

A wooden signpost with three directional arrows in a forest. The signpost is made of a vertical wooden post with three horizontal wooden planks attached. Each plank has a hand-painted arrow pointing in a different direction: left, right, and down. The wood is weathered and shows signs of use. The background is a blurred forest scene with green foliage and brown tree trunks.

The World of Choice

Ted Sleeper

TIDINGS BOOKLET SERIES

*The World
of Choice*

Ted Sleeper

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PREFACE

A Word to Young People

You have important decisions to make in your life. The decisions you make are affected by the kind of person you are. The decisions you make also affect the kind of person you will be.

This book is devoted to exploring the issue of choice: Why we have the power of choice, the kinds of choices we can make, how God sees these choices and responds to them. The decisions we make often reflect what we really value deep inside; they can also shape the kind of person we ultimately become.

As you read through this material, talk about it with your friends. Share your thoughts and feelings with them. Talk about how what you are reading can affect, and perhaps, change your life. This is the challenge of this book!

CHAPTER 1

The World God Created In The Beginning

The World As God Intended It: Genesis 1:16-31

*Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our **image**, according to Our **likeness**; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in His image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.*

Then God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” And God said, “See, I have given you every herb that yields seed which is on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food. Also, to every beast of the earth, to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, in which there is life, I have given every green herb for food”; and it was so.

Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good. So the evening and the morning were the sixth day. (Gen 1:26-31)

Consider first what those bolded key words above mean. The word, “**likeness**” according to *Strong’s Bible dictionary* means “resemblance; concretely, a model, shape.” In other words, in some way we are meant to “resemble” or be a “model” of God! How? Fortunately, we are not left to guesswork. The key is found immediately following God’s creative declaration about image and likeness: Man was to have “dominion” over all God had created, that is, power and authority over all life on earth. As God had all power and authority over everything He had created, man was meant to “resemble” God in man’s rulership over all life on earth.

But notice that the first key word is not “likeness,” but “image.” The word “image” according to *Strong’s* means to “represent.” We see this often in the Old Testament where we read of Israel worshipping various idols. These idols were meant to represent or be an “image” of God. But how would man represent God? By manifesting in his actions the character and attributes of his Creator. This means man was created with the ability to manifest these attributes of Almighty God:

“...merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children to the third and the fourth generation.” (Exod 34:6-7)

In other words, man was intended to be a model or representation of God in all his behavior as ruler over the earth. God intended man to be part of His family!

When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained, what is man that You are mindful of him, and the son of man that You visit him? For You have made him a little lower than the angels, and You have crowned him with glory and honor. You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen—even the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea that pass through the paths of the seas. O LORD, our Lord, How excellent is Your name in all the earth! (Psa 8:3-9)

And what was the world like that God had created for man to rule over? Everything, including all life, was at peace and in good order. God’s will was being done and it showed in every plant and in every animal. Truly, everything was “very good”!

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play by the cobra’s hole, and the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper’s den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. (Isa 11:6-9)

This is the world that was, and this is the world that will yet be. Keep this vision in your thinking. This is place where God wants to take us, if we are willing.

Training Ground for Responsible Living: Genesis 2:15-17

Then the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” (Gen 2:15-17)

Why do animals obey God? Because they were created to follow out a specific set of behaviors. Unlike animals, though, we were not “programmed,” so why do we obey God? Consider this illustration that is well understood by most young people: Why do we go the speed limit when we see the Highway Patrol? Here “fear” is the key factor because we understand the force of law in our lives. Here is how the Apostle Paul explains it:

But we know that the law is good if one uses it lawfully, knowing this: that the law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless and insubordinate, for the ungodly and for sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, for fornicators, for

sodomites, for kidnappers, for liars, for perjurers, and if there is any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine. (1 Tim 1:8-10)

We can all appreciate how the fear of the law, as well as recognition of consequences and risks, can moderate and guide our behavior. But there is another force at work in us that can move us to do things: **desire**. Why do you ask someone you like and want to get to know out on a date? No law is needed here! It is our desire—something we want—that motivates our behavior. And in these kinds of situations, our behavior is based on choice, not on compulsion.

We see the power of choice based on desire especially in the Bible with respect to God:

Sacrifice and offering You did not desire; My ears You have opened. Burnt offering and sin offering You did not require. Then I said, “Behold, I come; In the scroll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do Your will, O my God, and Your law is within my heart.” (Psa 40:6-8)

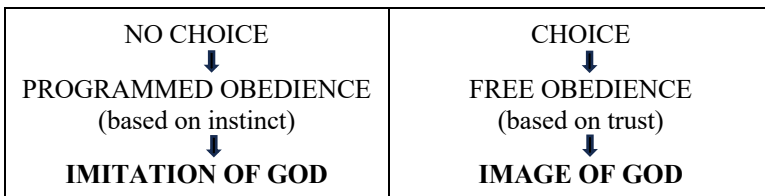
Can animals show *real* love, compassion, faithfulness (i.e., the character of God)? An animal’s instinctual responses may imitate God’s character, but these are programmed responses (including, for example, a dog’s “faithfulness”).

What is missing from animals? **The power of choice**. Real love, compassion, faithfulness can only exist when it is based on choice, not bio-chemical programming... or coercion or force.

When God created man in His image, it required two things for this image to become reality:

A Place: There needed to be a place where man’s potential could be developed. This was the purpose of the Garden. This was meant to be God’s School where man could learn the ways of God.

The Freedom to Choose: If *real* compassion, love, faithfulness was to be developed, man had to be free to choose this because he wanted to, not because he had to or was forced to or was programmed to do this. The chart below helps sum up the difference between humans and animals:



A Small Problem

Does one *have* to obey God? Consider the Divine problem: *Freedom to obey God also means the freedom to disobey*. To create beings that were more than mere robots, God had to allow the emergence of another will, one contrary to His own, and therefore the possibility of *moral evil* coming into His Creation.

Why, then, should one obey God? A world of choice also means **a choice of worlds**. Ponder well the outcome of the choices we have. Which world would you like to live in?

OUR CHOICE OF WORLDS

| <p>Fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23)</p> | <p>Works of the Flesh (Gal 5:19-21)</p> |
|--|---|
| <p>When you follow the desires of God, your lives will produce: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control... Those who belong to Christ Jesus have nailed the passions and desires of their sinful nature to his cross and crucified them there. (paraphrase)</p> | <p>When you follow the desires of the flesh, your lives will produce: sexual immorality, impure thoughts, eagerness for lustful pleasure, idolatry, use of mind-altering drugs, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, divisions, cliques, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other kinds of sin... Anyone living this sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God. (paraphrase)</p> |

CHAPTER 2

The World of Choice

The Serpent

Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, “Has God indeed said, you shall not eat of every tree of the garden?”

And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, ‘You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.’”

Then the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate. (Gen 3:1-6)

The Serpent’s argument is the archetype of every accusation that has ever been made against God and His ways. While this animal was morally incapable of understanding this, the Serpent, in one breath accused God of:

- lying (“you will not die”)
- deceiving (“God knows”)
- being selfish (“will be like God”)

And these implied accusations raised three critical questions that had to be answered, now, by the woman, and later, by all her offspring:

| Genesis 3:5 - The Serpent’s Questions (raised by his words) | Genesis 3:6 - The Woman’s Answer (implicit in her actions) |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does God really know what is best for me (in denying me this tree)? <i>How would you know this if He is a deceiver?</i> • Can I trust God to do what is best for me (or will He let me down)? <i>How can you trust Him if He lies to you?</i> • Do I want to trust God? <i>Why should you if He is so selfish?</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No! If God knew what was best for me, would He have denied me this tree? • No! If God is lying about the tree, how can I trust anything He says? • No! I want this tree too much: It is beautiful to look at, delicious to taste, and I can be as wise as God! |

The Consequences of Choice: Genesis 3:7-24

All choices have an outcome. The real question is: *Will it be the one I wanted or expected?* In Genesis 3:7-24 we have set before us the outcomes of the choice to eat of the fruit. Consider first their response when they disobeyed God and what it says about their internal feelings:

- **3:7** “they knew they were naked” => **SHAME**
 “made themselves coverings”
- **3:8** “hid themselves” => **GUILT**
- **3:9** “I was afraid” => **FEAR**

In one stroke, man ruined God’s world and brought an abrupt halt to God’s purpose with man and His earth. While God did not give up, several things did happen as a result of man’s choice:

- **3:16-19:** Painful labor (in childbirth and the field); disease, suffering; hardship, and death, all came into the world to restrain and limit the destructive evil that would now flow from man’s selfishness.
- **3:23-24:** God’s work to realize His purpose with man and this earth was now made much, much harder.

The Last Choice

Ponder deeply where man’s choice finally led him. What would you do with a world like this?

Now it came to pass, when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were born to them, that the sons of God saw the daughters of men, that they were beautiful; and they took wives for themselves of all whom they chose.

There were giants on the earth in those days, and also afterward, when the sons of God came in to the daughters of men and they bore children to them. Those were the mighty men who were of old, men of renown.

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.

The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. So God looked upon the earth, and indeed it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth. (Gen 6:1-2,4-6,11-12)

Sadly, some choices we make may be our last...

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them.

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

*Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. Therefore **God also gave them up to uncleanness**, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves...*

*And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, **God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting**; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them. (Rom 1:18-32)*

Consider in the following diagram the path that Paul maps out based on the choices we make. Notice how each poor decision takes us further away from the right path until finally we become hardened and refuse to change. Notice too that each choice in the wrong direction makes the work of God more and more difficult. Poor choices do not lock us into making more poor choices. We *can* change direction at any time; this is called “repentance.” It is just that the accumulating load of poor choices makes that “repentance” harder and harder.

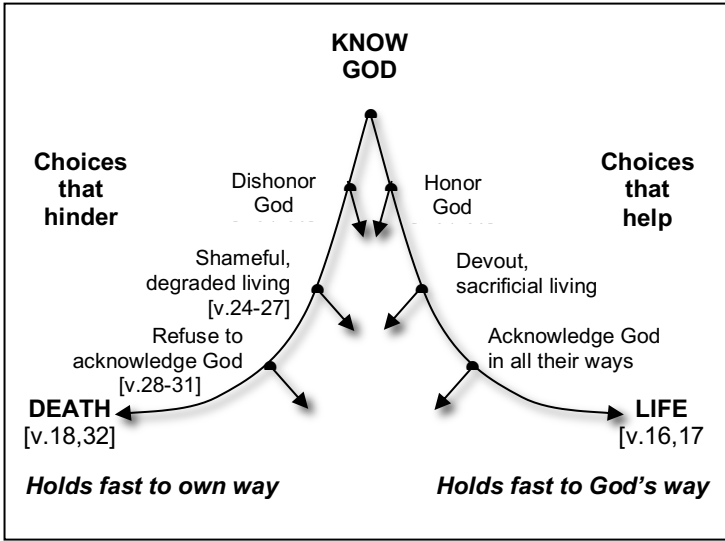


Figure 1: Our Choices

What God Doesn't Want

God doesn't want us to die as Peter reminds us: "The Lord is... not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Pet 3:9). And Paul agrees: "[God] desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (1 Tim 2:4). God really **does** want us to choose life!

"Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name" (Acts 15:14).

God is *still* seeking out men and women for His Name, people who *want* to belong to His Family, who *want* to be like Him, who deeply value His ways because they know they are the *best* ways. With *these* people, God works to develop those characteristics that will fit them to inherit the honor promised from the beginning of His creation.

What God Needs

What, then, does God want from us?

Therefore, beloved, looking forward to these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, without spot and blameless; and consider that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation—as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you,

You therefore, beloved, since you know this beforehand, beware lest you also fall from your own steadfastness, being led away with the error of the wicked; but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen. (2 Pet 3:14-15,17-18)

Simply put, God wants us to turn away from our old ways (repentance) and to begin making right choices.

CHAPTER 3

Anatomy of Poor Choices

We want to take a closer look at the nature and cause behind the poor choices we can make. Hopefully this will give us a better understanding of ourselves and a knowledge of what we can do to *not* make poor choices. We will first consider Bible examples of poor choices. We will follow this by summarizing the causes behind these poor choices and how we can avoid making them.

Case Studies of Poor Choices

Consider the following case studies given to us by God to help us understand more clearly what our choices arise from. While it might be easier to put before the reader extended quotes, I think it will be better for the reader to take out their Bibles and read the selections indicated. The questions that follow each case study will help the reader absorb the lessons in these Scriptures.

LOT (Genesis 13:9-13; 19:1-29)

Why did he choose the plain of Sodom?

Poor choices are often driven by the desires of our eyes—even in the face of obvious risk, and the prideful conviction we can handle any trouble.

Why did he stay?

His life had become comfortable, familiar.

Why did he move into Sodom?

Greater comfort, a more settled life. Perhaps also because two of his daughters had become engaged to be married into Sodomite families.

Why didn't he leave?

Peter tells us explicitly that Lot was tormented daily by the lawless behavior of the people he lived among (2 Pet 2:8), so this was not really such a perfect place to live in. But, once you begin to compromise, values and ideals you once held are less and less able to restrain you from more compromises. Each step Lot took toward Sodom made the next step easier and the reverse steps increasingly harder. Poor choices begin a slippery, downhill path of increasing compromises.

What happened to Lot?

Lot lost everything: flocks, herds, menservants, maidservants, possessions, even his wife! Why didn't Lot return to Abraham with his daughters and admit his foolishness? Poor choices can be very costly!

DAVID AND SAUL (1 Samuel 27:1-4,11-12; 29:1-7; 30:1-6)

Why did David flee?

David's faith failed; he came to fear Saul more than God. Even godly men and women can make poor choices. Poor choices and compromises can also begin with our failure to really trust God.

Did his life become easier because of this choice?

Saul was no longer in pursuit, but how does one live a lie easily among one's enemies? Poor choices always create more problems than they solve.

How did David's choice affect God's work with him?

David's choice made it harder for God to help him. Note the narrow escape from having to fight with the Philistines.

What did God have to do to deliver David from his poor choice?

To deliver David now required the use of a terrible experience he would never forget. Poor choices always make it harder for God to help you; sometimes God must use evil to deliver us from our choices.

DAVID AND BATHSHEBA (2 Samuel 11:1-17; 12:7-12)

What mistake did David make in this situation?

The roof in ancient times was a place for prayer and meditation. When David should have been looking up, he looked down. What we *see* very often exerts a powerful influence over us.

What common thing did David do after he acted on his poor decision?

David had no good choices, all ways out were compromises, so he made more poor choices to cover up the first. Poor choices often lead to denial and further poor, foolish choices, each one moving us further from God in an attempt to extricate ourselves from the first poor choice.

What consequence came as a result of David's choice?

David would have trouble for the rest of his life because of this poor choice. Poor choices can be like this, they can bring lasting bitterness, pain and trouble, or at a minimum, lasting scars as a reminder of one's foolishness.

For example, marriage to one who does not share our faith towards God will mean division, tension in our shared life; someone will lose, or both lose. Or again, sexual promiscuity can mean both physical and psychological scarring from STDs and possibly the inability to have children. Consequences such as this for those who are willing to trust God is always corrective, not destructive. *Only through consequences can God remove from His beloved those weaknesses that mar their growth in godliness.*

ACHAN (Joshua 7:1-26)**What did Achan do that he should not have done?**

Achan took valuables from the city of Jericho when God commanded all to be destroyed.

Why did Achan make this poor choice?

It was what he saw and coveted that caused the problem.

How might he have avoided making this choice?

As the wise man counseled, avoid the path that would require this choice: “Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of evil. Avoid it, do not travel on it; turn away from it and pass on” (Prov 4:14-15).

Who was caught up in the consequences of his choice?

Achan’s whole family suffered from his choice, including his little children. Compare today:

- Pregnancy outside of marriage: A child suffers from the lack of a stable home.
- Divorce: Children suffer from the lack of healthy role models and fractured loyalties, from guilt and/or anger, for a long time.
- Drug abuse: Children can be permanently damaged.

Our poor choices *can* hurt others, often permanently.

Is this fair?

Should God have made the world like this? Short answer: God didn’t. This is the world *we* chose. God can’t remove the consequences lest we become just a robot.

SOLOMON (1 Kings 11:1-8)**What did Solomon do?**

Solomon married many foreign women.

Why did he make this choice?

Was this because he sought political alliances with the nations around him to ensure the stability of his throne instead of trusting in his God?

What were the results of his choice?

Solomon laid a foundation for future trouble by disregarding God’s warning about “multiplying wives,” and “marrying foreign women.” Choices he made early in his life later destroyed him. The consequences of decisions are not always felt immediately, some may not appear for years, but by then we may be too ensnared by our sins to want to turn away.

Was anyone else affected by his choice?

Poor choices can lay a foundation for trouble that can affect many generations of those we care about. Josiah, who cleansed Judah from all the idols Solomon set up for his foreign wives was 15 generations down the kingly line!

Then the king defiled the high places that were east of Jerusalem, which were on the south of the Mount of Corruption, which Solomon king of Israel had built for Ashtoreth the abomination of the Sidonians, for Chemosh the abomination of the Moabites, and for Milcom the abomination of the people of Ammon. (2 Kgs 23:13)

ISRAEL IN THE WILDERNESS (Numbers 13:31-33; 14:1-4, 39-41)

Why do you think Israel made the decisions they did?

They didn't believe or trust God. The things they saw with their eyes were more compelling than all past work and evidence of the living God.

Why couldn't God work with their decisions?

Hebrews 3:7-19 makes it clear that God's people had departed from their God in their hearts because they had more interest in their *own* desires and plans. In the end, God had nothing in them to work with.

SUMMARY

With these examples, let's summarize the lessons they have set before us.

What are some of the causes of poor choices?

- **Ignorance - Deception**

God wants me to be happy, doesn't He? (ignorance of God's ways)

Thought I could handle it. (self-deceived)

Everyone is doing it; I don't see any problem with it. (other-deceived)

Teacher/parent/respected authority said it was okay. (other-deceived)

- **Disbelief - Distrust**

Didn't really believe God; thought I knew better. (little or no faith)

Wasn't really convinced God cared about me. (lack of trust)

- **Personal Needs**

Wanted to satisfy my own desires. (desire to have = covetousness)

Wanted to be like my friends/others. (desire to conform)

Wanted to get even for what someone did to me. (desire for revenge)

Wanted to get away from/forget all my problems. (desire to escape)

Didn't see any reason to change. (pride)

- **Lack of Self-Respect**

Didn't really matter, I'm just a loser anyway.

Other people are more valuable, smarter... so I should follow their lead.

Needed to feel valued and accepted by others, to be loved.

What kind of consequences might follow from poor choices?

Poor choices usually create more problems than they solve. They also begin to create a slippery path of compromise and, therefore, further poor choices (e.g., Lot, David). Poor choices can also be very costly, often creating lasting bitterness, trouble, or pain for oneself, but also for others who are innocent. This harm can last for generations, sometimes it is permanent (e.g., Achan, Solomon).

How can we recognize poor choices?

Poor choices may require us to redefine what God wants so we can move ahead with our plans. They also involve some kind of compromise between God and our own desires (e.g., David). Poor choices involve appeals to my flesh's desires and my pride; such appeals are always self-centered, not God or other-centered (e.g., Lot).

Why are poor choices often so easy to make?

It is very hard to resist things we feel we need or want.

How can we avoid making poor choices in our own life?

We need to avoid the circumstances that might confront us with poor choices! (Proverbs 4:23-27, 13-14.) We also need to be willing to take a risk with God and trust Him despite our reservations and fears.

Can we recover from poor choices? Why not always?

Yes, but not always. Think of Lot when he decided to move into Sodom, or David when he went after Bathsheba and had her husband killed in battle. Judas is a clear example of someone who made some very poor choices.

Our poor choices can make it much harder for God to help us. Sometimes only evil circumstances brought on by God can reach us and turn us back to Him. Some choices, though, may even make it impossible for God to save us. Think of Judas. In Romans 1:18-32 Paul recounts the behavior of God's people who would not turn from their increasingly evil ways. Put simply, God can't help us if we refuse to turn back to Him.

What can we do to recover from poor choices?

We must humble ourselves under the mighty, loving, hand of God, accepting His discipline, and resting in His Mercy. What is impossible for man, *is* possible for God. When we truly turn back to Him, He can work mightily in our lives!

CHAPTER 4

Anatomy of Good Choices

We look now at the opposite of our last chapter, at those who made good choices and what moved them to make these choices.

Case Studies of Good Choices

As in our last chapter, we will consider first examples given to us by God of men and women who made good choices. Again, the reader is urged to read first the Bible passages cited, and then to consider the questions asked to help the reader absorb the lessons in these Scriptures.

NOAH (Genesis 6:5-12, 22; Hebrews 11:7)

What are some other possible responses Noah could have made to God's request?

Noah could have re-interpreted what God wanted to make the command into something more acceptable to his friends and neighbors.

Did Noah fully understand the importance of obedience to God?

Wisdom begins with a willingness to "fear" God's counsel and commandments even when we do not fully understand the importance of these commands due to our lack of experience.

Why, then, did Noah respond as he did?

Noah lived in an evil and violent world and surely did not want it to continue. He saw the effect on his family. But most importantly, Noah really believed that God meant what He said and that He would fulfill His word as difficult as it was to believe how this could happen.

ABRAHAM AND UR (Genesis 12:1-4; Hebrews 11:8-16)

Ur was a major port city, much like San Francisco, Portland, Los Angeles, or New York. It had theaters, exciting religions, comfortable housing with indoor plumbing. It was progressive, sophisticated, cultured. The father of Abraham had probably settled into a very comfortable life.

Why would Abraham leave such a city?

Abraham trusted God. He valued far more what God had promised, even though he sacrificed a very comfortable existence in Ur. Good choices can be costly to our natural desire for peace, security and comfort, but when compared with the value of what God has promised, such sacrifices are worth it.

After Abraham saw the poor alternative in the land of Canaan, why would he stick with his decision, especially since God made it clear he would not inherit this land during his lifetime?

He valued a place and a world where God's ways would always be done, where men and woman would rejoice in living and behaving according to God's character and ways (i.e., kindness, compassion, restraint, forgiveness, faithfulness and righteous judgment).

These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them. (Heb 11:13-16)

DANIEL'S FRIENDS (Daniel 3)

What would you have done faced with this choice (v 4-6)?

Aren't we supposed to obey the powers God places over us? (See Romans 13:1-5.) Weren't other Jews obeying the king's command? God does know our hearts, so does our outward behavior really matter that much?

Yes, God does know what is in our hearts, but He wants to see it reflected in our actions and in our obedience. Read slowly through Hebrews 11 and notice that in every case those who are being commended all demonstrated their faith by their actions.

But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.

But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?

For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also. (Jas 2:16,20,26)

So why didn't they compromise?

Faithfulness to God in every circumstance was more important than life itself. And it was this faithfulness that God was pleased to bless! Good choices are always choices *not* to compromise one's loyalty and faithfulness to God.

HEZEKIAH AND THE ASSYRIANS (Isaiah 36:1-21)

Consider the difficulties Hezekiah and his people faced in choosing to resist the Assyrians:

- Assyrian military tactics were designed to shock and horrify.
- Assyria's track record in the land of Israel was one of success (Isa 36:18-20; 2 Kgs 19:12).
- The Assyrian offer that would preserve their lives would have been a powerful challenge to the words and promise of an invisible God.

The people were faced with circumstances that must have seemed impossible to surmount. There was no remedy, no escape, nothing but the terrifying possibility that all they knew would collapse around them and they would be taken away as slaves.

Why, then, did they choose to trust God?

They had just witnessed the power of their invisible God in the healing of Hezekiah from a mortal disease (2 Kgs 20:1-7). This helped them to gain confidence that God had the power to deliver them from the Assyrians.

ISRAEL (Exodus 4:29-31; 5:1-6, 20-21)**Wasn't Israel's initial decision to trust God a good decision?**

Israel assumed that once they trusted God everything would improve, but it didn't, their troubles only increased!

Why would God do this, put them into positions of doubt, perplexity, and vulnerability?

Real trust and faith in God isn't learned in smooth and easy circumstances. Some choices to trust God have to be made when all the circumstances shout against it.

ISRAEL IN THE WILDERNESS (Exodus 15:22-24; 16:2-3)**APOSTLE PAUL (2 Corinthians 11:23-27)****JERUSALEM'S JEWISH CHRISTIANS (Hebrews 10:32-34)**

Read through each of these accounts carefully. Though actual details vary, all these people had the same kind of experience after they chose to obey God. They all experienced evil and painful situations.

Given their experiences, why would anyone in their position want to continue to make the choice to obey God?

The answer to this question is not easy. Some have struggled with this question all their lives. What we are told about the Son of God in Hebrews 5:7-9 may be helpful. Now consider the Divine commentaries on:

Israel (Deuteronomy 8:2-5)

Paul (2 Corinthians 12:7-10)

Jerusalem Christians (Hebrews 10:35-39)

The Corinthian Believers (1 Corinthians 10:13)

All of these continued to make the choice to obey God because they valued what God offered them more than present comfort and possessions. Good choices are not a guarantee we will never experience problems or difficulties. Even the Son of God needed the discipline of evil circumstances to develop the righteousness of character and life God desired. We shouldn't be surprised, then, to find other children of God needing the same discipline. But good choices *are* an assurance that we will be spared those experiences that bring lasting bitterness and regret. In this assurance there is much peace of heart and mind. The fruit of our choice to trust God is always ultimately joy, thanksgiving, and peace.

And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: "My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the LORD loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives." If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? But if you are without chastening, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate and not sons.

Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live? For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed best to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. (Heb 12:5-11)

SUMMARY

How can we recognize a good choice?

Good choices always involve a decision to trust God, and then, because we trust Him, to obey and submit to the discipline of His Hand. Good choices are always choices *not* to compromise loyalty and faithfulness to God.

Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths. Do not be wise in your own eyes; Fear the LORD and depart from evil. It will be health to your flesh, and strength to your bones. (Prov 3:5-8)

Good choices can sometimes be costly.

Good choices can be costly to our natural desire for peace and security and comfort in our lives. Read again the examples set before us in Hebrews 11 and see how peace and security was not the outcome of their good choices.

Why, then, make good choices?

Good choices are always better than bad ones: God *always* blesses the choice to trust Him, even though it may not appear that way at first. Good choices are not necessarily a guarantee against the experience and discipline of evil, but they are an assurance that God will work through these experiences for our lasting good. They are also the assurance that we will be spared those experiences that bring lasting bitterness and regret.

Why are good choices sometimes so difficult to make?

Some choices to trust God have to be made when all the circumstances shout against it. Also, God's blessings that follow good choices don't always follow immediately, sometimes we must wait for those blessings. And remember, good choices are not a guarantee we will avoid the experience and discipline of evil circumstances. But we do have the assurance that God *will* cause all things to work together for our eternal good, the creation of one fit to be God's son or daughter eternally:

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?

Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: "For Your sake we are killed all day long; We are accounted as sheep for the slaughter."

Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:28-39)

How can we learn to make good choices?

Set the course of your life in the right direction *now*. Take a chance on God; put yourself at risk in small things, especially when you are young. Walk with those who make good choices; learn from their examples and mark the outcome of their faith.

CHAPTER 5

Making The Best Choice

Wisdom

Wouldn't choices be easier if we knew in advance their outcome? This is what wisdom gives to us! *Wisdom is the ability to see the end of a journey, and all the road between.*

But who can possibly know the outcome of a decision, especially ones that may affect our whole life? Proverbs (as does all the Bible) gives a very definite answer: *“The LORD gives wisdom, and from His mouth comes knowledge and understanding” (Prov 2:6).*

Learning the Wisdom of God

Consider the following passages:

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov 9:10).

“The fear of the LORD is the instruction in wisdom” (Prov 15:33).

Why is this true? Because the fear of the LORD is an attitude of mind towards God that so honors and values what He has to say that we willingly listen and follow His counsel.

The Blessing of Wisdom

For those who do seek His wisdom and retain His instruction, there is a special blessing: *“You will walk safely in your way... your foot will not stumble. When you lie down, you will not be afraid” (Prov 3:21-26).*

The Call of Wisdom

*“How long will you who are **simple** love your simple ways? How long will **mockers** delight in mockery and **fools** hate knowledge? Repent at my rebuke! Then I will pour out my thoughts to you, I will make known to you my teachings. (Prov 1:22-23 NIV).*

Those Who Make Choices

The Simple: Has no clue which way is best, just drifts along with the crowd taking whatever life offers. Senseless, directionless, purposeless, easily deceived and easily led.

The Scoffer: Knows his way is the only right way, hence belittles others for their “stupidity.” The word “arrogant” fits this person well.

The Fool: Doesn't care whether his way is right as long as it benefits him; he has grown fat from the pursuit of his own pleasures. Self-assured, he is confident, impervious to correction.

The Wise: Cares about doing what is right, therefore he or she listens willingly and intently to counsel and instruction, to correction and reproof. Things go well in this person's life because he/she is preserved from the evil of foolish and thoughtless choices.

Which one will we become? The choices we make throughout our life will determine this.

Making The Best Choice

God's Special Gift

We have considered that we are able to make choices because of the special gift God has given to all: *the gift of freewill*. Unlike animals, we can choose to follow God or our own will. We have considered good and poor choices and how this affects the purpose God wishes to work out in us. Now, we want to look at making the best choice.

A View of Our World

Step back for a moment and look at the world in which we make our choices. We looked at this already, but we need to keep this picture in our minds when we consider making the best choice:

Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. (Gal 5:19-21)

This is the world that flows out of the heart of man, from hearts that follow their own desires (Mark 7:18-23). But, is this our world or is this something *in* our world? Sometimes I think we get the picture all wrong: We see our world as black, ugly, infested everywhere with evil. It isn't. There is also good and beauty in our world. Some of the qualities mentioned in Galatians 5:22-23 are also found in our world: "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."

But here is problem:

The voice said, "Cry out!" And he said, "What shall I cry?" "All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower

fades, because the breath of the LORD blows upon it; Surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever.” (Isaiah 40:6-8)

Do you see the problem? Even the best and most beautiful of this world will ultimately wither and perish.

And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.

Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands—that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. (Eph 2:1-3,11-12)

This is our only birthright, the world into which we are born... a world without hope, a world without God.

The First Best Choice

Jesus answered and said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born?”

Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” (John 3:3-6)

This is where the Father’s work really begins, at the birth of His new son or daughter. This birth is “from above” because it comes from God. It is through “the spirit” because the force that changes our thinking comes from God, it is His Word which reveals to us His way of thinking. Our response? To “die” to our old way of life in the waters of baptism, and then arise to the new life shown us in Jesus Christ. This is *not* a second birth from “the flesh.” As Peter says, we have been “born again, not of corruptible seed, but incorruptible, through the Word of God which lives and abides forever” (1 Pet 1:23-25).

It is critical to realize that baptism isn’t just about becoming more religious or dedicated to the things of God. It is all of that, but it is also about becoming part of a whole different world—in this case the world of *life*:

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life. (John 5:24)

Important Lesson About Baptism

Now consider King Saul:

- 1 Samuel 10:6, 10-11 A new beginning. A new person... just like at baptism.
- 1 Samuel 13:8-14 But... Saul was not prepared to wait on God.
- 1 Samuel 15:13, 20-21 Saul didn't take God at His Word, he compromised.

Baptism is *not* discipleship; it is only our first best choice. It is our vow that we want to make the best choices for the rest of our life. If it is not followed by many more best choices, then our new beginning will be stillborn like Saul's.

Recovering From Poor Choices

What if you foolishly make poor choices? David is a model for recovering from poor choices; we can learn much from him:

*Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. When I kept silent, my bones grew old through my groaning all the day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was turned into the drought of summer. **I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden.** I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," and You forgave the iniquity of my sin. (Psa 32:1-5)*

Consider also 2 Samuel 12:1-15 when David took Bathsheba as his wife after having her husband killed. What can we learn from David?

- It is vital that we stop making compromises and trying to cover up our past poor choices.
- We must fully acknowledge our failure to God.
- We must then accept the consequences and God's discipline through these consequences through which God seeks to help us.
- Finally, we must make a new beginning.

This is what baptism is all about!

What God Needs From Us

*When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, "I am Almighty God; **walk before Me and be blameless.**" (Gen 17:1)*

“**walk before me**” means to walk in God's presence, as God directs, instead of going on our own journey.

“**and be blameless**” carries the meaning of completeness of parts, being whole without blemish or injury. Does this mean we can't or won't make mistakes?

Clearly, this was not true with Abraham when he lied to Abimelech after God spoke with him. What God wanted was for Abraham to walk before Him without wavering and doubt, to trust Him fully and completely. This is something that took time as God worked with Abraham, but God's work did succeed:

*who, **contrary to hope, in hope believed**, so that he became the father of many nations, according to what was spoken, "So shall your descendants be." And not being weak in faith, he **did not consider his own body**, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), **and the deadness of Sarah's womb. He did not waver** at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore "it was accounted to him for righteousness." Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead. (Rom 4:18-24)*

This is what the best choice is always about: It is about choosing to trust God fully and completely in *all* our ways. So important is this to God that He is willing to count our trust as our *righteousness* before Him!

And trusting God is *not* an intellectual exercise, as James so clearly declares: "For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also" (Jas 2:26). Notice carefully what he is telling us. He equates faith with "the body," and our works to "the spirit," the breath, that gives us life. In other words, our *deeds* make our faith alive, not vice versa! If there are no works, our faith is a dead faith.

What God Will Do

*Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for **it is God who works in you** both to will and to do for His good pleasure. (Phil 2:12-13)*

God works *with* us and *in* us, as we work with Him. He helps to transform our natural, self-centered desires and actions into selfless, godly desires and actions.

And when we do struggle? God can and does forgive us, and He can send help to us through His Son.

For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Heb 4:15-16)

The Passion of God

See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil, in that I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments, that you may live and multiply; and the LORD your God will bless you in the land which you go to possess. ...I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; (Deut 30:15-16,19)

This is God’s passion, His intense desire, that we would choose to love Him that we might have life, the truest and best life, *His* life. So you are left with only one real question:

Do you want to make this choice?

See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil, in that I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments, that you may live and multiply; and the LORD your God will bless you in the land which you go to possess. ... I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; (Deut 30:15-16,19)

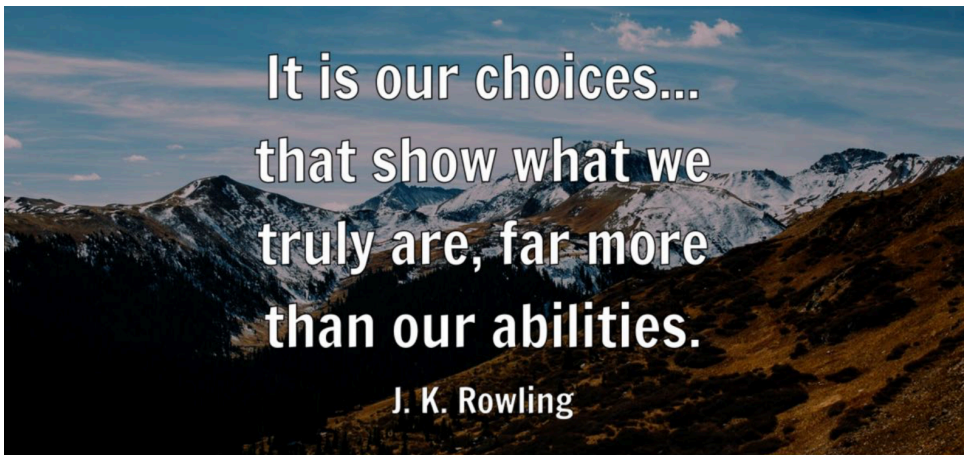


Figure 2