

The background of the cover is a photograph of a weathered wooden signpost. The signpost has a vertical post with several horizontal wooden planks attached to it. The planks are arranged in a way that they point in various directions, some straight out, some angled upwards, and some crossed over each other. The wood is aged and has a natural, light brown color. The background is a cloudy sky with soft, diffused light, and some dark green foliage is visible at the bottom.

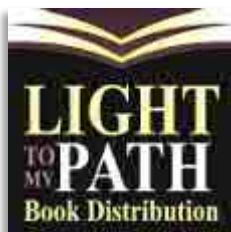
The Choices We Make

The Freedom to
Choose and the
Impact of our De-
cisions

F. Wayne MacLeod

The Choices We Make

Our Freedom to Choose and the Impact of our Decisions



F. Wayne MacLeod

Light To My Path Book Distribution

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Preface

One of the most basic freedoms God has given us is the freedom of choice. This reflects His own character, for He is a God of choice and commitment. We must never, however, take this freedom lightly. The choice of Adam and Eve brought sin into this world, and we have suffered the consequences ever since.

The decisions we make can have a dramatic impact on the shape and texture of our lives. The course we take as a result can radically alter our experiences and destiny.

Because the decisions we make are so important, the Lord has spared no effort to help us in our choices. He has given us His Word and His Holy Spirit to be our guide. He oversees our decisions and will graciously forgive us when we fall short of His purpose.

The God who gave us this freedom, however, now calls us to exercise our privilege. He who chooses us, now asks us to choose Him. Indecision is not an option. Jesus declared that the one who is not with Him was against Him (Luke 11:23). He told the church in Laodicea that because they wavered between cold and hot, he would spit them out of His mouth (Revelation 3:15).

It is all too easy for us to sit back and let the Christian life happen. The reality of the matter, however, is that if we want to grow in our relationship with God, there are decisions we will need to make. While maturity in our walk with the Lord Jesus cannot be accomplished apart from the work of His Spirit, the decisions and commitments we make will also have a powerful impact on our fellowship and intimacy with Him.

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As with any topical study, this is not the whole picture. Of course, there is more to the Christian life than the decisions we make. I believe firmly that I need God's Spirit to lead and direct me in the things I do. Without the work of Jesus Christ none of our decisions would ultimately matter. I also believe that were it not for the fact that God first loved me, I would never have chosen to love Him. He takes the initiative, but I must also respond to Him. Isn't this how it is in any relationship? I may choose to love my wife, but she also chooses to love me in return.

Because God has chosen to love us and reveal Himself to us, we now have the privilege of responding in kind to Him. God has laid out before us a wonderful purpose for our lives. He now expects us to open our heart and accept that purpose. For many years, I wrestled with being a pastor. God continually placed me in pastoral situations. I remember the time I finally said to the Lord, "Okay Lord, I accept this role." From that time forward things changed in my heart. God gave me a deeper heart for His people, and I found that wherever I went He placed people who needed pastoral concern and care. God had chosen a task for me, but I needed to willingly accept that role before I could experience the fullness of His blessing on it. I needed to choose what He had chosen for me.

In essence, the Christian life is about surrender to the will and purpose of Christ. What is surrender? Surrender is a willing and free choice to accept God's purpose for my life. This is what God is calling us to do. He is asking us to choose Him because He has first chosen us.

In this study we will examine what the Bible has to say about our freedom to choose and reveal what Scripture has to say about the choices and decisions we make. May the Lord be pleased to use this

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study to enable us to make the decisions necessary so that we can become all that God intends us to be for His glory.

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Chapter 1

Choice as a Function of the Soul

The question of the human will is one that has been discussed from the beginning of time. Ancient Greek philosophers debated the definition and limits of the human will. Early church theologians also examined this question from a Biblical perspective. It is not my purpose to explore these historical arguments. As a devotional writer, my goal is to simply consider the nature of the human will and its impact on our walk and relationship with God.

Let's begin with some definitions. The Bible teaches that human beings have a soul. The soul is distinct from the physical body but makes up who we are as individuals. The soul is that part of us that is capable of emotion, reason, and commitment. Let's consider what Scripture has to say about this.

The Emotions and Passions of the Soul

In Genesis 34 we have an example of the feelings of Shechem for Jacob's daughter Dinah:

[8] But Hamor spoke with them, saying, "The soul of my son Shechem longs for your daughter. Please give her to him to be his wife. (Genesis 34:8)

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Notice that Shechem's soul longed for Dinah. In other words, he felt a deep attraction and passion for her in his soul.

Jesus felt deep emotion in His soul as He approached of His death. Speaking about the time Jesus spent with His disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, the gospel writer Mark says:

[33] And he took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. [34] And he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch."
(Mark 14)

Jesus told His disciples that day that He was feeling deep sorrow in His soul. Emotions are a function of the human soul.

The Reasoning and Memory of the Soul

The human soul is also capable of reason and understanding. Consider the words of the Psalmist in Psalm 139:

[14] I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. (Psalm 139)

The soul of the Psalmist contemplated the nature of the human body and understood that it was "wonderfully made." His soul marveled at the complexity of the work of God.

According to Lamentations 3, this reasoning soul is also capable of remembering details.

[19] Remember my affliction and my wanderings, the wormwood and the gall! [20] My soul continually remembers it and is bowed down within me. (Lamentations 3)

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The soul is the place where memories are stored, and thoughts processed.

The Commitments and Decisions of the Soul

There is another function of the human soul. It is in the soul that commitments and decisions are made. We will examine this in more detail in this study but let me give a few examples of this from Scripture.

In Genesis 27 we read:

[27:1] When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see, he called Esau his older son and said to him, "My son"; and he answered, "Here I am." [2] He said, "Behold, I am old; I do not know the day of my death. [3] Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me, [4] and prepare for me delicious food, such as I love, and bring it to me so that I may eat, that my soul may bless you before I die." (Genesis 27)

These verses recount the desire of Isaac to bless his son Esau. Notice particularly that this decision to bless was a function of his soul – "that my soul may bless you before I die." Isaac felt compassion in his soul for his son and reasoned that he wanted to bless him. The decision to move forward with this purpose was a function of his soul.

In Deuteronomy 26 the Lord commanded His people to walk in obedience to His commandments with all their heart and soul.

[16] "This day the LORD your God commands you to do these statutes and rules. You shall therefore be careful to do them with

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all your heart and with all your soul. [17] You have declared today that the LORD is your God, and that you will walk in his ways, and keep his statutes and his commandments and his rules, and will obey his voice. (Deuteronomy 26)

What is of note here is that the Lord commanded His people to obey with all their soul. In other words, there was a commitment they needed to make in their soul. That commitment was to walk in absolute obedience to the Lord and His purposes for their lives.

The Psalmist understood this commitment of the soul toward God when he said:

*[167] My soul keeps your testimonies; I love them exceedingly.
(Psalm 119)*

The decision to keep the testimonies of God was made in the soul of the Psalmist. He felt a passion and love for the testimonies of the Lord in his soul and committed himself to walking in those ways.

Not all decisions made in the soul are for good. Consider the teaching of the Lord in Luke 12. In this passage the Lord Jesus spoke about a rich man who was making plans for his future.

[19] And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." [20] But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' (Luke 12)

Notice the connection here between the soul and the decision to relax, eat, drink and be merry. This decision was made in his soul without any concern for God or His purpose. Ultimately, that decision would cost the man his life. The soul is both emotional and

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reasoning and it in this soul that decisions and commitments are made.

It is this capacity of the soul to make decisions and commitments that is of concern for us in this study. We have this God-given ability to choose between one action or another. It is also within our capacity to determine our commitments and priorities in life.

We exercise this freedom of choice every day. We wake up on the morning and determine to get out of bed. We then move throughout the day making decisions based on the commitments we have made in our soul about our life and its priorities. I am sitting in front of my computer writing this chapter as an act of my will. I believe God has called me to this ministry and so I dedicate time to studying and writing. There are other things I could be doing. In fact, I have been overwhelmed with other things of late but in my soul, I see this as a priority, so I commit to making time for it.

Our soul feels emotions and can retain and process facts but these things in themselves are insufficient. The soul sifts through those emotions and thoughts and turns them into decisions and commitments. It determines the course of action it will take based on what it feels and understands.

As we have seen, not all the decisions and commitments of the soul are righteous and holy. Sin exists because of the decisions and passions of the human will. It was the decision Adam and Eve to disobey God that brought a curse upon this earth. Our decisions will change the shape and texture of our life and relationship with God.

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For Consideration:

What is the soul? What is the function of the human soul?

To what extent do the decisions of the soul impact our life and walk with God?

What are the priorities of your soul?

For Prayer:

Thank the Lord that He has given us the ability to feel, reason and decide. Ask Him to give you grace to make the right decisions in your life.

Do you know someone who had made bad decisions in life? Ask the Lord to minister to them and bring them to a place where He becomes the priority.

Chapter 2

Human Choice and the Fall into Sin

God created human beings with an emotional and reasonable soul. That soul can form opinions, make decisions and choose between one action and another. Our soul can make commitments and set priorities based on what it understands and feels. This places us under great responsibility. Who among us can say that we have always made the right decision? The passions our soul feels can often lead us astray if not held in check. The reasoning of the soul can be based on an incomplete or faulty understanding of reality.

The commitments our soul makes can be life transforming. They can also be devastating. We have an example of this in the Garden of Eden as recorded in Genesis 2.

[15] The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. [16] And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, [17] 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." (Genesis 2)

Notice in Genesis 2:15-17 that the Lord placed the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden and forbade Adam to eat from it. The question we must ask ourselves is this; if God did not want Adam to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, why did He put it in the garden?

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By placing the forbidden tree in the garden, God was giving Adam and Eve a choice. God honoured the decisions of the soul He had created in Adam and demonstrated the kind of relationship He desired with His creation. God gave Adam a soul that could feel emotions, reason and make deep commitments. It is the soul that makes relationships meaningful. The soul feels passion and desire for another. Its capacity to reason enables us to process needs and respond. It enables us to grow in knowledge and understanding of our partner. It helps us understand them and their responses toward us. It also enables us to make a loving and lasting commitment to them. Without the soul, our relationships would be mechanical.

Consider the engine of a car and how each part relates to the other and works together to enable the vehicle to move from one place to another. Each part functions in harmony with the other but the engine has no soul. There is no passion, understanding or willful commitment.

God could have created human beings like an engine, but He chose to give us a soul and a will as a function of that soul. In doing so, He designed a very different type of relationship. He introduced a relationship where passions, understanding and commitment were essential ingredients.

By giving us a soul, God showed us that He was not looking for a mechanical relationship where we did what we were programmed to do. Instead, He was looking for a relationship where His people willingly chose to love Him. A relationship in which there was passion, understanding and willing commitment.

God placed the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden to give Adam a choice. He gave him the possibility of disobedience.

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He gave him the opportunity to walk away from Him. True love and devotion require a choice. I am free to walk away but I choose not to. I am free to make something else a priority, but I willingly commit myself to God instead. I prefer to suffer loss rather than be unfaithful. I do so willingly and with a joyful heart.

The fact that God gives us a will and the ability to choose, makes our relationship with Him very personal. It also gives us the possibility of choosing another path. This is what happened in the garden of Eden. Tempted by the devil, Eve picked the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, ate it and gave it to her husband to eat. She did this knowing full well that the fruit of the tree was forbidden. Deceived by the serpent, Eve made a conscious decision to disobey. God did not stop her. He allowed her to make that decision even though it meant a break in their relationship.

The decision to disobey God was a function of the soul. Adam and Eve chose to walk away from God and His purpose. While I have the ability to disobey, I am also accountable for my actions and responsible for the decisions I make. I will suffer the consequences of my bad choices. This is what happened to Adam and Eve. The curse of God fell on the world. Their relationship with Him would not be the same. The intimacy they experienced with each other suffered. Creation groaned under the weight of their sin and rebellion. The decision Adam and Eve made that day changed the course of the world and required the intervention of a Saviour to restore humanity's fellowship with God.

God created us with a soul that could feel, reason and make deep commitments but that soul is also capable of making bad decisions as well. The result of those bad decisions can be devastating. The soul that was designed to enable me to enjoy a personal and intimate relationship with God can also rip me from His arms. The

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human soul with its ability to choose is a powerful faculty. It can lead me into the paths of truth and righteousness or into the very pit of hell itself. How important it is that we use this will correctly for the shape and texture of our lives depend on the decisions we make.

For Consideration:

Why do you suppose God put the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden?

What is the difference between a “mechanical” relationship and a personal relationship? What role does the soul have to play in this?

How do the decisions we make impact our lives? Give an example of a decision that changed your life.

Can we choose to walk with God and obey? What is sin?

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How is the shape and texture of our lives changed by the decisions we make?

For Prayer:

Thank God that He created you with a soul that feels, reasons and makes willing commitments.

Ask God to help you to make the right decisions for your life. Commit yourself to walking with Him and His purpose.

Chapter 3

The Freedom to Choose

God has created us with the ability to choose. In the last chapter, we saw that this choice makes our commitment to Him very personal. We see evidence of this freedom of choice throughout the Scripture.

Consider, for example, the decision of Moses in Exodus 17:

[8] Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. [9] So Moses said to Joshua, "Choose for us men, and go out and fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand." [10] So Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. [11] Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. [12] But Moses' hands grew weary, so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side. So his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. [13] And Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword. (Exodus 17)

As Moses led the people of God through the wilderness toward the Promised Land, they came to the region of Rephidim where they were confronted by the Amalekite army. These Amalekites were unwilling to allow the Israelites passage through their land and saw them as a threat. Moses considered the situation and made a

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decision. He told Joshua to assemble an army and stand up against their enemy. Moses went up on a hill with the staff of God in his hands. As long as he kept that staff raised high in the air the Israelites defeated their enemies. That day God honoured the decision of Moses to wage war with the Amalekites and He granted victory to Israel.

That day Moses decided to face his opponents head on. He chose not to run from them but to confront them. He knew that God had called them to the Promised Land and so He determined to face the foe in the power of God.

Not all decisions are God-honouring. As the Israelites continued their journey through the wilderness they began to grumble about their living conditions. After considering their hardships the people made a decision:

[14:2] And all the people of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to them, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! [3] Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?" [4] And they said to one another, "Let us choose a leader and go back to Egypt." (Numbers 14)

That day the people decided to choose a new leader and return to Egypt. As a result of this decision the Lord struck the nation with a great pestilence (Numbers 14:11-12). Were it not for the choice of Moses to intercede for the nation, God would have destroyed them. Numbers 14 is filled with choices. The people chose to rebel against the purpose of God. God chose to destroy them. Moses chose to intercede for them. God chose to relent and forgive. These

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decisions were life-changing decisions that would impact the course of Israel's future.

After listening to the complaint of Job about his suffering, his friend Eliphaz responded:

[15:1] Then Eliphaz the Temanite answered and said: [2] "Should a wise man answer with windy knowledge, and fill his belly with the east wind? [3] Should he argue in unprofitable talk, or in words with which he can do no good? [4] But you are doing away with the fear of God and hindering meditation before God. [5] For your iniquity teaches your mouth, and you choose the tongue of the crafty. [6] Your own mouth condemns you, and not I; your own lips testify against you. (Job 15)

Notice particularly that Eliphaz accused Job of making a bad decision – "you choose the tongue of the crafty" (verses 5). In other words, Eliphaz believed that Job chose to give free vent to his complaint without showing any respect for God and His purposes. He felt that the words Job chose to speak dishonoured God. Eliphaz believed that Job should have chosen His words more carefully.

Jesus expressed a similar thought when He said:

[36] I tell you, on the day of judgment people will give account for every careless word they speak (Matthew 12)

We have the freedom to express our careless words but will give and accounting for what we say in the day of judgement.

The writer of the book of Proverbs rebukes the people of his day because of the choices they made:

[29] Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD, [30] would have none of my counsel and despised all

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my reproof, [31] therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way, and have their fill of their own devices. (Proverbs 1)

The people of that day chose not to fear the Lord. They decided to despise the counsel and reproof of God. The result was that God would give them over to their evil ways. In the New Testament the apostle Paul said something very similar when he wrote:

[18] For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. [19] For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. [20] For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. [21] For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. [22] Claiming to be wise, they became fools, [23] and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. [24] Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, [25] because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. (Romans 1)

God revealed Himself to the Romans, but they chose not to honour Him. Instead they gave their bodies over to the lusts of the flesh and to bow down to idols. Because of their decision, God gave them over to their flesh and its ways. Ultimately, they would be consumed by their own desires and perish in their sin.

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It is clear that we have choices to make in this life. Those choices will affect the shape of our lives here on this earth and in the life to come. Understanding the importance of the decisions we make, God pleads with His people in Deuteronomy 30 to make the right decisions:

[15] "See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. [16] If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. [17] But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, [18] I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. [19] I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, [20] loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them." (Deuteronomy 30)

God set before his people the way of life and the way of death and pleaded with them to "choose life." He gave His people the dignity of choice but warned them of the consequences of making a wrong decision.

As Israel's military commander Joshua came to the end of His life, he called the people of God to assemble before him and spoke these words to them:

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[14] "Now therefore fear the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. [15] And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD." (Joshua 24)

Joshua challenged the people of Israel to throw out their gods and set their eyes to serve the one true God of Israel. Notice how he offered the people a choice – "if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve" (verse 15). He let them know that they were free to choose the gods of the Amorites or any other false god they would consider. He revealed to them, however, his personal decision – "as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD" (verse 15).

What do these verses teach us? It is quite clear that as human beings we have been created with the ability to make decisions. We have the choice to stand up to our enemies in the strength of God or walk away. We must decide whether to honour God with our words or complain against His purpose. We must determine whether we walk in obedience or despise God's reproof and counsel. We have the obligation to choose between life and death. We are to establish in our hearts whom we will serve –whether that be the God of Israel or the gods of the nations. God placed all these decisions before His people in Scripture.

God sets a choice before us and asks us to make a decision. Will you choose to stand strong or run? Will you choose to honour Him in word and deed or will you reject His word for your own lusts? Will you choose God or this world? These are decisions we must consciously make every day. We have not always made the right

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decision. We have often fallen short of the standard God has set out for us. We must take responsibility for the decisions we have made. We must live our lives realizing that because God has created us with a soul that is capable of making decisions and commitments, we will be accountable to Him for the decisions we make. The choices we make in life will be reflected in the fruitfulness we experience in life and the intimacy we experience with God.

For Consideration:

Have you ever faced obstacles in your life? What choice did you make when facing those obstacles? How did that choice affect the outcome?

The apostle James speaks about the tongue as being one of the most difficult parts of our body to control. Can we choose the words we speak? How does our choice honour or dishonour God or those around us?

Have you ever surrendered to temptation in your life? What role did your freedom of choice have to play in this?

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Can we choose to walk in obedience to God and His word? Have you always chosen this path?

How important are the decisions we make each day? What impact do those decisions have on the shape and texture of our lives?

For Prayer:

Ask the Lord for the grace to stand up to the obstacles in your life.
Ask Him for the wisdom to choose what is right.

Ask God to give you a more conscious awareness of the choices He is asking you to make on a daily basis.

Do you know someone who has made bad decisions in their life? Take a moment to pray that God would open their eyes to these decisions. Ask Him to give them the willingness to confess these decisions to Him. Ask the Lord to give them the willingness to learn from Him and to choose life.

Chapter 4

The Impact of Our Decisions and Commitments

The choices we make can have a life-changing impact on our lives. There are many illustrations of this in the Bible. We have already considered the effect of the decision of Adam and Eve in the Garden. Let's take a moment to consider more examples of the impact of choices made by some key Bible characters.

Let's consider first the choices made by King David in his affair with his neighbour's wife, Bathsheba. We are quite familiar with the story of how David was up on the roof of his house when his neighbour's wife came out to bathe. David found himself attracted to Bathsheba's beauty and made a decision.

[4] So David sent messengers and took her, and she came to him, and he lay with her. (Now she had been purifying herself from her uncleanness.) Then she returned to her house. [5] And the woman conceived, and she sent and told David, "I am pregnant." (2 Samuel 11)

When Bathsheba announced that she was pregnant with David's child, David had further decisions to make. He chose to deceive Bathsheba's husband into thinking that the child was his. He called him from the battlefield and encouraged him to go home to his wife. When Bathsheba's husband refused to do so, David

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commanded that he be put in the front of the battle in the hopes that he would be killed. When that happened, David then married Bathsheba and took her as his wife.

David's decisions were in direct opposition to the purpose of God for his life. The Lord sent Nathan the prophet to rebuke David. Listen to the words of the prophet:

[10] Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.' [11] Thus says the LORD, 'Behold, I will raise up evil against you out of your own house. And I will take your wives before your eyes and give them to your neighbor, and he shall lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. [12] For you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel and before the sun.'" (2 Samuel 12)

The punishment for David that day was three-fold. First, God told him that he would be constantly at war with his enemies. Second, He would raise up evil against his house. Finally, God would take his wives and give them to his neighbour who would sleep with them in broad daylight.

As we examine the life of David after these choices, we see clearly the fulfilment of the prophecy of Nathan. David would become a king with a lot of blood on his hands from fighting with the enemies of Israel. In fact, the great dream of David to build a temple would have to be forfeited because of the blood on his hands. As David came to the end of his life, he shared his vision for the construction of a temple with his son Solomon. Listen to the words he shared with his son in 1 Chronicles 22:

[7] David said to Solomon, "My son, I had it in my heart to build a house to the name of the LORD my God. [8] But the word of the

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LORD came to me, saying, 'You have shed much blood and have waged great wars. You shall not build a house to my name, because you have shed so much blood before me on the earth. (1 Chronicles 22)

David would never see the construction of the temple. By making the decision to sleep with his neighbour's wife, David would sacrifice one of his life's greatest desires.

Beyond this, however, David's life would never be the same after his affair with Bathsheba. His family was plagued with problems. The child born as a result of this illegitimate union between David and Bathsheba died (2 Samuel 12:15-18). David's son Amnon was attracted to his brother's daughter Tamar and raped her (2 Samuel 13). Absalom, the father of Tamar murdered his brother Amnon for raping his daughter. The result of this murder was that Absalom was forced to flee Jerusalem and go into hiding. After years of feeling that his father had never forgiven him, Absalom came to hate his father David. This hatred became so intense that Absalom conspired to overthrow him as king. As an act of disdain for his father, Absalom set up a tent on the roof of the palace and slept with his father's concubines (2 Samuel 16:20-23).

David's choice to sleep with Bathsheba had devastating consequences for himself and his family. His life and family would never be the same again.

In Acts 4 we read how the Spirit of God was moving in the lives of the believers. The work of God's Spirit in those days was so powerful that people shared everything they had. Acts 4 tells us that there were no needy people among them:

[34] There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the

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proceeds of what was sold [35] and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. (Acts 4)

This work of God's Spirit moved the believers of that day to go as far as to sell their lands and homes and bring the proceeds to the apostles to be distributed among the needy. Ananias and Sapphira were among those early believers moved by the Spirit of God to sell their land. We read their story in Acts 5.

After selling a piece of property, this couple kept back a portion of the proceeds for themselves. This act was perfectly legitimate. No one was forcing these believers to give up everything. The problem, however, was a decision that the couple made in their hearts. They decided to deceive the church into thinking that they were giving the full price of the sale. They wanted the their fellow believers to think they were giving everything when it was only a portion of the sale price.

This was a decision that couple made together. When they brought their money to the apostles, however, the Holy Spirit revealed to Peter the truth. He confronted Ananias about his decision to lie to the church. The result of this lie was that Ananias was struck dead by the Spirit of God.

Three hours later his wife came in, not knowing what had happened to her husband. Peter asked her if they had sold their property for the amount given. When she too chose to lie about it, she was also struck dead and buried beside her husband (Acts 5:7-10)

Ananias and Sapphira decided to deceive the church. That decision was made freely and deliberately. The consequences of their decision, however, was fatal. They would both die a very tragic death because of the wrong choice.

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Let me examine one more example of the consequences of our decisions. The book of Daniel describes the period of time when Israel was living in exile under the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar decided to train some of the keenest youth of Israel and enlist them in his service. Among those men was a man by the name of Daniel.

Part of the training routine for these young men was a particular diet. This diet, however, was contrary to the Jewish food law and as such would defile the Jewish men who were eating it. Daniel, as a true man of faith, made a decision as he entered this training:

[8] But Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food, or with the wine that he drank. Therefore he asked the chief of the eunuchs to allow him not to defile himself. (Daniel 1)

God gave Daniel favour with the chief eunuch and he allowed Daniel to eat only vegetables and drink only water. After ten days on this diet, Daniel's appearance was better than all the others who participated in the king's diet. Daniel decided to honour God in this matter and God granted him favour and blessing.

In time, Daniel would prove his value and be promoted to a position of high honour in the government of the nation. This aroused the jealousy of other officials who decided to do all they could to find fault with him and bring him down. The only way these officials could find to harm Daniel was in regard to his faith in the God of Israel. They devised a scheme to ask the king to make it illegal for anyone to pray to anyone but the king himself on pain of death. When Daniel heard this, he determined to continue praying regardless of the consequences.

When the officials accused Daniel of breaking the law, the king was forced to throw him into a lion's den. Daniel accepted the

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punishment and was handed over to the lions. God, however, protected Daniel and shut the mouths of the lions so that he was safe throughout the entire night.

When the king went to see what had happened to Daniel and discovered that his God had protected him, he made the following proclamation:

[25] Then King Darius wrote to all the peoples, nations, and languages that dwell in all the earth: "Peace be multiplied to you. [26] I make a decree, that in all my royal dominion people are to tremble and fear before the God of Daniel, for he is the living God, enduring forever; his kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion shall be to the end. [27] He delivers and rescues; he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth, he who has saved Daniel from the power of the lions." (Daniel 6)

King Darius decreed that all peoples, nations and languages of the earth were to honour and fear the God of Daniel. He declared Him to be the true and living God. This was an incredible declaration from the lips of a pagan king. By means of royal channels the testimony of Daniel and the power of His God was declared to the entire dominion of King Darius.

How did this declaration come about? It was the result of decisions made by Daniel. A decision not to defile himself with the king's food. A decision to never surrender to the worship of any other God but the God of Israel. A decision to risk even death to be true and faithful to his God. Those personal decisions would have an impact on the entire nation. Because of those decisions, the God of Israel would be declared the true God throughout the world.

The Lord God has created us and given us the capacity to make decisions. The decisions we make will have an impact on the course

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our lives take. As you stand before the temptation of the devil, you have a decision to make that will impact your life forever. Will you surrender to the temptation and walk the path of evil or will you resist? What course your life takes will be determined by that decision. David's life would never be the same after he sinned with Bathsheba. His vision of a great temple was lost that day. Ananias and Sapphira's life came to an abrupt halt after they decided to lie to the church. Daniel's decisions to be faithful, however, although he suffered greatly, was a means to great blessing. His determination to honour God, placed him in positions of influence and authority. Through his life and testimony, the fame of the God of Israel would spread to the entire world.

It is a great honour to have the ability to make decisions in life. With this great blessing of choice, however, comes great responsibility. Will we make the right decisions?

For Consideration:

Could God have stopped David from sinning with Bathsheba? Have you ever had a time when God kept you from falling into sin? Is God obligated to stop us from sinning?

What were the consequences of David's sin with Bathsheba?

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The decision of Ananias and Sapphira led to their death. Take a moment to consider the consequences of the decisions you have made in life.

Does making the right decision mean that we will not have troubles? Consider the decisions Daniel made. What troubles did that bring him? What were the results of these right decisions?

For Prayer:

Ask the Lord to help you to understand that He is not obligated to keep you from making bad decisions, nor is He to blame for the consequences of those bad decisions.

Ask God to forgive you for the bad decisions you have made in life.

Ask the Lord to guide you and give you strength to determine, like Daniel, to honour Him in the decisions you make in life.

Chapter 5

The Call to Choose

Throughout the Scripture, the Lord God calls us to exercise our privilege of choice. One of the most important decisions we will have to make in life is whether to follow the Lord or pursue our agenda.

Standing before the people of his day, Joshua challenged them to choose the God they would serve:

[14] "Now therefore fear the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. [15] And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD." (Joshua 24)

The people of God needed to make a decision. Would they walk in the purpose of the Lord or would they choose another god? According to Joshua, they were free to make the decision they wanted, but there would be consequences for making the wrong decision.

In Deuteronomy 11, Moses told the Israelites that the Lord was setting out two options for their lives:

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*[26] "See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse:
[27] the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD
your God, which I command you today, [28] and the curse, if you
do not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn
aside from the way that I am commanding you today, to go after
other gods that you have not known. [29] And when the LORD your
God brings you into the land that you are entering to take
possession of it, you shall set the blessing on Mount Gerizim and
the curse on Mount Ebal. (Deuteronomy 11)*

God set before Israel a blessing and a curse. What the people would experience depended on the decisions they made. If they chose to obey the commandments of the Lord, they would be blessed. If they chose to disobey, they would experience His curse. The implication here is that the people of Israel had a choice to make.

This choice becomes even clearer in Deuteronomy 30:

*[15] "See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil.
[16] If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I
command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in
his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and
his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God
will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession
of it. [17] But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but
are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, [18] I
declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live
long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and
possess. [19] I call heaven and earth to witness against you today,
that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse.
Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, [20]
loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to
him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in*

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the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.” (Deuteronomy 30)

God set life and death (blessing and cursing) before His people. He gave them a choice of path to take. Notice in verse 19 how the Lord then called on His people to make a decision. He pleads with them to “choose life.” God is calling for an act of the will. He is calling for His people to make a heartfelt decision to follow after Him and experience the blessings He wanted to shower on them. This decision, however, would not be forced on them. They had the freedom to walk away from God and choose the path of disobedience and death.

The Bible is filled with examples of men and women who did not choose this path of life and blessing. Speaking of those who chose to resist the path of godly wisdom the writer of Proverbs said:

[28] Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently but will not find me. [29] Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the LORD, [30] would have none of my counsel and despised all my reproof, [31] therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way, and have their fill of their own devices. (Proverbs 1)

Here the writer describes a people who chose not to fear the Lord and walk in His ways. The result of this decision was that they would “eat the fruit of their own ways.”

This same call is extended in the New Testament. John, the gospel writer tells us why he wrote his account of the life of Jesus Christ:

[30] Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; [31] but these are

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written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20)

John wrote his gospel so that those who heard the story of the life of Jesus would believe and have life in his name. What does it mean to believe? I like to define belief as putting our whole weight on something. The person who believes holds nothing back but places his or her full confidence in the object of their belief. There is an element of choice in belief. Will we place our trust in what we hear or will we doubt? Will we surrender to the truth presented to us or will we reject it and walk away? John wanted to present the fact about the life and death of the Lord Jesus and bring each reader to a place of decision. Would they trust the facts and place their full confidence in Jesus or would they walk away from him? He called for a decision.

What was the central message of the Lord Jesus? Mark 1 tells us that He preached that the Kingdom of God was at hand and challenged people to repent and believe the good news of the gospel:

[14] Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, [15] and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." (Mark 1)

Jesus taught that He was the Messiah who was to come and that those who believed in Him and the work He had come to do would be saved from their sin and have eternal life. Jesus demonstrated that He was the Messiah in different ways. Speaking to the people in John 14, He said:

[10] Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own

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authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works. [11] Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves. (John 14)

Notice what Jesus is saying here. He reminded His listeners that the words He spoke were from the Father. He also told them that the miraculous works He did were also evidence of the work of the Father in Him. He then called on the people of the day who heard His words and saw His works to decide what they would do in response. He encouraged them to make a commitment to believe.

[11] Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves. (John 14)

Jesus called for a decision—believe that I am from the Father? Jesus presented all this evidence to the people of His day so that they could make an informed decision. Like the gospel writer John, He presented all the fact and called for a response of belief.

Standing before the people of Israel and the prophets of Baal the prophet Elijah spoke these words:

[20] So Ahab sent to all the people of Israel and gathered the prophets together at Mount Carmel. [21] And Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." And the people did not answer him a word. (1 Kings 18)

In those days the people of God were tempted to follow after the pagan god Baal. Elijah rebuked them for this and called those who stood before him to make a decision between one or the other. "How long will you go limping between two different opinions?" he asked. God expected that they make up their mind. Would they

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follow Him or would they follow Baal? They could not live in the middle.

Jesus made it clear that we must decide whom we will serve. We cannot serve two masters. We must choose one or the other:

[24] "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money. (Matthew 6)

The apostle James reminds us that a double-minded person is unstable in all his ways (James 1:8). He goes on to challenge the double minded to break with their indecision and submit to God.

[7] Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. [8] Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. (James 4)

Double-mindedness is a sin that needs to be addressed. The cure for double-mindedness is to make a decision about the direction we were going to follow. In this case, James challenged his readers to submit to Christ and turn from everything else.

Jesus speaks about double-mindedness in Revelation 3. He describes it as being lukewarm—neither cold or hot:

[15] "I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were either cold or hot! [16] So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. (Revelation 3)

The Lord Jesus told the church of Laodicea that they were lukewarm. He went on to say that He wished they were either cold or hot. In other words, he wished that they would make up their

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mind. Were they for Him or against Him? Would they serve Him or resist Him? This luke-warmness was worse than being totally cold. The greatest damage to the testimony of the church is done by those who have never made a firm commitment to the Lord Jesus and His Word. They claim to be Christians, but they also love the world and its ways. They waver between the Lord and the world. This, according to Jesus, was so offensive to Him that He would spit these believers out of His mouth.

Luke-warmness, double-mindedness and indecision are not to be taken lightly. These are sins from which we need to repent. Jesus had this to say about those who could not decide who they would serve:

[23] Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters. (Luke 11)

Are you with Christ or are you against Him? You can't sit on the fence in indecision. If you do not choose Christ and put your full confidence in Him, you are against Him. You cannot serve two masters. You cannot continue to limp between two opinions? Scripture calls us to declare our allegiance and warns us that if we are ashamed of Him and His words then He will be ashamed of us:

[26] For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. (Luke 9)

This call to choose the path we will take is one we must all make. We must decide whether we will serve God or follow the world and its ways. This is a daily decision we must make. Each circumstance and trial that comes our way will challenge that decision and call for a renewed commitment. What is certain is that each of us must

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choose. Luke-warmness and double-mindedness is not an option in Scripture.

For Consideration:

Does God give us the freedom of choice?

What is the heart of God for us? Why doesn't God force absolute obedience in everything?

John wrote his gospel so that his readers would believe. Jesus preached and performed miraculous signs so that people would believe. What keeps us from accepting their evidence?

What is the sin of luke-warmness and double-mindedness? How does this sin damage the testimony of the church today?

Can we follow Jesus if we are undecided and double-minded?

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For Prayer:

Ask the Lord to forgive you for the sin of luke-warmness and double-mindedness. Ask Him to give you the grace to devote yourself completely to Him.

Do you know people around you that have never fully committed themselves to Christ and His ways? Ask God to challenge them about making a firm commitment to follow after Him alone.

Chapter 6

The Guidance of Scripture in the Choices We Make

Having created us with the ability to choose, God now expects that we exercise this privilege. Many of the decisions we make will have a dramatic impact on our lives and the lives of those around us. The shape and texture of our lives depend, in large part, on the decisions we make. This is not something we can take lightly.

What we need to understand is that the Lord God who created us with the ability to choose, also promises to guide us in the decisions we make. We are not left to ourselves in this matter. One of the very first ways in which God guides us in the decisions we make is by providing us with His Word in written form.

Listen to what the apostle Paul said about the Scriptures:

[16] All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, [17] that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy)

Notice what the apostle told Timothy about the Scriptures. Scripture has been inspired by God and is useful for reproof, correcting and training. The Word of God has been given so that we might be equipped for the work God has called us to do. In other

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words, God has given us His Word to show us how we are to live and serve Him on this earth. It is the guidebook for life and faith.

If we want to know how to live, we need to examine the Scriptures. If we want to know truth, we need to study what God tells us in His inspired Word. The Word of God forms the foundation on which all our decisions are made.

Listen to the words of the psalmist in Psalm 73:

[24] You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. (Psalm 73)

The psalmist found great comfort in the fact that He did not have to make the choices he made without the counsel and guidance of the Lord God. As he lived his life making one decision after another, he had the assurance that the Lord God would guide him in the choices he made.

Psalm 119 speaks powerfully about the guidance of the Word of God in the choices we make. The Psalm begins with these words:

[119:1] Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD! (Psalm 119)

Notice that the Psalmist said that those whose way was blameless were blessed. He explains how this blamelessness could be achieved in the second half of the verse. Those who walk in the law of the Lord walk blamelessly. In other words, if we want to know how we should walk, we need to study the Scriptures. The Word of God is our guide in how to live in a way that pleases the Lord and brings blessing. Only as we keep our eyes fixed on the commandments of God can we walk shamelessly:

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[6] Then I shall not be put to shame, having my eyes fixed on all your commandments. (Psalm 119)

In Psalm 119:9 the psalmist asks the question: “How can a young man keep his way pure?” In other words, how can a young man or woman make the right decisions in life? Notice the response:

[9] How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word. [10] With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments! [11] I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you. (Psalm 119)

The way to make right decisions in life is to live our life according to the Word of God. The Word of God needs to form the basis for every decision a young man or woman makes. For that to happen this young man or woman needs to store up the words of God in their heart.

What does it mean to store up the words of God in your heart? In part, this implies reading, studying, and learning the principles of Scripture. The Scriptures need to become part of our life. We need to allow the teaching of Scripture to penetrate deeply into our heart and mind so that when we are faced with the need to decide between various courses of action, we will understand the purpose of God for our lives and walk accordingly. You cannot make the right decisions in life if you are not reading and studying the Scriptures. We need to store up the word of God in our heart so that we do not sin. Scripture is our guide in the decisions we need to make.

The psalmist understood the importance of the Word of God in the decisions and choices he made each day. In fact, he describes the Word of God as a lamp for his feet.

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*[105] Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. [106] I have sworn an oath and confirmed it, to keep your righteous rules.
(Psalm 119)*

Have you ever had to walk in the darkness? When we cannot see where we are going, we risk stepping on something or tripping over an obstacle in our path. The psalmist saw the Word of the Lord to be a lamp for his feet on the path of life. It revealed the obstacles and sins to be avoided. It showed him how he was to live and the principles by which he was to govern his life. By walking according to the principles of God's Word, he was able to make the right decisions. He swore an oath to himself that he would walk in the truth of Scripture and let it be his guide in the decisions he made each day.

The decisions the psalmist made in life were not always wise. In fact, in Psalm 119:67 he speaks of how he went astray.

*[67] Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word.
[68] You are good and do good; teach me your statutes. (Psalm
119)*

Notice how the psalmist found his way back when he went astray – “but now I keep your word.” In other words, he found his way back to the right path when he looked to the Word of God and allowed it to be his guide. He pleaded with God in the very next verse to teach him his statutes so that he would be able to keep on the path of righteousness and experience the blessing of the Lord.

Consider the prayer of Jesus for His disciples in John 17.

[13] But now I am coming to you, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves. [14] I have given them your word, and the world has hated them

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because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. [15] I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. [16] They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. [17] Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. (John 17)

As the Lord Jesus prepared to return to the Father, He told the Father that He had left them His Word. That Word caused the world to hate them. It guided them in how to live and that lifestyle was not the way of the world. By following the teaching of that Word Jesus left, these disciples were like light in the darkness. They confronted the sin and evil of their generation and were hated for it.

Notice in verse 17 how Jesus prayed that the Father would sanctify His disciples in the truth and then makes the statement: “Your word is truth.” What was Jesus praying here? He was asking the Father to use the Word He had left His disciples for the purpose of making them more holy. He is praying that the truth He left His disciples would guide them in the decisions they made and transform their lives as they chose to believe and walk in obedience.

The Scriptures we have are God’s means of directing us onto the path He has laid out for us. The Word of God is our guidebook for life and faith. If we want to know what we are to believe, we need to study the Scriptures. If we want to know how to make the right choices in life we need to reflect on the teaching of the Bible.

God has given us the privilege of choice in life. This privilege brings with it a tremendous burden of responsibility. Wrong decisions can have devastating consequences. This is why the Lord also has miraculously preserved the Scriptures for us. This word is filled with teaching and instruction. It tells that stories of men and women

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who have gone before us. Some of these individuals made bad decisions. We see the result of these decisions in their stories. The Scriptures that God has passed on to us today are given to us to guide us in the decisions and choices we make in life.

God does not leave us to choose without also giving us some guidelines, examples and instruction. If we want to make the right decisions we must be guided by the Word of God.

For Consideration:

Why has the Lord God given us the Scriptures?

Can you make wise decisions in life without the Scriptures?

Do you make the reading and study of Scripture a regular part of your weekly routine? What is the difference between studying the Scripture for knowledge and studying for how to live?

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For Prayer:

Thank the Lord that the Scriptures contain the purpose of God for our lives. Thank Him for the teaching and illustrations of the lives of men and women of faith that help us to be wise in the decisions we make.

Ask the Lord to give you a deeper passion to study and know the truth of the Scriptures.

Ask the Lord to forgive you for times when you made decisions that were contrary to His purpose as laid out in the Word of God.

Chapter 7

The Leading of the Spirit and the Decisions We Make

The Lord does not leave us to make our decisions alone. We saw in the last chapter that He has preserved His Word in written form so that we could have a guideline for how to live. Even those who walk in obedience to this Word, however, find themselves in situations where choosing between one course of action or another is still very difficult.

As a young man in Bible School, I was faced with the decision of what to do with my life. I felt the call of God to full-time service but wasn't sure what that implied. I knew that the Scriptures called me to be a servant of God, but there was nowhere in those Scriptures that told me what my ministry would be or where I would exercise that ministry. The Bible gives us general principles, but often we need more direction for the specific details.

I don't have time in this study to go through the details of how the Lord led me to be a foreign missionary on the islands of Mauritius and Reunion. Suffice it to say that the decision was not one that I made rationally nor was there a chapter and verse in the Bible that said, "Wayne, go to Mauritius." What I can say, however, is that the Lord guided that decision and made it quite clear that this was the path I was to take.

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The leading of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer is mysterious but there is no doubt that God not only directs us by means of His written word but also through the leading and prompting of His Spirit. Consider the way the Lord led the apostles in Acts 16:

[6] And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.

[7] And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. [8] So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. [9] And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." [10] And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. (Acts 16)

When the apostles attempted to go toward Asia, they were "forbidden by the Holy Spirit." Understanding this, they changed course for the region of Bithynia but again, "the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them." Finally, one evening Paul had a vision of a man calling out to him from the region of Macedonia. The result was that he "concluded that God had called them to preach the gospel to them."

The decisions made in those days were certainly shaped by the apostles' study of the Word but it was far more than that. Nothing in their study of the Word of God told them to go to Macedonia. What they did have, however, from Scripture was an understanding of the work and leading of God. This understanding opened their minds to the prompting of the Spirit of God in the direction they took. The Holy Spirit, led the disciples and showed them the path He wanted them to take.

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Philip the evangelist also experienced this leading of the Lord when he was in the region of Samaria. At this time the Lord was doing wonderful things. A revival broke out in the region where Philip was preaching. It was at the height of this revival, however, the Lord spoke to Philip and directed him to the desert. Acts 8 recounts this story:

[26] Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a desert place. [27] And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship [28] and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. [29] And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and join this chariot." [30] So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" [31] And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. (Acts 8)

Notice the leading of the Lord in the life of Philip. It was "the angel of the Lord" who told him to leave Samaria and go south to the "road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." That was all the information Philip had. He was to travel on that road to Gaza. When he arrived, he saw a chariot traveling on that same road. It was then that the Spirit of God said to Philip, "Go over and join this chariot." Obeying the prompting of the Spirit, Philip had the opportunity to lead the Ethiopian official to the Lord.

Philip did not receive this direction from the reading of the Law of Moses or the gospel he had heard from the apostles. The decisions he made were based on the specific leading of God's Spirit in his life.

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The Lord promises to guide us in the way we should go. The psalmist understood this when he wrote:

[8] I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. [9] 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. (Psalm 32)

What is important for us to understand in Psalm 32:8-9 is that we have a responsibility, knowing that the Lord will guide us. We are not to be like a stubborn mule or horse that requires a bit and bridle to force them to go in a certain way. Instead, we are to willingly and obediently choose the leading of the Lord.

Speaking through His prophet Isaiah, the Lord made a promise to His people:

[20] And though the Lord give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself anymore, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. [21] And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way, walk in it," when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left. (Isaiah 30)

The promise of the Lord through Isaiah was that the Lord would teach them the way they were to go. They would hear the Lord say, "This is the way, walk in it."

There are many more illustrations of the leading of the Lord in the lives of His people in Scripture. Certainly, the Lord guided His people through His Word, but He also led them by His Spirit and His prompting in their lives as well.

Before Jesus left to be with His Father, He spoke these words to the disciples:

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[7] Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. [8] And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: [9] concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; [10] concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; [11] concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged. [12] "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. [13] When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. [14] He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. [15] All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16)

The Lord Jesus told His disciples the day He left them to return to His father that He would send the Holy Spirit to them. The disciples, at this point in their lives depended heavily on the counsel and teaching of the Lord Jesus. They could not imagine life without Him physically by their side. They needed His wisdom daily. The words of Jesus were a comfort to the disciples that day. He would not leave them to fend for themselves alone. He would send a Helper.

Notice what the Lord said the Holy Spirit would do. First, the Holy Spirit would open people's eyes to sin and bring a deep awareness of a coming judgement (verses 8-11). Second, He would guide God's people into an understanding of the truth of God (verses 12, 13). Third, He would reveal how they were to live their lives and make decisions that brought glory to the name of the Lord Jesus (verse 14). Finally, He would declare the will and purpose of the Lord Jesus to those who would listen to Him (verse 15).

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As we consider the great responsibility that comes with the freedom to choose, it is a deep comfort to us that we are not left to make those decisions alone. We have the written Word of God to guide us in what we are to believe and how we are to live. We also have the presence of the Holy Spirit in us to guide us in the practical application of that Word.

If we are to make the right decisions we must not only be diligent in the study of the Word of God but we must also tune our ears to hear the counsel and teaching of the Spirit of God who has been given to be our teacher and guide.

For Consideration:

Give some examples of how the Holy Spirit led individuals in the Bible. Have you ever known this kind of leading? Explain.

While Scripture is clear about how we are to walk and what we are to believe, is there a verse in the Bible for every decision you need to make in life?

What is the role of the Holy Spirit? Will he ever lead us in a way that is contrary to the principles of the Scriptures?

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How can we cultivate a deeper awareness of the leading and counsel of the Holy Spirit in the decisions we make?

For Prayer:

Take a moment to thank the Lord that He gives us His Holy Spirit to be our guide and teacher in the decisions we make.

Ask God to help you to become more aware of the presence and role of the Holy Spirit in your life. Ask Him to give you a deeper understanding of His leading.

Ask the Lord to forgive you for times when you have grieved His Holy Spirit by not listening to His rebuke and submitting to His direction.

Chapter 8

The Counsel of Godly Believers

As believers, we are called upon to exercise our privilege of choice regularly. We have seen how He gives us the Scriptures and His Holy Spirit to teach and counsel us in the way we should go. There is another support God has given us in the decisions we must make in life. That support comes in the form of the godly men and women around us.

Solomon, who was the wisest man in the Old Testament, often spoke of the need of wise counsel.

[5] A wise man is full of strength, and a man of knowledge enhances his might, [6] for by wise guidance you can wage your war, and in abundance of counselors there is victory. (Proverbs 24)

[14] Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety. (Proverbs 11)

[22] Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed. (Proverbs 15)

Solomon makes some important points here in these verses. Notice how he tells us that people and plans fail without counsel. Solomon felt so strongly about this that he went as far as to say:

[12] Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him. (Proverbs 26)

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In other words, if you think you are wise enough to make your own decisions without the counsel and advice of others than you are worse than a fool. According to Solomon, there is safety in the “abundance of counsellors” (Proverbs 11:14). When we have “many advisers” our plans will succeed (Proverbs 15:22). There is victory with “an abundance of counselors” (Proverbs 24:6).

The advice of Solomon to anyone seeking to make the right decision is to seek the counsel of wise and discerning people around us. Pride will keep us from seeking this advice but the wise person who wants to succeed will never hesitate to consult others before making his or her decision.

It should be noted here that not all advice given to us is wise. Rehoboam, the son of Solomon discovered this. The people of Israel approached the newly enthroned King Rehoboam and asked him to lighten the load his father had imposed on them. Before replying to the people Rehoboam sought the advice of Solomon’s counsellors.

[6] Then King Rehoboam took counsel with the old men, who had stood before Solomon his father while he was yet alive, saying, “How do you advise me to answer this people?” [7] And they said to him, “If you will be a servant to this people today and serve them, and speak good words to them when you answer them, then they will be your servants forever.” (1 Kings 12)

These wise old counsellors advised Rehoboam to lighten the load his father had placed on the people. Rehoboam, however, was not happy with this counsel and instead sought the counsel of his young friends:

[8] But he abandoned the counsel that the old men gave him and took counsel with the young men who had grown up with him and stood before him. [9] And he said to them, “What do you advise

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that we answer this people who have said to me, 'Lighten the yoke that your father put on us?'" [10] And the young men who had grown up with him said to him, "Thus shall you speak to this people who said to you, 'Your father made our yoke heavy, but you lighten it for us,' thus shall you say to them, 'My little finger is thicker than my father's thighs. [11] And now, whereas my father laid on you a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions.'" (1 Kings 12)

The counsel of his friends appealed more to Rehoboam than that given to him by the elderly men and so he decided to increase the burden on his people. The result was the breakup of the nation and the formation of Judah as a rival nation to Israel.

The experience of Rehoboam shows us that while seeking the counsel of others in the decisions we make is important, it is quite possible to gather around us people who will give us the advice we want and not necessarily the advice we need. Not all counsel is wise. We need to exercise discernment about the people from whom we seek counsel.

While not all counsel is wise, it is nonetheless vital that we listen to the wisdom of the godly and wise men and women around us. In fact, there are times when these men and women are instruments of God sent to us to correct us or set us on the right path. Consider the case of Moses in Exodus 18. As leader of the people of Israel, Moses was required to make many decisions daily.

On one occasion Moses' father-in-law came to visit him. The next day Moses got up in the morning and spent the entire day, from morning till evening judging cases for the people of God:

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[13] The next day Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood around Moses from morning till evening. (Exodus 18)

When his father-in-law saw this, he asked Moses why he spent the entire day judging cases for Israel. Moses explained the situation to his father-in-law:

[15] And Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God; [16] when they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make them know the statutes of God and his laws."

There were many disputes among the people of God and Moses needed to seek the Lord and decide how to settle these disputes.

Moses' father-in-law rebuked him when he heard his response:

[17] Moses' father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing is not good. [18] You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out, for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone. (Exodus 18)

His father-in-law went on to counsel Moses in what to do. He advised him to train trustworthy men in the law of God and have them take care of the simple cases so that his burden would be lifted and that people who were waiting for counsel would receive that counsel in a speedy and efficient manner. God used Moses' father-in-law to show him a better way to minister to the people. While Moses did not ask for this advise God sent it to him. It was important that Moses be willing to receive this counsel as from the Lord.

A similar incident took place in the New Testament. In Acts 18 we read about a Jewish man by the name of Apollos. He had been

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instructed in the way of the Lord and spoke the truth with eloquence and accuracy (Acts 18:25). There were some gaps, however, in his knowledge.

When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the “way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:26). Apollos received this counsel and would go on to become an even more powerful preacher of the Word of God (Acts 18:28). Apollos was not actually looking for this counsel, but God sent it to him through Priscilla and Aquila. These were God’s instruments to empower Apollos and make him a more effective preacher.

Let me conclude with one more illustration from Scripture related to how God uses corporate wisdom to help us to know the direction we need to take. In Acts 15 we read about a situation that arose in Antioch. Preachers from Judea had come to the region and were preaching that unless a man was circumcised according to the Law of Moses he could not be saved. This caused quite a stir among the believers in the church. Paul and Barnabas took issue with this doctrine and opposed the teachers from Judea. The church was divided and because of the dissension among believers, a delegation of believers led by Paul and Barnabas was sent to Jerusalem to appear before the apostles and elders and seek a ruling on the matter.

[2] And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question. (Acts 15)

After much discussion the council in Jerusalem came to its decision. The conclusion was put in writing and stated the following:

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[28] For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements: [29] that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.” (Acts 15)

Notice the phrase, “it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.” In other words, the council had a clear sense of the leading of the Holy Spirit in the ruling they made. This was not the result of human debate but the work of God’s Spirit through the rulers of the church. God moved among those leaders, directing them as they debated to make a decision that would bring Him honour and accomplish His purpose for the salvation of His people. The matter of whether a man needed to be circumcised to be saved was resolved as the church of Antioch sought the council of the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. Led by the Spirit of God, these apostles and elders were able to discern God’s purpose and advise the brothers and sisters of Antioch.

What we see in these Biblical illustrations is that the Lord God may send people who can advise us in the way we should go. If we are to make the correct choices we need to be willing to listen to the godly men and women around us. God gives us His Scripture to guide us. He also directs us by means of the leading of His Holy Spirit and the wise counsel of people He sends our way.

For Consideration:

Solomon tells us that without counsel, plans fail. What keeps us from seeking the counsel of others?

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How do we discern between good counsellors and bad counsellors?

Has God ever sent people to you with advice? Have you always listened to that advice?

Consider the decisions made at the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15. What is the role of public debate and prayer in the making of decisions?

For Prayer:

Ask the Lord to make you more willing to seek the counsel and advice of godly men and women.

Ask God to forgive you for times when you have persisted in your own way despite the counsel of those around you.

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Thank the Lord for how He uses other people to help us make the right decisions. Ask Him for discernment to know the difference between wise and unwise counsel.

Chapter 9

The God Who Oversees Our Decisions

While the Lord God has given His children all the support they need to make godly decisions, not everyone will listen to the counsel of the Lord. Decisions are made every day contrary to the purpose of God. Some of those decisions will hurt us. It is for this reason that God has also taken it on Himself to oversee and protect us against the ungodly choices we make.

Joseph was the favourite child of his father Jacob. This favouritism stirred up the jealousy of his brothers who began to hate him. This hatred became so intense that when the opportunity presented itself, Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery and told his father that a wild animal had eaten him. Their decision to get rid of Joseph came from an evil heart of jealousy and anger but God would overrule and turn the situation into something good.

Joseph became a powerful leader in Egypt and when a great famine arose in the region, he saved not only the nation of Egypt but his own nation as well. Standing before his brothers after the death of their father Jacob, Joseph declared:

[19] But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? [20] As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. (Genesis 50)

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The God of Joseph protected him against the evil decisions of his brothers and used their evil choices to save the nation of Israel.

The story of Samson in Judges 13-14 is a story of many bad decisions. In Judges 14 we read how Samson went down to the region of Timnah and met a woman there he wanted to marry. This desire to marry a foreign woman was contrary to the Law of Moses. Notice the response of Samson's parents to his choice of bride:

[3] But his father and mother said to him, "Is there not a woman among the daughters of your relatives, or among all our people, that you must go to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?" But Samson said to his father, "Get her for me, for she is right in my eyes." (Judges 14)

Samson insisted on marrying the woman of Timnah despite the counsel of his parents. On his way to Timnah with his parents for the engagement, Samson met a lion. He killed that lion and left its carcass in the field. When he returned for the marriage ceremony, Samson saw that bees had made a nest in the dead lion's body. Scooping out honey from the carcass, Samson ate it and gave some to his parents.

What we need to understand here is that Samson was a Nazirite and under obligation before God to allow his hair to grow long and never touch a dead body. When Samson went over to that carcass, scooped out honey and ate it, he chose to ignore his vow before the Lord.

When he arrived in Timnah, Samson presented a riddle to his friends: "Out of the eater came something to eat. Out of the strong came something sweet" (Judges 14:14). He told them that if they could solve his riddle within three days, he would give them thirty pieces of clothing. If they couldn't, they would give him thirty pieces

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of clothing. His friends approached Samson's fiancée and told her that if she did not get the answer the riddle, they would kill her and her family. When these friends answered his riddle, Samson knew what they had done. In anger, he went out and killed thirty men from the city, brought their clothes to his friends and left town. Seeing that he left town, Samson's father-in-law gave his wife to another man.

When Samson returned to be with his wife and discovered that she had been given to another man, he burned the grain fields and orchards at the time of harvest. This so infuriated the town that they killed Samson's wife and family. Samson declared that day that he would not stop until he had avenged this blood (Judges 15:7). For the rest of his life, Samson would fight the Philistines as the enemies of Israel.

The Philistines were the number one enemy of Israel in the days of Samson. They had been oppressing Israel for forty years. As Israel cried out to God for deliverance, God spoke to a young barren woman by the name of Manoah and told her that she would bear a son who would begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines:

[3] "Behold, you are barren and have not borne children, but you shall conceive and bear a son. [4] Therefore be careful and drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, [5] for behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb, and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines." (Judges 13)

Samson would become aware of this call on his life through a series of bad decisions. He would choose to marry a foreign woman. He decided to ignore his call as a Nazirite and touched the dead body

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of a lion. He invited his friends to answer his riddle about that lion and trusted his fiancée with the answer. He killed thirty men in the city and set fire to the Philistine fields. These rash and ungodly decisions shaped the hatred and bitterness of Samson's heart toward the Philistines. The result was that the rest of his life was devoted to destroying that enemy of God's people. While Samson would ultimately lose his life at the hands of the Philistines, he would go down in history as a defender of Israel and a mighty warrior in defence of his nation. God used him, despite the ungodliness of his choices in life.

While God did not stop Samson or Joseph's brothers from making bad decisions, He did overrule and accomplish good in the end. There is something very mysterious about the sovereignty of God. Even when we make wrong decisions, God can use those decisions to accomplish His purpose. He is bigger than our decisions and choices.

There is a wonderful passage in the book of Hosea that speaks to how God oversaw the decisions of His people.

[5] For their mother has played the whore; she who conceived them has acted shamefully. For she said, 'I will go after my lovers, who give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink.' [6] Therefore I will hedge up her way with thorns, and I will build a wall against her, so that she cannot find her paths. [7] She shall pursue her lovers but not overtake them, and she shall seek them but shall not find them. Then she shall say, 'I will go and return to my first husband, for it was better for me then than now.' (Hosea 2)

In Hosea 2 the Lord accused his people of unfaithfulness. He accused her of going after other lovers and abandoning her one

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true God. At this point in her history, Israel chose to walk away from God and pursue other gods. Notice the response of God to this decision. He would hedge her way with thorns and build a wall against her so that, although she pursued her lovers, she would not overtake them.

God setup barriers for his people to hinder their path of destruction. He placed thorns and walls on the road she chose. He did this so that she would return to Him. While God did not take away Israel's decision to choose, He would not make the path of evil easy for her.

The apostle Paul experienced this on his way to Damascus. He had chosen a religious life and part of that was to remove all who blasphemed the name of His God. He saw Christianity as part of this blasphemy. While on his way to Damascus God struck him with a blinding light. A voice came from that light and said: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads" (Acts 26:14)

The goad was a pointed rod that was used to drive cattle. What God is saying to Paul here is that He was using a goad to drive Paul in the path He had laid out for him. Paul was making his decisions but God was overruling those decision. God pursued Paul in his rebellion. The conviction of the Lord chased him wherever he went. Knocked down to his knees before the blinding light of the Lord, Paul was forced to change his decision. Would he finally surrender to the belief he fought so fiercely to destroy? Over the next few days, the pride of Paul was broken and he freely opened his heart to the truth of Jesus Christ. He would become the greatest missionary of the early church, suffering for the cause he once sought to crush.

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What do we learn from these Biblical examples? The God who gives us free choice, does not surrender His control. He continues to sovereignly oversee the affairs of my life. He can use the bad decisions I make to accomplish good. He can block the paths I choose to take or line them with thorns to make my progress difficult. He will chase after me when I choose the wrong path with. He watches out for me as I make my decisions.

How thankful we need to be that God does not hand over full control of the universe to human beings and their decisions. I am free to make decisions but there is a God who is over every decision I make watching out for me and directing my path.

For Consideration:

How did God change the evil decision of Joseph's brothers into good?

Did Samson's bad decisions keep God from using him? Explain.

Has God ever kept you from making a bad decision? Explain.

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The Lord God pursued Paul as he sought to persecute believers. Have you ever been pursued by God?

While God gives us the freedom to choose, does He surrender complete control to human beings?

For Prayer:

Thank the Lord that he can take our bad decisions and use them for good in our lives.

Take a moment to thank the Lord for times He has protected you from making bad choices in your life.

Thank the Lord that He is in control of the events of your life. Thank Him that while you are free to choose He is still watching out for you and seeking your good.

Chapter 10

Testing the Lord with Our Decisions

While God has given us great support in the decisions we make, we can ignore His counsel. Not everyone walks according to the principles of God's Word. We can resist the leading of God's Spirit. Sometimes this is unintentional, but at other times, because of the hardness of our hearts and the stubbornness of our wills, we intentionally choose to disobey and disregard the purpose of God for our lives.

Listen to the words of the Lord through Moses in Deuteronomy 6:

[16] "You shall not put the LORD your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah. [17] You shall diligently keep the commandments of the LORD your God, and his testimonies and his statutes, which he has commanded you. [18] And you shall do what is right and good in the sight of the LORD, that it may go well with you, and that you may go in and take possession of the good land that the LORD swore to give to your fathers [19] by thrusting out all your enemies from before you, as the LORD has promised. (Deuteronomy 6)

The command of God to His people was that they walk in obedience to His command. Israel was not to put the Lord their God to the test. As an example of what it meant to test the Lord, Moses reminds his people of what took place at Massah.

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Exodus 17 recounts what took place at Massah. Israel had become weary of travelling through the wilderness and voiced their complaint to Moses. They told him that they wanted to return to Egypt instead of following the Lord's direction to the Promised Land. They expressed frustration that they were hungry and thirsty and wanted nothing more to do with God's purpose. Massah came to represent the bitter and rebellious human spirit that refused to walk in God's ways.

The psalmist spoke about this stubborn heart in Psalm 95:

[7] For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. Today, if you hear his voice, [8] do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, [9] when your fathers put me to the test and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work. [10] For forty years I loathed that generation and said, "They are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways." [11] Therefore I swore in my wrath, "They shall not enter my rest."
(Psalm 95)

Notice how the psalmist challenges us not to harden our heart if we hear the voice of God. He cites the example of what took place at Massah for the reader to consider. It is possible for us to hear the voice of God and harden our heart to it. The psalmist describes this as putting God to the test. Notice the result of putting God to the test— God loathed that generation (verse 10) and swore that they would not enter His rest (verse 11).

In Psalm 81 the Psalmist tells us that because Israel did not listen to His voice, God gave them over to their stubborn hearts:

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[11] "But my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would not submit to me. [12] So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels. (Psalm 81)

God gave the people what they wanted but they would pay the price.

Writing in Romans 1 the apostle Paul said:

[18] For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. [19] For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. [20] For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. [21] For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. [22] Claiming to be wise, they became fools, [23] and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. [24] Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, [25] because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.
(Romans 1)

Paul told the Romans that the wrath of God was being revealed against ungodly practices of his day. God had revealed His presence but the people of Rome refused to consider Him or His purpose. Instead they chose to exchange the glory of God for idols and images. They chose to follow the lusts of their hearts rather than

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the command of God. The result was that God gave them up to their lusts and sinful desires. Paul went on in Romans 1 to describe the result:

[26] For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; [27] and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. [28] And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. [29] They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, [30] slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, [31] foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. [32] Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them. (Romans 1)

Roman society was filled with immorality, unrighteousness, envy, murder, deceit, gossip, foolishness, disrespect, insolence and heartlessness. While people did as they pleased, their society paid a very high price. They chose to ignore God's purpose and so God gave them up to their desires. Those passions and lusts destroyed them.

Speaking to the people of Hosea's day the Lord said:

[17] Ephraim is joined to idols; leave him alone. [18] When their drink is gone, they give themselves to whoring; their rulers dearly

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love shame. [19] A wind has wrapped them in its wings, and they shall be ashamed because of their sacrifices. (Hosea 4)

Ephraim had chosen to turn from God and worship idols, live in drunkenness and immorality. "Leave him alone," God said, "they shall be ashamed." The day would come when Ephraim would look back in deep shame for his rebellion and wasteful life. God would not stop him if he persisted in this track but he would ultimately pay the price for his foolishness.

The Pharisees of Jesus day had the privilege of hearing Him preach. They saw His miracles and spoke personally with Him, yet they refused to accept Him as the Son of God. They stubbornly resisted Him and His message. Speaking about these Pharisees the Lord Jesus said:

[14] Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit." (Matthew 15)

The Lord gave the Pharisees over to their rebellious heart. They could have their way, but the cost would be very high – as blind leaders they would "fall into a pit." In that pit they would be forever separated from the God they rejected. They would only have themselves to blame for this.

Listen to the words of Stephen as he testified before his accusers:

[39] Our fathers refused to obey him, but thrust him aside, and in their hearts they turned to Egypt, [40] saying to Aaron, 'Make for us gods who will go before us. As for this Moses who led us out from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' [41] And they made a calf in those days, and offered a sacrifice to the idol and were rejoicing in the works of their hands. [42] But God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of

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heaven, as it is written in the book of the prophets: “Did you bring to me slain beasts and sacrifices, during the forty years in the wilderness, O house of Israel? [43] You took up the tent of Moloch and the star of your god Rephan, the images that you made to worship; and I will send you into exile beyond Babylon.’ (Acts 7)

Stephen shares with his listeners that their fathers refused to obey the Lord and stubbornly longed to return to Egypt. They rejected the one true God and worshipped a calf god instead. The result was that “God turned away and gave them over to worship the host of heaven” (verse 42). This ultimately resulted in the exile of Israel to Babylon where she lost her homeland and everything she owned (verse 43). This happened because they rejected the Lord’s counsel and “thrust him aside” (verse 39).

Listen to the words of Paul about the unbelieving Gentile in Ephesians 4:

[17] Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds. [18] They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. [19] They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity. [20] But that is not the way you learned Christ! (Ephesians 4)

Paul describes the Gentiles as having a calloused heart. This is a heart that is no longer soft or receptive to the Word of God or the leading of His Spirit. Paul used these Gentiles as an example and concluded by saying, “but that is not the way you learned Christ” (verse 20). In other words, the sincere Christian is one who keeps his or her heart soft and receptive to the counsel of God.

Testing the Lord with Our Decisions

In 2 Thessalonians 2, the apostle Paul spoke prophetically about a coming time. He predicted that a lawlessness will come to this earth accompanied by false signs and wonders.

[9] The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, [10] and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. [11] Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, [12] in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness. (2 Thessalonians 2)

What is important for us to note in these verses is that many will refuse to love the truth and believe the falsehood of the lawless one. This will result, according to Paul, in the Lord giving them over to strong delusions and falsehood. In the end these individuals will be condemned because they “did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness” (verse 12).

These verses show us that it is possible to reject the counsel of the Lord. We can disobey the teaching of Scripture. We can refuse to follow the prompting of the Spirit of God in our lives. Even believers fall short of the standard God has set. It is possible to so persist in our rebellion that God gives us over to it and we suffer the consequences in our lives.

Maybe you have met someone who has refused to forgive a brother or sister for an offense. Maybe you have watched a brother or sister continue in a sinful lifestyle, resisting the conviction of the Spirit to repent. Sin exists because we reject the counsel of God. Suffering and pain in our world was the result of a bad choice. Eve ate the forbidden fruit, ignoring the command of God, and brought the

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curse of sin on this earth. This sin brought the devastation we see today.

As we continue to resist the Word of God and the conviction of His Spirit, sin is perpetuated and continues its deadly rampage of our society and personal lives. God gives us a choice. He miraculously preserved His Word to be our guide into truth. He sends us His Holy Spirit to teach us and lead us in the way we should go. He even promises to oversee our choices and transform our bad decisions into good. He expects us to listen to His counsel and follow His leading. He wants us to willingly surrender to His purpose. His desire is that we actively seek to walk in obedience. He gives us the freedom to reject what He says but pleads with us to listen:

*[7] Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, "Today, if you hear his voice,
[8] do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of
testing in the wilderness, (Hebrews 3)*

If we suffer the consequences of disobedience it is not because God has not done all that is necessary but because we have tested Him and resisted His voice. If we can hear His voice, we must not harden our heart to it. Instead, we must keep our heart pure and sensitive to Him and His leading so that we can choose the path of righteousness and blessing.

For Consideration:

Is it possible to resist God's will for our lives and make wrong decisions?

Testing the Lord with Our Decisions

It is possible for the believer to make a wrong choice and live in sin?

What does it mean for God to give us over to our sinful hearts?
What is the result of this in our lives?

Do you see a resistance to God and His purpose in your society?
Explain

How do you cultivate a soft heart toward God and His will for your life? What hardens our heart to the things of God?

Are there any sins in your life that the Lord has been speaking to you about today? What are they? What do you need to do?

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For Prayer:

Ask the Lord to soften your heart to His Word and the leading of His Spirit. Ask Him to give you ears to hear and a willing heart to obey.

Thank the Lord for the freedom He has given us to choose Him. Thank Him that He guides us in our decisions. Ask Him for greater sensitivity to His leading and conviction in your life.

Take a moment to pray for those who have been given over to their sinful lifestyle. Ask God to soften the heart of those who are living in sin so that they can repent and be restored to fellowship with God.

Chapter 11

Sin: The Rebellious Will

How would you define sin? While there are many ways to define sin, let me take a moment here to partially answer this question in the context of this study. Sin, in many ways, is a conscious or sub-conscious rebellion of the will against the purpose of God.

In the Garden of Eden, Eve stood before the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Speaking with Satan that day, Eve was tempted to eat the forbidden fruit. She knew the Lord told her not to eat from the tree but, excited about the perceived benefits of tasting the fruit, she defied the command of the Lord and disobeyed. This was a conscious and rational choice she made. She placed herself in opposition to God and defied His order. This was the first sin.

What took place in the Garden continued throughout the history of God's people. Israel would rebel against the purpose of God and choose her own way. Writing in Psalm 78, the psalmist reminded the people of his day that they were not to be like their fathers who were stubborn and rebellious, and "whose spirit was not faithful to God."

[5] He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers to teach to their children, [6] that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children, [7] so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments; [8] and that they should not be like their

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*fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation whose heart was not steadfast, whose spirit was not faithful to God.
(Psalm 78)*

Their fathers sinned against the Lord God by choosing to live a life of unfaithfulness toward Him.

God speaks often about the rebellion of Israel in the Scriptures. Isaiah accused his people of rebellion when he said:

[9] For they are a rebellious people, lying children, children unwilling to hear the instruction of the LORD; (Isaiah 30)

Through His prophet Isaiah the Lord also declared:

[2] I spread out my hands all the day to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices; (Isaiah 65)

Isaiah describes a people who were unwilling to hear the instruction of God and chose to follow their own devices. This was a decision the people of God made. They chose to block their ears and do their own thing.

Ezekiel describes the people of his day as being a “rebellious house:”

[7] And you shall speak my words to them, whether they hear or refuse to hear, for they are a rebellious house. (Ezekiel 2)

Notice how he describes this rebellion in Ezekiel 12:

[12:1] The word of the LORD came to me: [2] “Son of man, you dwell in the midst of a rebellious house, who have eyes to see, but see not, who have ears to hear, but hear not, for they are a rebellious house. (Ezekiel 12)

Sin: The Rebellious Will

The people Ezekiel spoke to had eyes to see but they would not see. They had ears to hear but they would not hear. God spoke to His people, but they refused to listen to what he had to say. He revealed His presence in their midst, but they refused to see what He was trying to show them. They sinned by rejecting Him and His Word.

Speaking to the nation of Babylon the prophet Jeremiah said:

[29] "Summon archers against Babylon, all those who bend the bow. Encamp around her; let no one escape. Repay her according to her deeds; do to her according to all that she has done. For she has proudly defied the LORD, the Holy One of Israel. (Jeremiah 50)

Notice how Jeremiah accused the nation of Babylon of proudly defying the Lord. She stood against Him and destroyed His people. Her sin was to challenge God and place herself in opposition to His purpose.

A brief search for the phrase "would not" in Scripture reveals some interesting results.

[26] "Yet you would not go up, but rebelled against the command of the LORD your God. (Deuteronomy 1)

In this verse, Moses speaks about how God was ready to lead His people into the Promised Land but they refused to take up arms to fight the enemy for fear that they could not defeat them. This was a decision the people of God made in defiance against the purpose of God for them at that time.

Through Jeremiah the Lord rebuked His people because, despite the fact that he had "persistently" sent prophets to warn them, they

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would not listen. They chose instead to reject these prophets and their message from the Lord.

[19] because they did not pay attention to my words, declares the LORD, that I persistently sent to you by my servants the prophets, but you would not listen, declares the LORD.’ (Jeremiah 29)

The Bible also speaks multiple times about people who “refused” God’s purpose for their lives. This refusal was a conscious decision on the part of the individuals concerned. In Psalm 78 the psalmist writes:

[10] They did not keep God’s covenant, but refused to walk according to his law. (Psalm 78)

The people of God decided to reject the covenant and law of God and walk in their own path.

Jeremiah speaks of a people who refused to take correction and repent but made their faces harder than rock:

[3] O LORD, do not your eyes look for truth? You have struck them down, but they felt no anguish; you have consumed them, but they refused to take correction. They have made their faces harder than rock; they have refused to repent. (Jeremiah 5)

The prophet Zechariah has this to say:

[11] But they refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears that they might not hear. [12] They made their hearts diamond-hard lest they should hear the law and the words that the LORD of hosts had sent by his Spirit through the former prophets. Therefore great anger came from the LORD of hosts. (Zechariah 7)

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It is hard to read Zechariah 7:11-12 without seeing that the refusal of God's people to listen to Him was a conscious decision on their part. They "turned a stubborn shoulder." They "stopped their ears that they might not hear." "They made their hearts diamond-hard lest they should hear the law." The fault lay squarely on the shoulders of God's people. They were the ones to resist and reject the Lord and His ways. They used their freedom of choice to turn their backs on the Lord God.

Finally, in the New Testament, the apostle Paul, writing to the Thessalonians, says this about the unbeliever:

*[10] and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing,
because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. (2
Thessalonians 2)*

Paul told the Thessalonians that the reason their friends and loved one were not saved was because they refused to love the truth.

While it is easy to blame original sin on our lostness, the passages we have examined show us that we must also realize that we choose to continue in this rebellion. Sin is our condition before Christ but it is also a personal decision we have made. We cannot place all the blame on Adam and Eve. I choose what they chose. I resist the counsel of God in my life. I reject His Word to do my own thing. I turn my back on Christ as the solution to my sin. I harden my heart to the will of God. I am full of pride and lift myself up before God. I surrender to my fleshly desires and lusts. Nobody forced me to choose this path. I chose it willingly and freely of my own accord. Sin is a personal choice to rebel against God's purpose. I am guilty by my own choice.

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For Consideration:

What is sin?

Does God always keep us from sinning? Do I have a choice not to sin?

Have you ever found yourself not wanting to hear the Word of God or twist the truth to justify your actions?

Does the fact that I am a sinner by nature mean that I am no longer responsible for my sins? Am I forced to sin because of my sinful nature or is sin a decision I make to defy God?

For Prayer:

Ask God to protect you from a rebellious heart.

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Confess that you sin not just because you have a sinful nature but because you have personally chosen to walk in rebellion. Admit your guilt before God and thank Him for His forgiveness.

Do you know someone who has been resisting God and His will for their life? Take a moment to pray that the Lord would break any rebelliousness and allow them to surrender to Him.

Chapter 12

Salvation: The Renewal of the Will

In the last chapter, we saw that sin is the result of the rebellions will. We are sinners not just because of Adam and Eve, but also because of our own choice. The prophet Jeremiah said this about the human heart:

[9] The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? [10] "I the LORD search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds." (Jeremiah 17)

It is not easy for us to accept the fact that we have a heart that is "desperately sick." Every so often, however, I take a brief second to consider what is in my heart. I ask myself what would be possible if I were to allow my heart to do whatever it wanted without restrictions or restraint. I know the temptations I feel. I knew that thoughts and attitudes I wrestle with in my mind. I know that without the presence of God in my life I would not be where I am today. I know that there is a rebellious nature within me. I know that this heart wrestles with the things of God. I knew that if God were to "search the heart and test the mind," it would fall far short of His standard. It is a heart and mind that naturally resists His purpose and will.

Listen to what the Lord God said when He looked into the hearts and minds of the people of Noah's day:

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[5] The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. [6] And the LORD regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. (Genesis 6)

The intentions and thoughts of human hearts were “evil continually.” The thoughts and intentions of the human will were not in sync with the purpose of God.

The apostle Paul made it clear that there is not one person who has not fallen short of the standard of God.

[23] for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3)

Sin is a choice we make to resist God and His purpose in our lives. This comes from a heart and mind that does not submit itself to God and His purpose. It comes from a heart that is sick as a result of the fall of humanity into sin.

The psalmist David understood the sinfulness of his heart after he committed adultery with his neighbour's wife and then had him murdered so he wouldn't discover the truth. Reflecting on this time of his life David wrote:

[51:1] Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. [2] Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! (Psalm 51)

David understood that the decisions he had made were not godly. They offended a holy God. He begged God to forgive Him for the evil choices he had so freely made. In Psalm 51:7-8 he pleaded with

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God to cleanse him of his impurity and restore joy and gladness to his heart.

[7] Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. [8] Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have broken rejoice. (Psalm 51)

He then goes on in verse 10 to ask God to give him a new heart and renew a right spirit in him:

[10] Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. (Psalm 51)

David believed it was possible for God to give him a new heart. He understood the evil of his thoughts and intentions. He wanted God to change this in him by giving him a spirit that would long for Him.

Giving us a new heart is not only possible, but it is the delight of God to do so. God promised His people in the days of Moses that He would circumcise their heart and the heart of their offspring:

[6] And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live. (Deuteronomy 30)

Notice the result of the circumcision of the heart – “you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.” This work of God in the lives of His people would transform their will and give them a desire to seek after God.

God promised the same thing through Jeremiah:

[38] And they shall be my people, and I will be their God. [39] I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever,

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for their own good and the good of their children after them. [40] I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me. (Jeremiah 32)

Through Jeremiah, the Lord promised that He would put a new heart in His people so that would fear Him forever. This new heart would cause them to reverence and obey the Lord God. It would give them a will to consider His purpose in the decisions and choices they made in life. Serving God and honouring His name would have a place of priority in this new heart.

God told His people through Ezekiel that He would remove their old heart of stone and give them a new heart of flesh:

[25] I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.

[26] And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. [27] And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. (Ezekiel 36)

Notice again the result of this new heart and spirit. It would cause God's people to walk in His statutes and be careful to obey His rules (verse 27). There would be a new allegiance and passion. The heart that God gave His people would long to walk in fellowship with Him.

What is important for us to see here, however, is that while God was willing to give His people a new heart, He wanted them to ask Him for this life-changing transformation. We have already seen how David came to a place in his life where he cried out to God for a "right spirit." Behind this cry was the work of God who continued to pursue David in his rebellion. God worked in the rebellious heart

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of the psalmist. The conviction of God on his life became so powerful after his sin with Bathsheba that David's stony heart was broken and he pleaded with God for a new spirit within him. The cry of David for a new heart was a personal choice but it was a choice made as a result of the conviction of God's Spirit on his life.

God wants to give us a new heart. Notice in Ezekiel 18:20 how He pleads with His people to allow Him to do this work in their lives:

[30] "Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, declares the Lord GOD. Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin. [31] Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? [32] For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live." (Ezekiel 18)

The challenge of God was for His people to cast away their sin and rebellion and make themselves a new heart and spirit (verse 31). How was it possible for them to receive this new heart and spirit? They had to turn from their sin and cry out to God. He would give them this new spirit if they would seek Him. It was something He wanted to do but He offered them a choice. "Why will you die?" He asked them. "So turn, and live" (verse 32). God's people had a decision to make. They could die in rebellion with a rebellious heart of sin, or they could cry out to Him and He would give them a new heart.

The apostle Paul, writing to the Corinthians said this:

[17] Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. [18] All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; (2 Corinthians 5)

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What is salvation? According to Paul, it is becoming a new creation through the work of Christ. What does it mean to become a new person? It is to be given a new heart and spirit. This is what God promised through His prophets of the Old Testament. Those who experience the salvation of God experience a transformation of their will. They have within them a whole new set of priorities and desires. The new heart they have received longs for Christ and His purpose. The old desires and passions are passing away. They now seek to walk in the purpose of God and in fellowship with Him.

Writing to Titus the apostle described the work of salvation as a washing and renewal of the Holy Spirit through the work of Jesus.

[4] But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, [5] he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, [6] whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, (Titus 3)

What we need to see from Paul's words to Timothy is that salvation is not just a washing or cleansing of our sins but also a renewal of the Holy Spirit. In other words, we are not just forgiven, but we are also changed. Our hearts and minds are renewed by the inner work of God's Spirit. Our wills are transformed so that they seek after and long for the Lord God and His purpose in our lives.

While sin has to do with the rebellion of our will, salvation is the renewal of our will. God removes the old heart of stone and replaces it with a tender heart of flesh. He replaces our rebellious spirit with a spirit that longs for Him and delights in His ways. Salvation is not just the forgiveness of our sin but also the renewal of our heart and spirit. It is a life-changing transformation of our person. As the Spirit of God comes to live in us, He changes us from

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the inside. I am no longer the same person. My passions are changed. My priorities are shifted. My attitudes are transformed. The choices I make now come from a heart that is renewed and in fellowship with God.

For Consideration:

How does Scripture describe the human heart?

How did David come to understand the sinfulness of his heart?

What role does the Spirit of God play in bringing us to awareness of our sinful heart?

What do we learn in this chapter about the desire of God to give us a new heart?

What changes come about when God renews our heart or gives us a new heart? How does this renewal of our will affect the decisions we make?

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For Prayer:

Has the Lord renewed your heart and mind? If so, take a moment to thank Him for this new life? If not, ask Him to renew you today.

Thank the Holy Spirit for pursuing and convicting you. Thank Him that He reveals sin and our need of the salvation of God.

Ask God to help you to live now in the renewal of your heart and mind. Ask Him to give you grace to make decisions that bring Him honour and glory.

Chapter 13

Sanctification: The Surrender of Our Will

In the last chapter, we spoke about how God is willing to give us a new heart. What is vital for us to understand is that even those who have been given a new heart and desire can wander from God and His purpose and make ungodly decisions in life.

Throughout the New Testament, the Lord called His people to a life of surrender and obedience. The temptation to walk in the ways of the flesh remains, even in those who have received a new heart. The apostle Paul expressed this struggle when he wrote:

14 For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. 15 For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. 16 Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. (Romans 7)

The apostle Paul experienced a tension between the flesh and the new heart God had given him. He hated sin and rebellion against God in his heart but found his flesh longing to live in ungodliness. A battle raged within him as a result.

This battle will rage in every believer. Paul encouraged the Roman Christians to walk in the Spirit and put the deeds of the flesh to death:

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*13 For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.
(Romans 8)*

He exhorted believers to make no provision for the flesh:

14 But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. (Romans 13)

Writing to the Galatians Paul went on to say:

16 But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. (Galatians 5)

It was the expectation of the apostle that those who belonged to Christ and received this new heart would actively engage in the crucifixion of their fleshly passions and desires:

24 And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. (Galatians 5)

The apostle Peter expressed the same thought when he wrote:

1 Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, 2 so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God. (1 Peter 4)

According to Peter, it is the obligation of believers to arm themselves for battle against the flesh and its passions. Receiving a new heart does not mean we will never struggle with the sinful passions of the flesh. If anything, it will make us more aware of its

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evil desires. The light of Christ in us will expose the darkness of sin. This in turn will increase our battle with the flesh. Both Paul and Peter challenged believers to take that battle seriously. Believers are to learn how to surrender to the purpose of God and resist the attractions of evil.

Paul encouraged the Romans to offer their bodies as living sacrifices to the Lord.

1 I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12)

Paul challenged believers in Romans 12 to be renewed in their mind. While these believers had already received a new heart, they were exhorted to allow God to continue transforming them. This transformation is not a one-time event but a lifelong process and requires a surrender of our will to the purpose of God on a daily basis.

Titus reminded his readers that they had received the grace of God in salvation so that they could train themselves to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions:

11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, 12 training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age (Titus 2)

Listen to the prayer of Jesus for His disciples in John 17:

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16 They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. 17 Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. (John 17)

Jesus asked the Father to sanctify His disciples in the truth. He then went on to tell them that that truth was found in the Word of God. What Jesus is saying here is that it is His will that all believer become more and more like Him. The means by which they become more like Him is through the truth. As they reflected on and obeyed His Word, they would be transformed into His image. If they were going to become like Christ, they would have to battle their flesh and its passions and choose rather to walk in the truth of Christ. There can be no maturity in Christ without the surrender of our will to Him and His purpose.

Sanctification is the process whereby we become more like the Lord Jesus through the surrender of our will to His. This requires a decision to die to the passions of our flesh. If we want to mature in our relationship with Christ, there is a decision to be made. We need to make it our commitment to choose His purpose in everything. We need to lay down our own ideas and make it our priority to walk in His will. In many ways the difference between maturity and immaturity is a matter of choice. Those who are mature in Christ have chosen to surrender their will to Him. They have committed themselves to walk in obedience no matter the cost.

This is a decision we must all make. Will we choose to walk in the purpose of God or will we surrender to the passions of our flesh? Will we commit ourselves to absolute obedience or will we compromise and fail to become all that Christ wants us to be?

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For Consideration:

Does receiving a new heart mean we will never be tempted?

Explain the struggle between the new heart and the flesh? Have you experienced this struggle personally?

Are all believers mature? What role do the decisions we make have in our maturity in Christ?

Can we experience maturity in Christ if we do not surrender our will to Him?

For Prayer:

Ask the Lord to help you to care for the new heart He has given you by making the right choices to walk in obedience.

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Take a moment to ask the Lord to show you if there is anything in your life that is not fully surrendered to Him and His purpose. Ask Him for forgiveness and the grace necessary to choose Him and His purpose for you.

Chapter 14

Faith: The Strength to Follow Through

When the Lord saved us, He not only forgave our sin but also gave us a new heart and will. In the last chapter, we saw that receiving a new heart does not mean that we never struggle with the flesh. A battle rages in the life of the believer because of the new heart he or she has received. The flesh desires the things of this world and rebels against the purpose of God. The new heart we have received is tender toward God and desires Him and His purpose. The apostle Paul encouraged believers in Galatia to crucify the flesh with its desires and passions (Galatians 5:24) and learn to walk in the Spirit (Galatians 5:16).

Throughout Scripture the call goes out to believers to die to themselves, pick up their cross and follow the Lord Jesus. Consider the words of Jesus in John 12:

[24] Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

[25] Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. (John 12)

Jesus does not hesitate to call us to leave everything to seek Him. Matthew 4 recounts the call of the disciples to follow Jesus:

[18] While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. [19] And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men." [20] Immediately

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they left their nets and followed him. [21] And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. [22] Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. (Matthew 4)

Notice how Jesus asked these men to leave their jobs and family to be His disciples. Jesus expected total loyalty on the part of His disciples, and this required sacrifice.

[13] No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.” (Luke 16)

One day a rich young ruler came to Jesus and asked Him what he needed to do to have eternal life. Jesus told him to sell everything and follow Him:

[21] Jesus said to him, “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” (Matthew 19)

That day the rich young ruler made the most important decision he ever made:

[22] When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. (Matthew 19)

He turned his back on the Lord Jesus and walked away. He was unwilling to leave everything to become a disciple of Jesus. He preferred his wealth.

For those who surrender all to follow Jesus, our Lord promised:

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[29] And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. (Matthew 19)

For every believer there is a great decision to make. Will we surrender all and follow the Lord Jesus? Will we pick up our cross and unashamedly become a disciple of Christ? Will we step out into the unknown to walk in His purpose?

There is a great uncertainty for all who will accept this challenge. We find security in our possessions and routine. What if the Lord asks us to surrender this to Him? Knowing ourselves and our weaknesses, we wonder if we could persevere through opposition. Will the challenge of ministry and the Christian life be too much for us? There are times when the Lord calls us to do things we do not feel qualified to do. Like the rich young ruler, we stand before the call of God to surrender everything, pick up our cross and follow Jesus. What will be our decision? How can we persevere in that call? The answer to this has to do with faith.

Faith is defined in Hebrews 11 as follows:

[11:1] Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (Hebrews 11)

Faith an assurance and conviction of things we cannot see or understand logically. It is a confidence in God and His Word.

Hebrews 11 gives us examples of men and women of faith. In verse 7 we read about Noah who made a commitment to obey God and build an ark based only on what God told Him:

[7] By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his

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household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith. (Hebrews 11)

Abraham left his homeland to follow the leading of God when He did not know where he was going:

[8] By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. (Hebrews 11)

Moses renounced the privileges of Egypt to lead his people through the wilderness toward the Promised Land.

[24] By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, [25] choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. [26] He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward. (Hebrews 11)

It was that same faith that motivated countless saints to persevere when hardships stripped them of everything they owned. By faith these saints conquered the kingdoms, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword and were made strong in weakness (Hebrews 11:32-34). They endured great obstacles in life but experienced wonderful victory because they trusted God and His Word:

[35] ...Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. [36] Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. [37] They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— [38] of whom the world was not worthy— wandering

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about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. [39] And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, [40] since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect. (Hebrews 11)

The men and women of Hebrews 11 made some important decisions. They determined to walk in faithfulness and obedience to the Lord their God, no matter the cost. They made that decision knowing full well that there would be great sacrifice. They stepped out into the unknown with only God and His promises to trust. They overcame enemies greater than themselves. They pushed back the forces of darkness and laid down their lives in victory and faithful obedience. It was their faith in God and His Word that gave them victory.

The apostle John declared that those who were born of God would overcome the world. Notice how that victory is possible:

[4] For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world— our faith. [5] Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? (1 John 5)

It is faith in Jesus Christ that gives us victory. We believe in Jesus and His Word. We trust in the power of His Spirit in us. We step out boldly because we trust Him and His leading. We know that what is impossible to us is possible with God.

Faith is the strength we need to follow through on our decisions and commitments to God. In fact, the apostle Paul challenges us to make faith in God an essential ingredient in every decision. Listen to what he told the Romans:

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[23] But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin. (Romans 14)

The work of the Spirit in our heart gives us a deeper passion for Christ. As He works in us, we find ourselves motivated to make commitments to the Lord and His purpose. Each day brings its decisions. We are called on to choose whether we will walk in faith and obedience or whether we resist the Word of God and the conviction of His Spirit. It is our faith that will enable us to make the right decisions and to persevere in those decisions when things get difficult. We believe in Jesus and trust His promises. We step out with fear at times but that fear is overcome by the confidence and conviction that God is faithful and will keep us no matter what happens. The decisions and commitments we make must be strengthened and supported by faith in God, His will and His enabling. This is our strength to follow through to the end.

For Consideration:

Will my decisions always make my life easier? Why would we make decisions that would bring hardship? Consider Hebrews 11 and the decisions of the men and women of faith described there.

What is faith?

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How does faith strengthen our commitments and support our decisions?

To what extent do you exercise faith in the decisions and commitments you make?

For Prayer:

Ask the Lord for the grace necessary to make the right decisions, even when those decisions make your life more difficult.

Ask God to strengthen your confidence in Him and His Word. Ask Him to enable you to step out boldly in obedience.

Have you found yourself feeling overwhelmed in the ministry and task that God has given you? Ask God to increase your faith and confidence in Him and His promises. Ask Him to lead you in the path He has for your life and give you peace in His purpose

Chapter 15

Grace: The Freedom to Fail

We have seen in the course of this study that the Lord God has given us the responsibility to choose. The decisions we make will have consequences in our lives. Not everyone makes the right choice. Jesus told a parable in Matthew 25:14-30 about a master who went away and left his servants with money to invest on his behalf in his absence.

The master gave each of his three servants a different sum of money. To one, he gave five talents, to the second, he gave two, and the final servant received only one talent. The servants who received five and two talents invested them and doubled the master's money. When the master asked the last servant to give an account of what he had done with his money, he replied:

[24] ...'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, [25] so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.' (Matthew 25)

The servant who had received one talent told the master that he was afraid and hid his talent in the ground. Consider this for a moment. This individual was fearful of failing his master. He knew that the decision about how to invest the money he had received

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was an important one. The master expected a return on his investment. This servant knew that if he made a wrong decision, he could fail and lose the money his master had given him. Not wanting to lose the money he chose not to invest it but keep it safely and return it in full to the master when he arrived home from his journey.

The fear of failure is a very real issue for us. Many believers are paralyzed by this fear. We cannot make a commitment for fear that we will not be able to follow through with that commitment. We do not feel that we are up to the task so we put off making our decision. We lack faith in the call of God on our lives and in His ability to enable us to fulfil that call.

Sometimes the reason we struggle to make a commitment has to do with our past failures. Consider Moses, who at the age of forty, attempted to deliver the people of Israel from their bondage. According to Acts 7:24-25, he killed an Egyptian who was abusing a Hebrew slave because he wanted the Israelites to understand that he was ready to save them. The Hebrew slaves, however, rejected the offer of Moses to be their deliverer. When the news of how Moses had murdered the Egyptian came out, Moses was forced to abandon his nation to save his life.

Forty years later when the Lord God spoke to Moses from the burning bush and called him to return to Egypt, Moses pleaded with God to send someone else. He made all kinds of excuses because he did not feel worthy of such a task. Could it be that Moses struggled to commit himself to the call of God because he had experienced failure in the past? He did not want to face that failure again. He was initially unwilling to take the risk of obeying God's call.

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In Luke 15 we read the parable of Jesus about the prodigal son. This son decided to collect his inheritance and leave home. In a far-away country, he lived a reckless lifestyle and wasted all his money. When he ran out, he was left with nothing. Facing death, the son determined to return home to his father. When he arrived home, he was greeted by his father with a warm embrace. Listen to the words of the prodigal son when his father came out to greet him:

[21] And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'
(Luke 15)

This son, knowing his careless and sinful life, returned home with a deep sense of unworthiness. He had sinned against his father and his God. He no longer felt worthy to be a son. Sin and failure in the past can keep us from making deep commitments to God and His service. Like this son, we feel so unworthy to be a servant of God. We don't understand how He could ever trust us or forgive us.

Fear of our inability, past failures and a misunderstanding of the forgiveness of the Lord can keep us from making a commitment to the Lord and His purpose for our lives. It is hard to choose obedience when we are overwhelmed with these feelings.

This is where grace comes into play. God is a gracious God who does not always give us what we deserve. Let me illustrate this with some Biblical examples.

The apostle Peter was a self-confident man who boasted about his relationship with the Lord. When Jesus told him that he would deny him three times, Peter, was more surprised than anyone. He told Jesus that even if all the other disciples denied Him, he certainly would not. When it happened as Jesus predicted, Peter was broken. Luke 22:62 tells us that he "wept bitterly."

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What is important for us to see here, however, is what would happen with Peter after this denial of Jesus. Acts 2 described what took place on the day of Pentecost. The Spirit of God moved Peter to stand in front of a crowd of thousands of people. That day he preached one of the most powerful messages of his life. The result was that 3,000 people committed their lives to the Lord Jesus and were added to the church. Peter would go on to become a faithful servant of God and a key figure in the early church. Peter had failed his Lord but the grace of God offered him forgiveness, cleansing and a new start.

What is true of Peter is also true of the apostle Paul who, at one point in his life, was an enemy to Christ and the church of his day. He went on a campaign to rid the world of Christians who, according to him, preached heresy. This man's life would be changed, when he met the Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus. All past failures and sins were forgiven and Paul would go on to become the greatest missionary of the early church. Paul never forgot his past, but his experience of the grace of God to forgive enabled him to persevere through great obstacles. Writing to the Corinthians the apostle said:

[9] For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. [10] But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. (1 Corinthians 15)

Notice how Paul told the Corinthians that the grace of God toward him was not in vain. He determined that because of that grace, he would work harder than any other apostle. Paul so appreciated the forgiveness of God that he made up His mind to commit himself to a life of full surrender to God. He never married, he moved from one place to another preaching and teaching about Jesus. He would

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endure more hardship than any other apostle, but He refused to surrender. The grace of God toward him was a powerful motivation to serve.

In Luke 7 we have the account of how a “sinful woman” came to the home where Jesus was reclining at table to eat with the Pharisees. She brought with her a box of alabaster ointment and, approaching Jesus, knelt down and anointed his feet with the precious ointment. She kissed His feet and wiped her tears off with her hair. The Pharisee, who had invited Jesus to his home, felt offended and said to himself:

[39] ... “If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, for she is a sinner.”

Knowing the thoughts of the Pharisee heart, Jesus told a parable about a man who had two debtors. The first owed him 500 denarii and the second 50 denarii. The money lender, however, decided to cancel both debts. Jesus asked Simon the Pharisee, who had invited them to his house, which debtor would love the money lender more. He responded by telling Jesus that the one who had the largest debt would likely love the money lender most. Jesus went on to tell Simon the meaning of the parable.

[44] Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. [45] You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. [46] You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. [47] Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.” (Luke 7)

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What is important to note here is the phrase “her sins, which are many, are forgiven –for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.” Jesus did not deny the fact that this woman had lived a sinful lifestyle. She had failed God and hurt many people. There in the home of Simon, however, she experienced the wonderful grace of Jesus. She was pardoned of all her sin. Her past would no longer stand between her and her God. That day Jesus told her: “Your sins are forgiven ... Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (Luke 7:48-50). As far as we know, she would go on to love Jesus much.

David, the man who committed adultery and murdered the woman husband to hide the deed, is described by Paul in Acts 13 as being a man after God’s own heart:

[22] And when he had removed him, he raised up David to be their king, of whom he testified and said, ‘I have found in David the son of Jesse a man after my heart, who will do all my will.’ (Acts 13)

Listen to the description of David’s life at the time of his death:

[26] Thus David the son of Jesse reigned over all Israel. [27] The time that he reigned over Israel was forty years. He reigned seven years in Hebron and thirty-three years in Jerusalem. [28] Then he died at a good age, full of days, riches, and honor. And Solomon his son reigned in his place. (1 Chronicles 29)

David, died at “a good age, full of days, riches, and honor” (verse 28). David was not sinless, but he died with honour because of the wonderful grace of God. He is known as the greatest king of Israel.

What do these illustrations teach us about the subject of this study? We learn that there are many obstacles in life that can hinder us from making the right decisions and commitments. Our fears, our

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past failures and our inability to receive forgiveness can keep us from doing the right thing and stepping out in obedience to the Lord.

The grace of God, however, gives us the freedom to fall and get back on our feet again. The grace of God gives us the freedom to fail. It reaches down to those who have made bad decisions in life and offers them pardon and cleansing. It gives them the opportunity to start afresh. It was the grace of God that gave Peter the opportunity to stand up before thousands of people after he had denied Jesus. It was the grace of God that extended forgiveness to the sinful woman who knelt at His feet washing them with her tears. It was the grace of God that gave Paul the courage to devote His life to the Christ he had persecuted.

Not one of us will get through life without the need for the gracious forgiveness of the Lord God. We have all made bad decisions in life. We have all failed in one way or another. The difference between someone who has been mightily used of God and someone who had hidden their talents has to do with their understanding of God's grace not only to completely pardon but also to enable.

Those who are mightily used of God are those who have been forgiven and stepped out in that forgiveness. They have accepted His cleansing for their failures. They have obeyed His call even though they have felt unworthy. They have determined to receive His grace and step out in obedience for the glory of His name.

Do you have fears? Are you afraid of failing? Do you feel that the sins of your past are just too much for God to forgive? Do you feel He can use someone else, but you are simply unworthy? Are these feelings keeping you from making the decisions God has called you to make? Maybe you need to understand the nature of grace. Grace

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is the unmerited favour of God. We do not deserve what God gives but we dare not miss out on the opportunity to experience His forgiveness and enabling. Grace gives us the freedom to fail by offering pardon and forgiveness to all who will avail themselves to it.

For Consideration:

What keeps you from making the decisions you need to make today?

What fears do you experience in making the decisions and commitments God is asking you to make?

Do your past failures need to keep you from making the right decision today?

What is grace? How have you experienced the grace of God in your life? How does the knowledge of God's grace enable you to step out boldly in His purpose?

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For Prayer:

Ask the Lord to show you what hinders you from making the decisions He is calling you to make today?

Ask God to give you victory over your fears. Thank Him that He is willing to give you all that you need to do what He is asking you to do.

Thank the Lord that, as a gracious God, He is willing to forgive our failures. Thank Him that you do not have to be perfect to be used for His glory.

The apostle Paul was so overwhelmed by the grace of God that he His life to serving the God he had once persecuted. Ask God to give you a deep sense of gratitude for His grace in your life.

Chapter 16

The God of Covenantal Promises

God does not ask us to do what He is unwilling to do Himself. Decision making is part of the character of God—He chooses, commits and promises. Let's take a moment here to consider this aspect of the nature of God.

In the days of Noah, the earth was very corrupt. The heart of humankind turned from God, and people did as they pleased. This angered God, and He determined to destroy its inhabitants. Out of all the families of the earth, however, He chose to save the family of Noah. Genesis 6 describes an agreement God made with this family:

[17] For behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life under heaven. Everything that is on the earth shall die. [18] But I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. [19] And of every living thing of all flesh, you shall bring two of every sort into the ark to keep them alive with you. They shall be male and female. (Genesis 6)

That day God chose Noah and his family and preserved them from the coming judgement. Through this family He would again populate the earth.

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Later, in Genesis 15, God chose to make an agreement with another family.

[15:1] After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." [2] But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" [3] And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir." [4] And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." [5] And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." [6] And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness. (Genesis 15)

God chose to bless the family of Abraham by increasing their number and making them a great nation. Genesis 17 goes into further details about the promise of God to the family of Abraham:

[4] "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. [5] No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. [6] I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. [7] And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. [8] And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God." (Genesis 17)

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God promised to make the family of Abraham into a great nation. He promised to be the God of Abraham's descendants and give them a land of their own. God would thrust out other nations and give their land to the children of Abraham.

This commitment of the Lord to the family of Abraham would be tested repeatedly, but God would be faithful to His word. It was not because the descendants of Abraham were any better than the other families of the earth that God chose them. They gave Him plenty of reason to be angry with them. God, however, took His commitments seriously and devoted Himself to doing what He said He would do. Moses reminded his people of this in Deuteronomy 9 when he said to them:

[4] "Do not say in your heart, after the LORD your God has thrust them out before you, 'It is because of my righteousness that the LORD has brought me in to possess this land,' whereas it is because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is driving them out before you. [5] Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is driving them out from before you, and that he may confirm the word that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. (Deuteronomy 9)

In 2 Samuel 7 the Lord spoke to King David and made a promise to him:

[16] And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever. (2 Samuel 7)

Notice again how the Lord chooses the family of David and makes a firm commitment to them. God promised David that His kingdom would be sure, and his throne established forever. The fulfillment

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of this is in the Lord Jesus who reigns forever as a descendant of David.

When we come to the New Testament, we read how Jesus, prior to His crucifixion, gathered His disciples together and broke bread with them. As He broke the bread and shared the wine, Jesus told those present:

[20] And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. (Luke 22)

Notice the reference to a covenant. Jesus told His disciples that He was making a covenant commitment with them and all who would follow after them. What was the nature of that covenant? The apostle Paul told the Romans that part of the new covenant would be the forgiveness of sin.

[27] "and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins." (Romans 11)

The writer to the Hebrews added:

[10] For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. [11] And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. [12] For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more." (Hebrews 8)

The Lord God chooses to commit Himself to those who accept Him. He promises to be their God. He promises to renew their hearts by

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giving them a desire for Him and His purpose. He determines in His heart to forgive our sin. This is His commitment to us.

The psalmist David had great confidence in the promises and commitment of God.

*[8] The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O LORD, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands.
(Psalm 138)*

He trusted that the Lord would not forsake him even in the most trying of circumstances.

Speaking through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord Himself declared:

[15] "Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. [16] Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me. (Isaiah 49)

God's commitment to His children is greater than the commitment of any mother. He will never forget us. In fact, Isaiah 49:16 tells us that we are engraved on the palm of His hands. We are always before Him and on His mind. He knows every detail about us and oversees every aspect of our lives.

Speaking to Joshua, the mighty warrior, the Lord said:

[5] No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you. (Joshua 1)

God is a God of choices and commitments. We know Him today because He chose to reveal Himself to us and He pursued us until

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He won our heart. We live today because God has chosen to give us life. We will never know how deep the commitment of God toward us is. How many times has he spared our lives? How many times has He protected us from harm? How many times has He redirected our path?

Why should the great Creator care for me in this way? Why should He devote Himself to me? Why should He determine to save me and fill me with His Spirit? Why should he bless and keep me? Why should He use me? We may never have the answers for these questions, but we must be always grateful for the choice of God. We must always rejoice in the fact that He is a God who commits Himself to His people and promises to be true to His promises for their lives.

The God who chooses us and commits Himself entirely to us, asks us to follow His lead. He calls us also to choose Him. God demonstrates to us what He expects of us. He chooses us so that we can choose Him. He commits Himself to us so that we can commit ourselves to Him in return.

Commitments and decisions are part of the character of God and will also be part of our Christian life. If we are to become all that God would have us to be there will be some tough decisions to make. The first of those decisions relates to the God we will serve. In the words of Joshua:

[15] And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”
(Joshua 24)

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The second decision we will need to make relates to the words of Jesus in Matthew 16:

*[24] Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.
(Matthew 16)*

The question that lies before us is this: Will we deny ourselves and take up our cross to follow the Lord Jesus? Will we like Paul, "count everything loss" to know Christ (see Philippians 3:7-8).

The God of covenantal promises expects that those who enter this covenant with Him will also commit themselves to Him as He commits Himself to them. They choose Him because He chose them (John 15:16). They love Him because He first loved them (1 John 4:19). They forgive others because He forgave them (Luke 11:14). They die to themselves because He died for them (Romans 12:1).

The Christian live is a live of commitment and choice. It is first God's choice and commitment to us. But it is also our response to Him. God created us in His image and part of the image is the ability to choose. The most important of all decisions relates to our commitment to Him.

For Consideration:

What evidence is there in Scripture that God is a God of commitments and decisions?

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Give some examples of God's commitment to families and people in Scripture? Why did God make those commitments?

What is the nature of the covenant Jesus makes with those who accept Him? What are His promises to us under this covenant?

As those created in the image of God what decisions and commitments do we need to make?

Is it enough for us to be content with God's choice or do we need to choose ourselves? Can we choose not to embrace His commitment toward us? What is the result?

For Prayer:

Thank the Lord that, as a God of commitment and decisions, He chose to pursue us and make us His children through the work of His Son Jesus.

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Thank the Lord personally for how He chose to reveal Himself to you and the commitment He made to you, even when you did not deserve it.

Ask God for the grace to commit yourself fully to Him even as He has committed Himself to you.

Chapter 17

The Resolutions of the Saints

This decision to follow the Lord Jesus not one to take lightly, for there is a cost to pay for all who make such a commitment. Consider the words of Jesus in Luke 14:

[26] "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. [27] Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. [28] For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? [29] Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, [30] saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' [31] Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? [32] And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. [33] So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14)

The cost to following Jesus a heavy one. Jesus tells us if we want to follow Him, we must count the cost. To be His disciple we must surrender our families and our own lives to Him. We must be willing to take up our cross and be ready to die to ourselves and all that we have. He must be first in all things. His purpose must come before

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our own. To honour Him we must willingly lay down all that we have. Nothing can be more important than Him and His will in our lives.

King David asks the question: “Who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill?” In other words, who will stand before God and dwell in His presence? Consider the answer he gives to these questions in Psalm 15:

[1] O LORD, who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill? [2] He who walks blamelessly and does what is right and speaks truth in his heart; [3] who does not slander with his tongue and does no evil to his neighbor, nor takes up a reproach against his friend; [4] in whose eyes a vile person is despised, but who honors those who fear the LORD; who swears to his own hurt and does not change (Psalm 15)

The person who can stand before the Lord and dwell on His holy is one who has made a commitment to live in integrity before His God. According to verse 4, he is also one who “swears to his own hurt and does not change.” In other words, he will willingly suffer hurt or even death rather than be unfaithful to his or her commitment. This is the kind of person the Lord is pleased to receive into His presence.

We are all called to choose whether we will walk with the Lord or not. The choice we make will have a long-lasting impact on our lives. It will be a life-changing decision that determines the priorities of our hearts. Throughout the history of Christianity, God’s people have been called to make a choice.

Standing before the council of church leaders who had gathered to demand that Martin Luther recant what he had written in his books, knowing full well the consequences of his choice, Luther declared:

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Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen.

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diet_of_Worms)

As a result of his decision, Luther was forced into hiding. The Diet of Worms issued the following decree regarding Martin Luther:

For this reason we forbid anyone from this time forward to dare, either by words or by deeds, to receive, defend, sustain, or favour the said Martin Luther. On the contrary, we want him to be apprehended and punished as a notorious heretic, as he deserves, to be brought personally before us, or to be securely guarded until those who have captured him inform us, whereupon we will order the appropriate manner of proceeding against the said Luther. Those who will help in his capture will be rewarded generously for their good work. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diet_of_Worms)

For his decision to stand firm on the truth He believe from the Word of God, Martin Luther would become a wanted man. His choice to be faithful to the Lord had a price, but He was willing to be faithful to the truth “to his own hurt.”

In 1956, five missionaries went to visit the Huaorani Indians of Ecuador. While they knew it was dangerous, they had been building a relationship with them for a few months and felt it time to make a deeper connection. In January of 1956 they encountered ten Huaorani warriors who, despite the missionaries’ friendly efforts to

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befriend them, attacked and killed them. The decision they made that day to reach out to these Huaorani Indians proved to be fatal.

What was it that drove these missionaries to attempt to reach this hostile Indian tribe? Among those slaughtered by these warriors was a man by the name of Jim Elliot. Consider the following quote:

His journal entry for October 28, 1949, expresses his belief that work dedicated to Jesus was more important than his life (see Luke 9:24. "For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it.") He wrote, "he is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose." (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jim_Elliot)

These missionaries counted the cost and were willing to lay everything down for the sake of reaching the world for Christ. Their choice was based on the understanding that His purpose was greater than their lives. They would obey even if they lost their lives in the process.

In an article entitled "William Carey's 11 Resolutions," J.D. Greear reveals the resolutions of William Carey, missionary to India:

1. To set an infinite value on men's souls
2. To acquaint ourselves with the snares which hold the minds of the people
3. To abstain from whatever deepens India's prejudice against the Gospel
4. To watch for every chance of doing the people good
5. To preach "Christ crucified" as the grand means of conversion
6. To esteem and treat Indians always as our equals
7. To guard and build up "the hosts that they may be gathered"

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8. To cultivate their spiritual gifts, ever pressing upon them from their missionary obligation, since Indians only can win India for Christ
9. To labor unceasingly in biblical translation
10. To be instant in the nurture of personal religion
11. To give ourselves without reserve to the Cause, "not counting even the clothes we wear our own" (<https://jdgreear.com/blog/william-careys-11-resolutions/>)

In order to obey the call of God on his life, William Carey determined that he would live by these standards and committed his life to this end.

John Wesley (1703-1791), an English theologian and evangelist, wrote the following in his journal:

With regard to my own behavior, I now renewed and wrote down my former resolutions.

1. *To use absolute openness and unreserve with all I should converse with.*
2. *To labor after continual seriousness, not willingly indulging myself in any the least levity of behavior, or in laughter; no, not for a moment.*
3. *To speak no word which does not tend to the glory of God; in particular, not to talk of worldly things. Others may, nay, must. But what is that to thee? And,*
4. *To take no pleasure which does not tend to the glory of God; thanking God every moment for all I do take, and therefore rejecting every sort and degree of it which I feel I cannot so thank Him in and for.* (<https://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/journal.vi.ii.xi.html>)

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While these resolutions may not be for everyone, it was the commitment of John Wesley to live a life that pleased his Lord in every way. He wanted his life to count and was willing to lay down anything that would keep him from the service of his Master.

The great American theologian and preacher, Jonathan Edwards who lived from 1703-1758 had a long list of resolutions. A December 2006 article entitled "The Resolutions of Jonathan Edwards," lists his personal resolutions. While there are too many to include in this chapter let me share just a few:

Resolved, never to do any manner of thing, whether in soul or body, less or more, but what tends to the glory of God; nor be, nor suffer it, if I can avoid it.

Resolved, never to lose one moment of time; but improve it the most profitable way I possibly can.

Resolved, never to do anything, which I should be afraid to do, if it were the last hour of my life.

Resolved, that I will live so as I shall wish I had done when I come to die.

Resolved, to endeavor to my utmost to act as I can think I should do, if I had already seen the happiness of heaven, and hell torments.

Resolved, to study the Scriptures so steadily, constantly and frequently, as that I may find, and plainly perceive myself to grow in the knowledge of the same.

Resolved, never henceforward, till I die, to act as if I were any way my own, but entirely and altogether God's

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<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-resolutions-of-jonathan-edwards>

Listen to the words of the apostle Paul to the Philippians as he declared to them his priorities and commitment in life:

[20] as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. [21] For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. (Philippians 1)

Paul resolved in his heart to live such a life that he would not be ashamed of his actions and words. He determined that in everything he said or did, he would do so that Christ would be honoured. He would live and die to know Christ.

We could go on speaking about the commitment of the many saints in history who chose to devote and sacrifice their lives for the cause of Christ. What is important for us to note, however, is that these saints of God made a personal commitment to God and chose to discipline their bodies and minds to be faithful to that commitment, to the glory of God.

All too often we live our Christian lives as if they were to unfold without any effort or discipline on our part. We are happy that God has chosen to save us and commit Himself to us, but we do not respond in kind. The God who has given us the freedom to choose, waits upon our decision. Will we respond to His choosing us by choosing Him? Will we acknowledge to His sacrifice for us by offering ourselves body, soul and spirit to Him without reserve or condition?

Choice is an essential part of any relationship. You may choose to love someone but what a delight it is to know that they choose to

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love you back. What is your commitment to Christ and His purpose? Will you resolve, like so many saints of old, to devote your body, your mind, your resources and your time to Him and His purpose?

For Consideration:

Can we expect to grow in our Christian life without making a deep commitment to Christ and His purpose for our life?

What role does discipline, and hard decisions play in our walk with God?

How would you describe your relationship with Christ? What commitments have you made to Him and His service?

It is possible for a relationship to be one-sided? Knowing that God has chosen us, how important is it for us to choose Him in return?

For Prayer

Ask the Lord to help you to be purposeful in your walk with Him.

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Ask the Lord to show you what His priorities are for your personal life and ministry. Take a moment to consider what your commitment to Him should be. Ask Him to give you the heart-felt discipline to walk in that purpose.

Light To My Path Book Distribution

Light To My Path Book Distribution (LTMP) is a book writing and distribution ministry reaching out to needy Christian workers in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Many Christian workers in developing countries do not have the resources necessary to obtain Bible training or purchase Bible study materials for their ministries and personal encouragement.

F. Wayne MacLeod is a member of Action International Ministries and has been writing these books with a goal to distribute them freely to needy pastors and Christian workers around the world.

These books are being used in preaching, teaching, evangelism and encouragement of local believers in over sixty countries. Books have now been translated into several languages. The goal is to make them available to as many believers as possible.

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