



Decision Making

DECISION MAKING AND THE WILL OF GOD

CHARLES R. SWINDOLL

(Romans 12:2)



Thinking theologically is difficult. We much prefer to live in the here-and-now realm, seeing life as others see it, dealing with realities we can touch, analyze, prove, and explain. We are much more comfortable with the tactile, the familiar, the logic shaped by our culture.

But God offers a better way to live—one requiring faith that lifts us above the drag and grind of our immediate little world, opens new dimensions of thought, and introduces a perspective without human limitations. In order to enter this better way, we must train ourselves to think theologically. This turns our focus away from ourselves and opens our minds to a God-centered frame of reference, where all things begin and end with Him.

KNOWING GOD'S WILL

What is God's will and what is not God's will? How can we know God's will? Is it common to miss God's will or is that even possible? Can I really know that I am doing God's will? That I am in His will? All these and more are common questions every thoughtful believer grapples with at one time or another in life.

Much of the confusion goes back to not understanding God and how He does His inscrutable work in our lives. The Christian life is not merely a matter of getting from here to there . . . from point A to point B. Instead, God's will for us in this life is more about the journey itself.

Our human tendency is to focus solely on our calling—where we should go, how we should get there, and what we should do. God's concern is the process that will mature us and make us more like His Son. God is the Potter; we are the clay. Not one of us is qualified to grasp the first particle

of why God does what He does when He does it and how He chooses to do it (Rom. 11:33, 34).

GOD'S DECRETIVE WILL

The first facet of God's will is His "decretive" will: His sovereign, determined, immutable will. This determined, decreed dimension of God's will has four qualities: (1) It is absolute. (2) It is immutable, which means "unchangeable." (3) It is unconditional. (4) It is always in complete harmony with His plan and His nature. In other words, the decreed will of God will be holy, just, good, and righteous; therefore, it will be best. And it will all work toward those ends.

While we may not know the will of God for the future, He has given us a whole list of requirements that are in His will for all believers:

- > Obey and honor parents (Eph. 6:1, 2).
- > Marry only another Christian (2 Cor. 6:14).
- > Support our families (1 Tim. 5:8).
- > Raise our children by God's standards (Eph. 6:4).
- > Meditate on the Scriptures (Ps. 1:2).
- > Pray (1 Thess. 5:17).
- > Assemble for worship (Heb. 10:25).
- > Proclaim Christ (Acts 1:8).
- > Display love (1 Cor. 13).

And the list goes on and on. This is the will

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of God for our lives as children of God, no matter who we are or where we live.

GOD'S PERMISSIVE WILL

The second facet of God's will is His permissive will, which represents what God allows. For example, God allowed Job to go through suffering. God didn't cause the suffering; He permitted it. This is where the whole matter of evil comes into play. And this is one of the irreconcilable difficulties in our theology—the tension between the determined will of God and the responsibility of humanity. We need to make Christ known to the whole world, knowing all the while that not everyone in the world will believe. God does not cause sin, but He does permit it. He is not pleased when His creation yields to temptation, but He uses even that to accomplish His purposes.

God's leading in our lives generally follows basic principles that can help us in deciding His will for our lives.

1. *His written Word.* As the psalmist said, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps. 119:105).
2. *The prompting of the Holy Spirit.* Paul reminds us, "It is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13).
3. *The counsel of wise, qualified, trustworthy people.* At critical moments of life, it is helpful to seek the counsel of seasoned individuals. But we must choose our counselors very carefully. "Where there is no counsel, the people fall; but in the multitude of counselors there is safety" (Prov. 11:14).
4. *An inner assurance of peace.* "And let the peace of God rule in your hearts," Paul wrote (Col. 3:15). God's inner assurance of peace will act as an umpire in our hearts.

Ultimately, God's Word provides all the light we will ever need on our journey through this life. It brings light to our darkened minds. It helps us think theologically. Strange and mysterious though His leading may seem, when we derive our understanding from a serious investigation of the written Word of God, we will not be led astray. And we will continue to stand on the solid rock of God's Word of truth.

All other ground is sinking sand.

FURTHER MEDITATION:

Other passages to study about the issue of decision making include:

- Joshua 1:8, 9
- Psalm 32:8
- Proverbs 2:3-8; 3:5, 6; 12:15
- Luke 14:28
- Galatians 5:22-26
- 2 Timothy 3:14-17

To Learn More: Turn to the key passage note on decision making at 1 John 5:14 on page 1682. See also the personality profile of Joshua on page 296.

unsearchable *are* His judgments and His ways past finding out!

³⁴ "For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counselor?"^a

³⁵ "Or who has first given to Him And it shall be repaid to him?"^a

³⁶For of Him and through Him and to Him *are* all things, to whom *be* glory forever. Amen.

LIVING SACRIFICES TO GOD

12 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. ²And

do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

SERVE GOD WITH SPIRITUAL GIFTS

³For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of *himself* more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith. ⁴For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, ⁵so we, *being* many, are one body in Christ, and individually

11:34 ^aIsaiah 40:13; Jeremiah 23:18 **11:35** ^aJob 41:11

KEY PASSAGE



Attitudes

THE CHOICE

(12:1, 2)

People's attitudes reflect their perspective on life. And attitudes are formed in the mind—every attitude begins with a choice to look at the world in a certain way. Therefore, people can change their attitudes.

Believers must not be "conformed to this world," allowing the world's outlook to rule them, entice them, or decide their attitudes. Instead, Paul says, "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God." With a transformed mind, we can allow God to help us choose to have attitudes that are honoring to Him. He helps us to stay positive in any situation, as we see His plan unfold.

Those who struggle with negative attitudes should renew their mind and choose attitudes that honor and reveal God's work in their lives. God's Word is the best place to start.

To Learn More: Turn to the article about attitudes on pages 1174, 1175. See also the personality profile of Michal on page 395.

SOUL NOTE



Living Sacrifices (12:1, 2) The Jews had a system of sacrifices, prepared by God and recorded in the Law of Moses, by which their sins were forgiven. Paul used that picture to describe how believers should live, offering themselves to God as living sacrifices. Thus they could be transformed by the Holy Spirit and have renewed minds. This transformation and renewal helps God's people know His good, acceptable, and perfect will. We are promised that we can know God's will for us when making tough decisions. We must humbly pray and seek His guidance, knowing that He will answer. **Topic: Decision Making**

perfect in love. ¹⁹We love Him^a because He first loved us.

OBEDIENCE BY FAITH

²⁰If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can^a he love God whom he has not seen? ²¹And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God *must* love his brother also.

5 Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves Him who begot also loves him who is begotten of Him. ²By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep His commandments. ³For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And

His commandments are not burdensome. ⁴For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our^a faith. ⁵Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

THE CERTAINTY OF GOD'S WITNESS

⁶This is He who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not only by water, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth. ⁷For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three

4:19 ^aNU-Text omits *Him*. **4:20** ^aNU-Text reads *he cannot*. **5:4** ^aM-Text reads *your*.

SOUL NOTE



Without a Doubt (5:13) Christians need have no doubts about their faith. Those who believe in the name of the Son of God can *know* that they have eternal life. Other religions offer merely the hope of eternal life—if one has been good enough, done more good deeds than bad, or has sacrificed enough for others. Christians, however, can know for sure that they will be with Christ forever in heaven. We may face doubts, difficulties, and times of spiritual dryness, but through it all, we can know that we have eternal life, now and forever. **Topic: Belief**

KEY PASSAGE



Decision Making

MAKING CHOICES

(5:14)

God promises eternal life to those who believe. He also promises a continuing relationship with His people, "If we ask anything according to His will, He hears us." Believers have the ultimate Guide to walk them through life, helping them make right decisions.

How can believers know God's will as they make decisions? First, they should consider whether they truly want to know what God wants and if they truly want to follow His leadership. Then they should pray and study God's words for guidance. The Holy Spirit will help them interpret what God is doing in and around them in the decision-making process. Believers learn how to seek God's will, asking not what they want, but what He wants for them. When the answer comes, believers know it and can act upon it.

Whatever decisions we face—large or small—God will guide us. We need only ask Him, truly seeking His will, and He will answer.

To Learn More: Turn to the article about decision making on pages 1484, 1485. See also the personality profile of Joshua on page 296.

therefore he continued to bless you. So I delivered you out of his hand. ¹¹Then you went over the Jordan and came to Jericho. And the men of Jericho fought against you—also the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. But I delivered them into your hand. ¹²I sent the hornet before you which drove them out from before you,

also the two kings of the Amorites, but not with your sword or with your bow. ¹³I have given you a land for which you did not labor, and cities which you did not build, and you dwell in them; you eat of the vineyards and olive groves which you did not plant.

¹⁴Now therefore, fear the LORD, serve Him in sincerity and in truth, and put away the

gods which your fathers served on the other side of the River and in Egypt. Serve the LORD! ¹⁵And if it seems evil to you to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves this day whom

you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of 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."

"Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve. . . .

But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."

JOSHUA 24:15

¹⁶So the people answered and said: "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; ¹⁷for the LORD our God is He who brought us and our fathers up out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, who did those great signs in our sight, and preserved us in all the way that we went and among all the people through whom we

PERSONALITY PROFILE



Decision Making

THE GODLY DECISION MAKING OF JOSHUA

(JOSHUA 24:14, 15)

Joshua was the successor of Moses, training under his leadership and watching his example for many years. Born in Egypt under slavery, Joshua witnessed the miracles of deliverance. Moses and Joshua shared an unquenchable faith in God. They sojourned together in the wilderness for decades, set their sights together on the land of Canaan, and served the Israelite people with grace and justice. And, although Moses led the people out of Egypt, Joshua led them into the Promised Land.

Joshua acknowledged God in his decision making. Although God's battle plan for Jericho probably sounded unmilitary to the soldier in Joshua, he followed the instructions precisely. He sought God's direction and obeyed it even when it didn't match his own hunches. He practiced the priceless lesson that God does not offer guidance as an optional suggestion. God's ways are the way.

Even with extensive victories behind him, Joshua still faced constant challenges in godly decision making. Great faith was needed to live in Palestine and remain true to the God of Abraham. The Canaanites believed in numerous nature gods and worshiped many idols. The Israelites were constantly tempted to yield to the prevailing pagan rites. Joshua demonstrated a finely honed resistance to these temptations and often delivered sharp exhortations against pagan idolatry. Joshua made the decision to remain faithful. "As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD" became a powerful statement of his allegiance to God (Josh. 24:15). Today, when siren calls to pleasure, power, and riches are all around us, we need to decide to follow and honor God deliberately—and we need to repeat that decision every day.

To Learn More: Turn to the article about decision making on pages 1484, 1485. See also the key passage note at 1 John 5:14 on page 1682.

the way, but did not find them.²³ So the two men returned, descended from the mountain, and crossed over; and they came to Joshua the son of Nun, and told him all that had befallen them.²⁴ And they said to Joshua, "Truly the LORD has delivered all the land into our hands, for indeed all the inhabitants of the country are faithless because of us."

ISRAEL CROSSES THE JORDAN

Then Joshua rose early in the morning; and they set out from Acacia Grove¹ and came to the Jordan, he and all the children of Israel, and lodged there before they crossed over. ² So it was, after three days, that the officers went through the camp; and they commanded the people, saying, "When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests, the Levites, bearing it, then you shall set out from your place and go after it. ³ Yet there shall be a space between you and the ark, about two thousand cubits by measure. Do not come near it, that you may know the way by which you must go, for you have not passed this way before."

⁴ And Joshua said to the people, "Sanctify yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do wonders among you." ⁵ Then Joshua spoke to the priests, saying, "Take up the ark of the covenant and cross over before the people." So they took up the ark of the covenant and went before the people.

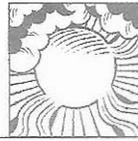
⁶ And the LORD said to Joshua, "This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that, as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. ⁷ You shall command the priests who bear the ark of the covenant, saying, 'When you have come to the edge of the water of the Jordan, you shall stand in the Jordan.'" ⁸ So Joshua said to the children of Israel, "Come here, and hear the words of the LORD your God."

⁹ Then the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD stood firm on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan; and all Israel crossed over on dry ground, until all the people had crossed completely over the Jordan.

¹⁰ And Joshua said to the children of Israel, "You shall be witnesses today, that the LORD has brought you across the Jordan, and all the waters of the Jordan have dried up, until all the people had crossed over on dry ground. ¹¹ And it came to pass, when all the people had crossed over, that Joshua commanded the priests, saying, 'Stand upon the rocks.'" ¹² So the priests stood upon the rocks in the middle of the Jordan, and the ark of the covenant stood upon the rocks, and the people crossed over on dry ground, until all the people had crossed over the Jordan.

¹³ Then the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD came to the Jordan, and the ark of the covenant stood upon the rocks in the middle of the Jordan, and the people crossed over on dry ground, until all the people had crossed over the Jordan.

¹⁴ So it was, when the people set out from their camp to cross over the Jordan, with the priests bearing the ark of the covenant before them, that the LORD said to Joshua, "When you see the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, and the priests, the Levites, bearing it, then you shall set out from your place and go after it. ¹⁵ Yet there shall be a space between you and the ark, about two thousand cubits by measure. Do not come near it, that you may know the way by which you must go, for you have not passed this way before." ¹⁶ Then Joshua spoke to the priests, saying, "Take up the ark of the covenant and cross over before the people." So they took up the ark of the covenant and went before the people.



SOUL NOTE

Know the Way (3:4) It could be said of every new day that we "have not passed this way before." Every day brings new experiences and new challenges that stretch our faith in God. Without God, people are left to wonder what direction to take. With God, believers can know that every new day is in His hands and He will guide according to His eternal plan. As the Israelites followed the ark in order to "know the way," so we can look to God and His Word in order to know the way He wants us to go. **Topic: Decision Making**

3:1 Hebrew *Shittim*



THE MEMORIAL STONES

And it came to pass, when all the people had completely crossed over the Jordan,

then come back to me." And the people departed. ⁶Then King Rehoboam consulted the elders who stood before his father Solomon while he still lived, and he said, "How do you advise me to answer these people?" ⁷And they spoke to him, saying, "If you will be a servant to these people today, and serve them, and answer them, and speak good words to them, then they will be your servants forever."

⁸But he rejected the advice which the elders had given him, and consulted the young men who had grown up with him, who stood before him. ⁹And he said to them, "What advice do you give? How should we answer this people who have spoken to me, saying, 'Lighten the yoke which your father put on us?'" ¹⁰Then the young men who had grown up with him spoke to him, saying, "Thus you should speak to this people who have spoken to you, saying, 'Your father made our yoke heavy, but you make it lighter on us'—thus you shall say to them: 'My little finger shall be thicker than my father's waist!'" ¹¹And now, whereas my father put a heavy yoke on you, I will add to your yoke; my father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scourges!"

¹²So Jeroboam and all the people came to Rehoboam the third day, as the king had directed, saying, "Come back to me the third day." ¹³Then the king answered the people roughly, and rejected the advice which the elders had given him; ¹⁴and he spoke to them according to the advice of the young men, saying, "My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke; my father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scourges!" ¹⁵So the king did not listen to the people; for the turn of events was from the LORD, that He might fulfill His word, which

he assembled all the house of Judah with the tribe of Benjamin, one hundred and eighty thousand chosen men who were warriors, to fight against the house of Israel, that he might restore the kingdom to Rehoboam the son of Solomon. ²²But the word of God came to Rehoboam the man of God, saying, ²³"Speak to Rehoboam the son of Solomon, king of Judah, to all the house of Judah and Benjamin, and to the rest of the people, saying, ²⁴"Thus says the LORD: "You shall not go up nor fight against me, for the turn of events was from the LORD, that He might fulfill His word, which

he did not have a wise son. Rehoboam failed to heed the counsel of the older men who had served his father, listening instead to his peers. Rehoboam's unwillingness to listen to the older and wiser men ultimately led to the division of his kingdom. It is wise to seek counsel, but then we must compare that advice to God's Word. God knows the way we should go. **Topic: Decision Making**



S O U L N O T E

12:11 ^aLiterally *scorpions* 12:14 ^aLiterally *scorpions*

unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!

³⁴ "For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counselor?"^a

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Topic: Decision Making

LOVING GOD UNDER TRIALS

12Blessed is the man who endures temptation: for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him. 13Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. 14But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. 15Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death. 16Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. 17Every good gift and every perfect gift is from

SOUL NOTE



Joy-Full (1:2-4) James, the leader of the church in Jerusalem, advised believers to be joyful during trials and troubles. Everyone faces trials in one form or another. We cannot control what we will encounter, but we can control the stress level that situations cause. Instead of being stressed, we can try being joyful. This is not a natural reaction, but one that the Holy Spirit can provide. It means choosing an attitude that looks expectantly to the lessons God will teach and the wisdom He will provide. There's no better prescription for dealing with stress! **Topic: Stress**

KEY PASSAGE



ASKING FOR IT

(1:5)

People admire wisdom in others. Wise people have the proper perspective and can make sensible and sensitive decisions. Such people seem to be few and far between. Among believers, however, the percentage of wise people should be high, for James writes, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God . . . and it will be given to him." Wisdom begins with God, who is its source. The first step to being wise is to have proper awe and reverence for God, and then to trust Him with one's life. We become wiser as we become more and more like Christ. God's wisdom is "pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy" (James 3:17). As we study and apply God's Word, yielding our lives daily to Christ, we need only ask God to give us His wisdom, and He promises He will.

To Learn More: Turn to the article about wisdom on pages 436, 437. See also the personality profile of Solomon on page 435.

SOUL NOTE



Make Up Your Mind (1:5) Life is full of choices: The "right" choice is not always clear, and the enemy of the better is often the good. Sometimes we must choose between two good options. Whatever the choice, we need God's wisdom to see life from His perspective and make good decisions in difficult circumstances. Fortunately, wisdom is fairly easy to obtain: James says to ask God and He will freely give it. God will generously supply all the wisdom we need for every decision we face. But when we ask, we need to be willing to do what He says! **Topic: Decision Making**