

JAMES SPENCER, PHD



MAKING
EVERYDAY
DECISIONS
FOR GOD'S
GLORY

 USEFUL TO GOD

ABOUT USEFUL TO GOD



HAVE YOU EVER CONFUSED TAKING A BATH WITH BAPTISM? I'M GUESSING THE ANSWER IS NO. BUT WHY? IN PART, IT IS BECAUSE BAPTISM INVOLVES RITUALS PERFORMED IN COMMUNITY, WHEREAS BATHS ARE NORMALLY PRIVATE. YET, WE SHOULDN'T DISMISS THE FACT THAT THE WORLD HAS NO COMPELLING STORY TO TELL ABOUT TAKING BATHS THAT WOULD LEAD US TO CONFUSE IT WITH BAPTISM. IT DOES, HOWEVER, HAVE THOSE STORIES FOR OTHER THINGS LIKE LOVE, POLITICS, ECONOMICS, SUCCESS, AND WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A "GOOD PERSON." THE WORLD TELLS STORIES THAT DENY GOD...IN FACT, IT CAN'T HELP BUT DO SO. ENTERTAINMENT, THE NEWS, CULTURAL NORMS, AND EVEN ACADEMIC DISCIPLINES TELL STORIES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF HUMANS WHO DON'T KNOW GOD.

USEFUL TO GOD EQUIPS CHRISTIANS TO RETELL THE WORLD'S STORIES WITH GOD AT THEIR CENTER. OUR TRAINING PROGRAMS AND RESOURCES PROVIDE GOD'S PEOPLE WITH FRAMEWORKS FOR THINKING AND ACTING SO THAT THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GOD'S STORY AND THE WORLD'S STORY IS AS APPARENT AS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A BATH AND A BAPTISM.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Find out more about James at usefultogod.com/james or subscribe to Thinking Christian at thinkingchristianpodcast.com

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Making Everyday Decisions for
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book



course



serpents & doves

christians, politics, and the art of bearing witness

james spencer, phd



USEFUL^{TO}GOD

I realized something while writing *Serpents and Doves: Christians, Politics, and the Art of Bearing Witness*. Despite spending a significant amount of time thinking about politics, politics isn't the core issue plaguing God's people. Instead, the core issue is the way we approach the world, think about the various events and ideas with which we interact, and understand our relationships with God and others. While many, if not all Christians, would agree that we are to point to and glorify God, we don't always know how to do that. We don't know how to make everyday decisions that glorify the triune God.

Saying that we don't know how to make everyday decisions that glorify God does not mean Christians never make such decisions. Instead, it means that the decisions we make are often informed by cultural conventions ... stories that distort, if not deny, the triune God. Our decision-making cannot depend on such conventions because to make God-glorifying decisions, we will often need to reject the world's wisdom.

This guide is intended to provide fresh ideas for how to make decisions by considering biblical passages that are often overlooked. The goal is to provide a framework for decision-making that takes our minds off autopilot and encourages a fresh approach that begins with a simple goal: making everyday decisions that point to and glorify the triune God.

As you study, please take the time to use the supplemental materials linked throughout the guide. There are podcast episodes and other reading that will help you grow spiritually. I would also encourage you to consider some of the other free and low-cost study resources available at Useful to God. Our desire is to equip the church to defy the world and follow Christ because we believe that discipleship opens up opportunities for us to do abundantly more than we could ever ask or think to build God's kingdom. You can find out more at www.usefultogod.com.

President, Useful to God

THE APPROACH

RESISTING, HEARING, DOING

Over the next seven weeks, you'll be challenged to learn to make everyday decisions for God's glory. Changing the way you make decisions will require study, reflection, and action. It will require you to develop a sensitivity to God's presence and provision, as well as a deep desire to make much of God.

The guide utilizes a threefold structure for personal spiritual growth that involves resisting, hearing, and doing. The structure is designed to help you grow spiritually by defying the world and following Christ.

Resisting

Consider ways you can resist the world's influence by setting aside some activity that is hindering your spiritual growth. You may choose one activity to give up for the whole study or you can vary it week to week.

As an example of resistance, Useful to God's "Go Dark, Shine Bright" campaign challenges believers to give up discretionary media use (media that is not related to one's livelihood) for a specified period of time. The point is not to suggest that media should be given up for good, though some may end up doing so. Rather, the point is to recognize that the world tells stories that deny God and that media often reinforces those stories. Often, the media we choose to consume hinders us from becoming disciples of Christ.

Opting out of some activity (like discretionary media use) allows you to remove a hindrance as you aid a "help" (i.e., this guide).

Hearing

Be intentional and consistent in listening to God's voice through Bible reading and prayer. Each week will begin with a devotional study related to decision-making. For the rest of the week, you will be asked to read and reflect on other biblical passages. In addition to reading the biblical text, the guide provides opportunities for you to engage in further study by listening to podcast episodes or watching videos, answering reflection questions, and journaling.

Prayer and Bible study go hand in hand. As you read, pray that God will give you the courage and wisdom to trust in the Lord rather than leaning on your own understanding (Proverbs 3:5).

Doing

Finally, do something. There is a difference between learning and learning obedience. Too often, we are not challenged to put our knowledge into practice. We become hearers who are not doers (James 1:19–25). Yet, as we begin to walk in obedience, I believe that we will come to know God with greater depth.

As with resistance, what you do doesn't need to be the spiritual equivalent of climbing Mount Everest. Instead, you should consider doing something that you can sustain over time. Obedience isn't a habit, but we often need to be faithful in small things to prepare ourselves to be faithful in big things.

INTRODUCTION

THE BIBLE AND DECISION MAKING

BIBLE READING:

GENESIS 4:1–26
GENESIS 11:1–9

FOR FURTHER TEACHING:

GENESIS 4:1–26,



GENESIS 11:1–9



In *The Matter with Things*, Iain McGilchrist suggests, “To exert power over something requires us only to know what happens when we pull the levers, press the button, or utter the spell.” He goes on to note, “It is hardly surprising, therefore, that while we have succeeded in coercing the world to our will to an extent unimaginable even a few generations ago, we have at the same time wrought havoc on that world precisely because we have not understood it.” There is a difference between knowing how to change, manipulate, or “exert power over something” and actually knowing something ... understanding it at its deepest levels. If we don’t understand God, ourselves, others, and the world, we can never be sure that our decisions aren’t reinforcing some fiction or distorting reality, particularly the reality of the triune God.

The Scriptures provide Christians with a deep understanding of the world. They also encourage us not to “pull the levers, press the button, or utter the spell” if doing so compromises our ability to point to and glorify the triune God. They prompt us to challenge the default option ... the one that seems most pragmatic and impactful. The Scriptures press us not to adopt an ends-justify-the-means sort of mentality or to comply with the world’s logic.

The Bible contains many stories that illustrate decisions rooted in the fear of the Lord. It also contains cautionary tales demonstrating the dangers of decisions that pursue some end other than the glorification of God. Consider the following:

ONE After God receives Abel’s sacrifice and rejects Cain’s offering (Genesis 4:4–5), Cain decides to eliminate the competition rather than offering an appropriate sacrifice. By killing Abel, Cain hopes to leave God with no alternative (4:8–9). Cain will (he thinks) be able to relate to God on his own terms because God will have no other choice. With the birth of Seth, however, God gives Eve a “substitute” or “replacement” for Abel (4:25). Even so, we see that Cain exerts power over his world based largely on a faulty view of God that leads Cain to believe he can manipulate God.

TWO When God comes down to see the city and tower the people are building so that they can have some security and create a name for themselves in Genesis 11:5, he says, “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them” (11:6). If God had not intervened, the people would have completed the city. Though it is not realized due to God’s action, the narrative highlights the potential of humanity’s capacity to do great things while ignoring God.

THREE The pharaoh, “who did not know Joseph,” decides to “deal shrewdly” with the Hebrews in an effort to guard against them rebelling against Egypt. He increases their workload (Exodus 1:11, 13), instructs the midwives to kill the newborn Hebrew sons (1:16), and ultimately commands the Hebrew sons to be drowned in the Nile (1:22). Pharaoh’s ignorance of God and the ways he blessed Egypt because of Jacob led Pharaoh to exercise his authority apart from God in a futile attempt to protect a nation he ironically (and tragically) dooms to defeat (15:1–21).

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These examples remind us of our capacity to make decisions that put us at odds with the triune God. These, along with a host of other narratives, demonstrate the consequences of decisions made without a deep understanding of the Lord's ways. However efficient or effective certain activities may seem, our decisions cannot be driven by efficiency and effectiveness. Instead, they must be motivated by our basic purpose: to point to and magnify the triune God.

The Bible also offers a number of positive pictures of decision-making, many of which are the consequence of learning to live in the presence of God. Making everyday decisions for the glory of God is something we learn to do as we experience God's presence and provision. Consider, for instance, 1 Samuel 17. **First**, while David is not an experienced soldier, Goliath is not his first challenge. After volunteering to fight Goliath, Saul questions David's ability to defeat Goliath. David responds by saying, "Your servant has struck down lions and bears, and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, for he has defied the armies of the living God ... The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine" (1 Samuel 17:36–37). David has experienced the presence and provision of the Lord in his struggles against the lion and the bear.

Second, Goliath is characterized as defaming the name of the Lord by humiliating Israel (17:26). As David says to Goliath before the battle, "You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of host, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied" (17:45). He goes on to say that the Lord will give him victory and that David will display "the dead bodies of the host of the Philistines ... that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the Lord saves not with sword and spear. For the battle is the Lord's, and he will give you into our hand" (17:46–47).

The David and Goliath narrative depicts David's commitment to glorifying the Lord and making his name known. David decides to fight Goliath to bring glory to God. It is a decision that is motivated by his desire to make God known and informed by his past experience of God. The narrative also illustrates the importance of experiencing God's presence and provision and of recognizing it as such.

Returning again to McGilchrist's insight with the story of David and Goliath in mind, we see that David's understanding of the world prompts choices other Israelites were unwilling to make. He doesn't have a mechanistic or pragmatic view of the world. He isn't "doing the math" to determine how likely it is that he will defeat Goliath. For David, that math doesn't matter. David knows that God will act for the sake of his name. As such, while we can, to some extent, attribute David's decision to his courage, the narrative emphasizes something slightly different: *David understands the world theologically*.

We see other instances of this sort of "calculation" in the Old and New Testaments. In Deuteronomy 30, Moses sets before Israel a choice between "life and good" and "death and evil" (30:15). "Life and good" are associated with keeping the Lord's commandments, whereas "death and evil" are the result of disloyalty and idolatry (30:16–18). He urges the Israelites to "choose life" by remaining loyal to God and recognizing the Lord "is your life and length of days" (30:20). There is no other strategy or way of relating to one another or creation that will bring life. Israel will only experience the blessings of God when they are willing to depend on God by living life on his terms.

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This concept was not something new for Israel. God had been with and provided for the Israelites. They, like David, had the opportunity to learn God's ways through experience. For instance, in Deuteronomy 8, Moses tells the Israelites that God led them through the wilderness and provided them with manna to test them and help them come to understand "that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (8:3). Put differently, the Israelites were given the opportunity to recognize that obeying the Lord is the path to life.

In the New Testament, we see a similar dynamic when Jesus sends his disciples out to the "lost sheep of Israel" (Matthew 10:5–15). This initial sending was intended to prepare the disciples for what they would inevitably face as they go out as "sheep in the midst of wolves" (10:16). He sends them out with a message (10:7), the power to heal and cast out demons (10:8), and relatively meager provisions (10:9–10). The disciples are to seek out those who are "worthy" in the towns they visit and to depend on their hospitality (10:11–12).

This initial mission would train Jesus's disciples by giving them the opportunity to experience the presence and provision of God through the hospitality of those supportive of the kingdom message. This experience was crucial because of the persecution that would come as they continued their mission. Learning to trust Christ's instruction and to depend on the Lord and his people even when resources were limited, or their own skills might fail them. As such, Jesus says, "Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you" (10:17–20). The dependence they learn on their initial mission is crucial because it will carry them through the rest of their time in ministry.

As Christians, we don't obey when it is convenient or when obedience seems to have some practical utility. We obey because we believe that our God is a God "who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think" (Ephesians 3:20). Our everyday decisions are grounded in a desire to point to and glorify God.

While "logic" can, at times, play a part, Christians must not allow what the world counts as "logical" to guide us. Instead, we must embrace the "theo-logic" found in the Scriptures by making decisions that point to and glorify the triune God.

"Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves."

- Matthew 10:16

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THE BIBLE AND DECISION MAKING

FRAMEWORKS

MAKING GOD GLORIFYING DECISIONS

BIBLE READING:

DEUT 8:1-20
MATTHEW 6:1-34

FOR FURTHER TEACHING:

DEUTERONOMOY 8:1-20



MATTHEW 6:1-34



This guide is intended to help you make everyday decisions for the glory of God by experiencing God's presence and provision and recognizing it as such. The Bible offers a number of pictures and guidance that aid believers in developing a biblical decision-making framework. That framework is rooted in the simple assertion that pointing to and glorifying God must lie at the heart of all Christian decision-making. To put it differently, pointing to and glorifying God is what we are always doing (or seeking to do) when we make decisions.

So, what does that look like? To illustrate, let's consider the televised cooking competition *Chopped*. Four contestants, usually highly trained chefs, are given a "mystery basket" filled with odd ingredients to make an appetizer, main course, and dessert. Using a mystery basket filled with gummy worms, jerky, starfruit, and pretzel sticks, the contestants have to head to the pantry and make a gourmet dish fit for three expert culinary judges ... and they often do. It is impressive to watch the contestants turn seemingly unusable, or at least unlikely, ingredients into something edible (if not spectacular).

The *Chopped* competitors have an expertise developed through formal schooling and years of experience. You don't develop the sort of expertise the *Chopped* competitors exhibit without dedicated preparation. They can work without a recipe because they have a deep understanding of their craft. They are able to make

good decisions despite tight time frames and strange ingredients because they understand how to combine, prepare, and present what they are given. Knowing the flavor combinations, having expert techniques, and drawing on experiences cooking other dishes allow the contestants to make an amazing dessert out of lemon cough drops, a stick of butter, and garlic bread.

Christians need to be able to make decisions like the contestants on *Chopped*. We need to be able to glorify God despite the “odd ingredients” with which we are presented by a chaotic world. To do so, we need to understand both the goal of our decision-making and the underlying “flavors” that, when combined, will allow us to glorify the triune God. Learning to make everyday decisions for God’s glory isn’t a matter of memorizing a list of principles or following a rigid process. It’s a matter of making God’s glory the nonnegotiable element of every decision we make. To give God all the glory requires us to cultivate an unreserved loyalty to God that spills over into a love for our neighbors and our love for other aspects of creation. Making decisions based on divided loyalties will always lead us away from glorifying God. Part of becoming an expert Christian is understanding how to point to and glorify God rather than fitting God into our lives whenever it is convenient for us to do so.

Learning to Listen to the Holy Spirit

Unlike the contestants on *Chopped*, we aren’t attempting to make decisions on our own. We have received the Holy Spirit whose interconnected work of inspiration and illumination guides us as we seek to live under the authority of Christ. To understand these works of the Holy Spirit and how they relate to decision-making, it is helpful to offer a brief introduction to speech act theory.

As Kevin Vanhoozer notes in *Is There Meaning in This Text*, speech act theory “starts with the assumption that the minimal unit of human communication is not a sentence or other expression, but rather the performance of certain kinds of acts, such as making statements, asking questions, giving orders, describing, explaining, apologizing, thanking, congratulating, etc.” To put it simply, speech act theory recognizes that we do things with words. When we do things with words, three aspects are involved: locution, illocution, and perlocution. The locution is the form of the communication, the illocution is the intended effect, and the perlocution is the effect the communication has on the individual(s) receiving the communication. Here is how it works:

- Locution: “Hello.”
- Illocution: The intended effect of saying “Hello” is to greet.
- Perlocution: The individual with whom we are speaking feels welcomed.

Examples can get more complex. I often tell the following story to students to illustrate the speech act theory:

My wife was working in a hospital in central Illinois. While visiting her one day, she noted that one of my friends from college was working as a doctor in a nearby town. I hadn't seen him in some time and wanted to connect. Knowing that it was unlikely that anyone in hospital reception would let an old college buddy through to a doctor, I decided to try a slightly different tactic. I called the hospital and introduced myself as "Dr. Spencer" (I held a PhD at the time). I went on to say that I was calling from a hospital in a neighboring town (I was still visiting my wife at work at the time) and was hoping to speak with Dr. Stanford (I've changed the name to protect the innocent). The receptionist put me through to my friend's voicemail and we inevitably connected later in the day.

Having told the story, I ask my students a simple question: "Did I lie to the receptionist?" Answers vary, but ultimately, the answer is more complex than a simple yes or no when viewed from the perspective of speech act theory. As declarations, it would be difficult to suggest that my statements were untrue. I was a doctor at the time having earned my PhD in theological studies. I was calling from the hospital cafeteria in a neighboring town. I was also hoping to speak with my friend. I didn't say anything that was untrue.

However, if we move beyond strictly "true" and "false" categories, it is rather simple to say that my broader intent (the illocutionary aspect of speech) was to deceive. I used true statements to do it, but by playing with the more ambiguous aspects of language, I pressed a version of the truth into the service of falsehood. Because the receptionist put me through to my friend's line, the perlocutionary effect was "belief." She believed what I was saying was true and transferred the call.

So, now that we have a general sense of speech act theory, how does it relate to the Holy Spirit's work of inspiration and illumination? First, we can see that the biblical text is the "realm" of locution and illocution. As Richard Averbeck notes in his essay "God, People, and the Bible":

The locutionary fact that the text says something and the illocutionary nature of what it says are both part of the text itself and, therefore, part of the Holy Spirit's work of inspiration, not illumination. These are the two parts of the "meaning" already accomplished in the text. For example, when Jesus says, "I tell you, unless your righteousness goes beyond that of the experts in the law and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:20), he says something locutionary and what he says amounts to an illocutionary warning. The reader who perceives this has attained to a proper perception of the text. This does not require illumination by the Holy Spirit.

He goes on to suggest that illumination involves perlocution or the effect a given text has on the reader. Illumination calls us to respond to God's word in faith by aligning our lives with it. As such, Averbeck suggests, "This is what the Holy Spirit's work of illumination is concerned with. The issue is not the 'sense' of Scripture but the need for us to come to our 'senses.'"

Listening for the prompting of the Holy Spirit is connected to biblical study because the Spirit speaks in and through the text of Scripture. The Spirit certainly works in other ways, but we should recognize the importance of his work in and through the biblical text and the importance of living under the biblical text as the final authority for life and faith.

Listening is not limited to Bible study. It also involves other activities that help us to develop a cadence of life that makes God's presence clear. Prayer, generosity, thanksgiving, and a host of other activities help us to attend to the Holy Spirit in our lives. As we resist distractions, we adopt a posture that will help us listen to the Holy Spirit.

Attending to What Is Both Urgent and Important

Stephen Covey describes in *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* matters that are both urgent and important as involving "significant results that require immediate attention." They are, in Covey's view, "crises" to which many people give too much attention. They become "crisis managers, problem-minded people, deadline-driven producers."

While Covey's description has its place, not all urgent and important matters are crises or problems. Some are urgent and important because they are vital to the way the world works. They are both urgent and important because they help us resist the harried pace and anxieties of the world around us. For Christians, practices like prayer, service, hospitality, evangelism, study, and a host of others are urgent and important not because we have a crisis, but because the world has a crisis. Christian practices are not urgent and important in the sense noted by Covey because Christians aren't in crisis...we are at peace. Our practices demonstrate the peace we have received.

To make good decisions, we need to be living into God's reality consistently before we need to decide. *We must engage in Christian practices in a way that makes them as natural as breathing.* These practices are not ends in themselves. Instead, they shape us for worship and create an environment in which it becomes easy for us to recognize God's presence and activity in our lives.

So, what are these urgent and important matters? They are the practices that mark us off as God's people. These practices include, but are not limited to, confession of sin (1 John 1:9), showing love and care for other Christians (1 John 3:17–18, 4:20), visiting the vulnerable (James 1:27), and doing those activities associated with being "filled by the Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18–21). These practices may begin as disciplines. We may not understand why we are doing such things or have any deep sense in why they matter. However, the goal is to make these practices a "normal" part of our lives. As I note in *Thinking Christian*:

**Practicing prayer,
participating in
worship, taking
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become less like
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more like breathing**

Practicing prayer, participating in worship, taking communion, submitting to the scriptures, giving to support God's missional activity become less like paying taxes and more like breathing...they are not the activities in which we engage because ignoring them has consequences we would rather avoid (like not paying taxes). Instead, they are practices that become so natural and necessary that not doing them feels suffocating ... as if something within us is broken.

It is both urgent and important that these disciplines characterize our lives as Christians. When they become embedded aspects of our character, we will orient ourselves in the world in ways that enhance our ability to make God-glorifying decisions.

These practices change the way we relate to God, the world, and others. They shape the way we think about ourselves. In doing so, they change our perspective about the way the world works. This change in perspective is one that God encouraged in the lives of Israel through his ongoing provision. As Deuteronomy notes, God tested Israel during their wilderness wanderings to determine whether they would obey his commands or not (8:2). Providing Israel with manna in the desert was intended to teach Israel "that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord" (8:3). God sought to teach Israel that obedience was the path forward. Following him was crucial because "the Lord is your life and the length of your days" (30:20).

Because God's people were incapable of shifting their perspective toward an unqualified loyalty to God, God had to act in fresh ways. He must solve the human problem. In Ezekiel, God promises to give his people a new heart and spirit and to put his Spirit within them (36:26–27). God acts to "cause you [his people] to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules" (36:27). We benefit from God's fresh action as members of the New Covenant. We have the Holy Spirit. As such, we are no longer slaves to sin (Romans 6:15–19). We are free to obey.

Our practices are made possible by our freedom. They are expressions of it. We are capable of such practices because we recognize that we are free. As Jonathan Tran notes in *The Vietnam War and Theologies of Memory*, "Christians charged with nothing but obedience are freed for obedience, and in this way for Christian theology, freedom prescinds as obedience." As we engage in our urgent and important practices, we will discover the limitlessness of our freedom to obey God. The practices don't free us. Instead, they put us in the position to realize the freedom we already have.

Understanding How We Know

Part of developing a biblical framework for decision-making requires that we understand how we know in the first place. Cognitive psychologist and philosopher John Vervaeke has suggested four ways of knowing: propositional, procedural, perspectival, and participatory. These four ways of knowing are helpful because they expand our understanding of knowing beyond assertions that can either be true or false (propositional knowing). These ways of knowing may be described as follows:

PROPOSITIONAL This way of knowing is about knowing “that.” It focuses on assertions that can either be true or false. For instance, we know “that” a bicycle is a mode of transportation.

PROCEDURAL Procedural knowing concerns knowing “how.” We have certain skills that could not be described as true or false. Knowing “how” to ride a bicycle, for example, is a type of knowledge.

PERSPECTIVAL This sort of knowing involves knowing from a particular point of view. It concerns the identification of information relevant to a particular person in a particular situation. It involves discrimination and discernment based on a number of factors that we tend to consider in a more or less automatic fashion. For instance, if I know “that” a bicycle is a mode of transportation (propositional knowing) and I know “how” to ride a bicycle (procedural knowing), seeing a bicycle when I need a mode of transportation is relevant (perspectival knowing). It may be more or less relevant than other modes of transportation. For example, a car may be more relevant if it is raining outside, if I have to travel a long distance, or if I have to carry a large number of items on my journey.

PARTICIPATORY Participatory knowing is the co-creation of an experience that involves the interplay between various elements in a given context. Together, for instance, a bicycle and a rider become something different together than they are apart. They are, in some sense, greater than the sum of their parts and capable of doing things together that they are not capable of doing apart from one another. To offer a different sort of example, consider baptism. There is a reason we can distinguish taking a bath from baptism. The difference, however, is not in the elements involved (e.g., an individual and water), but in the combination of other elements. A baptism usually involves a group of individuals with some sense of the significance of the rite, an officiant who facilitates the rite, words spoken to make clear what the rite signifies, and a celebration once the rite is complete. Baptism involves more than just being immersed in water. The reason we can differentiate between baptism and doing a cannonball off the high dive reflects our participatory knowledge.

How do these categories help us develop a biblical framework for decision-making? **First**, this typology makes distinctions between different ways of knowing without isolating those various ways of knowing from one another. This is crucial for a biblical framework because we don't simply know God as a set of propositions (propositional knowing) or by engaging in certain disciplines (procedural knowing). These are crucial, but we also know God by recognizing him as infinitely more relevant than any other actor or factor we may encounter (perspectival knowing) and by remaining alert to his role and presence in making our lives mean something it could not without him (participatory knowing).

The questions we ask can become part of our problem by reinforcing ways of thinking that push God to the margins of our lives rather than making him central.

Second, this typology reminds us that our decision-making isn't just a matter of rational thought. Decision-making often involves all four ways of knowing. Often our decisions will result in some action in the world. When we act, we do so with certain limitations on our ideas (propositional knowing) and skills (procedural knowing) that influence what is or is not relevant to us (perspectival knowing) and what sort of situation will be created as we act (participatory knowing). While the way these various ways of knowing interact may shift, they tend to hang together when we are making decisions.

Finally, the ways of knowing also provide us with potential questions to ask of ourselves and others. Asking questions slows us down. By asking questions, we can begin to understand the perspectives of others. Assertions of fact are relatively simple to consider from the perspective of truth or falsity. What is often more challenging to assess is how a given individual's skills (i.e., what they know how to do and do well) influence the sort of information they select. It can be fruitful to consider why a given individual or group sees certain assertions or positions as relevant (perspectival knowing). Understanding why a given position is so crucial often requires us to understand what it is that makes a given individual's world "work." Why is it that removing one piece or another creates a crisis (participatory knowing)? These and other questions allow us to enter into arenas where we may have knowledge gaps.

A biblical framework for decision-making is nested within our call to point to and glorify the triune God. It needs to be commensurate with the greatest commandment (to love God with all we are and have) and the second that flows from it (to love our neighbor as we love ourselves). The four ways of knowing make transparent the various understandings people bring to bear on decision-making. They help us be deliberate as we seek to make our own decisions as well as evaluate the decisions of others.

Asking Theological Questions

Our biblical framework requires that we learn to ask different questions. Questions are crucial because they reflect our underlying assumptions about reality. As leadership expert Jennifer Garvey Berger notes in *Simple Habits for Complex Times*, “Your old patterns constrain you, and your old questions keep you in familiar territory. It is new and different questions that open up new and different possibilities.” The questions we ask can become part of our problem by reinforcing ways of thinking that push God to the margins of our lives rather than making him central. As philosopher Slavoj Žižek observes in his lecture “Maybe We Just Need a Different Chicken,” “There are not only wrong answers to questions. There are also wrong questions in the sense that the very way we perceive a problem, which can be a very real problem, is effectively a part of the problem.”

Asking theological questions is rooted in two basic ideas: (1) We don’t always know exactly what God is doing and (2) we want to align ourselves with whatever he is doing. Because we don’t always know exactly what God is doing, we can be tempted to attribute what we don’t understand to “luck” (good or bad) or coincidence on the one hand or to punishment or blessing on the other. The former is characteristic of a perspective that views God as distant, if not absent, from our everyday experiences. The latter seeks to drain God of any mystery so that life’s complexity may be made simple and explained according to a rigid system.

Instead of defaulting to “luck” or “punishment,” Christians need to ask theological questions. We need to develop a sense of wonder and curiosity about what God is doing. We need to draw on the biblical text to understand (a) the range of actions that God has taken in the world, (b) the ways God’s people have made both faithful and unfaithful decisions, and (c) how we can prepare ourselves to make good decisions in our own lives. As we develop a sense of curiosity and a mind informed by the biblical text, we will be able to ask theological questions that help us guide our decision-making.

What are theological questions? How should we go about using the ways of knowing to formulate theological questions? The following questions are written in the first person, but could easily be reoriented to consider a different person’s perspective. The list is not exhaustive. It is intended to offer a general framework that will be sharpened in the devotionals included in the rest of this guide.

WHAT DO I KNOW ABOUT...? This question is one of the most basic. We need to have some sense of what we know about God, ourselves, others, creation, the thinking of the church throughout the ages, and, often, a variety of other forms of knowledge. When we are trying to make a decision, we are almost always going to have gaps in our knowledge. If we deem those gaps relevant, they can prompt us to pursue new information to fill in some of the gaps.

HOW IS WHAT I KNOW HOW TO DO WELL INFLUENCING THE WAY I THINK ABOUT ...? This question reminds us of the role our skill sets play in decision-making. It isn't just that some decisions will be precluded because we don't have the skills sufficient to make them (e.g., I'm happy to train my kids in the weight room but I leave the lacrosse coaching to the professionals), but that our skills generally create certain limitations on the ways we interact in the world. For example, I feel confident working with biblical texts, but have generally steered clear of philosophy. Based on my educational background, I am comfortable interpreting biblical texts and working in theological circles, but my lack of formal training and informal study in philosophy limit my tendency to look to philosophy on a regular basis.

DOES MY DECISION REFLECT MY CONVICTION THAT GOD IS INFINITELY MORE RELEVANT THAN ANY OTHER ACTOR OR FACTOR? This question is related to perspective knowing. It is a question that is intended to be both critical and reorienting. It is critical in so much as it prompts us to evaluate our decisions. It is reorienting in that it encourages us to rethink our decisions so that they reflect our conviction that God is infinitely relevant. We are, in other words, responding to God *from within a situation* rather than responding *to the situation and ignoring or marginalizing God*.

HOW DOES THIS DECISION DEMONSTRATE MY DESIRE TO PARTICIPATE WITH GOD BY POINTING TO AND GLORIFYING HIM?

Participatory knowing is about co-creation. It is about how our relationship with others (and the Other) and with aspects of creation come together to showcase God's presence and activity. *The question is intended to remind us that we can't just do whatever we want and then claim that God was involved.* While what we say is certainly important, our actions and our words need to be aligned so that God is given the glory.

These questions do not represent an exhaustive list, but they begin to help us consider how our decisions might differ if we didn't start with an idea of or about God, but with God himself. They assume God is present and active. They also assume that we are curious about what God is doing because we desire to participate with him as he makes all things new.

DEVOTIONAL 1

SO NO ONE ELSE CAN CLAIM THE GLORY

GENESIS 14:1–24

ADDITIONAL READING:

DEUTERONOMY 7:1-26
MATTHEW 4:1-11

FOR FURTHER TEACHING:

MATTHEW 4:1-11



MADE IN GOD'S IMAGE



When Abram learns that Lot and his possessions have been taken captive by Chedorlaomer, king of Elam, and his forces (Genesis 14:1–16), Abram forms a rescue party (14:13). After defeating Chedorlaomer and his allies (14:14–15), Abram begins his journey home with “all the possessions, and ... his kinsman Lot with his possessions, and the women and the people” (14:16).

On his way, Abram meets Melchizedek who is introduced as the “king of Salem” and “priest of God Most High” (14:18). Melchizedek brings bread and wine for Abram and pronounces a blessing on him saying,

Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
Possessor of heaven and earth;
and blessed be God Most High,
who has delivered your enemies into your hands.

This blessing and Melchizedek’s status as “priest of God Most High” (14:18) prompt Abraham to give Melchizedek “a tenth of everything” (14:20).

By giving Melchizedek an offering, Abram acknowledges Melchizedek’s status as one of God’s representatives. He also affirms the blessing. Abram’s victory is not to be attributed to Abram’s military prowess, but to God Most High. God himself reaffirms his role in the victory in Genesis 15:1 when he appears to Abram and says, “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” In giving Melchizedek an offering, Abram joins Melchizedek in giving all the glory to God.

After his interaction with Melchizedek, Abram interacts with another king...the king of Sodom. The king of Sodom does not come with bread, wine, or a blessing, but with an offer. He tells Abram that Abram can keep all the spoils of war so long as Abram returns the people to the king of Sodom (14:21). Abram, who felt free to give a “tenth of everything” to Melchizedek (14:20), is now faced with the choice of handling the other 90 percent of the spoils.

Abram declines the king of Sodom’s offer saying, “I have lifted my hand to the Lord, God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a sandal strap or anything that is yours, lest you should say, ‘I have made Abram rich’” (14:22–23). Abram does not place himself or those with him at a deficit by accepting “what the young men have eaten and the share of the men who went with me” (14:24).

Abram’s reasoning for not accepting the king of Sodom’s offer provides some insight into the sort of factors we might employ as we make decisions. **First**, it should be noted that Abram seems to have given this matter a certain amount of forethought. His response certainly suggests that Abram anticipated this sort of situation. His decision wasn’t made in the moment.

Second, accepting the payment from the king of Sodom would not change the reality of the situation. God still gave Abram the victory. Keeping the possessions could easily have been seen as a partial fulfillment of God’s promise to make Abram a great nation (Genesis 12:2). If, as Abram and Melchizedek affirm, God delivered Abram from his enemies, it would seem a small leap to recognize that God also gave Abram the spoils. Abram seems to understand that he has ownership over the possessions when he gives Melchizedek an offering from the spoils. The spoils belong to the victor (i.e., God). Abram’s choice isn’t about who “owns” the possessions, but about how that distribution of the possessions may skew the narrative. He wants to avoid the potential of someone other than God claiming the glory.

Abram refuses to make a decision that would allow the king of Sodom to lay claim to Abram’s success. Abram does not want the king of Sodom to be able to say that he is responsible for Abram’s wealth. Abram wants to be sure that no one but God gets the glory.

“But Abram said to the king of Sodom, “I have lifted my hand to the LORD, God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a sandal strap or anything that is yours, lest you should say, ‘I have made Abram rich.’”

Genesis 14:22-23

DEVOTIONAL 1

SO NO ONE ELSE CAN CLAIM THE GLORY

**WE CAN TAKE TIME TO
CONSIDER HOW A GIVEN
DECISION MIGHT ALLOW
SOMEONE ELSE
(INCLUDING OURSELVES)
TO CLAIM GOD’S GLORY.**

While interning at a church, I was asked to help a team who were planning a youth conference to set some goals that would allow them to measure the success of the event. We walked through the “normal” metrics such as the number of attendees, the number of kids who come to faith in Christ or offer a renewed commitment to following him. As we talked, it became clear that we were all uncomfortable with only having quantitative metrics. We wanted something more qualitative ... something that would reflect our conviction that the event wasn’t really “our” event.

We decided on the following question: How much of this event did we pull off without God? Obviously, we knew that the answer was “none of it.” However, in asking the question consistently as we planned and executed the event, we committed to the ongoing recognition that God was involved. We didn’t want our focus to become our own efforts. Instead, we wanted to remember God because, as Deuteronomy 8:18 suggests, “it is he who gives the power to get wealth [or make an event successful].”

Guiding Questions

- How might our decision in a given moment allow someone else (even ourselves) to claim the glory due to God alone?
- How might we make clear that we recognize God’s role in our lives in a given situation?
- How can we show ourselves willing to delay our own gratification or to do what seems less practical to ensure that only God gets the glory?

DEVOTIONAL 2

ARE MY LEGITIMATE CONCERNS AND AGENDAS OVERSHADOWING GOD?

EXODUS 2:11–15

ADDITIONAL READING:

GENESIS 15:6; 22:1-24
ON GOD AND POLITICS

FOR FURTHER TEACHING:

GENESIS 15:6; 22:1-24 (



ON GOD AND POLITICS



In Exodus 1:1–7, we learn that (a) all of Jacob’s sons have come to Egypt, (b) Joseph, who had risen to prominence in Egypt (Genesis 41:40–45), had died, and (c) Israel’s numbers continued to grow as they lived in Egypt. We also learn that there is a new king over Egypt who is unaware of Joseph and the blessing he brought to Egypt (1:8). Unlike the previous Pharaoh who trusted Joseph and allowed his family to settle in the land of Goshen, this Pharaoh sees Israel’s swelling ranks as a threat. He doesn’t understand that the multiplication and fruitfulness of Israel represents the working out of God’s blessing (Genesis 1:28, 9:1, 7, 17:6, 28:3, 41:52, 47:27; Exodus 1:7).

Israel’s growth prompts the Pharaoh “who knew no Joseph” to set in motion a series of strategies to control the Israelite population. Fearing that they will turn against Egypt or attempt to leave (1:10), he seeks to limit Israel’s strength by pressing them into hard labor (1:11–14), killing the male children at birth (1:15–16), and, finally, throwing all of the newborn male Israelites into the Nile (1:22). All of his efforts fail because Pharaoh was working against God and his order.

The increased workload results in greater multiplication of the Hebrews (1:12). The use of “multiplied” in this context again references God’s destiny for humankind that is now being manifested in Israel as his covenant people. Pharaoh is opposed to God. The midwives who were helping the Hebrew women give birth refuse to follow Pharaoh’s order to kill the male newborns

because the “midwives feared God” (1:17–19). Not only do the Hebrew males live, but God “dealt well with the midwives. And the people multiplied and grew very strong” (1:20). Again, we see that Pharaoh’s efforts fail while those who fear the Lord are rewarded and the Hebrews continue to “multiply.” While Pharaoh’s final gambit of drowning newborn males in the Nile appears to succeed, Moses, whom God will eventually use to deliver Israel, is drawn out of the Nile and raised by Pharaoh’s daughter (2:1–10).

Initially, however, Moses fails in a way similar to Pharaoh. Whereas Pharaoh is unsuccessful in destroying the Hebrews, Moses is unsuccessful in delivering them. Why? Moses responds to a situation rather than responding to God. Both Moses and Pharaoh identify “emergencies” that require their attention. Pharaoh fears for the fate of his nation. Moses is moved by the plight of his Hebrew brethren. Unfortunately, neither man is pursuing God’s glory. They seek to “fix” some problem through their own power. They look out at the world, recognize it isn’t as it should be, and attempt to modify it.

Moses may see more clearly than Pharaoh. He understands that the oppression of Israel is problematic. Yet, his actions are still rash and wrongheaded. Moses’s error is revealed when he breaks up a fight between two Hebrews and asks why they are fighting. One of the men answers saying, “Who made you a prince and a judge over us? Do you mean to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?” (1:14). The answer to the first question (Who made you a prince and a judge over us?) is revealing. No one made Moses the prince or judge of the Hebrews. He took that mantle upon himself. Therein lies the problem.

Like Moses, we will often witness events that should concern us. We have legitimate concerns. Our understanding of those concerns, however, is often incomplete. For instance, Pharaoh is right to be concerned for the safety of his nation. Providing security is part of a Pharaoh’s job description. Despite his legitimate concerns, Pharaoh misunderstands the multiplication of the Hebrews. It is not a threat but the outworking of God’s blessing ... not something to be feared, but something for which God should be given glory.

“But Abram said to the king of Sodom, “I have lifted my hand to the LORD, God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a sandal strap or anything that is yours, lest you should say, ‘I have made Abram rich.’”

Genesis 14:22-23

Similarly, Moses is right to see the oppression of the Hebrews as a tragedy. In seeking to stop one aspect of that oppression, Moses pursues a partial liberation apart from God. God is not simply seeking to bring a certain group out of a desperate situation. Instead, “God’s liberation in this instance, while benefiting the people of Israel, has as its end the fulfillment of the covenant that God made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the glorification of God.”[i]

Moses and Pharaoh offer negative examples of decision-making from which we can glean a variety of lessons. First, we need to recognize that we are going to witness myriad ways in which the world is not as it should be. We are right to have legitimate concerns for others and for creation more generally. Having legitimate concerns reflects our understanding that sin and its effects create situations in which human dignity is diminished.

Second, unlike Moses and Pharaoh, we need to learn to respond to God rather than responding to our legitimate concerns. Consider, for instance, the difference between Moses and Pharaoh on the one hand and the midwives on the other. Pharaoh and Moses focus on the situation (1:9–10, 2:11), whereas the midwives are characterized as God-fearing. It is not primarily their compassion for the Hebrews or moral outrage about the Pharaoh’s command that motivates them to rebel against Pharaoh. It is their fear of the Lord. It seems that we can assume that they oppose Pharaoh and feel his order is immoral. Yet, the text makes their underlying motive clear: the midwives fear God.

As we pursue our legitimate concerns, we need to remember that a “legitimate” concern is one that God also shares. Because we can assume that God shares our legitimate concerns, we can also assume that God will not allow the world to continue in its broken state forever. While he will often use us to care for those who are oppressed or to right some wrong, he does not expect us to fix the world on our own terms, in our own strength, using our own strategies. For God to get the glory, we must, first and foremost, fear the Lord. We must shift our attention to God remembering that he belongs in the foreground of any and all situations we may face.

**WE NEED TO DEVELOP
THEOLOGICAL
PRACTICES THAT WILL
HELP US DEVELOP AN
APPROPRIATE POSTURE
TOWARD OUR
LEGITIMATE CONCERNS.**

Waiting isn't easy for anyone. Our tendency is to act. We want the injustices and tragedies in the world to be resolved and feel some responsibility to do what we can to "fix" the world. The trouble is that we are not responsible for fixing the world, but for living faithfully in a world so broken only God can fix it. As such, we need to embrace theological practices like confession and repentance, prayer, lament, and friendship. We often recognize the power of such practices when there is nothing else we can do, but we need to acknowledge their power even when we have other options available to us.

For instance, when we learn to lament, we develop a deeper sense of what is wrong with the world and how broken the world really is. Lamenting with others even when we might not otherwise be affected by their plight is a powerful way for us to express our solidarity with other members of Christ's body or to reframe the complaints of non-Christians theologically. Lament gives us perspective.

Prayer, lament, confession, and various other practices can seem like trite responses to the world's problems. Yet, "once we adopt a disposition in which those who pray engage in an empty ritual, those who lament in a form of self-centered whining, or those who think deeply in vain musings that will never matter outside of some sort of ivory tower, we can be sure that we have made God a figure head instead of a ruler." [i] These practices can be ways for us to isolate ourselves from the world, but they can also be powerful practices for participating with God as he makes all things new.

The world is broken. We can't fix it. We aren't supposed to shape it so that it is broken in ways we think we can live with. Instead, we are to testify (in word and deed) to God's redemptive work. We do that not by seeking to be the hero of the story or by acting to address our legitimate concerns on our own terms. Instead, we recognize that our deepest and most legitimate concern is that God get the glory.

Guiding Questions

- How is it that we have, in the midst of our agendas, strategies, moral outrage, and legitimate concerns, fashioned God into a deity of our own making so that he looks increasingly like us when we should be conforming more closely to the image of his Son?
- Am I being driven by a "secondary" concern or by my primary concern of pointing to and glorifying the triune God?

DEVOTIONAL 3

HOW CAN I MAKE GOD'S INFINITE RELEVANCE CLEAR?

1 SAMUEL 24:1–22

ADDITIONAL READING:

DEUTERONOMY 5:12-15
DANIEL 8:8-30

FOR FURTHER TEACHING:

DEUTERONOMY 5:12-15



1 SAMUEL 17:1-58



David first encounters Saul when facing Goliath. After David slays Goliath, Saul seems to have viewed David as an asset because “David went out and was successful wherever Saul sent him, so that Saul set him over the men of war” (1 Samuel 18:5). However, as Saul and David return from battling the Philistines, Saul hears the women singing and elevating David above Saul saying, “Saul has struck down his thousands and David his ten thousands” (18:7). Having already been rejected as king over Israel, Saul recognizes the threat David poses and begins to plot against David.

Failing to kill David himself (18:10–11), Saul seeks to put David in harm’s way by having him fight the Philistines and then requesting a “bride-price” of “a hundred foreskins of the Philistines” (18:25). When David brings Saul the foreskins of the Philistines, “Saul saw and knew that the Lord was with David, and that Michal, Saul’s daughter loved him” (18:28). Saul increasingly sees David as a threat to his kingship (though he has already lost it) and became “David’s enemy continually” (18:29). After receiving a warning from Jonathan, David flees and remains on the run for much of the rest of the first book of Samuel.

The book of Samuel is crafted so that God is portrayed as the one who “will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed” (2:10). The Israelite kingship is given not taken. The narratives concerning David’s exploits while fleeing from Saul are designed to showcase God’s deliverance of David (2 Samuel 22:2–4,

15–20, 23–33). Though he has been rejected by the Israelites (8:7), David acknowledges God as Israel’s heavenly sovereign (22:14) who enforces his order against all forces that press against the regulations of the Lord (22:5–6, 8–20).

Saul attempts to eliminate his competition (i.e., David) reflect his misunderstanding of God and the means by which the kingship will be obtained and retained. David, however, sees the world as it actually is. As such, the books of 1 and 2 Samuel portray David as innocent of actions that could be construed as attempts to usurp Saul or seize power. David, for instance, is never implicated in the death of an Israelite.[i] David’s actions display the hand of God in the formation of the new dynasty meant to rule Israel into eternity. Although David clearly acts with ambitious motivations at certain points, his actions tend to fall in line with the heavenly King whom David is representing.

In 1 Samuel 24:1–22 reflects David’s willingness to wait for the throne instead of taking the throne. While being pursued by Saul, David and his men take refuge in a cave. Saul came into the cave where David and his men were hiding to “relieve himself” (24:3). David’s men see the situation as an opportunity given by God to “do to him [Saul] as it shall seem good to you” (24:4). While they likely expect David to kill Saul (cf. 24:7), he cuts off the corner of Saul’s robe (24:5). Even this relatively minimal offense causes David to feel guilty because, as David says, “The Lord forbid that I should do this thing to my lord, the Lord’s anointed, to put out my hand against him, seeing he is the Lord’s anointed” (24:6).

In the David and Bathsheba narrative (2 Samuel 11:1–27), David is clearly guilty of sending Uriah to his death. However, as the narrative emphasizes, Uriah is a Hittite. While Uriah proves to be a more faithful Israelite than David in that particular instance, the identification of Uriah as a foreigner who would have no legitimate claim to the throne maintains the integrity of the Davidic innocence motif even as it highlights David’s dark side.

This incident provides us with an important lesson regarding decision-making. David laments the relatively minor harm he has done to Saul (i.e., cutting off the corner of Saul’s robe) not because he has any particular respect for Saul, but because he respects the position that the Lord has given Saul. Saul is the Lord’s anointed. David, at this point, could also claim to be the Lord’s anointed (16:12–13), yet he does not see his position as the Lord’s anointed as something vulnerable. He has no need to chase it or protect it. It is sure so long as David remains faithful to the Lord. Because David is not anxious about his own future and fate, he does not need to eliminate Saul. He respects Saul’s position because he respects the Lord and trusts that the Lord will put him on the throne in due time.

WE NEED TO RECOGNIZE THAT NOT ACTING (OR EXERCISING RESTRAINT) IS A VIABLE CHRISTIAN RESPONSE WHEN “DOING SOMETHING” MIGHT DRAW ATTENTION TO US RATHER THAN ALLOWING US TO POINT TO AND GLORIFY THE TRIUNE GOD.

Just like David, we can exercise restraint when not doing so will shift the focus to us and our actions rather than pointing others to God. Exercising restraint can be an excuse not to do what needs to be done. As theologian Jürgen Moltmann notes in *Theology of Hope*,

To be sure, it is usually said that sin in its original form is man’s wanting to be as God. But that is only the one side of sin. The other side of such pride is hopelessness, resignation, inertia and melancholy ... Temptation then consists not so much in the titanic desire to be as God, but in weakness, timidity, weariness, not wanting to be what God requires of us.

Restraint does not have universal value. We must discern when and how to exercise restraint by considering when exercising restraint will allow us to glorify God.

Restraint is one choice available to those who are secure in Christ. For those who have built their house on the rock (Matthew 7:24), there is no need to grasp at what God has promised instead of waiting for it. That doesn’t mean we should never act, but it does mean that we can decide not to act when not acting serves God’s purposes.

Guiding Questions

- How might some of my decisions change if I recognized the security I have in Christ?
- Do my choices reflect a conviction that all people are made in God’s image? Am I prepared to respect the dignity of others even when they don’t respect me?

DEVOTIONAL 4

WHAT IF HONORING GOD DOESN'T WORK?

2 KINGS 22:1-23:30

ADDITIONAL READING:

1 KINGS 19:9-18
RETHINKING OUR
VALUES

FOR FURTHER TEACHING:

FROM PAIN TO PRAISE



RETHINKING OUR VALUES



After Shaphan reads the book of the Law to Josiah, Josiah repents (1 Kings 22:11). He also commands several of his men to consult Huldah the prophetess to “inquire of the Lord ... concerning the words of this book that has been found” (22:13–14). Huldah tells Josiah’s men that God will not spare the nation of Judah (22:16–17). However, because of Josiah’s repentance, God will “gather you [Josiah] to your fathers ... and your eyes shall not see all the disaster that I bring upon this place [Judah]” (22:20).

Upon hearing the word of the Lord, Josiah institutes a series of reforms in accordance with the book of the Law (23:1–25). Josiah knew the Lord would not spare Judah. He was not seeking a different outcome. He was seeking to “establish the words of the law that were written in the book that Hilkiyah the priest found in the house of the Lord” (23:24). Josiah’s primary desire was to honor the Lord because “Before him [Josiah] there was no king like him, who turned to the Lord with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the Law of Moses, nor did any like him arise after him” (23:25).

Josiah’s reforms were not primarily motivated by some abstract sense of justice or a desire to make Judah great again. They were motivated by a deep sense of allegiance to the Lord. Whether God would relent and spare Judah or not was of little consequence. Josiah was compelled to honor the Lord.

Despite the glowing description of Josiah as one “who turned to the Lord with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might” (23:25), “the Lord did not turn from the burning of his great wrath, by which his anger was kindled against Judah” (23:26). Even Josiah’s reforms could not keep Judah from going into exile. Still, that does not negate the significance of Josiah’s commitment to the Lord or the reforms that followed. Josiah’s faithfulness was not a means to an end. It was an end in itself.

Our faithfulness may not yield all the results we desire. In Josiah’s case, for instance, it seems likely that Josiah would have liked to see Judah spared. Still, Josiah’s reforms reflect his desire to see God glorified. He accomplishes that.

As we make our everyday decisions, we will be tempted to choose the pragmatic path ... the one that allows us to achieve some end that is important to us. We may even be tempted to tie our ambitions to something God is already doing as Jephthah did when he was made one of Israel’s judges (Judges 10:6–11:40). We need to resist those temptations and remain faithful even when being faithful doesn’t yield the results we want to see.

It is not so much that we should think of faithfulness as its own reward. Instead, when we decide to be faithful, we are living into God’s order. We look beyond what we can see. We act on our conviction that God is with us, but is never hindered by obstacles that would be insurmountable for us. We act on the conviction that being obedient always makes sense because God is “able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think according to the power at work within us” (Ephesians 3:20). We don’t need to understand how obedience will build God’s kingdom to know that it will.

Obedience can come in many forms. As we see in Josiah’s reforms, obedience is often active. Josiah uses his position to push out idolatry (2 Kings 23:4–20) and reinstitute Passover (23:21–27). At other times, faithfulness may involve suffering difficulties as we see Jesus do at various points in his life and ministry (Matthew 4:1–11, 27:32–34). As we make our everyday decisions, we need to remember that we have received a kingdom that cannot be shaken (Hebrews 12:28). We know God will make all things new. Because, like Josiah, we are privy to God’s ways, we have been freed from the ambiguities and fears that so often influence the way we and others act in the world. We are free to point to and glorify God with every decision we make without worrying that obeying God is not our best choice.

OBEYING GOD MAY NOT LEAD TO THE SORT OF RESULTS WE THINK WE WANT, BUT IT WILL ALWAYS ALLOW US TO POINT TO AND GLORIFY THE TRIUNE GOD AS WE TEST HIM BY TRUSTING HIM.

When the Israelites begin neglecting God and thinking that he is incapable of caring for their needs, God issues a challenge saying,

From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, “How shall we return?” Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, “How have we robbed you?” In your tithes and contributions. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. Bring the full tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need (Malachi 3:7–10).

While some have suggested that this passage teaches that tithing will result in material blessing, God’s promise to “pour down blessing” in this circumstance is specific to what is happening in Israel. God is calling his people to do a different sort of “math.” They need to realize that they are employing a losing strategy because they are neglecting God.

God’s call to test him points the way for us. We are to test God by trusting God even if it won’t always yield material blessings. In doing so, we demonstrate our conviction that God’s ways and thoughts are “higher” than our own (Isaiah 55:8–9).

Guiding Questions

- How and when do practical concerns keep me from following God?
- When do my behaviors reflect my conviction that glorifying God is crucial even if doing so means not getting what I want?

DEVOTIONAL 5

WHAT'S KEEPING ME FROM MAKING GOD-GLORIFYING DECISIONS?

JEREMIAH 7:1-55

ADDITIONAL READING:

LUKE 10:38-42
ON GASLIGHTING

FOR FURTHER TEACHING:

LUKE 10:38-42



ON GASLIGHTING



Ideologies tend to go deeper than we realize. An ideology as an underlying set of beliefs ... a framework for viewing and thinking about the world ... that claims to be complete and, to some large extent, closes itself off to revision and reform despite evidence that contradicts its claims. As I note in *Christian Resistance* “Ideologies are not necessarily wrong, but they are always incomplete ... the questions ideologies prompt us to ask and the solutions they suggest will never fully account for all that is going on in the world.”

Ideologies influence the way we see the world. While Christians are often concerned with so-called leftist ideologies (woke ideologies, transgenderism, etc.), the reality is that conservatism, liberalism, and almost any other “ism” you can think of is, or has the capacity to become, an ideology. We are, it would seem, prone to telling stories that reinforce the ways we want the world to be rather than seeing the world as it actually is.

In Jeremiah 7, the Israelites are faced with an ideology of the temple. Some within Judah are encouraging the people to trust in the temple. They claimed that as long as the temple is still standing, God will protect Judah. The temple becomes a symbol of God’s presence regardless of the Judah’s behavior. They claimed that God would never allow his temple to be destroyed.

While the temple had always served as a symbol “designed to point to the cosmic eschatological reality

that God’s tabernacling presence, formerly limited to the holy of holies, was to be extended throughout the whole earth.”[i] The temple ideology distorted the symbolic meaning of the temple by divorcing it from the life of God’s people. The temple may have been “designed” to gesture toward an eschatological reality, it was not designed to function in isolation. It was “designed” to be a symbol within the context of a covenant people who were committed to giving their unqualified loyalty to God.

The temple ideology claimed that the temple alone was a sufficient gauge of God’s pleasure. God was, in some sense, bound to his house. He will not (or cannot) abandon it. As such, the only thing that matters is that the temple is still standing. This ideology reinforces Judah’s choices. If God is still present in the temple, there is no reason for the citizens of Judah to think that their behavior needs to change.

Jeremiah, however, is called to convey a different message. As Walter Brueggeman suggests in *A Commentary on Jeremiah*, Jeremiah “is not rejecting liturgy or temple claims in principle, but those formulations which are false, that is, incongruent with the torah and with the Lord of the covenant ... if Judah does not amend its ways, it will not be kept in the land but will be sent into exile.”[i] Jeremiah calls the people to “amend” their ways (Jeremiah 7:2). If they do, God will allow them to dwell in Judah.

Having been possessed by a false ideology, the people of Judah are incapable of making the right decision ... they have no particular reason to think that God is displeased with their behavior. As Jeremiah says, “Behold, you trust in deceptive words to no avail” (7:8). The false prophets have made it easy for Judah to “steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house” (7:9–10).

The people of Judah allowed themselves to be taken captive by a false ideology. Jeremiah calls the people of Judah to make a different decision. He urges them to live differently so that their behavior reflects their loyalty to God. To do so, they must learn to question the temple ideology by recognizing that it is too limited to account for the requirements God has set forth. They need to recognize that God is not confined to the temple, but has consistently acted beyond the temple, tabernacle, and even the Promised Land (Acts 7:1–53). As Jeremiah reminds Judah, the temple in Shiloh was destroyed “because of the evil of my people Israel” (7:12). The people of Judah must recognize the vastness of God and allow the temple to point them toward their mission of glorifying God.

**WE NEED TO
INTERROGATE OUR
DECISIONS TO ENSURE
THEY ARE ROOTED IN
REALITY RATHER THAN
SUPPORTING A
FALSEHOOD.**

The people of Judah have forgotten what God requires. They have deluded themselves into thinking that they can live however they want because, as God's people who live in proximity to God's house on which God has placed his name, God is somehow obligated to keep them safe. They believe God's reputation is bound up with the preservation of his people.

In some sense, they are correct. What they miss is that they are also supposed to care about God's reputation, not just leverage it. Yes, the temple bears God's name, but so do God's people. They are not to bear his name in vain. Instead, they are to represent God to the world.

As we think about our everyday decisions, we need to consider whether we are representing God well. Have we adopted a picture of reality that distorts God? Are we acting in ways that convey our love for and loyalty to the Lord whose name we bear? We need to consider what we have assumed about the world and how it may be limiting our understanding of God. We need to commit to questioning our understanding of God by, for instance, reading portions of Scripture that we don't normally read. We need to engage in activities that will challenge us to rethink who God is ... that will help us to experience God in fresh ways that expand our understanding of who he is and how he works. When we do, God will surprise us in ways that will allow us to break free of the ideologies we have adopted.

Guiding Questions

- Am I allowing some symbol of God's blessing or presence to keep me from making God-glorifying decisions?
- Is my idea of God keeping me from engaging with God as he really is?

DEVOTIONAL 6

HAVE MY RIGHTS BECOME MORE IMPORTANT THAN GLORIFYING GOD?

ROMANS 14:1–15:7

ADDITIONAL READING:

1 CORINTHIANS 9:1–27

FOR FURTHER TEACHING:

1 CORINTHIANS 9:1-27



ON OUR RIGHTS AS U.S.
CITIZENS



In Romans, Paul is writing to a church with a mix of Jews and Gentiles. While the Jews and Gentiles are united in Christ, they have different convictions about a variety of matters that were creating tensions within the church. In *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, Ben Witherington notes, "Paul was quite convinced that there were significant divisions in Rome that needed to be overcome, and, to judge from chs. 9–11, they largely fell along the lines of the ethnic division in the church there." The Jewish Christians seem to have had certain concerns about what food was appropriate to eat, whereas the Gentile Christians felt they could eat whatever they wanted. Paul also references the observance of special "days" (14:5) as a point of disagreement.

Paul reminds the Roman church that there is room within the Christian faith for individual discretion. Clearly, there are doctrinal convictions that all Christians must share in common (Galatians 1:6–10, 3:1–9). There are also clear signs or marks that demonstrate one's true union with Christ and membership in the body of Christ (1 John 1:5–10). Still, the Christian life is not a set of rules and regulations. There is room for individuals to engage in different practices so long as each individual is "fully convinced in his own mind" (Romans 14:5).

The strong are to "welcome" those who are "weak in faith ... but not to quarrel over opinions" (14:1). There may well be a time when the "weak" recognize that

their practices are overly cautious, but the point of encouraging the strong to welcome the weak into community is not to hold debates about disputed matters or to argue over matters of individual conscience. Such matters are to be settled between an individual and God (14:12).

Rather than passing judgment on one another, all those within the community are to “decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother” (14:13). The strong are not to intentionally encourage or pressure the “weak” to act against their conscience. In *The Epistle to the Romans*, Douglas Moo notes, Paul is not “necessarily requiring ‘strong’ believers never to mention their views on these matters or to speak of their sense of freedom before others” but that the strong “are not to brag about their convictions before the ‘weak’ and, especially, that they are not to propagandize the ‘weak.’” To do so means they “are no longer walking in love” (14:15). Instead, they are more interested in exercising their own rights than with ensuring the “weak” do not stumble in their walk with Christ.

The Gentile Christians were to adapt their behavior so as not to exclude the Jewish Christians and, more importantly, to avoid tempting the Jewish Christians to act against their own conscience. They are being asked to set aside their rights for the sake of the Jewish Christians. As Paul says, “We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up” (15:1–2). Paul roots this approach to neighborly love in Christ who “did not please himself, but as it is written, ‘The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me’” (15:3).

**WE CANNOT ALLOW
OUR RIGHTS AND
FREEDOMS TO
BECOME MORE
IMPORTANT THAN
BUILDING THE BODY
OF CHRIST AND ITS
MEMBERS.**

In his first letter to the church in Corinth, Paul reminds the Corinthians that they have a variety of rights as apostles. They can “eat and drink” (1 Corinthians 9:4), “take along a believing wife” (9:5), and to work for a living (9:6). Paul’s rights, however, do not drive his decision-making. Instead, he has not made use of any of those rights not because he is committed to “endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ” (9:12).

Paul’s decisions are not driven by what he can claim. They aren’t a matter of maximizing his own freedoms or taking full advantage of the rights he has in Christ. For Paul, his rights are far less important than the proclamation of the gospel and the building up of the body of Christ.

Like Paul, we need to ensure that our rights and freedoms do not drive our decision-making. Being united with Christ brings many benefits. We can certainly take advantage of those benefits. However, exercising our rights and freedoms should serve the broader mission of building up the kingdom of God. When we consider our options, we need to make sure that we consider how our decisions may create obstacles for building up the body of Christ and its members. We do not make decisions isolated from the call to love God with all we are and have and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Guiding Questions

- Am I making decisions that are putting a stumbling block before other members of the Christian community?
- Where have my rights and freedoms become more important than the advancement of the gospel?

DEVOTIONAL 7

HOW MIGHT MY BEHAVIOR CAUSE GOD'S WORD TO BE REVILED?

**1 TIMOTHY 6:1;
TITUS 2:5**

ADDITIONAL READING:

**MATTHEW 10:1-42
2 PETER 2:1-3**

**FOR FURTHER
TEACHING:**

MATTHEW 10:1-42



BEARING GOD'S NAME



As Christians seek to imitate Christ, the way they relate to others will change. Throughout his letters (Ephesians 5:1–6:9; Col 3:18–25), Paul offers instruction about how Christian relationships should look as they seek to be “imitators of God” (Ephesians 5:1). In 1 Timothy 6 and Titus 2, Paul offers a variety of instructions for Christian groups. Servants (1 Timothy 6:1) and young women (Titus 2:5) are, in some sense, drawn together by Paul’s concern that their behavior does not cause “the name of God and the teaching” (1 Timothy 6:1) or “the word of God” (Titus 2:5) to be “reviled.”

The word translated as reviled refers more generally to speaking evil of someone or something. Clearly, reviling God and his word need not be prompted by poor Christian behavior (Acts 13:45, 18:6; Romans 3:8; cf. James 2:7). False teachers who lead believers into “sensuality” cause “the way of truth” to be “blasphemed” or “reviled” (2 Peter 2:2). Paul highlights the way that Jews who “boast in the law” while “breaking the law” “dishonor God” (Romans 2:23). They affirm the law’s teachings, but they don’t practice the law (2:17–22). In doing so, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you” (2:24).

It would seem possible for any Christian to cause the word of God to be reviled, so why does Paul make explicit reference to this danger in relation to slaves and women? Commenting on Titus 2:5 in *The Letters to Titus and Timothy*, Philip Towner notes,

All Christian household codes address women and slaves (sometimes passing over husbands or masters) because of the fact that in their respective relationships to husbands and masters, their behavior as Christians would be carefully observed (particularly if their counterpart was not a believer). The master determined the religion of the household, and conventional wisdom alleged that slaves and women were notorious for bringing home all kinds of new-fangled religions from the marketplace. If a new religious conviction entered the equation, the potential for tension and strong reactions by unbelievers inside or outside of the household increased dramatically.

In the ancient world, the hierarchy within a given household and the cultural conventions of the day seem to have prompted Paul to mention the potential for the behavior of women and slaves to be particularly susceptible to the dangers of blaspheming.

Those seeking to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ are already facing various forms of opposition in the Roman world. Paul is encouraging slaves and women to behave in a manner that will not add to that opposition. They should not give those prone to reviling God's word any excuse to do so. Instead, their behavior should conform not to some social hierarchy, but to the work of the gospel and the glorification of the triune God. Ensuring that our behavior does not cause the "name of God and the teaching" to be reviled (1 Timothy 6:1). As Robert Wall notes in *1 and 2 Timothy and Titus*, ensuring that one's behavior does not cause God's name, the teaching of the church, or the word of God to be reviled is "the real purpose of this letter [1 Timothy] for every reader and every working relationship." Even for Christians today, we must consider how our activities and the relationships we establish might give others an opportunity to revile God and his word.

**WE NEED TO
CONSIDER HOW THE
WAY WE RELATE TO
OTHERS REFLECTS
BACK ON GOD AND
HIS WORD.**

It is easy for us to adopt certain cultural conventions. Our societies do a good job of defining “normal.” The trouble with adopting cultural conventions is that Christ is often (if not always) countercultural. Being Christian means that we are members of God’s kingdom. The way we relate to the world needs to reflect our membership in that kingdom.

We need to avoid thinking that anytime God is reviled, we are doing something wrong. At the same time, we also need to consider whether we can change our behavior without compromising our theological convictions to remove some excuse for others to blaspheme God’s name or God’s word. The general idea is that our decisions should not solely be driven by what we have the right or freedom to do, but by how our behavior might create opportunities for others to slander God and his word unnecessarily.

Questions for God-Glorifying Decision-Making

- Am I asserting my rights and freedoms in a way that is disruptive to others and gives them opportunities to slander God and his word?
- Am I being strange in the right ways (ways that serve God and his purposes) or am I being strange in ways that serve my own purposes?

CONCLUSION

HOW DO WE MAKE EVERYDAY DECISIONS FOR GOD'S GLORY?

As we seek to make everyday decisions for God's glory, we need to be sensitive to the prompting of the Holy Spirit asking him to bring to our attention the various ways our understanding of God and the world is incomplete. He calls us to confession, encourages worship, and produces fruit in those committed to following Christ.

We also need to rethink our decision-making frameworks based on our commitment to representing God and reflecting him to the world. As we consider the Scriptures, we need to recognize that there is a set of values and a logic that we tend to neglect. For instance, God's people don't need to be successful ... they need to be faithful. We don't need to fix the world; we need to point to and glorify the triune God within it.

When we start listening to the word of God rather than following the world's conventions, we will begin to recognize the various ways in which our decision-making has been wrongheaded. If we begin with asking ourselves how we might point to and glorify the triune God, we will almost assuredly be led to make different decisions. Those decisions won't necessarily be comfortable, but they will allow us to make everyday decisions for God's glory.



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