

## CHAPTER FOUR

# RICH IN WISDOM

→ **Strategy:** The rich single life develops a faith that roots below the topsoil of culture and circumstance, yielding the fruit of good decisions and a hunger to obey God.

**Meditate on James 4:13-15.** What are some things you do that you just assume are God's will?

Seven a.m. at the IHOP. Maybe not the first place you'd think of going to sort out life's thorny questions, but there we were. The guy sitting across from my blueberry pancakes was wrestling with a dilemma that is not unusual for the single Christian men and women I know.

"I need to find a new place to live," he told me. "Right now I live close to my job, but not to any of my friends. If I move close to my friends, I'll have a long commute to work and not have time to do anything with anybody. If I stay close to my job, I keep the short commute, but I'll still be too far away to get together with people during the week. Not only that, I'm wondering if I should get a place by myself, or live with some other guys. Do I keep renting or do I try to invest in a house? I just wish I knew God's will!"

As the questions tumbled out all over our breakfast, it became apparent that no one question stood alone—each was connected to other questions. Where to begin? What was the key strand in this tangled mess that would unravel the mystery of God's will for my friend? I looked down at my pancakes, which had not only soaked up all my syrup, but any simple answers I might have offered as well.

### Wrestling with the Will of God

This sincere brother did not need to wash down his breakfast with a theological discussion on the nature of God's will. We could have taken most of the morning to reflect on God's sovereign will and moral will, his necessary will and his free will, and his secret will and revealed will. Such distinctions can be tremendously helpful in understanding how God, in his providence, works in our lives. But what about the other side of the equation? How do we follow God in day-to-day decisions? When confronted with our limited perspective, and confused by our mixed motives, can we truly know and obey God's will?

This question can be particularly challenging for single men and women. For the single adult, the freedom to live in undistracted devotion to God brings a perplexing array of decisions and lifestyle choices. By comparison, marriage and family tend to simplify decision-making by narrowing one's range of options. What I do with everything from my money to my weekends is processed through the grid of my roles as husband and parent.

Say I need a car. I may love that new sport-utility vehicle...

“ Belief that divine guidance is real rests upon two foundation-facts: first, the reality of God's *plan* for us; second, the ability of God to *communicate* with us.<sup>1</sup>

”

— J.I. Packer

but I'll take the used mini-van. It's a no-brainer for Andy Husband-Father. But if I were single, I'd more likely be able to take the sport-utility vehicle *or* the mini-van. No wonder advertisers target families for basic items like insurance and detergents (and mini-vans),

while the ads for luxury items such as sports cars, stereos, and cruises tend to feature single people. Advertisers know that most married people see their decisions in terms of necessity, while single people are more likely to interpret decisions in terms of opportunity.

The question my single friend wrestled with, therefore, was not the mountain-top question of “What is the will of God?” It was an intensely practical question: “How can I evaluate the opportunities in my life and make good decisions about them?” In the end, however, the heart cry of my single friends is not merely to go through life compiling a resume of good choices. Underlying their day-to-day concerns is a burning desire to walk the path of life under the guidance of God, and to please him both in the decisions they make, and how they go about making them.

In the final analysis, it is a heart cry for wisdom.

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### Is Anyone Asking?

In his epistle, the apostle James responds to this cry: “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will

#### For Further Study:

Read Genesis 13. What motivated Lot in his decision? What motivated Abram?

#### J.I. PACKER ON WISDOM

Wisdom is the power to see, and the inclination to choose, the best and highest goal, together with the surest means of attaining it.<sup>2</sup>

Wisdom in Scripture means choosing the best and noblest end at which to aim, along with the most appropriate and effective means to it.<sup>3</sup>

**For Further Study:**

Read James 1:5-8.  
What causes us to be unstable in our decision-making?

**Meditate on Proverbs**

**11:2, 13:10.** How can pride affect our ability to make good decisions?

be given to him” (1:5). When we think of wisdom, we may think it’s something we amass over time, like gray hair. Or we may think wisdom is only gained through lifelong study or mystical experiences. But James looks at people needing wisdom for ordinary perplexities and says, “You need it, ask for it.”

Not only does God respond, he *delights* to give wisdom. Commentator Alec Motyer describes the literal understanding of God’s intentions in this verse: “This is how the ‘giving God’ gives—with a selfless, total concern for us and with an exclusive preoccupation as if he had nothing else to do but to give and give again.”<sup>4</sup> God isn’t miserly with his precious pearls of wisdom. He backs up the truck and dumps wisdom into the lives of those who ask in faith. But what is this “wisdom” that God so desires to send our way?

The concept of wisdom has been around for ages. Nearly every ancient culture had extensive wisdom literature. Does this make wisdom the franchise of white-robed philosophers or proverb-spouting gurus? Not at all.

The Bible provides a perspective on wisdom that is incredibly practical. James admonishes his readers, “Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom” (3:13). The biblical treasure of wisdom, the Book of Proverbs, promises that with wisdom comes protection (2:11); long life (3:16); peace (3:17); honor (4:9); a steady walk (4:10-12); prosperity (19:8); patience (19:11) and a host of other practical benefits. But where does wisdom come from?

The first thing to know about wisdom is that it is not

““ Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen.<sup>5</sup> ””

— Paul the Apostle

some force out there in the universe that we tap into. God, “the only wise” (Ro 16:27), is both the source of wisdom and the barometer by which it is measured. James contrasts the wisdom that “comes from heaven” with that which is “earthly, unspiritual, of the devil” (Jas 3:15). Paul contrasts God’s wisdom with “man’s wisdom,” which is foolish by comparison (1Co 1:22-31).

The purest view we have of God’s wisdom is in Jesus Christ, “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom

**Meditate on**

**1 Corinthians 10:22-**

**31.** What foolishness has Christ removed from your life since you have known him?

**For Further Study:**

Read James 3:13-18. List the words from verse 17 that describe heavenly wisdom. Next to each word, write its earthly and unspiritual counterpart.

and knowledge” (Col 2:3). When wisdom needed a face, it was not that of Buddha, Socrates, or Jim Morrison, but of Jesus Christ, “Who became for us wisdom from God” (1Co 2:26). Biblical wisdom involves interaction between the God of wisdom and those who come to him for it.

Wayne Grudem defines God’s wisdom as his ability to always choose the best goals and the best means to attain those goals.<sup>6</sup> According to James, this is essentially what we get for the asking from God! *The New Bible Dictionary* defines wisdom as “forming the correct plan to gain the desired results....Wisdom takes insights gleaned from the knowledge of God’s ways and applies them in the daily walk.”<sup>7</sup> But does this mean that wisdom is simply figuring out the best way to get what we want? Not in the least!

The essential difference between God and man is that he is holy and we are not. His motives are always purely good, ours are always mixed (at best). In order for wisdom to be communicated to us, it has to affect not only what we do, but the inclination of our hearts as well. John Wesley prayed: “Give me, O Lord, that highest learning, to know thee; and that best wisdom, to know myself.”<sup>8</sup> John Calvin, who would find considerable debate with Wesley on a number of fronts, echoes this prayer: “Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid Wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves.”<sup>9</sup>

What these two giants of the faith are telling us is crucial to our understanding of wisdom. When it comes to wisdom, the rightness (or righteousness) of our character is as much an issue as is the quality of our decisions. God’s wisdom will not only reveal the best course of action, it will teach us about ourselves in light of his holiness. As David reflects in Psalm 51:6, “Surely you desire truth in the inner parts, you teach wisdom in the inmost place.” Wisdom from God is meant to affect our decisions and our hearts alike.

How can we begin to operate in wisdom in both the big decisions and the day-to-day steps of the single life? I would like to offer three essential tools for appropriating the wisdom God gives. They are Doctrine, Discipline, and Direction.

### **Doctrine: An Education in Fear**

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding” (Pr 9:10).

**For Further Study:**

Read Isaiah 6:1-10.  
What is most fearful  
about Isaiah's vision?

We know from this familiar verse that wisdom is somehow connected to the way we understand God. But what is "the fear of the Lord"?

Calvin described it as "reverence mingled with honor and fear."<sup>10</sup> Puritan theologian Charles Bridges called it "that affectionate reverence, by which the child of God bends himself humbly and carefully to his Father's law."<sup>11</sup> More recently, Sinclair Ferguson has described it as a "right recognition of God."<sup>12</sup> Simply put, the fear of the Lord is a right understanding of God that allows us to relate properly to him.

“ Fearing God is not a negative experience for those who love God. It is the kind of deeply satisfying trembling, and sweet humility and submission that rises in the presence of the absolute power and holiness of God....The safest place in the universe is with our arms around the neck of God. And the most dangerous place is any path where we flee from his presence.<sup>13</sup>

”

— John Piper

I'd like to toss a couple of terms in here: theology and doctrine. Do you know the difference? Here are some clues.

*Theology* is simply the study of God. You study God—you're proving it just by reading this book! So congratulations: you're a theologian (no, the term does *not* apply exclusively to full-time seminary professors). *Doctrine* is the way we organize the different

aspects of our theology for practical use. It is the mental files and folders we put our theological ideas into. Maybe you couldn't write a book about your doctrine, but that's not the point. Doctrine is your attempt to apply theology (what you believe about God) to everyday life.

How important is doctrine? The *first* thing recorded in Scripture about the *first* Christian church is that they were devoted to the doctrine of the apostles (Ac 2:37-42). Every church that received a New Testament letter was instructed in doctrine. The emphasis in Scripture is on "sound doctrine" (Tit 2:1). This literally means "hygienic" doctrine—clean, healthy, and uncluttered. Conversely, *unsound* doctrine is messy, polluted, and unhealthy. The way we understand God in practical terms through doctrine will affect how we relate to God and his will for our lives.

When I worked in real estate, I "organized" my desk by piling everything on top of it and digging around until I found what I needed. Occasionally I would throw some things away (like old candy-bar wrappers), but most of the time my desk was covered by a precarious mound of

**Meditate on Psalm**

**119: 1-8.** How should your doctrine affect your behavior?

paper. Whenever my desk was clear I would get scared that something had been lost, so I kept everything in big piles on the desk—so it would be lost in a confined space. Was this the best system of organization? No, but I was comfortable with it. The only time my system failed me was when I needed it most: when I had to find something right away.

**For Further Study:**

Read 1 Timothy 1:3-11. What do false doctrines promote? What does sound doctrine promote?

It's much the same with doctrine. Our doctrine can be cluttered with inconsistencies and error, and we may not even be aware of it. It's when we need to act on it, in the midst of a tough decision or difficult trial, that the "soundness" of our doctrine is tested.

Let's say I believe the unsound doctrine that God guarantees me a smooth day whenever I start the morning in prayer. Then one day, I pray in the morning but have a really difficult day anyway. What happens then? If I truly believe that unsound doctrine, I will start to question whether God really cares or knows about me. I will begin to doubt that prayer has any benefit. My unsound doctrine has not only failed me for today, it has led me down a path to other unsound doctrines that are far more damaging. Sound doctrine, on the other hand, will always lead me to an accurate understanding of God and my place in his plan. Sound doctrine provides vital perspective in times of decision.

How do we "clean up" our doctrine? By allowing the pure washing of God's Word, the Bible, to expose the impurities and errors in our understanding of God.

“ [Scripture] is given to make us humble, holy, wise in spiritual things; to direct us in our duties, to relieve us in our temptations, to comfort us under troubles, to make us love God and live unto Him.<sup>14</sup>

”  
— John Owen

Though we can encounter God and his truth in many ways, all of our experiences and assumptions must pass the test of Scripture. Theologian Bruce Milne states, "Getting doctrine right is the key to getting everything else right. If we are to know who God is, who we are, and what God wants

of us, we need to study Scripture."<sup>15</sup>

How does sound doctrine help us gain wisdom? By causing us to fear God with the right kind of fear. When we think of God rightly, we will fear him rightly. We begin to see that there is no inconsistency between the holiness of God our Judge and the love of God our Father. We begin to be thankful that his ways are higher than our ways (Isa 55:9). Sound doctrine helps us better under-

stand God's character, and this draws out trust from us, the way the faithful love of a parent stirs up trust in a child. We learn to pray with confidence, and act in faith. In the midst of perplexities of life, sound doctrine allows us to appreciate and rest in a holy fear of God.

When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego faced the toughest decision of their lives, whether to bow down to idols or be thrown into the fire, they did not have time for prayer, study, or a quick call to the local Bible answer man. They only had what they knew of God and his ways. Their response is an inspiring example of sound doctrine—men living in holy and uncompromising fear of the Lord:

“ There is one thing you have spoken  
There are two things I have found  
You O Lord are ever loving  
You O Lord are always strong  
I am longing to discover  
Both the closeness and the awe  
Feel the nearness of your whisper  
Hear the glory of your roar  
Just knowing you, hearing you speak  
Seeing you move mysteriously  
Your whisperings in my soul's ear  
I want the friendship and the fear  
Of knowing you<sup>16</sup>

”

— Matt Redman

O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up (Da 3:16-18).

Sound doctrine teaches us how to fear the Lord.

That's where wisdom starts.

### **Discipline: Ready, Set...**

Elisabeth Elliot wrote a wonderful book titled *Discipline, The Glad Surrender*. The title alone counters the common notion of spiritual disciplines as the busy-work of the Christian life. Now, I don't want to add my voice to the guilt chorus that sings in your conscience whenever you think about your unmet spiritual-discipline goals. Nor will I discuss the strategies and benefits of the various spiritual disciplines. (The recommended books at the end of this chapter can assist you with that.) I want you to see how the practice of the spiritual disciplines, by increasing our wisdom, helps us make better decisions.

“ The disciple is one who, intent upon becoming Christlike and so dwelling in his ‘faith and practice,’ systematically and progressively rearranges his affairs to that end.<sup>17</sup>

— Dallas Willard

#### **Meditate on Matthew**

**28:16-20.** If you are a Christian, at what point in your life did you move from being a convert to being a disciple?

#### **Meditate on Proverbs**

**6:9-11.** Are there any areas in your life in which you act like a sluggard?

If you are a Christian making any effort in your walk in God, you are a disciple—you are engaged in spiritual disciplines. The issue is the quality and effectiveness of the disciplines you are employing (or neglecting). Jesus said

“make disciples,” not just converts. The Greek word translated “disciple” means “student followers.” It speaks of enthusiastic apprentices who follow the master around, learning his ways by observing what he does and says.

That is one of the benefits of spiritual disciplines: they promote followership. As Donald Whitney keenly observes, “Learning and following involve discipline, for those who only *learn accidentally* and *follow incidentally* are not true disciples.”<sup>18</sup> Have you ever met bumper-car believers—Christians who learn mostly by accident? The only time the course of their lives changes is when they get hit by something that sends them in a different direction. They want to change but they depend on random collisions to trigger growth in their lives.

People who live this way don’t benefit much from their mistakes. The same errors keep coming back, and bad-habit ruts quickly become ditches. Why? Because these folks aren’t prepared to change. When your life is spent going with the flow it’s tough to change course in mid-stream. The Bible calls this folly, and folly does not sit at the same table with wisdom.

When I was growing up, there lived in my neighborhood a large dog named Tucky. When it came to chasing cars, Tucky had an unusual technique. Rather than running behind or alongside a vehicle in the traditional fashion, Tucky would run straight at the side of a moving car and ram the door with his head. This may have scared the wits out of many a driver, but it also took its toll on Tucky, especially his looks.

Now, Tucky had good intentions, for chasing cars was an honorable practice among the neighborhood dogs. But he was undisciplined in the chase, and his method lacked wisdom. Stuck in a bad habit, he never learned from his mistakes. One day, to everyone’s dismay and no one’s surprise, Tucky met his match against a well-armored pickup truck.

Don’t be a Tucky. Be a disciple. Allow the spiritual disciplines to train you in wisdom and the ways of God. Over time you’ll be better able to identify God’s will in specific

situations, and you'll be prepared to act accordingly.

The spiritual disciplines also open us up to the various means of God's grace and guidance. Have you ever vacationed at a cabin or beach house that had been closed up for quite some time? What is the first thing you do? Open a window, let some fresh air in! As you open windows and doors, the gentle breeze begins to flow through and the stuffiness dissipates.

Our lives can be like stuffy, closed-up houses. The spiritual disciplines act like open windows. And just like the cross-breezes that flow when windows are open, the various spiritual disciplines work together to allow a flow of grace through our lives. Bible study enriches our prayer. Fasting and solitude sharpen our listening. Service emboldens our evangelism. Over time the stuffy old house of our lives can begin to look more like a garden gazebo, with more openings than walls. The great thing about having a gazebo life is that, not only does the breeze blow through uninhibited, but there is clear vision all around.

In times of confusion and indecision, wouldn't you like to be able to say with the writer of Proverbs, "For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul" (Pr 2:10)? The spiritual disciplines are God's means of positioning us to hear his voice and respond to his guidance. They are wisdom at work on a daily basis.

### **Direction: Wisdom Applied**

You can probably see where this chapter is heading. Our decision-making isn't so much about "finding God's will," as if it had gotten lost like socks in the laundry. God's will IS. Our goal is to flow along with it as cooperatively as possible, ever conscious of the fact that God does not guide us so we can better manage our own way, but so that we can go his way.

In regard to God's will, we may prefer to think of ourselves as intrepid explorers of divine mysteries, but we're a lot more like what Scripture calls us: sheep who need to be led and guided at every turn. He calls, he leads, and we follow. Wisdom is about learning to be led by the Good Shepherd when all our sheep-ness would have us wander elsewhere.

In John 10:4, Jesus tells us there are two aspects to following: hearing the voice of the shepherd and following where the shepherd leads. Do you realize that we don't have to train our ears to hear the shepherd's voice? Jesus

#### **For Further Study:**

Read 1 Kings 19:1-18. How did God present himself to Elijah? How do you assume God would reveal himself to you?

## PERSONAL RETREATS

Did you ever have important decisions to make or heavy issues to sort out, but found yourself too busy or frazzled to think straight? I have found personal retreats to be a great way to clear my head and settle my heart. Each time I have taken a personal retreat I have come away with fresh perspective and faith, even if I didn't necessarily resolve any of the questions I was wrestling with. Here are some tips on how to approach a personal retreat.

There are many types of retreats. Most of the time you are getting away by yourself to spend time alone with God, but you can also use a retreat for personal planning, study, or evaluation.

If possible, an overnight retreat is best, but even a day away can be very beneficial.

Try to find a place that is restful and not too close or too far away. I try to get at least a half hour away but wouldn't want to drive more than two hours to get somewhere. Any place with televisions, computers, or lavish accommodations is not a good retreat location.

A retreat is an opportunity for rest. Most of us do not realize how tired we are or can become. So, first and foremost, let yourself stop and rest. This may or may not include additional sleep time. And remember, it takes time for our minds and bodies to slow down and for our hearts to settle. Be patient.

Don't bring a big agenda. The Lord knows what you need. Make it your prayer to enjoy his presence. Whether this be during rest, walks, or other ways, ask him to control the time and agenda, and respond to his prompting. God is very practical and we can trust him in the details.

Many people fast during retreats. While this is certainly not a requirement, I think food should be simple, the idea being that we want to give ourselves, our time, and our focus to other things.

Include worship in your time. If you play guitar, take one with you. Recorded worship music can also help.

Study materials are good, but the goal is NOT to knock out a backlog of reading or master a topic, but to encounter God through what you read. There are many devotional books that can be very helpful.

Bible study is essential, but again, the goal is not to find answers as much as to allow the Holy Spirit to illuminate God's Word in our hearts.

Take notes to reflect on later.

I have found that it is not uncommon for most of a personal retreat to be spent without any great experiences, but that there are moments of true communion with the Lord and even answers to prayer that come if we are patient.

Enjoy the process and leave the goals to God.

**1** If Jesus is the Good Shepherd, we must be the sheep. Which of the following characteristics of sheep would you least like ascribed to you?

- They don't really do anything, they're only good for their wool
- They have no natural defenses
- They have no sense of direction
- Even when they are clean, they smell bad

says we will know his voice when he speaks. From your first day as a Christian you were alive to the fact that God is in open, recognizable communication with you. It is one of the first things a new Christian notices.

Not only that, in our conversion we received the Holy Spirit within us, a divine "guidance counselor" who helps us respond to the Good Shepherd (Jn 16:13-15). We actually have to train our ears *not* to hear his voice—through unbelief, worldliness, distraction,

and the like. As Jack Deere has noted, "Although the voice of God runs through all experiences, most of us have diligently trained ourselves to ignore his voice and get on with the business of life."<sup>19</sup> This echoes Jesus' cryptic expression, "Let him who has ears, hear." Let's rediscover our spiritual ears.

When we do listen for God, we find his communication is not typically information-oriented. Rather, he is directive. He communicates primarily to lead, not to explain. And when he does instruct, he gives us enough to obey, but not enough to figure him out. This troubles our modern

minds, because we see the remaining elements of mystery as information unfairly withheld. But God holds out mystery as a promise of future revelation. Mystery is meant to draw out faith—the certainty of what we do not see (Heb 11:1). Remember, we're called to follow, not blaze our own trails. So as we turn our ears toward the shepherd's voice, and walk in the leading he gives us, we can have confidence that we are in the will of God.

“ Rather than looking for some sort of wrapped spiritual package from the Almighty, I want to rely upon my closeness to Him. So when I wonder about which job offer to take, I don't go through a divination process to discover the hidden message of God. Instead I examine how God has called me to live my life; what my motives are; what He has given me a heart for; where I am in my walk with Christ; and what God is saying to me through His word and His people.<sup>20</sup>

— Bruce Waltke

## Putting Wisdom Into Play

In concluding this chapter, I'd like to offer some practical tips for applying wisdom to our decisions.

**For Further Study:**

Read Philemon. Based on the information found in this letter, what are some of the convictions Paul held?

**Wise decisions flow out of godly convictions.** When faced with an important decision, remember that our choices are not made in a vacuum. Our convictions—the sound doctrines that we can and should hold about God and his revealed will for our lives—provide a crucial perspective for the questions that confront us. Our convictions also allow us to plan ahead. If I am considering going to graduate school or buying a house, my convictions regarding my use of time, my priorities, finances, etc. will shape how I approach the decision. As long as I am walking in those convictions I can explore my options with confidence and creativity. “Many are the plans in a man’s heart, but it is the LORD’S purpose that prevails” (Pr 19:21).

All convictions start with the great commandment. “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind....and love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22:37-39). If our decisions are governed by these higher goals, they won’t be dominated by our lesser desires like greed, ambition, pride, etc. Convictions are the fear of God at work in our lives.

**Wise decisions are made in the environment of counsel.**

One key source of wisdom from God is plain old everyday advice. “Wisdom is found in those who take advice” (Pr 13:10). When you’re faced with a major decision, do you habitually invite input from others? This can mean people close to you (friends, roommates, siblings), people who provide oversight in your life (pastors, parents, even bosses in some cases); people who are like you in temperament; people who look at things from a totally different perspective; people who have faced similar decisions; and people who generally exhibit godly wisdom in their lives. To seek advice is to walk in wisdom.

Let me note two things here. Getting advice doesn’t mean letting others make decisions for you. And it doesn’t mean that all the input you get from others must be consistent to be helpful. Get the necessary input, and take it before God.

It might seem that getting advice brings us wisdom because others have insight we lack. That’s true, but it’s only half the picture. When getting advice, God grants us wisdom because of the humility demonstrated by our willingness to draw others into our decisions. (By contrast,

““ The next best thing to being wise oneself is to live in a circle of those who are.”<sup>21</sup>

”  
— C.S. Lewis

**Meditate on Proverbs**

**15:22.** Make a list of the people you would go to for counsel in an important decision. Is this a well-rounded group?

pride drives us to make isolated, impulsive, unilateral decisions that we come to regret.) “When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with humility comes wisdom” (Pr 11:2). Don’t yield to your pride. Seek advice.

**Wise decisions are prayed through, not worried through.** I was speaking one day with a woman trying to decide where to move. She listed a number of fears that

“ Prayer is the mightiest engine God has placed in our hands. It is the best weapon to use in every difficulty, and the surest remedy in every trouble. It is the key that unlocks the treasury of promises, and the hand that draws forth grace and help in time of need.<sup>22</sup>

”  
— J.C. Ryle

had come to grip her, paralyzing her in the decision. Most of her mental effort was being expended, not in figuring out the details of the decision, but in warding off her anxiety over the situation. Her problem largely came down to her view of God (her theology), as expressed in a single worry: “Will God be there for me if

I step out?” Corrie Ten Boom, a single woman who knew her share of challenging decisions, had this to say about worry: “Worry does not empty tomorrow of its sorrow, it empties today of its strength.... It is the interest you pay on trouble before it comes.”<sup>23</sup> Paul’s wonderful antidote to worry and anxiety in Philippians 4:6-7—thankful prayer—is more than good advice. If, when with faced a big decision, we would pray whenever we are tempted to worry, we would find ourselves not only with the peace “which transcends all understanding,” but with a great deal more understanding as well.

**Wise decisions require patience.** When I was a young Christian, I was privileged to play guitar in my church’s worship band. One day my guitar was irreparably damaged. Fearing I would lose my spot in the band, I borrowed some money, rushed out, and bought a new guitar. In my haste, I ended up paying too much for a guitar I didn’t really like. It was a rash decision and I regretted it, as I have all the hasty decisions I have made. Had I been patient I would have made a better purchase *and* I would have seen God’s provision at work, instead of my own impulsiveness. “A man’s wisdom gives him patience” (Pr 19:10).

John Piper vividly describes the contrast between patience and impatience in seeking God’s guidance.

Impatience is a form of unbelief. It’s what we begin to feel when we start to doubt the wisdom of God’s timing or the goodness of God’s guidance....[Patience is]

**For Further Study:**  
Read Philippians 4:4-9. What are some “to do’s” from this passage that can help you battle anxiety?

a deepening, ripening, peaceful willingness to wait for God in the unplanned place of obedience, and to walk with God at the unplanned pace of obedience—to wait in his place, and go at his pace.<sup>24</sup>

Prior to making a big decision, many Christians take time away in a spiritual retreat. This serves as a forced shut-down of our impatience factory, allowing us to “wait in his place, and go at his pace.” Wisdom is best cultivated in a climate of patience.

**2** Briefly describe your ideal environment for a personal spiritual retreat.

**Wise decisions are not risk-proof.**

Eventually, after all the preparation, evaluation, and prayer, we still need to act. All wise decisions need decisiveness. Indecision and procrastination are never wise. It is rare, before making a decision, to have neat and tidy answers to all our questions. Typically, we must launch the ship not knowing exactly how well it will float. At these times, we find our ultimate peace in knowing that God has not created us for infallibility. Wisdom is not risk-free living; there is no such thing.

Thus, we may at times make decisions that do not turn out as we would have wanted or hoped. Does this mean we somehow have messed up God’s will for our lives? Has our error caused God’s cosmic hard drive to crash? By no means! Jerry Bridges notes, “We do have a responsibility to make wise decisions...But God’s plan for us is not contingent upon our decisions. God’s plan is not contingent at all. God’s plan is sovereign. It includes our foolish decisions as well as our wise ones.”<sup>26</sup>

Our confidence rests in two truths. The first is that, to God, *the decisions we make are no more important than the process by which we make them*. God has no problem putting us where he wants us. Scripture tells of God moving people around in the craziest ways—in great big arks and little reed baskets, in chariots of fire and bellies of big fish. It’s God’s job to put you in the right place at the right time. He glories in orchestrating the course of our lives.

The primary reason God gives us decisions to make is that he wants to do something *in* us, not just with us. Decisions and mysteries are God’s invitation to trust him. God uses our personal crises as opportunities for us to grow closer to him. Almost every decision we make can be undone, but the process by which we make decisions settles into

**For Further Study:**  
Read Colossians 1:9-12. What results does Paul seek as he prays for the Colossians?

our lives as habit, producing consistent results either good or bad, depending on the wisdom brought to the process.

“ We may insist on God telling us what to do because we live in fear or are obsessed with *being right* as a strategy for *being safe*.<sup>25</sup> ”

— Dallas Willard

God is at work within us and uses the *process* of decision-making to form his character and will in our lives.

Romans 8:28 is a wonderful promise for Christians faced with big decisions: “In all things God works for the good of those who love him,

who have been called according to his purpose.” All things?! Even my decisions that didn’t turn out as I’d expected? Even my honest mistakes? You bet. “All things” doesn’t leave much room for us to mess up God’s agenda.

My computer has a recycle bin where all the “permanent changes” to my documents go. Because of that bin, I don’t have to worry about deleting files by mistake. I have confidence to make file-related decisions. Romans 8:28 is kind of like the recycle bin of the Bible. Because of this promise, we can make decisions to the best of our ability and leave the results to God. And God will take those decisions and make them work—for his glory and our good.

So if you regret a decision made in the past, trust God that he will recycle it into a good thing for you. Prepare yourself for a life of wisdom through sound doctrine and spiritual disciplines. If you are living today in the valley of indecision, listen for the voice of the Good Shepherd, and follow where he leads. Don’t be afraid of decisions. Ask for what you lack. Ask for wisdom. And the promise of Proverbs 2:1-10 will be your supply:

My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, and if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God. For the LORD gives wisdom, and from his mouth come knowledge and understanding. He holds victory in store for the upright, he is a shield to those whose walk is blameless, for he guards the course of the just and protects the way of his faithful ones. Then you will understand what is right and just and fair—every good path. For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul. ■

**GROUP DISCUSSION**

1. Describe a good decision you have made and how you made it.
2. What are some decisions single people make that married people don't have to think about?
3. Think of the wisest person you've known. How did he or she exhibit wisdom?
4. Name some kinds of motives that can complicate our decisions.
5. Describe the last time you had a debate with someone about doctrine. What was it about? What did you learn? What would you say or do differently if you had that debate again today?
6. What spiritual discipline would you most like to develop, and why?
7. Which is the greatest hindrance you face to being aware of God's leading?
8. What are three convictions that you want to base your decisions on?
9. If you wanted to draw from the counsel of another person, who would you go to first, and why?
10. What are some signs that someone is struggling with anxiety? (See page 62)
11. Describe a time when you stepped out in faith and experienced the timely help of God.

**RECOMMENDED  
READING**

*Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* by Donald S. Whitney (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1991)

*Step by Step* by James Petty (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999)

*Discovering God's Will* by Sinclair B. Ferguson (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1982)

*Disciplines for Life* by C.J. Mahaney and John Loftness (Gaithersburg, MD: Sovereign Grace Ministries, 1992)

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