

Making The Right Decisions

Joshua 9

Famed American poet Robert Frost once wrote a piece he entitled, “*The Road Not Taken*,” in which he pictured for us a beautiful analogy for decision-making:

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

*Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,*

*And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.*

*I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

That poem was about much more than just deciding which road to take when you're out for a walk. It is more about which road to take in life, that the decisions we make as we travel through our lives can make a lot of difference in the direction our lives go, in the choices we make, and even in the lives of other people we care about. Flora Whittemore has said, “The doors we open and close each day decide the lives we live,” and she was talking about how the choices we make every day pile up until finally the direction of our lives has been set.

Making decisions can be a difficult thing to do. But making the *right* decision may sometimes be critical. There may be a lot riding on whether or not the correct decision is made. Think about the kinds of decisions you and I have to make in a day's time that are pretty much routine: What we're going to have for breakfast. What we're going to wear that day. Should I handle that chore today or is there something else more pressing. But life holds much more important decisions than that. Your school, your career, your marriage, or even to choose none of those—all are issues for which it is important to make the right decision.

If you hold a responsible position, you probably make difficult decisions every day, all day. If there are people who depend on you and your decisions, then the choices you make become all the more crucial. Think about the Governor of our state or the President of our country—we have no idea of the scope of the decisions that must be made every day. I'm grateful I don't have those responsibilities!

On a school day, when the weather is icy or snowy, someone has to make the decision as to whether schools will open or remain closed. Eugene T. Reville, superintendent of schools in Buffalo, New York, once shared his strategy for making that kind of judgment. He said, "I call the weather bureau, I call the streets department, I call the bus company. Then I let the dog out. If the dog won't go out then I know I have to close school." Yogi Berra had another take on decision-making. He once quipped, "When you come to a fork in the road, take it."

Some people just don't like making decisions. Singer Jimmy Buffet once remarked, "Indecision may or may not be my problem." A cartoon once showed Mom and Dad sitting at a kitchen table, looking at a Baby Names book. Across the table sat a teenager, who said, "For goodness' sake, just pick one. I'm nearly seventeen!" And while that may be an extreme example given for comic effect, sometimes we put off making very important decisions.

A decision to follow Christ with your whole heart could be one of them, and it may be a decision you need to make this very hour. You've put it off so long that perhaps you've been lulled into thinking that it doesn't really matter. But *not* to decide *is* to decide. "*See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction...I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you will love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him*" (Deuteronomy 30:15, 19b-20a).

I am not claiming that this particular sermon is the final word on decision-making. I'm certainly not an expert on the subject, having made some horrific decisions

myself. But there are in fact people who have a reputation for being able to make difficult decisions. There are people who have made a lot of money teaching other people how to make decisions. I located one website that offers more than 40 different ways to make decisions, even offering a self-test for determining one's ability to make decisions under fire.

And even though I would never claim to be an expert on the Bible, I do know a little something about it. Last week we looked at Joshua 9 from a negative aspect, at the story of how the Gibeonites deceived Joshua and the Israelites, and we saw the ways Satan works to deceive us. The evil one will work to deceive us with great detail. He will use flattery. He will use partial truth, and he will outright lie to us.

Today, I want us to turn that jewel of the ninth chapter of Joshua just a little in the light of God, and see it from a different perspective. In that same story, we can find four principles to remember when making decisions. Now when we talk about Christians making decisions we are of course assuming that we're talking about Christians whose hearts are pure and free of known sin. Sin, you see, can blind us to what God wants for us. These four Biblical concepts can be further narrowed down to just four words. Four words to remember when making decisions. Here they are: collect, concentrate, consider, and consult.

1 Collect, vv. 6-7

When we are faced with making a crucial decision, we should collect all the information available and look all the options. That's just common sense.

That is what the men of Israel were attempting to do here in verse seven. The Gibeonites went to the Hebrew camp at Gilgal and said, "*We have come from a distant country; make a treaty with us.*"

But the men of Israel wanted more information: "*But perhaps you live near us.*" That was an option; in fact, it was the truth. But when they were presented with a request for a peace treaty, they had to at least consider where the Gibeonites were from. The country of their origin had a lot to do, you will remember, with whether or not they could enter into a treaty with them. So they at least started out to make this decision in a good way—they were trying to collect as much information as they could before making a decision.

That's what we do even when we go shopping for groceries. Look at all the choices! Are there sales? Do you have coupons? Is this size a better buy than that one? What about buying a home or a car? Then there are a lot of options. Going on

a vacation? Voting? Even staying home to watch TV one evening provides you with so many, many options. By the way, ladies, we men don't change the channel on the remote to see what's on TV. We surf through the channels to see what *else* is on! We may weigh all the choices, collect all the information, and eventually choose.

Why should it be any different when we are talking about making decisions which could potentially affect our entire lives? If it helps to write them down in columns, then do that. Collect all the information you have available to you, consider what God says about it, and look all the options you have.

2 Concentrate, v. 8

When a critical decision is in the works, it is important to focus so you can concentrate on the task at hand, and not get side-tracked by other issues, even if those other issues are good things.

Joshua made an attempt at focus here. When the other men of Israel asked the Gibeonites about their country, remember, the Gibeonites gave a non-answer: "*We are your servants*." Joshua did not accept that answer, so he asked them, "Who are you and where do you come from?" At least for the moment, Joshua was focused on getting an answer. That was his concentration.

One of my responsibilities when I worked at LifeWay Christian Store as an assistant manager was to train the other employees in learning how to work with customers. One of the areas I would have to cover would be what to do when a customer is upset. I would point out that while the customer is not necessarily always right, sometimes they are upset for a very good reason. However, there were times when a person would come in with the weight of the whole world on his shoulders, and he would take it out on whichever employee happened to be helping him.

So sometimes my job became to help the employee concentrate on the real issue. I would frequently say to them, "The thing that people are upset about is hardly ever the thing they're upset about." When you understand that, it helps you to concentrate on your work, to stay focused on the real things you are supposed to be doing, and ultimately, help the customer with what they need.

The principle here is that concentrating helps you work through things, and sort out the issues. Staying focused is such an important part of making important decisions. Focused concentration is sometimes the only way to clear out the clutter

from your brain and heart so you *can* consider all the options. I'm not talking about some mind game mumbo-jumbo. It just may be that you have to say "no" to some things so you can keep your head clear. In fact, staying focused may have a lot to do with success or failure.

One of the best ways to stay focused so you can concentrate is to remove distractions. Joshua was trying to do that by returning to the original question of where they had come from. But see that the goal of the Gibeonites became then to distract Joshua from his question. **Notice this.** When the men of Israel first questioned them about their country of origin, the Gibeonites answered with four simple words: "*We are your servants.*" Actually, in the original Hebrew language, it was only one word!

But when Joshua jumped in and questioned them further, they launched into a long explanation, lasting from verse nine all the way through verse thirteen. And it worked! They distracted Joshua long enough to take his mind off the issue at hand. The woman at the well in John 4 did the same thing when Jesus talked about all the men she had been with. She immediately started asking Him about something else, and while Jesus answered her question, He concentrated on her need for salvation. So from Joshua's mistake and Jesus' example we learn the importance of spiritual concentration when there's a critical decision to be made. Stay focused. Don't allow yourself to become distracted by other issues.

3 Consider, vv. 3-13

Consider what? Well, last week we covered in detail about how Satan is working very hard to deceive God's people. Here is the summary: the Gibeonites equipped themselves with food, wineskins, clothes and sandals to give the appearance that they had traveled a great distance. They went to a lot of trouble to deceive. We need to consider that our spiritual enemy is working even harder to deceive us in our day, and so much the more as his time runs out!

But here's the full story: in order to make right decisions we should consider that just as Satan is working very hard to get us to make the wrong ones, God is working on our behalf to help us make the right ones. The good news is that we are not in this by ourselves. We have the Holy Spirit! We can receive guidance from God in our daily decisions and battles that we all face.

Well, how was God helping the Israelites here, and how does He help us? First, He guides in our decision-making through His own Holy Word. You see, God had already commanded the Israelites not to make alliances with any of the people

from inside the land of Canaan. That was clear enough. That was why the men of Israel were being so careful when they were first approached by the Gibeonites. If only they had *continued* to be careful! They understood the commandment of God not to make treaties with the people of the land, but where they failed was in their steadfast *application* of that truth.

In our day, it is true that God has given and preserved His Holy Word for us. It is up to us, however, to make sure that the application of that truth to our lives is consistent and persistent. We are to do the things we know we are to do from God's Word. But is it really that simple? Sometimes it is. When God's Word tells us not to commit adultery or not to steal, that's pretty clear.

But there are other times in our lives when we need to make decisions for which we cannot find some clear principle in the Bible. For example, should I accept that job or stay in the one where I am? What should I study in college? Is this the right person to marry? How should I structure my will so that my family is protected and God's Kingdom is advanced? You won't find those answers in the Bible.

So for that we need extra help. Guess what? God provides it! Here is what He tells us: "*He guides the humble in what is right and teaches them his way*" (Psalm 25:9); "*For this God is our God for ever and ever; he will be our guide even to the end*" (Psalm 48:14). We sometimes refer to the way God communicates with us as a "still, small voice," and here is a verse from Isaiah which tells us "*Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it'*" (Isaiah 42:16). All this comes through God's Holy Spirit, as Jesus told us "*But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth*" (John 16:13).

So when you're faced with having to make an important decision, consider that the Holy God, Everlasting Father, The Almighty One, the Creator of the ends of the Universe—He is the One Who has provided guidance through His Word and Who will continue to provide guidance for all who trust in Him. And He is the One who is working behind the scenes of our lives to guide us and lead us in the paths which are right.

4 Consult, v. 14

This is perhaps the most important of our concepts today. This is the one that undergirds all the rest. You can collect all the information, concentrate on the decision to be made, and consider that God is eager to provide guidance for you. But if you don't consult Him, if you don't ask Him, you can still

mess it up royally. If you ask Him, He just might show you that the information you have is incorrect or incomplete, because there's no way you and I can know what the future might hold, or how events might unfold. He does, and while He may not reveal everything to us, He might prevent us from making awful mistakes.

Verse fourteen tells us that the men of Israel sampled the provisions of the Gibeonites, and saw that the bread was indeed moldy and dry, and their wineskins were in fact brittle and cracked. They've been cautious not to rush into making a treaty with them. All the evidence they were presented pointed to the possibility that these men were, in fact, from a long way away.

They did just the opposite of what we've been saying here. They didn't collect all the facts, they allowed themselves to become distracted from the task at hand, and they didn't consider God's perspective in all this. But even then—*even then!*—had they stopped long enough to say to the Gibeonites, "We've got to pray about this. This is too important a decision" God would have stopped them from making this bad choice. The story could have been so, so different, except for what we read in verse fourteen: "*The men of Israel sampled their provisions but did not inquire of the Lord.*"

So, so sad. One Bible commentator calls this "ominous," as if these words were the massive storm cloud on the horizon, indicating something much more serious later on. In fact, the next book to appear in the Old Testament is Judges, and in the second chapter of that book an angel appears to the people after Joshua died, and gave them this message from God:

*I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land that I swore to give to your forefathers. I said, "I will never break my covenant with you, **and you shall not make a covenant with the people of this land, but you shall break down their altars.**" **Yet you have disobeyed me. Why have you done this?** Now therefore I tell you that I will not drive them out from before you; they will be thorns in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you."*
(Judges 2:1-3)

And to this very day, the descendants of the people of Canaan are a thorn in the sides of the people of Israel. Do you see the long-term repercussions of not doing what God says? Do you see the long-term effects of failing to consult with the Lord?

How many times have you and I made atrocious decisions because we went with our own instincts and never asked God? We never consulted Him. Or else we

prayed some perfunctory, unthinking prayer for guidance but didn't pause long enough to hear what He said?

Years after this, after David, the king of Judah was named Jehoshaphat. One day some men came in and told him, "*A vast army is coming against you, and they're almost here.*" Time for an important decision, right? This is what we read: "*Alarmed, Jehoshaphat resolved to inquire of the Lord, and he proclaimed a fast for all Judah.*" All the people gathered to "*seek help from the Lord.*" The king led them in a public prayer, which ended with these words: "*We have no power to face this vast army which is attacking us. **We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon you***" (2 Chronicles 20:1-12).

Then the very next verse tells us "*All the men of Judah, with their wives and children and little ones, stood there before the Lord.*" That's the ultimate key to any decision-making: asking God, **and standing before God long enough to hear the answer.** When making decisions, we always should look to God for guidance, and wait long enough to hear from Him.

The same truth is scattered throughout Scripture: "*Look to the Lord and his strength; seek his face always*" (1 Chronicles 16:11). "*Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you*" (Matthew 7:7). "*If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him*" (James 1:5).

There are at least two sides to every question, yes, but it is also true that there are two sides to a sheet of flypaper—and it makes a big difference to the fly which side he chooses. Which side we choose when we are faced with making a crucial decision is just as important.

Perhaps in a figurative sense you stand there with Robert Frost, trying to decide which road to take. He chose the road that had little traffic on it, and he said that made all the difference. But you and I have another method, a set of Biblical principles that will help us to make decisions when we really, really need to make the right ones, and they can make all the difference. **Collect** all the information you can, **concentrate** on the issue at hand, **consider** that the Lord is on your side, and **consult** God before making a final decision.