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Making Wise Decisions

Jeremiah 6:16

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Sometimes people ask me questions like, “*How do I know what God wants me to do?*” Or “*How can I know God’s will in this situation?*” “*I wish I knew what direction I should go in. I want to make the right decision, but I feel lost.*” Jeremiah 6:16 provides a path for us to follow when we truly wish to **make wise decisions** and to know God’s will for our lives so we can do it.

“Thus **says** the Lord: **Stand** at the crossroads, and **look**, and **ask** for the ancient paths where the good way lies; and **walk** in it, and find **rest** for your souls.

But they said, ‘*We will not walk in it.*’

This verse is brief, yet profound in its implications for making wise decisions. The first thing to note is “**Thus says the Lord.**” This means we 1) **Listen**, which reflects a **belief that God communicates with us**. If you want to know God’s will for your life or in a particular situation, first you need to believe God is willing and able to communicate with you. God speaks to us through the Bible, prayer, other people, and even through God’s creation.

In Jeremiah, “*Thus says the Lord,*” announces that what follows is important for us to hear. One aspect of spiritual growth is learning to hear, recognize and listen to God’s voice. On the Wednesday after Christmas, Jill and I met friends for lunch in New York City before Jill attended The Nutcracker ballet with one of them. I spent a couple hours walking in Manhattan, mostly in 843-acre Central Park which I had never done before. In the middle of that huge city, people were bird watching, walking dogs, and enjoying the afternoon. As I walked I remembered a story about two men who were in Manhattan, the streets buzzing with people, cars, horns honking, sirens wailing, just as it was as I was walking. One man was a native New Yorker, and the other a visiting farmer from Kansas. Suddenly the farmer stopped in his tracks. “*Hold on,*” he said, “*I hear a cricket.*” His friend replied, “*Are you kidding? Even if there were a cricket around here, which isn’t likely, you’d never be able to hear it over all the noise.*”

The farmer remained quiet for a few moments, then walked several steps to the corner where a bush was growing in a large cement planter. He turned several leaves over and found the cricket. The New Yorker was flabbergasted. *“What great ears you have,”* he said. *“No,”* the farmer replied, *“it’s a matter of what you’ve been conditioned to listen for. Look, I’ll show you.”* With that, he pulled a handful of coins from his pocket and let them drop to the sidewalk. As if on cue, every head on the block turned. *“You see,”* said the farmer, *“you hear what you want to hear. It’s a matter of what you’re listening for.”*¹

Have you been conditioned to listen for God speaking to you - through the Bible, through inner promptings, the events of your day, and conversations with others? If we’re not intentionally listening for God’s voice, we shouldn’t be surprised that we don’t hear anything. **When you think you hear God speaking, the first thing to do is stop and try to listen with focused attention.**

*“Thus says the Lord, **Stand at the crossroads.**”* 2) Stand implies we **Stop and Reflect**. Most accidents that happen at intersections occur because someone is speeding or fails to stop at a red light or stop sign. When you find yourself at a crossroads, you’re at a place of decision, a moment when your future will be shaped by the direction in which you go. When you’re at the crossroads the thing to do is to **stop and reflect** and not to rush forward as fast as you can. When the pace of your life is picking up, when changes are coming at you with increasing speed and frequency, the thing to do **may not be** to keep trying to go faster. There’s more to life than increasing it’s speed. You may need to stop, stand still, and catch your breath. Even doing this twice during the day for 15 minutes can help calm and settle you down. In times of decision and change when you need to determine your direction, rather than charging ahead, you may need to retreat, to slow down and stand still. There’s no substitute for reflection and learning.

*“Thus says the Lord: **Stand** at the crossroads, and **Look.**”* **3. Looking implies Gathering Information.** Many years ago, an older lady in our church, who has since

¹ William J. Bausch, *A World of Stories*, Twenty-Third Publications, Mystic, CT, 1999, 339.

died, was in an automobile accident. I received a call from her daughter, and I went to the hospital to visit her. I sat down next to her hospital bed and asked, “*How are you feeling? Can you tell me what happened?*” She said, “*Well, it was raining, and I was waiting to pull out onto Main Street. **I looked** and saw a black car coming very fast. And I pulled out and he just hit me.*” Thankfully, everyone involved was okay, but **it’s not enough to look if you don’t respond correctly to what you see coming.**

God says when you’re at the crossroads and have to make a decision, **look** as far as you can down the different roads which is a way of saying, gather as much information as you can about the consequences of the decision. For example, “*The road is wet, there’s a car coming quickly, I wonder what will happen if I pull out right in front of it?*” When you face a decision, ask yourself, what are the likely results of the choices you might make? What will you think about this decision ten or even twenty years from now? One of the most helpful things to ask yourself before any decision small or large is, what would my “ten years in the future self” want me to do in this situation? Often times we don’t look far enough down the road at the consequences of our choices before making a decision. What would your self ten years from now want you to put in your body? How would your future self want you to approach spending and saving money, or nurturing your spiritual life or whether to exercise regularly or investing time in building good relationships? The consequences of some decisions, whether positive or negative can be anticipated, but sometimes we can’t foresee all the possibilities, opportunities, or dangers that a certain way holds for us, that’s why the next step is vital.

“Thus **says** the Lord: **Stand** at the crossroads, and **look**, and

“**Ask for the ancient paths where the good way lies.**”

4. Asking means seeking direction and guidance. Looking implies our action, we’re doing the looking and using our powers of vision and discernment to help ourselves. **Asking** implies we’re going beyond our own abilities, seeking the Lord’s guidance. Asking demonstrates you’re humble enough to recognize there’s wisdom beyond yourself in God’s Word, God’s Spirit and in other people that may benefit you as you seek God’s guidance in making wise decisions. And while we live in a culture that worships at the altar of the new, the latest, and the cutting edge, Jeremiah invites us to

ask for the **ancient paths** where the good way lies. The ancient paths are where we get **our guiding spiritual principles** about things like faith, hope, love, kindness, mercy, honesty, humility, service, generosity, courage, compassion, honor, dignity, and respect. None of these are new, they're ancient and we should be asking how to walk in them more and more and we should expect those we look up to also to walk in them and live them. The higher a person's level of responsibility or leadership, the greater the consequences are for following these ancient virtues or not. It's discouraging when people at high levels of religion, politics, or business don't live these ancient virtues because it hurts so many more people than just themselves and those close to them.

The good way isn't hidden or obscured but it may not always be easy. It wasn't easy for Jeremiah. The message God gave him to preach was a hard one that condemned religious and political leaders as well as the people for their disobedience, injustice, evil, and worship of other gods. Jeremiah struggled with God, cried all the time, was put on trial by his people, had the scrolls with his prophetic words burned, and he endured opposition right up to the end of his life.

Jesus, in his most well-known sermon, said to those who were listening (Matthew 7:13-14), *“Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. For the gate is narrow and **the road is hard that leads to life**, and there are few who find it.”*

G.K. Chesterton wrote years ago, *“Christianity has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult, and left untried.”* One of the best things you can do for yourself to help yourself grow and mature is to do something that you find difficult, hard, or challenging every day, and that includes living as Jesus teaches us to live the good way of the ancient paths.

“Thus **says** the Lord: **Stand** at the crossroads, and **look**, and

“**Ask** for the ancient paths **where the good way lies and**”

5. “Walk in it.” Once you've looked and listened and received instruction and guidance then it's up to you to **take responsibility for the direction of your life.** Jeremiah reminds us of our own responsibility for our life. He warned the people of his time, and

they refused to listen. They refused to walk in the ancient paths. They looked to blame their enemies, God, even the prophet himself, but not themselves. Unwilling to hear, unwilling to obey, they were heading toward catastrophe. When it comes to making wise decisions, you don't want to suffer paralysis by analysis. You can't wait forever to make a decision, often times this process I'm talking about needs to be done in a relatively short period of time. There comes a moment when you need to get moving. You need to start walking in the direction God has revealed to you. Some of this walking and taking responsibility is part of maturing, which sadly, some people never do.

The Result of listening to the Lord, standing and reflecting, looking and gathering information, asking for direction and guidance, and then taking action is we will

“Find rest for our souls.” This is similar to when Jesus says, *“Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you **rest**. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and **you will find rest for your souls**. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”* Why would someone who is weary and carrying heavy burdens volunteer to take on another yoke? Perhaps because it's a yoke custom fitted for us. Yoked with and walking with Jesus in the ancient and good paths God has laid out for us, we will find rest. Rest doesn't mean inactivity or laziness that leads to spiritual weakness. Rather we'll have the assurance that comes from knowing the direction we're taking, the decision we've made, has been shaped by using our best abilities of discernment and observation as well as the guidance of God.

Sadly, Jeremiah's people would not follow this advice and they paid dearly for taking the wrong path at the crossroads. They chose poorly. They made a bad decision. God knows we all take wrong turns. We end up at dead ends or in a bad part of town and wonder how we got there or if we'll ever get out. God's grace is so great that even when we're disobedient, God keeps trying to speak to us and direct us on the right path.

When God's people failed to listen, God ultimately sent Jesus to make the way plain. Jesus called people who didn't follow God's ancient, good path “lost.” Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. He came to help us find and stay on God's good path that

leads to joy and abundant life and once we begin following him, our task becomes to help others to do the same thing.

Have ever gotten lost driving? It doesn't happen as often anymore with smart phones and navigation systems, but before those existed, sometimes people would get lost driving. Years ago, we were visiting Jill's parents in Pennsylvania, and we drove to Frackville where my father-in-law grew up, to visit relatives. Frackville is in the anthracite coal region of upstate Pennsylvania. It was well after dark and terribly foggy when we were preparing to leave Frackville to return to Newtown. We had two cars, and I was impatient to begin the drive back to Jill's parent's house, so instead of waiting for everyone else to come out and following their car, I asked which way to go and left with Nathan in my car with me.

The fog was awful, and the mountain roads are steep and curvy and driving was incredibly difficult and dangerous. I wasn't sure if I was traveling the right way, but I kept on going because I recognized buildings and places I was passing. It was a good 20-30 minutes before I realized I was going in the wrong direction. We were going *north* toward Knoebles amusement park where we'd been numerous times, which is why the landmarks looked familiar. I needed to go *south* to get to Jill's parent's home.

I decided to do a decidedly un-male thing; I stopped and asked for directions at a mini mart. There were three people in line and a guy behind the counter. I looked them over to see who I thought could best help me get where I needed to go. I picked the older, stocky man and asked him if he could tell me how to get on Route 61. He said, "*Just pull out of here and go left and then turn right at the light.*" I repeated back what he said, but of course I didn't have anything to *write down* what he told me, and the gas station was on a corner, and I wasn't sure which road he meant to pull out on. Back in the car, I looked at a piece of paper called "a map" and figured out where we were.

Angry that my impatience had gotten us off the right road and wasted so much time (I was 0 for 2 on fruit of the Spirit at that moment), I pulled out of the mini-mart parking lot and was immediately shrouded in the foggy darkness. I was driving slowly, and a car came up behind me driving much faster than I was comfortable going so I pulled over into an empty parking lot so it could pass. The car followed me in and pulled

alongside. *“Great,”* I thought to myself, *“what else can happen on a foggy, dark Saturday night in the middle of nowhere?”* I lowered the passenger window, and it was the man who had given me directions in the mini mart. He said, *“Follow me, and I’ll lead you back to Frackville.”* With that he pulled out. He obviously knew the way and the road like a native. All I did was follow his taillights until we were outside of town. He pulled over and I pulled next to him. Our windows went down again, and he asked,

“Do you know where you’re going?”

I told him the route numbers I needed to take, but he asked me again,

“Where do you want to go?” *“Newtown, in Bucks County,”* I replied.

“Okay, that’s the best way to get there,” he said.

I thanked him very much for his help in getting me on the right road and in the right direction and he replied, *“Well, I’m a retired State Trooper and I worked in this area for years. I could tell by the way you were driving that you were unsure of where you were going.”* I asked him, *“Are you going to church tomorrow?”* and he said no, they had already gone earlier that evening. So, I said, *“The next time you see your priest tell him you helped a lost Baptist pastor from Cape Cod get back on the right road.”*

It seems to me you can tell by the way some people are living that many are unsure of where they’re going, that they are in several senses of the word, lost. Many people seem to be accelerating down the road to nowhere at faster and faster speeds, forgetting that if you’re lost, going faster only gets you further away from where you need to be.

It’s always been and always will be the role of Christians and churches to help those who are lost to find their way to Jesus and to the ancient paths where the good way lies, and true life is found. Those of us who have decisions to make, who are unsure of what God wants us to do, those of us who are unsure which road to take, may need to humble ourselves and stop and ask God for directions. Like the retired state trooper Jesus asks, ***“Do you know where you’re going? Where do you want to***

go?" Jesus knows the road of life like a native, even in its darkest, foggiest, most dangerous moments. If you follow his taillights, he'll lead you safely home.

A Prayer for Guidance

Trusted Guide,
you are my mentor and Inspiration,
my home of good choices and decisions.
You help me search with confidence
as I find my way to inner peace.

Please gather your wisdom around me.
Guide me carefully as I make choices
about how to use my energy positively.
Place your discerning touch on my mind
so that I will think clearly.
Place your loving influence on my heart
so I will be more fully attentive
to what is really of value.

Teach me how to hear your voice,
to be aware of what is in my mind and heart,
to attend to your wisdom in those around me,
to acknowledge my intuitions and ponder my dreams,
to listen to the earth and all of life,
for in each piece of existence you are guiding me.

Guide of my life,
thank you for all you have given to me.
Reveal my spiritual path
and direct me in the living of it.
Lead me to inner peace and oneness with you.

(Adapted from: *Prayers to Sophia: Deepening Our Relationship with Holy Wisdom*,
Joyce Rupp. Sorin Books, Notre Dame, IN, used with permission)

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. Do you have a process you follow when you make decisions? Is it the same for small and large choices, or does it vary? What components are part of making good decisions for you?
- 2.. How would you describe the “*ancient paths, where the good way lies*” that the Lord speaks about through Jeremiah?
3. On a scale of 1 to 10, how good a listener are you? How do you hear the Lord’s voice speaking to you in your life – for example, in your Bible reading, in worship, prayer, nature, and through the counsel of family and friends?
4. In Jeremiah 6:16 the Lord encourages us to “*stand at the crossroads and look,*” how good are you at stopping, reflecting, and observing? What practices do you engage in to help you slow down and assess where you are?
5. The Lord says, “*Ask for the ancient paths where the good way lies.*” Asking means seeking direction and guidance. How comfortable are you asking for directions, guidance, or help? Why do you think that is?
6. How will Jeremiah 6:16 impact how you make decisions going forward?