is, they interpret opportunities or obstacles to supposedly back-up their course of action. "I know that my marriage is breaking up, but this new job which requires that I work sixty-hour weeks must be of God, because I've been offered it! It's an open door!" "I know that this job will prevent me from corporate worship, but why would God have brought it my way unless it was an open door?" Or else, the reverse is used. "You know I sent my CV to a few places, and no response. God must not want me to work. He's closing the

doors." "I needed to make that difficult phone call to so-and-so, but their phone was off. It must be the Lord closing the door, so I don't need to pursue it."

Fifth, many Christians look for impressions. That is, they look for an inner intuition, sense of peace, lack of anxiety, happiness in order to make a decision. "I was going to call my brother up and confront him about his sin, but I just didn't have peace about it." "I just feel really good about working on a cruise ship for 24 months. I really feel God is behind this."

Now, the thing you will notice about all of the things just mentioned, is that they are a lot like the ways unbelievers try to make decisions. Pagans look to have the spirits speak directly to them through whatever means of divination they use. Pagans look for signs to make decisions – a certain combination in the stars or the planets, a certain job event or life event which means they must do such-and-such. Pagans interpret events superstitiously – this is a good omen, this is a bad omen, this means good luck and I should do it, this means bad luck and I should not do it. Pagans will also tell you about the sudden feeling they had, the sudden impression, a sudden thought of so-and-so.

In other words, when Christians do these things, we are not acting very distinctly from the world. We are treating God's guidance just like the guidance that the pagans look for in all their superstition

Now I am not saying we are intentionally trying to deny God's guidance. I think many Christians are very desirous to please God in their decisions. But being ignorant or ill-taught in how God guides us, we simply take the pagan form of guidance and bring it into Christian experience, using Christian terms, invoking the Bible and using God as the cause.

We don't need to do this, because the Bible has a very clear, and very developed theology of decision-making. In fact, we can find all of the main ideas in the book of Ecclesiastes. Here Ecclesiastes will give us a summarised theology of Providence and Decision-making.

I. God's Meticulous Providence Determines Every Event

Ecclesiastes 7:13-14 *Consider the work of God; For who can make straight what He has made crooked? In the day of prosperity be joyful, But in the day of adversity consider: Surely God has appointed the one as well as the other, So that man can find out nothing that will come after him.*

Solomon is very clear that God controls the universe and everything that happens in it. If God makes it crooked, you cannot change it. If you are in a day of prosperity, God has appointed it. If you are in a day of adversity, God has appointed it. The whole map of history is actually His-story, and we are participants, not authors. We cannot change the ultimate plan God has for the ages.

Ecclesiastes 9:11-12 *I returned and saw under the sun that -- The race is not to the swift, Nor the battle to the strong, Nor bread to the wise, Nor riches to men of understanding, Nor favor to men of skill; But time and chance happen to them all. ¹² For man also does not know his time: Like fish taken in a cruel net, Like birds caught in a snare, So the sons of men are snared in an evil time, When it falls suddenly upon them.*

This is what you could call God's will of determination. Some have called it His will of decree. This is God's overarching sovereignty that guides everything from the movement of molecules to the gliding of the galaxies. It includes every act of every human and angel, good and evil. It includes all the good and the bad, the suffering and the joy, the crime and the peace, the growth and the destruction. God is finally in absolute control.

Ephesians 1:11 *In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose*

of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will,

Not only can we not change God's plan, we can never know it and fully understand it from our position in it. We are travellers in the landscape and do not get to see the whole map.

Ecclesiastes 8:16 - 9:1 *When I applied my heart to know wisdom and to see the business that is done on earth, even though one sees no sleep day or night, ¹⁷ then I saw all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. For though a man labors to discover it, yet he will not find it; moreover, though a wise man attempts to know it, he will not be able to find it. For I considered all this in my heart, so that I could declare it all: that the righteous and the wise and their works are in the hand of God. People know neither love nor hatred by anything they see before them.*

There is a second kind of will in God, and you could call it His will of desire. This is God's will seen from how things ought to be.

Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. (Gen 6:5-6)

This is what God commands man to do. This is what God requires from men. For example, He commands that all men repent, because He wants all to be saved. God is always stating His will of desire in the form of commands and principles in the Scripture.

Now the question we always wrestle with is, why does God in His will of determination allow things which contradict His will of desire? We don't have all the answers to that. But we know that God has seen fit to include things He hates, things which violate His desires, because of where this is all ultimately leading. His ultimate plan is more desirable to Him, so that He includes things that He Himself hates. For example, did God desire His Son to be murdered? No. But did God desire that we be saved? Yes. And so God included in His will, what He did not approve of, his Son being killed, so that many could be saved, and God would be glorified.

Now God's will of desire for you and me what He desires for us, and his will of determination as to what he causes and permits to happen to us, is not known to us.

And here is where we go wrong. We believe that if God has a will of direction for us, we must find out what that will is before making any decisions. We reason like this: if God has a plan for my life, then I must find out what that plan is. But that isn't true. Simply because God has a plan does not mean that He necessarily has any intention of sharing it with you. The book of Job certainly teaches us that God may never share with you what His plan is or was.

When we are trying to find out what God's secret will is, we end up obsessing about decisions, paranoid that we'll fall off the tightrope of God's perfect will for our lives. We end up abdicating responsibility. But the fact is, He hasn't told you, because He doesn't expect you to know it.

Deuteronomy 29:29 *"The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.*

So what role then do our decisions make?

II. Man's Responsibility Influences and Shapes Events

Ecclesiastes 10:8-9 *He who digs a pit will fall into it, And whoever breaks through a wall will be bitten by a serpent. ⁹ He who quarries stones may be hurt by them, And he who splits wood may be endangered by it.*

Some people incorrectly reason, if God is so sovereign, then it doesn't matter what I do. Whether I go left or right, it doesn't matter. No, the Bible says your decisions do matter. If you dig a pit, you can fall into it. If you break through a wall with a snake in it, you can be bitten. If you split wood, you can be injured. In other words, your actions have consequences. The Bible wouldn't be filled with commands to act one way and not another, to live one way and not another, if it didn't matter. It does matter.

Remember the New Testament warning:

Galatians 6:7 ¶ *Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.*

Your actions matter. They will bring consequences now, later and in eternity.

Now, does God know you will make them? Yes. Is He sovereign over them? Yes. Does He allow you to make bad ones? Yes. Does that mean He doesn't care or that it doesn't matter? No. Freedom of choice is an enormous and weighty privilege and responsibility. That you have the opportunity to shape your eternal rewards or your eternal loss is a mighty thing to grasp.

So if my decisions do matter in a world controlled by God, and yet God is not going to reveal to me His special plan for my life, what must I do?

1. Seek Wisdom For Your Decisions

11 Wisdom is good with an inheritance, And profitable to those who see the sun. 12 For wisdom is a defense as money is a defense, But the excellence of knowledge is that wisdom gives life to those who have it. (Ecc 7:11-12)

Here is a profoundly important principle. The Bible does not tell us to seek God's plan for our lives directly. It tells us to seek wisdom over and over again. What does that tell you about the way God wants you to make decisions? God does not want you to read the stars, the card, the entrails of a cat or to look for sky-writing. God wants you to get wisdom. That is, God wants you to think like He thinks, so that you will decide like He decides.

God's people are to make decisions with wisdom. We are not to wait for signs, open or closed doors, whims, impressions, intuitions, wet or dry fleeces, random Bible verses, peace or lack of peace. We are to firstly, and primarily seek wisdom. As a way of life, we are to be seeking wisdom.

Let me give you a New Testament text so that you can see what this looks like:

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. ² 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.*

How do you test or prove what is God's good and acceptable and perfect will? By giving yourself entirely to Him everyday. By loving Him with your heart, soul and mind. By forsaking the world and its ways and allowing your mind to be transformed.

Taking in the Scriptures. Seeing what they say about all of life. Meditating on them, memorising them. Learning to love what God loves and hate what He hates. If God says yes about something, then its yes. If He says no, then its no. Where God does not say yes or no, He wants you to use your sanctified preferences.

A.W. Tozer: "The many choices that we Christians must make from day to day involve only four

kinds of things: Those concerning which God has said an emphatic no; those about which He has said an equally emphatic yes; those concerning which He wants us to consult our own sanctified preferences; and those few and rare matters about which we cannot acquire enough information to permit us to make intelligent decisions and which for that reason require some special guidance from the Lord to prevent us from making serious mistakes."

This is the way that God guarantees that we live for His glory. You see, if God was just a dispensing machine to give us directions, if He were just an insurance policy to protect us from making wrong choices, we could remain pretty self-centred. God gives you directions, you do them and you ignore Him. But this way, God says – you must know Me. When you know and love Me, you will decide correctly. When you do this, what will you find out? Will you find out God's plan for your life in advance? No. You will find out God's revealed will in His Word. You will find out His will of desire.

And guess what: that's all He expects you to do. He does not require you to find out in advance the name of your spouse-to-be, or where you will live in 10 years. He expects you to know Him and love Him, so that in every one of your decisions, you have a pretty clear idea of what constitutes biblical wisdom.

You see, God would actually be a sneaky kind of God if He required that you know His will of direction for your life but then kept it hidden from you, and then disciplined you for getting it wrong. But God is not sneaky. All God wants you to know, He has revealed in His Word. And it is enough, 2 Peter 1:3 tells us for all of life and godliness.

Gathering wisdom can include studying the Bible for all it says on a matter – precepts, principles, examples. It involves getting godly counsel from other wise and godly Christians, reading what other wise and godly Christians now dead have already said. What you're doing is getting yourself into a place where as close as possible you're desiring what God desires. You exclude what is sinful, disobedient, or unwise as a choice. If it violates any kind of command, priority or wisdom in the Word, it is not God's will.

2. Make Dependent Decisions

Ecclesiastes 11:1-6 *Cast your bread upon the waters, For you will find it after many days. ² Give a serving to seven, and also to eight, For you do not know what evil will be on the earth. ³ If the clouds are full of rain, They empty themselves upon the earth; And if a tree falls to the south or the north, In the place where the tree falls, there it shall lie. ⁴ He who observes the wind will not sow, And he who regards the clouds will not reap. ⁵ ¶ As you do not know what is the way of the wind, Or how the bones grow in the womb of her who is with child, So you do not know the works of God who makes everything. ⁶ ¶ In the morning sow your seed, And in the evening do not withhold your hand; For you do not know which will prosper, Either this or that, Or whether both alike will be good.*

Cast your bread upon the waters, give a serving to seven or eight, sow your seed, these speak of action. Solomon says the one always observing the wind doesn't sow. You don't know the future, and you aren't required to know the future. So stop fretting about possible mistakes. If you have gathered all the wisdom you can, and have asked God for wisdom, the next thing you must do is make a decision. Act. Choose. Move.

Make that appointment. Send in that CV. Start that business. Pick the phone and call that godly young lady. Stop waiting for writing in the sky. Study the Word. Get wisdom. And then when you can see that your decision will not violate any wisdom, it seems wise, then do something. Do what you want.

You say, "that doesn't sound very spiritual." "On the surface it appears more spiritual to seek God's leading than just to go ahead and do the obvious thing. But it is not. If God gave you a watch would you honor Him more by asking Him for the time of day or by consulting the watch? If God gave a sailor a compass would the sailor please God more by kneeling in a frenzy of prayer to persuade God to show him which way to go or by steering according to the compass?

Except for those things that are specifically commanded or forbidden, it is God's will that we be free to exercise our own intelligent choice. The shepherd will lead the sheep but he does not wish to decide which tuft of grass the sheep shall nibble each moment of the day. In almost everything touching our common life on earth God is pleased when we are pleased. He wills that we be as free as birds to soar and sing our Maker's praise without anxiety. God's choice for us may not be one but any one of a score of possible choices. The man or woman who is wholly and joyously surrendered to Christ cannot make a wrong choice. Any choice will be the right one." - Tozer

Augustine put it this way: Love God, and do what you want.

There is nothing more spiritual than to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit of wisdom, to be allowing the Word of Christ dwell richly in you with all wisdom, and gaining the mind of Christ. That is spiritual. There is nothing spiritual about doing nothing and blaming it on God.

God wants us to know His will of desire, and then get out there and make decisions. And he wants us to do so wholeheartedly.

Ecclesiastes 9:10 *Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going.*

The people who get out there and risk for God are the ones who experience the hand of God working mightily in their lives. You say, "God doesn't seem real to me." When last did you cast your bread upon the waters. When last did you strike up a conversation with someone to see if the Lord might not be working in that person's heart? When last did you give another Christian a phone call to see if God might not use you in his or her life? When last did you risk giving in a generous way, to see if the Lord makes good on His promise to supply all your needs in Christ Jesus? When last did you step out to see if you could write something or make something or say something or do something for the Lord? When last did you investigate the idea of starting a ministry in this church? When last did you take the chance of being trained further? When last did you look to see how the Lord might want to use you in business for His glory?

God needs an army of people gaining wisdom like bees gaining nectar and then moving. He does not need a crowd of people with hands in their pockets saying, "We're just waiting for the Lord's leading on our lives."

Make decisions. Be diligent. And finish what you start. Don't become a person who is either too impatient to do something well, or someone who is always nostalgic about the past.

Ecclesiastes 7:8-10 *The end of a thing is better than its beginning; The patient in spirit is better than the proud in spirit. ⁹ Do not hasten in your spirit to be angry, For anger rests in the bosom of fools. ¹⁰ Do not say, "Why were the former days better than these?" For you do not inquire wisely concerning this.*

And here's what happens. When believers make decisions using God-given wisdom, God promises to direct. He doesn't promise to then reveal to you His will of direction. He promises to lead and guide you into His determined will. His will of direction happens as you make decisions in wisdom.

Proverbs 16:9 ⁹ *A man's heart plans his way, But the LORD directs his steps.*

Proverbs 19:21 *There are many plans in a man's heart, Nevertheless the LORD's counsel -- that will stand.*

Psalms 37:23 *The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD, And He delights in his way.*

So does it matter what I do? Yes. God is always urging us to obey Him, so that it might be well with us. The more we conform to God's will of desire, the better it will be for us. If we choose sin, God isn't taken by surprise or thwarted.

This is how God shepherds us. Not with fleeces, visions, impressions, peace, open or closed doors. He shepherds us by telling us what He desires. The more we do that, the more we experience the good that He promised. The less we do that, the less we experience it. Either way, He is sovereign over all our choices. And either way, he is not going to reveal to you His plan for you ahead of your decisions. God shepherds you as you make decisions, not as you hang around waiting for Him to make the decision for you.

You see, seeking wisdom, and then making wise decisions takes two things: it takes diligent devotion, to gather the knowledge, speak to others, pray that God would help you to understand things clearly, and then it takes courage – to go ahead and make a decision based on godly wisdom. In other words, the enemy of good, God-pleasing decision making is laziness and fear. We are too lazy to gather wisdom as a way of life, and we are too afraid to take responsibility for our decisions, jump out and see what God does. So we become timid, and even cowardly about making decisions. We want perfect choices all the time, so we retreat. And very often, we just wait. We don't make any decisions. And from that place of passivity, we say we are waiting on the Lord, and trusting Him to tell us what to do. And some Christians end up doing very little, while they keep waiting for a form of guidance God has not promised to give.

The year ahead will be the same as the last in this respect: God will meticulously govern every event that takes place. The year ahead may be different in this respect: you may influence the outcome of events by seeking wisdom, and then diligently making dependent decisions.