



LIFE DIRECTION



MAKING WISE DECISIONS

We face choices every day; therefore, we need to make many decisions. What shall I have for dinner? What clothes shall I buy? Is this right job for me? Is this the right amount of freedom to give to my child at their age? Is this the right person to assign responsibility to? Is this the right person to marry? How much time should I dedicate to do this or that?

In almost all instances the choices that face us are moral ones, by which I mean, there is no right or wrong answer in the eye of the law, it's a case of which one is morally right or preferable. If you were to approach a judge and say to her, "I'm thinking about getting a new job, and I have a couple of options – I could go to this place or that place. Which one do you think I should do?" The judge would say, "I don't mind. From a legal perspective, both are allowable – you just need to choose which one is best for you." We face many choices, and we need to make many decisions, but while our decisions maybe legally allowable, they may not always be wise. Wisdom is the ability to make right or preferable choices – and to make wise decisions we need guidance.

In the Bible, many different Hebrew words talk about guidance, but the most commonly found Hebrew word for 'guidance' originates from the word 'rope'. The word 'guidance' in Hebrew texts derives from the word rope because ropes were used to direct boats in those days – sailors used ropes to navigate on the seas. Rope was used to raise or lower the sails, and direct the sales so that they could best harness the power of the wind. And so as we navigate life and endeavour to make wise decisions it would be prudent for us to hold onto God's guiding ropes – and his ropes come in the form of recommendations and instructions written in the Bible.

One book in the Bible that is full of guidance for life is the book of Proverbs. Proverbs are snippets of wisdom to help ordinary people make wise decisions.

HOW TO MAKE WISE DECISIONS GENERALLY – BE STRATEGIC

We are going to look at 3 ways to make wise decisions generally – the first is – be strategic.

If you plan and work hard, you will have plenty; if you get in a hurry, you will end up poor. Proverbs 21:5 (CEV)

In this Proverb, we are called to plan ahead, be diligent, be strategic, work hard and make conscious decisions ahead of time with an end goal in mind. Conversely, it warns against, impulse decision making, decisions that are formed on the hoof or in haste. These decisions are generally poor decisions that lead to poor outcomes. Wise decision making involves making decisions in a timely fashion, and not leaving decisions to the last moment.

So far, this is at least easy to understand – some people are naturally better at planning ahead, but most of us will probably agree that in principle this proverb makes sense. The next one on this list is a bit more challenging!

HOW TO MAKE WISE DECISIONS GENERALLY – MAKE DECISIONS CALMLY

The second way to make wise decisions generally is to keep calm.

We make our own decisions, but the Lord alone determines what happens. Proverbs 16:33 (CEV)

This one seems on first viewing to contradict itself. It starts by saying we are in control of our own decisions, but then it says God governs our destiny. How can these two things fit side by side? How can we be free to choose and for our future to be determined by God? Well, every part of this Proverb is true.

Your plans, your decisions are up to you – you are responsible for what you decide, and you will be held to account for what you choose. So, if you do something wrong or stupid, then God is going to hold you accountable, and he should. But, at the same time, what happens as a result of the decisions we make are totally controlled and fixed by God. We may struggle to understand how God can control the outcome of our every decision without controlling the decisions themselves because we struggle to comprehend God's vast ability to do good.

This passage says that we have total control over our own decisions, but God can bring about good in everything we do – God fixes everything. "In all things God works for the good of those who love him" (Romans 8:28). God's ability to do good is not restrained by our ability to make wise decisions. What a relief. To fully understand how God actually works all things for our good, we would need to understand God himself fully – and that, to put it mildly, is challenging. So don't worry about how God does what he does, just keep calm and leave that bit up to him.

What does this Proverb mean? It means that we are in control of our decisions, but if we get it wrong, we need not worry, because God will not allow our mistake to ultimately bring about permanent destruction. There will always be consequences for all the things we do (and because there are consequences we are compelled to live wisely), but God remains in control of our ultimate destiny and is always working for the good of those who love him. It's great to know that if we mess up, God always cleans up.

A great example of this is in the story of Joseph and his father and brothers. Joseph's father, Jacob, favoured Joseph, and that caused his brothers to become murderously jealous, it was also encouraging Joseph to be prideful and shallow. Joseph's brothers decided to throw him into a pit before selling him off as a slave. Much later in Joseph's life, he was falsely accused of rape and was thrown into another pit, a prison and left there for years. A multitude of bad decisions led Joseph to experience terrible consequences, but God remained in total control of his ultimate destiny. God worked with people's cruel and sinful behaviour for the good of those who love him. Joseph became a highly respected man, his brothers came to love him, and his father's lineage is continued because through Joseph God prevents the family from starving. In this story, we see people freely making decisions and God determining their ultimate destiny, which is good for all those who love him.

Sometimes we withhold ourselves from making strategic decisions because we are scared that we might make a mess – we reason that it would be better to avoid making a decision than to make a wrong decision inadvertently. But this second Proverb helps us when we feel like this. Even if we make a bad decision, by mistake, God will clean up our mess. There is no mess too messy for him to clean – there is no situation that we can cause which he cannot turn to good. So don't worry, just go ahead, do the best you can do and keep calm – God is there working for your good.

HOW TO MAKE WISE DECISIONS GENERALLY – TRUST GOD WITH EVERYTHING

The third way to make wise decisions generally is to trust God with everything.

Commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established. Proverbs 16:3 (ESV)

On first sight, this Proverb looks excellent! It seems like this Proverb says, 'if we commit our plans to God then everything will work out really well'. But this Proverb says something very different. What this Proverb actually means is the complete reversal of what we think it says. It actually says: 'commit what you do and who you are to the Lord, and you will become someone who makes wise decisions'. To commit is to unconditionally trust God with all areas of your life, your relationships, your job security, your future, your pension, your health, your bank account. Commit everything to God, and you will be able to make smart decisions in all these areas.

The thing is, commitment costs. Please don't think that if you trust in God then he will give you whatever you need and want; instead you should say, 'I believe you – give me or withhold from me whatever you choose'. In real terms, to commit means to do whatever God instructs irrespective of whether we understand why God is instructing us to do it, and regardless of whether we want to do it.

When I talk with people about God, I get to hear a question, maybe you hear it too – the question is, why does God let things happen, especially bad things, why not just turn up in person and just sort things out? Why doesn't God do that? Because no one every became wise by being told what to do. Just like no one has learnt how to swim by reading a book on how to swim. Wisdom comes only with an experience of trusting God – who is absolutely wise and entirely fair and totally trustworthy and wholly loving and in complete control.

HOW TO MAKE WISE DECISIONS SPECIFICALLY – WHAT IS GOD SAYING?

We've looked at how to make wise decisions generally, let's now look at how to make wise decisions specifically. Here are 3 ways to do this – the first is to ask, what is God saying?

Sometimes, just asking God to help us make a decision is all that is needed. One time, David inquired of God for an answer. He was on the run from Saul, and he asked God, 'if I hide in that city and Saul pursues me there will the people of that city give me up?' And God said 'Yes.' So David decided not to go there, and he went to some other place. Wouldn't be good if we could do that?

Have you ever been on a website and up pops a box in the corner with a message that says 'Hi, I'm Bob, do you have any questions or need any help?' Wouldn't it be good if God did that? It would be great if God popped up and said, "Anything you need help with, just ping me over your question, but be sure to tell me your name and email address so I can get back to you?" And you write back, 'well actually, there's a girl I like, and I was just wondered if you thought it would be ok if I asked her out?' – Maybe you could also suggest a good film we could go and see?

Sometimes God does answer questions as directly as he did with David when he was running from Saul, but often we can know what God is saying by looking at what he has already said. God has already said, 'He destined us from the beginning to share the likeness of his Son.' Romans 8:29 (The Passion Translation). So, if you have a decision to make and there are, say, two options, one option is a sure guarantee to make you more like Christ and the other one is guaranteed to make you less like Christ then go for the first one. If both options make you look more like Christ, then you choose.

A four-year-old child once asked his dad if he could go out and play with his friend. The father said, 'sure, but we're going have dinner in half an hour, so don't go too far and be sure to return within half an hour'. Twenty years later child had grown up and was at University, and he rang up his dad and said, 'Dad, can I go out and play. My friends have got a frisbee and wondered if I could join them?' You might imagine the dad being worried that their kid felt it appropriate to ask the question in the first place. 'Well, dad I just you to make all my decisions for me!' God wants us to be like him – to be mature and use the gifts and abilities, including making wise decisions, that he has given us.

HOW TO MAKE WISE DECISIONS – WHAT ARE YOU DRAWN TOWARDS?

That brings me onto the second point. Another way to make wise decisions is to ask ourselves – what am I drawn towards?

The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps. Proverbs 16:9 (ESV)

I think God places in us desires, and those desires can be ways that God leads us in specific directions.

When Karen and I moved to Sheffield to start up Sheffield Vineyard church, there was a degree of uncertainty that we felt. There was a longing within us too, and we felt that our heart's desire was a way of God calling us, but we never got the pop box on his webpage confirming it. I remember during the move to Sheffield thinking, what if we were wrong? We had been given words and pictures that seemed to confirm what we thought, especially from our leaders and even from people who we had never met and they didn't know any about us, but still, moving city is expensive, and it's a great way to lose close friends.

Sometimes you just need to trust your desires – and you won't ever know until you make a move. In our case, it was a year after we moved that I saw four statues of Griffins on four stone pillars in the city centre and I heard with fantastic clarity God say, 'I called you here, all four of you, and my decision is set in stone'. (My surname is 'Griffin'.) But we heard that afterwards. We made a move because there was a feeling inside that felt like it was from God, but we couldn't be one hundred per cent certain at the time.

CAUTION – should also say, that sometimes it's best not to make decisions based only on what we feel is good for us. Consider Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane just before his death, and he's talking with his father – can you imagine him saying, 'I think I'm not going to get crucified! I've got a bad feeling about the whole thing. I feel as though I wouldn't like to do it, so I'm going to sit this one out if that's ok.' Check your feelings by asking what other people think, people who you respect and admire, people who tell you the truth, not just what you what you want to hear. If what you feel doesn't marry with what you read in the Bible, then it's probably indigestion.

HOW TO MAKE WISE DECISIONS – WHAT DOORS ARE OPENING?

My last point is basic, but it's essential – Another way to make wise decisions is to observe – what doors are opening?

As Paul and the others went from city to city, they told the followers what the apostles and leaders in Jerusalem had decided, and they urged them to follow these instructions. The churches became stronger in their faith, and each day more people put their faith in the Lord. Paul and his friends went through Phrygia and Galatia, but the Holy Spirit would not let them preach in Asia. After they arrived in Mysia, they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not let them. So they went on through Mysia until they came to Troas. Acts 16: 4-10 (CEV)

Paul went wherever a path led him, and whenever he tried to go to some place that God didn't intend for him to go at that time, God closed the door, they walked passed and moved onto the next area. If God closes doors, don't hang around waiting for them to be reopened or try to jammy them open yourself, just walk past and go to a door that opens.

LAST WORD

I wanted to say something to people who are in their final year at University; people who are facing a huge decision – what do I do next? If that's you, I want to say to you – prioritise God and the church.

Over the years I've noticed a lot of people prioritise jobs and finances. I see that many people say, 'I'll look for a good job and see where that takes me, and wherever I end up, I'll endeavour to find the best church nearby.' I just wonder if there will be people who actually say the opposite – 'I'll look for a good church and see where that takes me, and wherever I end up, I'll endeavour to find the best job nearby.' If you don't know what to do next and you like this church, then why don't you stay here!

I also hear a lot of people say 'I want to stay in Sheffield, I love it here, but I want to do a masters course, or I want to get a job, but nothing is opening up, and I can't afford to stay here – my only option seems to be to go home'. Here's my advice:

- Be strategic – what's best for the long term?
- Keep calm – make the best decision you can, but know that God works all things for our good.
- And trust God with everything – commit your life to God and you'll get good at making decisions.

And then ask:

- What is God saying, and if you don't get a website pop-up answer then ask what will make you most like Christ?
- What are you drawn towards?
- What doors are opening or closing? Pick your priority and go for that. And if all the doors shut, then consider where else to go.

In a nutshell:

- Decide your priorities and make a plan
- Keep calm and know that God is in control. (You may need to read Proverbs 16:33 a few times to remind yourself that 'the Lord alone determines what happens'.)
- Then commit everything to him and trust him, even when you don't understand what he's doing.