



Demystifying Decision-Making

A PRACTICAL GUIDE

AIMEE JOSEPH

“I’ve often wished that God would skywrite his will for me, but after reading *Demystifying Decision-Making*, I see that the process of seeking God is as important as the outcome. This book draws extensively from Scripture and will be a trusted guide to navigate life’s choices, from everyday decisions to life-changing ones. Aimee does not offer a pat formula but rather a robust framework to help gather and fit together the puzzle pieces in our decisions, drawing closer to the Lord as we do. I will refer to this wonderful book often!”

Vaneetha Risner, author, *Walking Through Fire: A Memoir of Loss and Redemption*

“We wake up every day to hundreds of decisions. We must decide what to have for breakfast, what to wear to work, and what to do with our free time. The sheer number of choices can be overwhelming. Add to those smaller decisions the bigger questions of calling, relationships, and goals—and we almost don’t want to get up in the morning. Thankfully, Aimee Joseph is a faithful guide as we navigate both large and small dilemmas. In the pages of this book, we learn to weigh our choices according to God’s word and his will and come away with a renewed trust in the God who sovereignly ordains all things. Whatever you are trying to decide, I trust you will find this book a helpful resource.”

Megan Hill, author, *Praying Together* and *A Place to Belong*; Editor, The Gospel Coalition

“Whatever big decision you’re facing right now, Aimee cannot make it for you. This book won’t tell you the one clear and easy answer. But in Christ, informed by the word of the living God, Aimee does have some vital principles to share. Scripture doesn’t give us quick answers to our hardest decisions, but we’re not left in the dark. And when we learn what God has to say about our moments of conscious decision, we’re not only better prepared to face future anxious junctures, but also to become the kind of person who instinctively and sometimes almost effortlessly discerns the will of God. This book will help now, and later.”

David Mathis, Senior Teacher and Executive Editor, desiringGod.org; Pastor, Cities Church, St. Paul, Minnesota; author, *Habits of Grace*

“In the modern and wealthy West, we all know the paralyzing power of endless choice. Our cultural mantra that we are self-made causes decision-making to be all the more intimidating. Aimee Joseph gives us both a theological framework and practical steps for making good choices. This book will serve anyone who has to make any decision—all of us! And it will be especially helpful to those who help others make decisions: pastors, professors, counselors, friends, and mentors. I love Joseph’s priority on the character and goodness of our God, the reliability of his word, and the unshakable grace on which we stand when we make choices both large and small. Her words are both a bulwark and a comfort, pointing us to God’s eternal wisdom as well as his matchless grace.”

Jen Oshman, author, *Enough about Me: Find Lasting Joy in the Age of Self*

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A Practical Guide

Aimee Joseph

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Demystifying Decision-Making: A Practical Guide

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To G'Joe, Tyus, Eli, and Phin

All the way may the Savior lead us.

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Introduction

Ubiquitous Decisions

SOMETIMES THINGS BECOME so much a part of the fabric of our lives that we don't even recognize them. Decisions are chief among them. They are so ubiquitous that we tend to drown out their prevalence and significance.

In a self-initiated experiment, I decided to keep a running tally of the number of decisions I made throughout an average day. Before my feet even hit the ground, I had counted four: *Do I sleep five more minutes? Do I shower now or after my morning walk? When should I take the dog for a walk? What shall I wear today?*

Next, I stared down a significant breakfast decision. I landed on cereal but then had to decide which cereal, which bowl, and which milk. As soon as those decisions were settled, I faced coffee decisions: *travel mug or regular mug? Sugar or Splenda?*

At this point, I had been awake only three minutes. *Where will I sit to spend time with God? Should I journal or read the Bible? Assuming I decide to start with reading the Bible, where shall I read this morning? How many verses?* We are only ten minutes into

the day. Suffice it to say that after an hour I promptly quit the exercise, utterly overwhelmed by the sheer number of decisions that make up an ordinary day.

If you are not convinced by my experiment, I'd like to invite you into a short trip to the local grocery store. We aren't shopping for a Thanksgiving meal. We only need the ingredients for an apple pie. Sounds simple enough, right? Before we even get to the store, we must decide which parking spot to choose based on which entrance we will walk through. Then we must choose whether to get the wonky-wheeled shopping cart or risk nearly breaking our wrists carrying a basket. Friends, we are not yet fully in the store. We approach the produce section with a simple need: apples. What used to be a semi-simple choice between green or red has become a complex decision these days. *Pink Lady, Gala, Red Delicious, or Fuji? Organic or regular?* Next comes flour. *Almond flour? Whole wheat flour? Enriched flour? Store brand or name brand?* Regarding eggs, we have an entire endcap from which to choose. *Regular eggs, organic eggs, free-range eggs, and local eggs* (and every possible combination of these categories). I won't belabor the point. You live in the same world I do. We experience the same decision-making fatigue. Thus far we are only making an apple pie. We have not even broached the subject of the weightier decisions of life.

The Dizziness of Decisions

Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish theologian and philosopher, once said, "Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom." If grocery store decisions make us dizzy, the more significant decisions of our lives cause deeper and more disorienting anxiety. One of the unantici-

pated weights of living in an age of unprecedented freedom is the anxiety that comes as its counterpart.

In the past (and in other cultures in the present), freedom was much more limited. Most children were not able to choose a calling or direction. They would learn the family trade that had been passed down from generation to generation. Likewise, it was assumed that they would remain in the hometown that the family had lived in for generations.

My parents-in-law were born in neighboring villages in Kerala, India. My amma had two career choices: nurse or teacher. When my appa was young, he knew he would study engineering as his father and uncles had. Amma and Appa did not even play a primary role in choosing to marry one another; their parents arranged their marriage. The second time they met, they were walking down the aisle and into their future. After having twins (one of whom is now my handsome husband), they emigrated to the United States in search of a better future and more opportunities for their children.

Flash-forward twenty years. My husband and I sit around Amma and Appa's kitchen table in Austin, Texas, with our three children. My middle son has been tasked with preparing a heritage report for his class. We huddle around the table as a captive audience as my son interviews my in-laws. When asked about their childhood in India, both Amma and Appa smile as they reminisce. "It was so carefree; we played all the time. We did not have the stress and the worry. We were just children."

My children have far more choices than Amma and Appa had at their age. They can choose from five different club soccer teams. They select multiple elective courses even at their elementary

school. Shows, books, and role models regularly remind them to be whoever and whatever they want to be. For now, these promises of choice and freedom sound alluring. However, in less than ten years my oldest son will likely be graduating from college. Suddenly the freedom to be and do whatever he wants will transform into the intense, crushing anxiety that is the dizziness of freedom. Professors and well-intentioned friends will be asking him a litany of questions. *What are you going to do when you graduate? To which graduate schools have you applied? Where will you live?*

In a culture marked by freedom yet marred by anxiety, the decision-making process confuses us. Some decisions paralyze us, while other decisions pass by seemingly unnoticed.

The Shaping Power of Decisions

In his short but powerful book *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Leo Tolstoy brings us to the deathbed of an average Russian man. Ivan, like most of us, did not take the time to think about his daily decisions. Life was so full, so promising, so busy with its demands and desires, that Ivan simply went along for the ride. The currents of culture and the tyranny of the moment directed his life. He attended the popular parties, married into the right class, and worked hard as a lawyer to purchase the right fabric for the right drapes to meet the current fashions. His life came to a screeching halt with the diagnosis of a terminal illness.

Tolstoy invites us into the moment in which Ivan, an unreflective man, must face the cumulative effect of his life decisions. He lived his life as “a capable, cheerful, good-natured, and sociable man.” He did whatever his station and culture dictated to be fashionable. When institutions and fashions changed, he

adjusted accordingly. He climbed the social and professional ladders. He married well, even if not for love. Tolstoy leads the reader through Ivan's decisions in the same matter-of-fact way that Ivan made them. Ivan and his wife bore children. They hit a few rough patches financially and eventually rebounded. After moving into a new home, Tolstoy writes the following about Ivan and his family:

And so, they began to live in their new quarters which, as always happens when people get settled, was just one room too small, and on their new income, which, as is always the case, was just a bit less—about five hundred rubles—than they needed. But it was all very nice.¹

In a way that seems almost laughable to the reader, Tolstoy describes the ordinariness of Ivan's life. A series of decisions stacking up. Tolstoy summarizes a lifetime of decisions in a few sentences, saying, "So they lived. Everything went along without change and everything was fine."²

Until it wasn't.

After being diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, Ivan's perspective began to change. His terminal illness cast decisions he thought were pleasant inevitabilities in a different light. Tolstoy captures Ivan's significant moment of realization:

And in his imagination, he called to mind the best moments of his pleasant life. Yet, strangely enough, all the best moments of his pleasant life now seemed entirely different than they had in the past. . . . "Perhaps I did not live as I should have," it

suddenly occurred to him. “But how could that be when I did everything one is supposed to?”³

Our culture constantly reminds us to take each moment as it comes and to live for today. Ivan Illyich did those things. He made decisions based on the culture around him and the desires within him; however, at the end of his life, his decisions proved disappointing. How can we avoid finding ourselves in Ivan’s shoes? To what cumulative end are our daily decisions directing us?

Divine Direction in Decisions

If you are reading this book, I imagine I don’t have to convince you of the dizziness of decisions or their power to shape our lives. You are likely living in the crosshairs of critical decisions. Perhaps you are wondering which path to take, which church to choose, or which spouse to marry. No matter what decision you are deliberating, the incredibly good news is that the Scriptures offer guidance for believers making decisions.

God graciously stamped humanity in his image, giving us the ability to make decisions (Gen. 1:27). By his very nature, God is self-revelatory, meaning he wants to be known, seen, worshiped, and followed. God is not a divine clockmaker who created the universe and then stepped away to let it run. Rather, he has intimately involved himself in his creation from the beginning.

Even after God’s people alienated themselves from him through their sin, God moved toward them and directed them (Gen. 3:8–10). He created for himself a people whom he would lead (Gen. 12:1–9). He sent prophets to speak to them, priests to atone for them, and kings to lead them. His engagement with his

decision-making people came to a culmination in the incarnation of Christ (John 1:6–14). Christ made the invisible God visible in a tangible way (Heb. 1:3). Christ walked this earth and experienced the daily decisions of life. Though he was tempted in every way as we are (Heb. 4:15), he made every decision considering the favor of his father. He chose to follow God even when that choice meant death on a cross (Phil. 2:8).

Through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, believers are invited into the freedom of making decisions as children of God. Rather than following the whims of their heart, believers are invited to place the desires of their hearts alongside the word of God as a ruler. God's word, God's Spirit, and God's people are intended to help instruct us in the series of decisions that constitutes life.

The Path before Us

Judging from the number of books and articles promising five steps to better decisions or the secret to discovering calling, people hunger for practical wisdom and guidance. We want to know which way to go, which house to buy, or which college to attend. We are eager to be given the answer; however, before we can jump into practical decision-making, it is necessary that we lay a theological foundation. While God's word can practically guide us, God intends his word to do something far more profound.

In *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis paints a powerful word picture:

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof

and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.⁴

People are drawn to books that address their problem, their proverbial leaky faucet. While I do hope that this book will address that leaky faucet of yours, I also expect that it will knock down a few walls and change your design-making blueprint. Before we can get to practical decision-making, we should address existing frameworks, potentially razing them that we might raise up a biblically and theologically informed framework. Questions for further discussion are included in the back of the book. Whether you are working through this book alone, with a mentor, or with a group of trusted friends, these questions are intended to help you reflect upon, synthesize, and apply the principles we will learn.

In chapters 1 and 2 we will explore God's design in creating human beings as decision makers. We will learn the great responsibility and privilege entrusted to us as we sift through what choices and consequences mean in light of the cross. We will also wrestle through the apparent contradictions between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. Most significantly, we will stand at the foot of the cross to be reminded that God views us

through the faithful decisions of Christ even amid our failures and shortcomings (2 Cor. 5:21).

In chapters 3 and 4 we will unpack various concepts of God's will and discover the distinction between his hidden will and his revealed will. Once we get our biblical bearings, we will address common approaches to making decisions and the dashboards we consult in making decisions. In chapters 5 and 6 we will familiarize ourselves with tools that God provides as we prepare for and make decisions. Finally, in chapter 7, we will address the regret, fear, and pride that often await us after decisions have been made. The same God who offers us wisdom in making decisions also secures peace for us on the other side of decision-making.

I wish we could sit down over coffee to discuss the dilemma or decision you face. It would be an honor and a privilege to hear your story and learn about the various decisions that may have led you to this book. Alas, by its limited nature, a book on decision-making in general may fail to address "the holy particularity of the soul in need."⁵ However, I have been expectantly praying that God would use this little book as a pointer to Christ, the one who meets the needs of his creation with his abundant wisdom and love. I am asking that the same Lord who brings order out of chaos might begin to part the clouds that confuse the decision-making process. I have confidence that the clarity of his word and the absolute nature of his character will demystify the process and lead you into the freedom and privilege of making decisions as his image bearers on this earth.

The Drama of Decisions

DECISION-MAKING IS OFTEN DRAMATIC, even for undramatic people. Think about the last show you binge-watched or the latest novel you stayed up late to finish. Chances are you were gripped by the drama of a decision faced by one of the characters. The Mandalorian decides between bounty hunting and rescuing the Child, Josephine March waffles between love and independence, and Katniss Everdeen vacillates between Peeta or Gale. In all ages and places, people (real and imagined) choose what they believe is best based on a myriad of factors. In order to understand the way we make decisions today, let's take a moment to survey decision-making throughout human history.

Decision-Making throughout History

From the beginning of recorded history, people have wrestled with the decisions of their lives. For centuries, people based their decision-making on a desire to discern the will of the gods. Decision-making began with the presupposition that the gods were interested in what

people did and demanded to be pleased, or at least appeased, by human choices. Even a cursory reading of ancient Greek and Roman mythology reveals the deep human desire to discern what might please the fickle gods. Humans cowered in fear or relied on cunning and trickery to stay away from the wrath of their pantheon of gods and goddesses, each of whom operated out of their own whims. Their gods were moving targets, which left them uneasy when making decisions. Imagine never knowing whether your choice of a spouse would result in blessing or a lethal firebolt from Mount Olympus! As a result, humans resorted to divination: strange and diverse methods of attempting to discern the will of their gods.

Divination

Many pagan cultures practiced *hepatoscopy*, which was the study of the liver. To our modern minds, the liver sounds like a strange place to start; however, they believed the liver, the heaviest organ, housed memory and intelligence. Thus it made logical sense to them that if the gods wanted to reveal themselves to them, they would do so through the liver.

Another pagan ritual to discern the will of the gods was called “rhabdomancy.” In this method people used arrows to help determine what the gods willed. Supposedly, the flight of the arrow and its landing place provided direction in decisions. Other methods for divination included the use of household idols called “teraphim” as well as palm reading and astrology.¹

Twenty-First-Century Divination

While those methods sound rudimentary and strange to our ears, it’s helpful to consider some of our own postmodern at-

tempts to understand what God wants for our decisions. Some people still dabble in astrology, horoscopes, and fortune-telling when considering major life decisions today. In fact, upon moving to Southern California from the Southeast, I was shocked at how many of my new neighbors mentioned their astrological symbols as significant factors in their decisions. In conversations, a friend would casually say, "I am a Pisces, so I love the beach," or, "My horoscope mentioned that good things were coming my way this month." I did my best to stifle my shock, as I had wrongly thought palm readers and tarot cards were mostly artifacts or the stuff of movies. The number of New Age shops advertising these services within a 10-mile radius of my home tells me otherwise.

Astrology and other New Age aids in decision-making are somewhat right in lifting hungry, searching eyes up to the skies; however, they stop short by looking at the canvas of creation rather than looking further back to the knowable Creator. The further our postmodern culture pushes back from its Judeo-Christian roots, the more people grasp for ancient avenues for divine help and direction. As Solomon insightfully wrote in Ecclesiastes 3:11, God "has put eternity into man's heart." Try as we might to exclude God from the picture, he keeps finding his way back into our hearts because they were made for eternity.

Even within the Christian faith, many believers fall back upon ancient methods for discerning God's will, begging for signs of God's direction in big decisions. Believers do this partly because they do not understand the nature of God and his means of revealing his will.

Reason Alone

Most people believe that God has nothing to do with our lives and choices at all. As those born after the age of reason, many twenty-first-century minds approach decision-making as if it were an entirely rational process. If we were to assign the rational approach a representative symbol, it would likely be a list of pros and cons. While a well-thought-out list of pros and cons provides helpful perspective in making decisions, reason alone addresses only one aspect of humanity. It raises the mind over and against the will and the body, pressing significant God-given parts of our lives out of the process.

We have been deeply marked by Enlightenment ideals. Our overestimation of the human capacity to reason pushes God to the periphery. Some of us seem to have forgotten that decision-making began from a deep desire to understand God's will.

Follow Your Heart

Chances are that most of your neighbors are neither mystics nor rationalists. Chances are that most of them ascribe to some version of the popular modern mantra, "Follow your heart." According to this prevalent perspective, whatever feels right, looks good, or seems best *is* best. As long as no one gets hurt, your choices are entirely up to you and what you want. This line of thinking sounds good to us initially. In fact, I remember a friend in high school making me a little sign with the pithy quote, "In matters of the head, think with the head; in matters of the heart, think with the heart." I liked it so much that I hung it on my wall. It would be a few years before I realized

that such reasoning, beautiful though it sounded, was both unhelpful and unbiblical.

As we will discuss in chapter 4, God has knit us together body, mind, and soul. This means that our emotions and desires matter in the decision-making process; however, the fall of mankind into sin affects both our minds and our emotions. In other words, the fall affects our affections (a fancy, old-fashioned word for feelings). Our feelings, inclinations, and preferences must be washed in the word and sanctified. As early as Saint Augustine and Jonathan Edwards, Christian theologians have fought to keep religious affections a significant part of the Christian life.² While affections have a role to play in making decisions, they are not to have the final word; Christ alone gets that distinction.

Each of these approaches gets something right and something wrong. Contemporary mystics rightly claim that we must acknowledge something outside ourselves when making choices, but they don't understand the nature of the true God. Contemporary rationalists rightly use faculties of reason and logic to make choices, but they don't acknowledge the God who is sovereign over the minds of all people. Contemporary heart followers rightly know that what we want has a legitimate place in our goals, but they don't recognize the deceitfulness of the sinful heart or the lordship of God over our desires.

To properly understand the full picture of our framework for decision-making, the best place to begin is with the Bible.

Why Am I Here?

While many of us don't realize it, our worldview influences the way we approach decisions. A worldview provides the framework

through which we see, understand, and process all of life. Every worldview answers four main questions regarding human life: “Why am I here?” “What went wrong with the world?” “What is the solution?” and “Where is history heading?” While these questions may sound ethereal, their answers have incredibly real results in our day-to-day lives.

Even those who would not consider themselves religious adhere to some form of a worldview. Atheists have a certain view of the world, and this view cannot be separated from the way they approach decisions. For example, someone who does not believe in a supernatural being likely lives by the mantra, “Let us eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” If our lives are confined to the actual years we live on the earth, then such a short-term view will inform the daily habits of those who adhere to this view.

Thankfully, God has not left us to our own devices to answer these worldview questions. Unlike the pagan gods that were mere inventions of the people who believed in them, God has given us his inspired, inerrant, and infallible word. The first two chapters of Genesis answer our questions regarding the origin and purpose of human life.

In Genesis 1:26, we find the members of the Trinity talking among themselves about their purposes in creating humanity, saying, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” Humanity was not created out of boredom or some other lack in our God, but rather out of the fullness of the Trinity. We were created in the image of a relational and personal God who is self-revelatory. We were created out of relationship and for relationship. Thus the decisions we make about where to work, whom to marry, how to spend our money and time, and the myriad of other questions we

rightly ask should be made within the backdrop of our relationship to God and his purposes for humanity at large.

When God created us and uniquely stamped us with his image, he set us apart from the rest of creation. As the psalmist poetically muses, “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?” (Ps. 8:3–4).

As his image bearers, we have souls that have been breathed to life by the very breath of God (Gen. 2:7). We have the capacity to reason, create, and communicate. In creating us, God granted us the ability to choose freely. In God’s place we might have chosen to create automatons programmed always and only to do our will; however, God wanted a volitional relationship with us. As such, he gave Adam and Eve real boundaries and real choices with real consequences. Having provided them with everything they could possibly need and beyond, he commanded Adam, who was to inform Eve, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:16–17).

Ample trees grew for their enjoyment. It was the orchard of all orchards. They had everything they needed, yet in their free will, they chose to disobey God by eating from the one tree forbidden them. Lured by the lies of the great enemy of God, a former angel who wanted more power than he was given, they began to doubt the character and goodness of their Creator God. Believing the lie that he was withholding good from them, they took matters into their own hands, deciding to eat the fruit that was forbidden.

Most books on decision-making fail to factor in the significance of this one decision, which has eternal and lasting consequences on our own decision-making. In this single decision, the representatives of humanity severed vital relationship with God. As we make decisions today, significant aftershocks of Adam and Eve's decision still shake us. Before we think about the real and pressing decisions set before us, we are invited to remember Christ's decision to redeem us from the consequences of our choices.

The Drama of Redemption

Our decisions have depth. Some decisions, like what to order from Grubhub or which streaming service to use, stand on the surface of our lives. Other decisions, like which career path to follow or which person to marry, lie a stratum or two below. You likely picked up this book to address some of these questions, and I promise we will get to them. But first we will plumb the depths of our hearts to address our spiritual decisions. While the surface and middle-strata decisions are significant, the Scriptures tell the tale of humanity's poor spiritual choices.

Though we live in very different times and cultures from God's people in the Old and New Testaments, we share the same spiritual dilemma at the deepest level. Like them, even when God makes his commands clear, we fail to fulfill them. By sins of commission (wrong things done) and sins of omission (right things left undone), our spiritual choices have created a chasm between us and our God. In his letter to Titus, the apostle Paul perfectly sums up the broken system and the one who finally stepped in to fix it:

We ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior. (Titus 3:3–6)

God graciously decided to reconcile his people to himself. Predicting the coming of Christ through the Holy Spirit, Isaiah wrote, “Truth is lacking. . . . The LORD saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede; then his own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him” (Isa. 59:15–16). Using poetic language of a warrior getting ready for battle, Isaiah describes Christ getting ready to come and bring salvation to his decision-decimated people. He wrote, “He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak” (Isa. 59:17).

Christ, the second person of the Trinity, was born into time and space. Being fully man and fully God, he perfectly made his decisions under the gaze of his heavenly father. As the second Adam, he perfectly did what the first Adam had failed to do. Just as the curse entered the world through Adam’s poor decision, salvation entered the world through Jesus’s life of God-honoring decisions (Rom. 5:12–21).

In the great exchange that took place on the cross of Christ, God made the sinless one to bear the consequences of every wrong decision made by his children (2 Cor. 5:21). In the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, believers regain the ability to make decisions that will please God. In Christ, we are no longer judged on the sum of our disobedient decisions but on the sum of his obedient decisions. From that secured standing before God, we are invited into living lives that please him, decision by decision. In sending the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, to indwell the hearts of those who believe in him, Christ has given us a live-in guide in our decision-making.

The Drama of Decision-Making

Christ's finished work invites believers into the drama of decision-making. As his image bearers, we have freedom to make decisions that honor God. Through the indwelling Spirit who illuminates the word of God to make it understandable to us, we have been given all we need to make decisions with the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16).

In Christ, we pick up where Adam and Eve failed. We're able to make decisions that honor God and advance his ways on earth. We have great freedom in the decisions we make, provided they do not go against his revealed word or quench the Spirit who indwells us, which we will address in subsequent chapters. God created us to be his children, not robots. As such, God extends to us the incredible and often weighty compliment of being decision makers.

In *The Screwtape Letters*, a fictional book of letters written from a senior demon to a young demon, C. S. Lewis depicts the demons

as utterly confused as to why God, referred to as “the Enemy,” would allow free will in his creatures:

You must have often wondered why the Enemy does not make more use of His power to be sensibly present to human souls in any degree He chooses and at any moment. But you now see that the Irresistible and the Indisputable are the two weapons which the very nature of His scheme forbids Him to use. Merely to override a human will (as His felt presence in any but the faintest and most mitigated degree would certainly do) would be for Him useless. He cannot ravish. He can only woo.³

We may imagine life would be easier if God were to write out his will in the clouds or send a full blueprint of his plans for us. But when we wish for a simpler approach to decision-making, we ask for less than God intends for us. He would have us grow into mature sons and daughters who learn to make decisions through apprenticeship to him. Through his Spirit and his word, he will gradually form us into the kind of people who use their free will to obey, honor, and advance his ways. While a long and messy process, this glorifies him and affirms our dignity as his unique image bearers.

Before we move on in our discussion about the decision-making process, we are invited to stop and kneel before one of the many profound mysteries of the Christian faith.

God’s Sovereignty and Man’s Responsibility

Given that God is infinite, inexhaustible, unlimited, and eternal in his very nature, our attempts to understand him and his ways

in the world are marked by a necessary mystery. The Christian life is riddled with mysteries that our finite minds struggle to comprehend. Our God is three in one, one in three. Jesus Christ was fully God and fully man. We are righteous in Christ and being made righteous simultaneously.

God, speaking through the prophet Isaiah, tells his people that his thoughts are not their thoughts, and his ways are not their ways. Just as the heavens are higher than the earth, God's ways are much higher than ours (Isa. 55:8–9). In his classic book *The Pursuit of God*, A. W. Tozer powerfully captures how we ought to respond when we bump into the mysteries of God. He writes, "The believing man does not claim to understand. He falls to his knees and whispers, 'God.'"⁴

When we approach the topic of God's will, we have to acknowledge the mystery of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. When we face mysteries like these, we often find ourselves leaning heavily toward one side or the other. However, we do so at the peril of truth. If we lean too heavily on the side of man's responsibility, we will crush ourselves under the weight of decisions. Without the balancing and buoying reality of God's sovereignty, thousands of possibilities and potential consequences will paralyze us. Indeed, the overwhelming statistics of anxiety and depression gripping our world give evidence that we are leaning too heavily on man's responsibility. Without the knowledge of a good God who, in the words of Martin Luther, sovereignly draws straight with crooked sticks, decisions can lead to crippling fear and debilitating anxiety.

On the other hand, if we lean too heavily on God's sovereignty, we erroneously depict God as a puppeteer. We imagine him mov-

ing the strings to do what pleases him while we sit powerlessly pulled in various directions. This line of thinking, left unchecked by the balancing reality of our responsibility as image bearers, can quickly lead to fatalism and nihilism.

In his book *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, J. I. Packer addresses the mystery of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. He uses the long-disputed scientific debate over the nature of light to help us understand this *antimony*, which is "an apparent incompatibility between two apparent truths."⁵ As physics was developing, some scientists and experiments proved, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that light behaved as a wave. Other scientists and experiments proved, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that light behaved as a particle. Both sides were certain that only one could be true, but both were wrong. Light is both wave and particle at the same time.

Packer continues to describe the antinomy between God's sovereignty, represented by God as king, and man's responsibility, represented by God as judge. Both are scripturally supported, sometimes in the same passage. He concludes, "Man is a responsible moral agent, though he is divinely controlled; man is divinely controlled, though he is also a responsible moral agent."⁶

We are free to make decisions, and those decisions matter. At the same time, our God is sovereign over every action and consequence, directing all human history toward his desired ends. Both are true simultaneously. While our human minds want to reconcile this antinomy, C. H. Spurgeon reminds us, "I never reconcile friends."⁷ Rather than seeking to reconcile them, we are invited to kneel in awe before the God who holds all things together (Ps. 95:6; Col. 1:17). Elisabeth Elliot shows us how by

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stating, “Next to the Incarnation, I know of no more staggering and humbling truth than that a sovereign God has ordained my participation.”⁸

Now that we have knelt in wonder and worship at the mystery of God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility, we can continue to press forward in learning about our part in biblical decision-making.