



ASK THE  
CHRISTIAN  
COUNSELOR



# ANXIOUS ABOUT DECISIONS

FINDING FREEDOM  
IN THE PEACE OF GOD

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## INTRODUCTION

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened,  
and I will give you rest.” — Matthew 11:28

**T**he basic message I want you to take away from this book is that God uses your decision-making to help you grow up and mature as a Christian. Decision-making is an arena for spiritual formation. This arena especially has the potential to bring you toward a greater sense of peace, steadiness, and confidence in living out your calling. Living from a sense of calling can feel complicated if you experience significant or extreme decision anxiety and if you suffer from intrusive and obsessive thoughts. Those more profound struggles can be particularly crippling, so they are part of the focus of this book, but much of what I’ll say will still be applicable to those who experience the less severe irritations and pains of feeling periodically stuck in times of decision.

Decision anxiety covers a set of feelings and behaviors that interrupt, complicate, or excessively slow down our decisions. It includes feelings of fear, panic, or a lasting unsettledness that is excessive or doesn’t fit the circumstances.

For most of us, some degree of anxiety complicates our decision-making and our sense of calling as Christians. We often just don’t know what to do, and we wonder what God wants us to do. What is our calling? We hear this in Micah 6:8.

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.  
And what does the Lord require of you?  
To act justly and to love mercy  
and to walk humbly with your God.

Everyday decisions are opportunities to apply this broad call personally. In our life decisions, such as whether to remain as a high school teacher or go back to school for nursing, we will be more spiritually grounded when we think about pursuing options that provide a way for us to live out our calling, but often the specific answer will not be clear or obvious on this front. Most professions provide daily opportunities to be just, merciful, and humbly walking with God. Making good decisions is about growing in wisdom and skill to apply the principles of the broad Christian calling to the specifics of our lives, in humble dependence on God and in community with wise helpers.

Outside of what's covered in the Ten Commandments and the golden rule, decisions are usually not about discovering God's will in the specifics, because God doesn't typically tell us what decisions to make, and he doesn't hide from us the things he wants us to know. For example, we know a lot more about *how* he wants us to live than where he wants us to live, what he wants us to do for work once we get there, and who to pursue this calling with. There's more to God's will than we know, and we never uncover all the mysteries. God is kind to give us what he wants us to know, but it's humbling to consider how much remains unknown to us (Deuteronomy 29:29; 1 Corinthians 2:9–12; 2 Peter 1:3).

To be a creation rather than the Creator means our knowledge is partial, incomplete, and limited. There's no way around the unknowns that drive decision anxiety. That may sound disappointing, but please don't stop reading here. God has big plans for our big decisions, and he

has something to offer us for the small ones too. Although in one sense anxiety or worry is something we do, we also typically experience indecisiveness as an affliction, something that happens to us or in us that hurts. And God has much to say to suffering people.

God has often led his people through times of wilderness, through valleys where death casts a long shadow, and through times of suffering when his strength is made perfect in our weakness. Uncertainty, danger, and risk are forms of suffering that are never pleasant. But he offers us something better than certainty and the absence of risk: he promises to be with us. And when the Good Shepherd is leading us, we find that he uses our times of decision-making to form us in two ways: he makes us more peaceful and makes us better stewards. The longer and closer we walk with the Good Shepherd, the more the decisions coming from our hearts are aligned with his heart.

## **PEACE**

When we give up trying to uncover God's plan in all the details, it opens the door to look for something else. We can start seeking his peace, a spiritual steadiness right in the middle of the uncertainty—this is the kind of peace that passes understanding (Philippians 4:7). We start looking for rest, calm, and trust that we experience in our relationship with God. And so we walk with this little light of mine, a lamp for our feet shining on a few steps of the path. We accept the uncertainty, take a deep breath, and as Emily P. Freeman (and also Princess Anna in *Frozen II*) says, do “the next right thing.”<sup>1</sup> To embrace peace is not to strive for certainty in our decisions, and to some extent, not to wait for God to intervene and make our decisions for us. We make decisions best when we understand

God has given us his presence, peace, and guidance in his Word and among his people, and that at the end of the day, we ourselves are invited to make decisions.

I wonder if this sounds unspiritual. Doesn't God's Spirit lead us in decision-making? Some people speak about frequently feeling a sense of God's leading, and they talk about getting nudges and clarity when they fast and pray. Sometimes the stories are compelling—for example, feeling the sudden urge to call someone, only to discover a chance to meet an urgent need. I've certainly felt things like this, and I've often wished this would happen more frequently. I've at times wished God would step in and make certain decisions so that I wouldn't have to; I've wanted him to convey the right answer to me through other people or through strong and clear feelings. Some believers might encourage me to give more time to really listen for God in this way and to give more space to weigh my feelings as a venue of God's possible leading. Although I don't quite share their perspective, I want to leave space for the kind of humility that listens to their encouragement because Christians certainly believe in a God who cares about the details of our lives and intervenes for good. We'll consider this more in chapter 3.

Regardless of our desire for impressions from God, believers who struggle with anxiety rarely experience moments of clear, felt leading from God. And even if we did, our most spiritual impulses still need to be shaped by biblical wisdom and humility in community. My own conviction is that God is more interested in growing us up as Christians and helping us learn how to make wise decisions, rather than making decisions for us via impressions or authority figures. To think that our decisions are to some extent up to us can be a scary thought. But it's only scary if we're alone in those decisions and if the

ultimate outcome for our bodies and souls is up to chance or totally dependent on our own wisdom. God can use even our mistakes and failures for our good and his glory. Personal decision-making isn't isolated independence but connected maturity and agency. We're free to do, free to act, and especially free to love God and neighbor. This is the free, mature, active life God has for us. And in all of our decision-making, the Holy Spirit never leaves or forsakes us. God is kind to give us his Spirit, who leads us toward what matters most, but it is in God's time and in God's ways. And in the last day, he will unveil his mysterious working—we will see how he has worked greater good out of our small good, and how he has subverted or overturned all the bad done to us or by us (Romans 8:28).

My general sense is that believers who struggle with decision anxiety aren't helped by giving more time and attention to possible impressions from the Spirit. Instead, the focus of our prayer and reflection should be on the kinds of things the Spirit promises in the Bible, especially his promise to bring us to peace. Peace is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22)—God grows peacefulness in us as both an experience and as a way of life. Peace is part of what it means to be wise (James 3:17–18). Peace, in the sense of not being tossed around and constantly shaken, is also part of Christian maturity. To be a Spirit-filled believer is to be bound to other believers by peace, and to get firmer and stronger together, so that we all stand on our own two feet (Ephesians 4:2, 11–16). We're not looking to act more independently; instead, we're aiming to rest in dependence on God and interdependence with others, and from that deep sense of security, we are empowered to confidently take action. Far from being an unspiritual pursuit, looking for peace in our decisions requires us to walk with Jesus, the Prince of Peace. What

deeper peace could we access than the peace he made by his sacrificial, reconciling love? He makes peace between God and people, and between people, and inside people. He quiets the war and hostility outside us and inside us.

Peace is an emotion, and it's a wonderful thing to feel. But it is also so much more. *Shalom* in the Bible is a term used to describe a reconciling peace for the person and for the whole community, a shared well-being and goodness and wholeness, a sense that things are working the way they should.

With this kind of peace inside of us because we have been reconciled with God, we're moved to make peace outside of us with others, to love our neighbor and our enemy. With this peace within us, we also worry less about what decisions are best for us, and we start being more concerned with making the kind of decisions that bring about God's peace in the world, especially in our small corner of the world. We keep looking and praying for God's kingdom of peace to come, on earth as it is in heaven, and this orientation transforms our quiet peace inside into an active peace outside. It moves our Sabbath into a week of new creation work. Instead of being immobilized with decision anxiety, we're mobilized toward God's work in the world. To be in this mindset is to be truly alive, as we were created to be.

## **STEWARDSHIP**

We bring the peace of God into our role as managers, or "stewards," of our lives. In the Bible, a steward is someone who manages what belongs to someone else. This means that all we have is from God, and he has given us the calling and task of managing or governing what he has entrusted to us. Most of the time we probably don't feel like little kings and queens, ruling our worlds. We have overseers at work, at church, and in society. We often feel

we don't have much power in our world. And it's true, we aren't equally responsible for everything in the same way, and not everything is ours only. It's a gift that we all aren't called to be in charge in every way.

But from another point of view, little kings and queens are exactly what we are. The picture that the book of Genesis paints of humanity includes images such as vice regents, royal gardeners, organizers, sorters, namers, and rulers. Humanity, at its ideal in Psalm 8, is a little lower than the angels, small in view of God but big in his world. People have all kinds of authority, managing and arranging every kind of animal in land and sky and sea. Of course, with evil in the picture, humanity is only a shell of its former self—sometimes more like the beasts than the angels.<sup>2</sup> Every day humans manage this world imperfectly, with staggeringly mixed results, curing diseases with one hand and turning away refugee children with the other. Stewardship matters; big decisions matter.

Every day humans manage their own little world with striking imperfection too. People take jobs they come to regret, date and marry against better judgment, and sometimes drive drunk. At the same time, as I write, some people are doing heroic and sacrificial work to provide health care in a global pandemic, some are dating and marrying with wisdom and kindness, and some are back to gathering in groups in church basements to help each other try to live sober. We are imperfect managers of a good but broken world. We are imperfect managers of good but broken lives. We do not have the option of perfect lives and perfect decisions. We often do not even have the full confidence that we've made the best decision out of the options available. We certainly do not know what the future holds. So what does God ask of his stewards, his managers of imperfect lives?



The apostle Paul gives us an idea. “This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful” (1 Corinthians 4:1–2). God gives to his people a trust, a managerial oversight, and in this passage, the early leaders of the Christian faith wanted to faithfully manage their charge of teaching about the love of Jesus. By extension God also gives us a management of our own lives and areas of service. We don’t outgrow the original calling of humanity in Genesis, to govern our little corner of the world, to order and arrange it so that it is fruitful (Genesis 1:28; Matthew 25:14–30).

Sometimes this feels like a lot to manage, and sometimes it feels like only a little. But no one else is ultimately responsible for my life in the way that I am—it’s a special charge that we will give an account for (Romans 14:4, 12; 2 Corinthians 5:10). What is required of stewards is not to be perfect, to know the future, or to play the odds. We’re called to be faithful. We will not always get it right, and not all situations even have a good solution. But every day we want to walk outside to the little plot of land that God has given us to garden. We water and fertilize, we tend and trim, and we trust God for fruit to come from our labors (1 Corinthians 3:6–8).

### **HOW THIS BOOK WILL HELP**

This book won’t provide you with a thorough protocol for making good decisions. I can’t assure you of a great outcome for each of your decisions. I want to help you become freer from decision anxiety, and part of this freedom involves coming to terms with a difficult reality: for most of our nonmoral decisions, we don’t have ultimate assurance that our decisions are good. Sometimes we don’t even

get reliable assurance that our decisions aren't bad. My goal is to help you live faithfully with these uncertainties.

Additional help is available in clear and accessible resources like Steven Johnson's *Farsighted*, which distills practical principles from a broader study of decision-making, whether for urban planning and corporate strategy or for personal decisions about career and romance.<sup>3</sup> Resources like this will help you make a better list of pros and cons prior to a significant decision, to add a numeric value to items on your list, to recognize knowns and unknowns, to think of the bigger picture and potential long-term consequences, to tolerate ambiguities and uncertainties, and to take constructive action. Many Christian resources draw from these kinds of practical strategies but also seek to add a fuller picture of the goals of a Christian's decision-making and help you toward a better understanding God's will. I'll highlight only one.

Much of the basic message for Christians about decision-making and God's will is captured in J. I. Packer's pamphlet, *Finding God's Will*.<sup>4</sup> He points out that we often encounter six key problems in times of decision-making. To work against each of these is to be freer to make good decisions:

1. unwillingness to *think*
2. unwillingness to *think ahead*
3. unwillingness to *take advice*
4. unwillingness to *suspect oneself*
5. unwillingness to *discount personal magnetism*
6. unwillingness to *wait*.<sup>5</sup>

By highlighting the value of thinking, Packer is pushing back against pietistic tendencies and toward reasoning with a conscience shaped by God's Word and values shaped by God's heart. By "unwillingness to discount

personal magnetism,” he identifies the problem of people coming under the sway of a compelling and domineering leader, and thus having their decision-making compromised and their decisions corrupted.

Most people will need messages like Packer’s to grow in their discipleship as Christians. People who struggle with decision anxiety will also benefit from these broad resources but not yet. The reason is that those who struggle with decision anxiety are typically marked by a list of struggles that are the opposite of the six problems in Packer’s list:

- overthinking
- thinking ahead so much that one isn’t in the present
- gathering advice from as many people as possible
- feeling constant self-doubt and suspicion of oneself
- being unable to trust others
- delaying decisions so long that one loses opportunities

These problems make decisions quite difficult, and the more severe they are, the more paralyzed strugglers become. If they first turn to otherwise excellent resources like Packer’s, they will likely become even more mired in decision anxiety. These kinds of struggles warrant some focused help. So I’ll limit my focus to helping people who struggle with decision anxiety, whereas many other good books can help shape us as faithful decision-makers. One limitation of this short book is that I won’t offer a comprehensive approach to decision-making, but helpful frameworks and general teaching can be found in resources listed at the end of this book.

## **HOW TO READ IN YOUR CONTEXT**

I want to recognize other limitations as well. Culture heavily shapes the pressures and default protocols of

decision-making. Although I have tried to expand my work so it can be applied in a variety of ways, my perspective is generally limited to my majority culture American context, which also describes most of the people I've served as a counselor during the past ten years. And yet, I do see many ways that culture directly impacts decision anxiety, so what I share will need to be worked out and adapted in individual and local contexts. For example, I find communal life to be anemic for many of the majority culture people who struggle with decision anxiety to whom I have provided counseling. Feeling alone and feeling great pressure to act, to self-create, to self-optimize, and to succeed in exceptional ways are significant contributing factors to anxiety.<sup>6</sup> Much of my guidance is shaped by providing care against this cultural backdrop. Those in other cultures may notice somewhat different challenges to their sense of peace and stewardship, and thus other contributing factors to their decision anxiety.

In some more collectivist cultures, the pressure to succeed may be expressed differently, but anxiety invades there too. Greg Jao highlights the difference between the US Army's tagline, "Be all that you can be," and the traditional Asian values that say, "Be all that your family has sacrificed for you to be."<sup>7</sup> In either case, the pressure to succeed, whether it's for self or for family, can be a significant contributor to decision anxiety. Our communities and cultures shape the contours of our pressures and anxieties. Other anxieties emerge in culture-specific ways as well, such as what Sheila Wise Rowe calls "breakaway guilt." Some young African Americans experience distress and anxiety about how educational and career decisions will impact their participation in the communities and relationships they grew up in, creating unique pressures on the decision-making process.<sup>8</sup>

Further, as you'll see especially in the chapters on marriage and vocation, our decisions largely flow from our sense of who we are and who we're called to be. Anxiety surrounding identity necessarily complicates decisions. In *Being Latino in Christ*, Orlando Crespo gives a window into identity confusion and formation,<sup>9</sup> and more recently, Robert Chao Romero captures the experience of liminality or in-betweenness in the American context, which fosters identity confusion and therefore makes many decisions more complex.<sup>10</sup>

Our sense of connection or disconnection from our communities, our sense of how we fit in and which culture we belong to, directly affects our ability to make big decisions—marriage, vocation, and location—but also smaller lifestyle choices. How we live is connected to who we are and who we want to be connected to. As Christians, we want our decisions to flow from who God has called us to be, and, ideally, we make these decisions within the church community as our most profound family. This can be a comforting message spiritually, but it can be a complicated message relationally. How can I make decisions when I face complications in asking who I am, who God has made me to be, and who he is calling me to be? How do I do this in the communities I live in, both family and church?

This leads us to the key messages in chapters 1 and 2 because these questions reveal, in part, how anxiety works: we become aware of ambiguity and uncertainty, we notice and react to the risk, and then our efforts to find certainty actually compound the problem. For believers, confusion about God's will further amplifies anxiety, so chapter 3 will complete part 1 on how anxiety works. We'll then consider where anxiety comes from—and how we come by it honestly. In chapters 4 and 5, we'll look at the kinds of

pressures and messages from society and family that help us understand how easily decision anxiety can take hold, and why we get stuck while trying to make life decisions in young adulthood and beyond. Finally, we'll look at solutions through three examples: seeking prayerful knowledge of God and ourselves in anxiety about marriage (chapter 6), cultivating a mindset of stewardship in anxiety about career (chapter 7), and growing in the skill of Christian living by facing our fears in small decisions (chapter 8). This final chapter will engage more directly the kind of anxiety that can be described as OCD or scrupulosity, though this experience will also be touched on at various points throughout the book. Decision anxiety is not a technical term but an informal way to talk about anxiety that interferes with our decisions. Throughout the book, I will mostly use the language of the larger category of anxiety because most anxieties follow the same basic pattern.

Even so, there are no easy answers. I do believe, however, that the core messages of this book, at least to the extent that they reflect Christian concerns and hopes, will nudge us toward remembering a foundational biblical teaching that can bring us peace in a world of dangers: "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble" (Psalm 46:1).

### **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION**

1. On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being minimal, 10 being debilitating), how severe is your anxiety about decisions on most days?
2. What kinds of decisions often leave you feeling stuck?
3. This chapter contrasts two lists of problems with decisions. Which items on these lists most apply to you?