

# **HOW TO KNOW WHAT TO DO**

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

1. Life is all about decision-making.
2. The average person makes about 70 decisions a day, or 25,000 decisions a year. If you live 75 years, that's 1,875,000 decisions.
3. Life is the sum of your decisions.
4. And many of your decisions in life will be really big. They will have big consequences – where to go to college, what to major in, who to marry, where to go to church, buy or sell, move or stay, start a business or not, etc.
5. If you to be happy and successful in life, then you need to learn to make good decisions.
6. How are you supposed to know what to do? How can you make good decisions?
7. Christians should be the best decision-makers because we have better resources than anybody else. We have the Bible, prayer, and other believers to help us. Unfortunately, many Christians are so heavenly-minded that they are of no earthly good. They have over-complicated and over-spiritualized decision-making, resulting in really bad decisions. I often see zealous Christians make really stupid decisions. It's painful to watch.
8. In this message I want to teach you how to make good decisions. Before we get there, I want to talk about four unreliable but popular methods of decision-making.
9. If you want to go deeper into this subject, I want to recommend a book by Gary Friesen called *Decision Making and the Will of God*. I don't agree with everything in the book, but it's the best book that I've read about Biblical decision-making.

## **II. UNRELIABLE WAYS TO MAKE DECISIONS**

### **1. Listening for impressions.**

- i. The first unreliable way to make decisions is to ask God to tell you what He wants you to do and then listen for His still small voice

(not His audible voice), also called impressions, or inward urgings, or a guiding impulse.

- ii. People who make decisions this way say things like this: “I feel like God is telling to me to do this.” “I feel like God is leading me to do that.” “I feel like God laid it on my heart to do such and such.” “I feel like God is calling me to do such and such.”
- iii. This sounds very spiritual, but there are at least three weaknesses with this method of decision-making.

**iv. THREE WEAKNESSES**

**v. First, it is unbiblical.**

- 1. The Bible does not command us or instruct us to make decisions by listening for impressions or inward urgings.
- 2. There aren't even examples of this in the Bible. People don't make decisions based on impressions or inward urgings.

**vi. Second, it is subjective.**

- 1. When something is subjective, it is based on feelings and opinion. It is not verifiable. You can't prove it or disprove it. When something is objective, it is not based on feeling or opinion.
- 2. The problem with inner impressions is they are subjective. There is no objective way to determine if it the feeling or impulse or urge came from God.
- 3. If you tell me that you “feel” or “sense” God leading you to do such and such, I'm not going to dispute that. Maybe He is. But how do you know for sure? I don't doubt that you had an impression, or that you felt an inward urge, or a guiding impulse. The real question is how do you know that impression came from God?
- 4. Impressions can have many sources. Thoughts and ideas and desires and feelings can come from all sorts of places. They can come from God, or from your own desires, or something you read, or saw, or heard, or even Satan. You do know that the devil can put thoughts in your head, right?
- 5. There are only two objective ways to hear God's voice<sup>1</sup>:

- a. His written Word (the Bible).
  - b. His audible voice (direct revelation; God’s verbal communication to the individual).
6. When God speaks to you through the Bible or His audible voice, there is no guesswork. It is clear and undeniable. There is no uncertainty. You don’t have to wonder, “What exactly is God saying?” or, “Did that thought or desire come from God?”
  7. There’s a big difference between saying, “I feel God is telling me to do this,” and “God told me to do this.”
  8. This is why I believe Christians need to get away from this kind of language. Unless God audibly spoke to you, then don’t say, “I feel God leading me, telling me, calling me, laying it on my heart.’ When people use that language, they aren’t claiming that God audibly told them something; they mean that they had an impressing, they felt an impulse, an inward urge, and they assume it is from God. But once again, how do you know for sure that impression came from God? You can’t with any certainty.
  9. Here’s the danger: When you claim that God told you, or led you, or laid it on your heart do d something, you are blaming God for something He might have had nothing to do with.
  10. Here’s the bottom line: Don’t blame your decisions on God unless you can point to a verse in the Bible, or you heard His audible voice.

**vii. Third, it leads to spiritual abuse.**

1. A big problem in evangelical Christianity today is spiritual abuse, which often comes in the form of a Christian manipulating other Christians by saying, “I feel God telling me that we (or you) should do such and such.”
2. Sadly, pastors do this all the time. They go to their churches and say, “Church, I feel like God is calling us to build a new building, start a new ministry, hire a new staff person, etc.” Well, what is the church supposed to do, disobey God? So,

even if the decision seems foolish, the church blindly follows.

3. I can see why pastors do this. It is much easier to persuade the church to follow you if you tell them your idea is from God. If I wanted you to lead you to do something, it would be much easier to say, "I feel God is leading us to do this," than to persuade you with reason and facts and arguments. It would be easy to call you up and say, "I sense that God wants you to give more; God wants you to serve in this position." If the idea came from God, you wouldn't be able to argue with me.
4. It's shocking how often pastors use this kind of language. I recently heard a sermon in which the pastor said that God told him the passage of Scripture he was to preach on for that sermon. He didn't mean that God audibly told him the verse to preach on. Instead, he had a feeling, an impulse, an impression to preach on a certain verse, and he blamed it on God.
5. Last week I was listening to a sermon, and the pastor started out like this. "I want to let you know that in prayer today I really felt God speak to me that there are numbers of people this week who, if you will obey God, you are going to get a financial breakthrough. This is personally and in churches. Some of you, while you are here at this conference, you're going to get calls and texts. People are going to notify you about your breakthrough." Did you hear what he said? He didn't say that God spoke audibly to him; he would deny that. He said, "I really felt God speak to me." In other words, he felt an impression; he felt an impulse; some thoughts came into his head; and he assumes they are from God; he is blaming them on God. But that's subjective. Unless God speaks audibly or through the Bible it's subjective. You can't know for sure that the impression was from God.

6. When Lydia was in college a pastor approached her and said, "I feel like God wants you to come to our church to be our youth minister." He didn't hear an audible voice; he had a feeling and blamed it on God. Fortunately, my wife had enough wisdom to say, "Well, God didn't tell me that, and until He does, I'm not moving." Not long after that incident, the same pastor left his wife, his church, and the faith to live as a homosexual. I think Lydia made the right call.
  7. Spiritual abuse happens all the time.
  8. I've heard of Christian singles saying to one another, "I feel like God is leading us to date," or "God has put it on my heart that you're going to be my wife."
  9. Beware when people use this language. If even they are sincere and truly believe that their impression or idea came from God, it's still subjective. There's no way to know for sure.
- viii. This is why you won't hear me talk like this. You won't hear me say, "I feel like God is leading us to do this or that." "I feel like God is telling me to do this that." "I feel like God laid this on my heart." I won't manipulate you like that. If God speaks audibly to me, that's different; but that has never happened to me. Instead, you will hear me say, "I think we need to do this or that, and here are the reasons."

## 2. Waiting for inner peace.

- i. A second unreliable way to make decisions is to wait for inner peace. Some assume that God "gives confirmation through a settled, supernatural sense of peace."<sup>ii</sup> In other words, if you are headed in the right direction, then God will give you a sense of peace. If you feel unsettled or anxious or worried or fearful, then you are headed in the wrong direction.
- ii. **Gary Friesen** describes this method. "When trying to choose between two apparently equal options, submit the whole issue to the umpire of God's peace. Picture each option in your mind as you pray and then listen carefully to God's still small voice in the

form of His peace concerning the correct choice. This peace functions as an umpire that calls each decision in question. So long as the believer is living within the center of God's will, he experiences an inner quietness of heart that cannot be explained on merely human grounds (surpassing comprehension). The umpire of peace is calling "safe." But if the Christian begins moving in the wrong direction, he experiences increasing restlessness and inner anxiety." (Gary Friesen)

iii. This may sound good, but there are two weaknesses to this method.

iv. **TWO WEAKNESSES**

1. **First, it is unbiblical.**

- a. This idea of waiting for inner peace to make decisions is not in the Bible.
- b. The Bible speaks about peace in two ways – internal peace and external peace.
- c. Internal peace is described in Philippians 4:6-7.
- d. **Philippians 4:6-7** "6 Don't worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."
- e. The peace here is the opposite of worry in the midst of trials. It is the absence of worry, or an inner assurance that God is going to take care of you, based on faith in His promises.
- f. This peace has nothing to do with decision-making, and it is not a promise to give you a peaceful feeling when you make the right decision. It is a promise of peace in the storm if you have faith in God.
- g. Col 3:15 describes the second kind of peace, external peace.
- h. **Colossians 3:15** And let the peace of Christ, to which you were also called in one body, rule your hearts. And be thankful.

- i. The second kind of peace is external, or relational, among individuals. It is the opposite of hostility and divisions between people. This is clearly the context of this verse, which goes from vs. 12-17, starting with the commands to be compassionate, kind, humble, gentle, patient forgiving, and loving for the sake of unity.

## 2. Second, it is subjective.

- a. Once again, it is based on feelings and opinions. There's no way of knowing for sure that your feelings are from God. Our feelings and emotions can be affected by all sorts of things. The absence of peace can be caused by all sorts of things: insomnia, illness, concern for a loved one, stress at work, an approaching deadline, nagging uncertainties, timidity, a new experience, etc.

## 3. Looking for circumstances.

- i. The third unreliable decision-making method is to look for circumstances. The idea is that since God controls circumstances, then He can use them as signs to guide you.
- ii. **Gary Friesen** puts it like this: "Since they are controlled by God, circumstances can point to His will. He uses 'open and closed doors' (though sometimes a door that is closed only means that we should wait)."iii
- iii. The problem with circumstances is that they must be interpreted, and the Bible gives no guidelines for how to read circumstances.
- iv. **Gary Friesen** poses the following questions about circumstances: "When does a circumstance constitute a yes sign? How do we distinguish between an open door and one that is only ajar? And who opened that door – God, or Satan, or neither of them? When we encounter an obstacle in pursuit of some goal, is that obstruction a roadblock, a closed door, or a test of faith?"iv
- v. Consider this example. Lightning struck the church steeple. One person says, "God is telling us to relocate in the suburbs." Another person says, "Oh no, I think it's quite obvious He's saying 'no' to

our expansion plans.” A third person says, “Maybe the Lord is telling us that there is sin holding back the work in our church.” Still another says, “I think God is saying that we need to get rid of our steeple because they look too traditional and will turn off unchurched people.”

- vi. Circumstances are unreliable signs. Sometimes Christians will say, “You can see God’s hand all over this project.” What they usually mean is that everything is falling into place; it’s easy; it’s all open doors. But does that really mean God’s hand is in it? Do hardship and failure and obstacles mean you are going in the wrong direction? Do they mean that God’s hand is not on you? History is replete with examples of people who accomplished great things only because they were unwilling to give up. Everyone around them said, “Your goals are ridiculous. You need to give up. You’ll never make it.” But they didn’t look at hardship, and failure, and rejection as signs from God that they should give up. They kept going in spite of the circumstances and eventually succeeded.
- vii. Abraham Lincoln is one such example. He ran for the Illinois House of Representatives and lost. He ran for the U.S. Senate twice and lost both times. He ran for vice president in 1856 and lost. But he didn’t give up. And it’s a good thing, because in 1860 he ran for president and won, and changed the course of our nation.
- viii. In 1993, Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen wrote a book. But when they tried to find a publisher, they were rejected. In fact, they were rejected by 144 publishers. Was that a sign that they should give up? They didn’t, and eventually a small publisher in Florida agreed to work with them. Their book was called *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, and it became a runaway bestseller and the first of many books of which they have sold more than 600 million copies.
- ix. Just as adversity is not necessarily a sign that you should turn around, open doors are not necessarily signs that you should keep going. The bank would be glad to lend you money for a house or a car that you can’t afford. There are many companies that would

love to hire my wife, but that doesn't mean she should quit her job as a stay-at-home-mom and go to work. Circumstances are unreliable road signs.

#### 4. Putting out a fleece.

- i. The fourth unreliable method for making decisions is to put out a fleece.
- ii. Here's an example. Let's say there's a girl that you want to date, but you're not sure if you should. So, you pray, "Lord, if you want me to ask her out, then let her pick up the phone before the second ring."
- iii. Here's another example. Imagine that you are trying to decide which college to attend – ULL or LSU – so you pray, "Lord, if you want me to attend ULL, then let the New Orleans Saints win today. If you want me to go to LSU, then cause the Saints to lose today."
- iv. This idea of putting out a fleece comes from the story of Gideon in Judges 6:36-40. First, God sent an angel to speak directly to Gideon, telling him to attack the Midianites. To confirm that this was God's will, he put a fleece blanket on the ground and asked God to keep it dry overnight while the rest of the ground was wet. God did it. Then he asked God the next night to keep the ground dry and only make the blanket wet. God did it. From that story many people have concluded that we can put out our own fleeces and ask God to guide us.
- v. But there are **four problems with fleeces**.
- vi. First, Gideon's story is descriptive, not prescriptive. The Bible described what Gideon did, but it did not prescribe that all Christians should do it. For example, the Bible says that Jesus wore sandals, but that doesn't mean should or have to wear sandals.
- vii. Second, Gideon asked God for a true miracle. An example would be, "Lord, if you want me date this girl, then make her father call me up and ask me to date her." That's more like it. If you are going to put out a fleece, make sure it is an unmistakable miracle and that it cannot be mistaken for a coincidence.

- viii. Third, Gideon’s story is not necessarily a good example to follow. Yes, God was gracious to him and did give him the sign, but Gideon shouldn’t have asked for it. God had already spoken audibly to him, but he still doubted. That would be like a married man praying, “Lord, I’m considering adultery. If you don’t want me to do it, then give me a sign.” You shouldn’t ask for sign because God has already made that clear. And remember, the Jews asked Jesus for a sign that He was the messiah, and He rebuked them, saying that only evil and adulterous people ask for a sign.
- ix. Fourth, fleece’s can be manipulated by the devil as well. Remember, the devil has the power to perform miracles.

### III. THE WAY OF WISDOM

1. So, if these are all unreliable ways of making decisions, then what is the reliable way? How can you make good decisions?
2. In Gary Friesen’s book, he describes the biblical decision-making process “the way of wisdom.” It involves four steps.
- 3. First, where there is a clear command in Scripture, you must obey.**
  - i. **Psalm 119:14** You have commanded that your precepts be diligently kept.
  - ii. The first thing to do when making a decision is to go to God's written word and see what He has clearly said about the issue.
  - iii. This is the most important step in decision-making.
  - iv. It never ceases to amaze me that so many Christians skip this step.
  - v. For example, you don’t have to wonder if you should marry an unbeliever. God has already made it very clear in the Bible that you should only marry a believer. You don’t have to wonder if you should obey or disobey your parents; God has already stated that in His word.
- 4. Second, where there is no clear command, God gives you freedom (and responsibility) to choose.**
  - i. This step should be extremely liberating.
  - ii. We all make decisions this way when it comes to the routine decisions of daily life, not realizing that the same approach should be applied to the bigger decisions.

- iii. For example, how did you decide what to wear today? Did you pray about it and wait for God's still small voice? No, since you know that there is no clear command in Scripture about what to wear (other than modesty), you just assumed that you had the freedom to choose your own outfit.
- iv. How did you decide which route to take to church this morning? Did you pray about it, and listen for God's still small voice? Did you put out a fleece? Did you wait for peace? No. You know there's no clear-cut command in Scripture about which route to take, so you just assumed God has given you the freedom (and responsibility) to choose.
- v. This is how we make the vast majority of decisions in our lives, but when it comes to the really big, really consequential decisions, we do things differently. But it's not different.
- vi. When there is no clear command in Scripture, we have the freedom (and responsibility) to choose the option that seems best to us.
- vii. Which college should you attend? What should you major in? Who should you marry? Which job should you take? If there's no clear command in Scripture, then it's up to you.
- viii. The word "responsibility" comes into play when your decision backfires on you. It was your decision, so don't blame it on God if it doesn't turn out the way you wanted. For example, God gave you the freedom to decide which route to take to church, but that means you're responsible if you happen to be late. God gives you the freedom to decide what to study in college, but that means you are responsible if you fail. Don't blame God.
- ix. In a nutshell this step means that if there is no clear command in Scripture, then do what you want to do. Do what you think is best.

**5. Third, where there is no clear command, God gives you wisdom to choose.**

- i. Where there is no command, you have freedom and responsibility to choose, but that doesn't mean you are on your own. God wants to give you wisdom to help you.

- ii. In fact, the Bible commands you to be wise.
  - iii. **Ephesians 5:15** Pay careful attention, then, to how you walk—not as unwise people but as wise
  - iv. Wisdom is not optional for Christians. Even though you have the freedom to choose, you must choose wisely.
  - v. There are a number steps you can take to make a wise decision. (Steps to Wisdom)
    1. **First, search the Scriptures.**
      - a. **Psalm 19:7** The instruction of the LORD is perfect, renewing one's life; the testimony of the LORD is trustworthy, making the inexperienced wise.
      - b. The Bible is filled with wisdom principles that can be applied to decision-making. For example, the Bible doesn't say that it is a sin to go into debt, but it does issue strong warnings about it.
    2. **Second, pray for wisdom.**
      - a. **James 1:5** Now if any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God—who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly—and it will be given to him.
    3. **Third, do your homework** and educate yourself about the issue.
      - a. **Proverbs 15:14** A wise person is hungry for knowledge, while the fool feeds on trash.
    4. **Fourth, seek wise counsel** from people who have more knowledge, experience, and spiritual maturity.
      - a. **Proverbs 19:20** – Get all the advice and instruction you can, so you will be wise the rest of your life.
  - vi. Instead of trying to hear inner impressions from God on the matter, it more fruitful to ask, "What is the wise thing to do?" In other words, the Bible may not say you can't do it, but that doesn't mean you should. What is the wise thing to do?
- 6. Fourth, when you have chosen what is obedient and wise, trust God to work it out for your good.**
- i. Romans 8:28 is one of my favorite verses.

- ii. **Romans 8:28** "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."
- iii. That verse means that God is big enough to use whatever happens for your good.
- iv. Here's the bad news. Even if you try your best to do what is obedient and wise, there's no guarantee that your decision will turn out the way you want it to. Life happens. There's no guarantee that you will have success in your chosen major, or that your new business venture will prosper, or that your marriage won't end in divorce, or that your kids won't rebel, or that your new ministry effort will bear fruit. There's no guarantee that you will always make the best decision. No matter how careful you are, sometimes your decisions will backfire on you. That's the bad news.
- v. But the good news is that God loves you, and He promises to work all things together for your good. He is bigger than your bad decisions and your wrong turns. He is big enough to take care of you and move you to where He wants you to go no matter what you decide to do, as long as you seek Him first and stay within His moral will.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

1. Let's do a quick review. How can you make good decisions? How do you know what you should do?
2. The unreliable methods of decision-making are:
  - i. Listening for impressions.
  - ii. Waiting for inner peace.
  - iii. Looking for circumstances.
  - iv. Putting out a fleece.
3. All of those have major weaknesses and flaws.
4. A better and more biblical way of decision-making is "the way of wisdom."
  - i. First, where there is a clear command in Scripture, you must obey.
  - ii. Second, where there is no clear command, God gives you freedom (and responsibility) to choose.

- iii. Third, where there is no command, God gives you wisdom to choose.
- iv. Fourth, when you have chosen what is obedient and wise, trust God to work it out for your good.

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<sup>i</sup> Gary Friesen, *Decision Making and the Will of God*, p. 91.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*