

How Do We Make the Right Choices?

Under the Hood #7 | August 11, 2024 | 8:00, 9:30, 11:00 AM | Steve Howell



Opening

In the book of 1 Chronicles, there is an interesting story about King David. In chapter 21, David gives in to a temptation... **to do math!** (*I know what many of you are thinking: "I knew math was evil!"*). It's not actually the math part that is the problem;¹ it's what he was using the math *for*.



David talks to the commander of his army and orders him to do a census – a headcount of the available military-aged men (lit. those who “drew the sword”). “*Add them up,*” David says.

On the surface, this seems like a smart idea. All of us need to know the resources we have at our disposal, whether it is dollars in the bank account, kids in the car, or Oreos in the pantry. For a king to know the number of potential military recruits is important...at least for a normal king.

But King David isn't normal, because the kingdom of Israel isn't normal. Israel a special *theological* identity, and the reaction of David's general shows that we are dealing with an unusual *spiritual* situation here.

“But Joab replied, “May the Lord increase the number of his people a hundred times over! But why, my lord the king, do you want to do this? Are they not all your servants? Why must you cause Israel to sin?”” (1 Chronicles 21:3, NLT)

Rather than endorsing this census of fighters, the general Joab begs David to reconsider. Joab's reaction informs us that David seemed to be putting his trust in the **number of troops** he had rather than the **God who provides victory**. While God *could* provide victory with large numbers, he could also bless and multiply a tiny army as needed, or He could even win the battle himself. There was no reason for the king serving under the divine Warrior – the Lord of Heaven's Armies! – to put his trust in a few extra guys with swords!



David pushes forward with his sinful choice, though. The census takes place, and God is displeased. Rather than overlook this offense, God decides to justly punish David's sin...but He gives David a choice.

*“Then the Lord spoke to Gad, David's seer. This was the message: “Go and say to David, ‘This is what the Lord says: I will give you three choices. Choose one of these punishments, and I will inflict it on you.’” So Gad came to David and said, “These are the choices the Lord has given you. You may choose **three years of***

¹ Why should it be? Math is awesome! 😊

famine, three months of destruction by the sword of your enemies, or three days of severe plague as the angel of the Lord brings devastation throughout the land of Israel. Decide what answer I should give the Lord who sent me.” (1 Chronicles 21:9–12, NLT)

3 days, 3 months, or 3 years. Which should David choose?



The Right Choice

Making the right decision is maybe one of the hardest choices we face. Each day, we are confronted with an onslaught of options. Many are inconsequential, but many are serious. We wrestle with knowing which course of action to take, and we struggle with the implications of our selections.

How do we make the right choices?

I know you and I both wrestle with decision-making. It is a frequent conversation for pastoral counseling at the church, for worksite counseling in the office, for parental counseling at home, and for internal counseling in our own heads!

“What do we do?”

“Is this right?”

“Should I move forward with this option?”

How do we make the right choices?

In this final message in our “Under the Hood” sermon series, we’re going to give you some guidance. Throughout the series, we’ve been trying to identify concrete ways that we can improve as followers of Jesus. We’ve been looking at *specific, real-world* steps we can take to gain practical power in our faith.

There are many other areas we could discuss beyond what has been covered (*and maybe we’ll come back to a sermon series sequel in the future!*), but today the focus is on **decision-making**. Let’s make the best choices we can make...in all kinds of situations!



To gain insight, our approach today is going to take a cue from a classic method for repairing vehicles. I’ve mentioned it before because it is the #1 tool of the home mechanic: **YouTube!** *When in doubt...pull up a video on YouTube!* This method has single-handedly given me more confidence to tackle car repairs than almost anything else in the world. Except for a real-world mechanic beside you, YouTube is the best way to have an expert at your side to give you an example of how to do things, from changing spark plugs to replacing a head gasket (*or helping you realize that a “minor” repair is way out of your league!*).

Examples are powerful!

So, as we think about how we make good decisions, let’s peek in on a few people who have “been there, done that” in Scripture. Let’s watch their examples, and then piece

together some of the wisdom we gather into five practical actions we could take as we work toward making the right choices!



Decision-Making Example #1: The Fiery Furnace

One example of decision-making comes from the Old Testament book of Daniel. It's one you may already know.

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon ordered the people of his nation to pay homage to him by bowing down and worshipping a giant statue of the king. Now as you know, for anyone who worships the True God, this was clearly wrong; it was clearly idolatry. Because it was wrong, three men who worshiped Yahweh ignored the command of the king. Their names were Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.



Under penalty of death – by incineration in a fiery furnace – the men were directed to worship King Nebuchadnezzar.

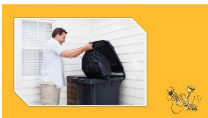
“Then Nebuchadnezzar flew into a rage and ordered that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego be brought before him. When they were brought in, Nebuchadnezzar said to them, “Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, that you refuse to serve my gods or to worship the gold statue I have set up? I will give you one more chance to bow down and worship the statue I have made when you hear the sound of the musical instruments. But if you refuse, you will be thrown immediately into the blazing furnace. And then what god will be able to rescue you from my power?”” (Daniel 3:13–15, NLT)

What a choice! Worship...or die.

How do they make the right choice?

In this case, as we look at their answer, we find that they *frame the choice correctly!*

Most decisions are impacted by how we frame the choice.



When your wife asks, “Do you want to take out the trash?” it requires you to frame the choice. Does she mean,

- *“Would you enjoy taking out the trash?” (a preference concern) or is she meaning,*
- *“Will you contribute to my happiness by taking care of this household chore?” (a partnership concern)*

Clearly, she means the latter! Framing the question properly impacts my response and helps me make a happier choice!

For Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, the option presented by King Nebuchadnezzar could be framed one of two ways:

Frame the Choice Correctly

Physical Safety vs
Eternal Obedience

- This is a **physical safety** issue. We must decide if we follow the king's order and stay safe, or if we disobey his order and die a painful death.... OR,
- This is an **eternal obedience** issue. We must decide if our loyalty to God matters more than our loyalty to the king...regardless of the physical outcome.

Those are quite different outlooks on the situation. And the three men chose the latter:

"Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego replied, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God whom we serve is able to save us. He will rescue us from your power, Your Majesty. But even if he doesn't, we want to make it clear to you, Your Majesty, that we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you have set up.""
(Daniel 3:16–18, NLT)

If we are going to make the right decisions, we need to look at the issue properly and understand what we're really choosing.

We need to frame the choice correctly.

(By the way, in case you didn't know the story out of Daniel, the three men are thrown in, but God miraculously saves them from harm!)



Decision-Making Example #2: The Garden

A second example of decision-making comes from the New Testament Gospels. It is recorded in several places, but I'll focus on the Gospel of Matthew this morning.



The time is late. The location is the Garden of Gethsemane outside of Jerusalem. The person is Jesus. He knows the time is short and that soon He will face an excruciating death. The cross has always been His future. This is how Jesus would satisfy the penalty you and I deserve for sin; He would take our deserved place and die for our sins.

As Jesus waits for his soon betrayal, He prays in this garden location.

"He went on a little farther and bowed with his face to the ground, praying, "My Father! If it is possible, let this cup of suffering be taken away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine."" (Matthew 26:39, NLT)

Here is a difficult internal decision. Jesus isn't wrestling with knowing which way He *should* go – that part is abundantly clear. Instead, he is wrestling with the choice of whether He *would* go. He is gaining strength to do the thing He knows is right.

Sometimes decision-making isn't really about the decision. It is about steeling yourself for the moment.

Power to Choose Correctly

Strength to do what
you already know you
should...

- It is about walking through the door to turn in your two weeks' notice.
- It is about picking up the phone to call your dad after you wreck the car.
- It is about opening your mouth to apologize and admit you were wrong.

You know the good that you should do, you just need a bit more power to do it. We are like the father who approached Jesus for the healing of his son. He knows Jesus is the only hope for a miracle...so if Jesus could help, please help!

“And Jesus said to him, “If you can’t! All things are possible for one who believes.” Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, “I believe; help my unbelief!”” (Mark 9:23–24, ESV)

How do we make the right choice?

Many times, the right choice is obvious, and we just need the strength to do it. That’s why Jesus prays in the Garden, “Not my will, but Your will.”

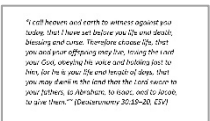
If we are going to make the right decisions, we need the will to act.

We need the power to choose correctly.



Decision-Making Example #3: The Covenant

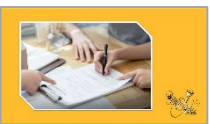
For the third example of decision-making, I want to take you back to the time of Moses. In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses is retelling the Law of God to the people of Israel before they enter the Promised Land for the first time. He has reviewed the entire covenant, and now he presents this final choice.



“I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.”” (Deuteronomy 30:19–20, ESV)

Good decisions often rest on knowing the outcome of your choice.

Clearly, not all outcomes are obvious. You can’t know how a stock will perform, nor whether the fish will bite in that section of the lake, nor if the business you open today will have enough customers to keep the doors open next month. Yet many outcomes do have clear consequences.



When you sign the paperwork to buy a house, that is a choice with very specific and clear consequences. You will have a set financial obligation to pay. You will have specific obligations as a property owner. You will have defined boundaries for where you live.

If you don't want to live in that location, or if you can't afford the payment, or if you don't want the obligations to take care of the lawn or fix the hot water heater...then don't sign! The consequences of your choice are clear.

Outcome of our Choice
Understanding the obligations of our choice...

So it was with Moses. He gave the Israelites the Law and told them the consequences. "I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse." Knowing the very clear outcome of the people's choice, Moses admonishes them to "choose life!"

If we are going to make the right decisions, we need to understand what is at stake.

We need to consider the outcome of our choice.

Making the Choice

Making the Choice

There is biblical wisdom here for our own choices when we consider all these examples.

- We need to **frame** the choice correctly.
- We need the **power** to choose correctly.
- We need to consider the **outcome** of our choice.

But maybe it would be most helpful to go back to King David as he faces his choice: 3 years of famine, 3 months of destruction by enemies, or 3 days of severe plague. Which should David choose?

"Then David said ..., "I am in great distress. Let me fall into the hand of the Lord, for his mercy is very great, but do not let me fall into the hand of man."" (1 Chronicles 21:13, ESV)

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(1 Chronicles 21:13, ESV)

No matter what we decision we face in any situation, this is a great response. "*Let me fall into the hand of the Lord!*" For David, it didn't really matter which one he chose (for the record, he selected the 3 days of plague). What mattered was that in his decision, he was looking to God alone.

Experience vs Response

Experience vs Response

Let me tell you an important truth: most of the decisions you make in life don't really matter. We might stress about them, but when we reach the end of our lives, those decisions are mostly meaningless.

Our decisions will impact the **experiences** we have. Your choice might mean the difference between being rich or middle-class. Your choice might mean the difference between being popular or an outsider. Your choice might mean the difference between a comfortable afternoon or a fight-filled evening. The choice will affect the *experience* you have.

But the experience we have is secondary to **the One** we experience it *with* and *for* (aka God!). Our decisions impact which experiences we will face (wealth, health, family), but it is our **response to God** *through* the experience that truly matters.

For the Christian, we are all going to end up with the same results... eventually.

"For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words." (1 Thessalonians 4:16-18, ESV)

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(1 Thessalonians 4:16–18, ESV)

That is the outcome for Christian billionaires and Christian paupers. It is true for Christian spouses and Christian singles. It is true of Christians who died of unexpected heart attacks and Christians who lived to see great-grandchildren. It is true of Christians who live in Kansas and Christians who live in Kenya. It is true of Christians who are known globally and those who live in obscurity.

The choices we make may impact our experience *up to* that point, but they will not *change* our future...UNLESS the choices cause us to reject Jesus!

So, here's what that means.

- **"Framing the choice correctly"** means deciding how it hurts or helps your relationship with God.
- Having the **"power to choose correctly"** means trusting the Holy Spirit to enable your response rather than leaning on your own strength.
- **"Considering the outcome of your choice"** means believing the promises and the warnings of God when He provides guidance.

If you want to make the "right" choice, you just need to know whether it is a choice that you do in obedience to Him or not.

"Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand." (Proverbs 19:21, ESV)

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Practical Ways to Make Right Choices



So, to wrap up our sermon and our series, let me give you five practical, real-world steps that can help you make the right choices as you follow God more closely.

Are you ready?



1. Choose the right flashlight.

If you want to make the right choices, you need to have clarity on the path ahead. You need the right kind of flashlight.

Scriptural Foundation: *“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”* (Psalm 119:105, ESV)

Why it works: Since the right choices are the ones that align us with God, His wisdom is what guides us best. The more you study your Bible, the more confident you can be that your path is right! Choose your Bible over self-help books, over podcasts, over sermons, over blogs, and over advice from friends. Start now to build up your internal database of decision-making direction from God so you can make better choices later!

Note: Ready to start? Go to a Bible study when Nite Life (our Wednesday night program) kicks off on August 28!

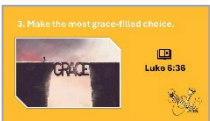


2. Stay teachable.

Did anyone here have life figured out when you were about seventeen or eighteen? I thought I did, too. But as I’ve gotten older, I’ve tried to become more teachable (still working on it!).

Scriptural Foundation: *“He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way.”* (Psalm 25:9, ESV)

Why it works: A person who stays teachable can pay attention to God’s direction. They can learn from mistakes and see where they drifted from His plan. Rather than be defensive and protect a broken decision-making process in your own head and/or heart, someone who is teachable can be led by God to make right choices.



3. Make the most grace-filled choice.

When choosing how to respond to people, you can emphasize right/wrong, or you can emphasize grace. Choose grace.

Scriptural Foundation: *“You must be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate.”* (Luke 6:36, NLT)

Why it works: If our choices are God-focused, then they must reflect His character. And nothing shows God’s character like grace. He gives to those who don’t deserve; he loves the unlovable. When we offer kindness to our enemies or forgiveness to those who offend us, we showcase God’s radical grace toward us. Rather than allowing our actions to be described as legalistic, cold, critical, or condescending...we can choose to act and speak in a way that brings mercy, love, wisdom, and encouragement to a situation. Those choices are more likely to be right



4. Act on the imperfect plan now.

Perfection is often the enemy of action. My old military boss used to quote General George S. Patton: “A good plan violently executed now is better than a perfect plan executed next week.” It’s not Scripture, but it’s still good advice, because it eliminates the tendency to hem and haw about following God.

Scriptural Foundation: *“I will hurry, without delay, to obey your commands.”*
(Psalm 119:60, NLT)

Why it works: A rambling prayer now is better than a flowery one next week. A choice to give something now is better than waiting a month to calculate what an exact title looks like. A choice to tell the truth now is better than a written explanation in six weeks. God wants our obedience now, no matter how much “better” it might be later. And obeying now is always the right choice.



5. Use pencil on your monthly planner.

Plans change, and decisions sometimes shift. So instead of a pen or permanent marker, use a pencil as a reminder that things can change.

Scriptural Foundation: *“Look here, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we are going to a certain town and will stay there a year. We will do business there and make a profit.” How do you know what your life will be like tomorrow? Your life is like the morning fog—it’s here a little while, then it’s gone. What you ought to say is, “If the Lord wants us to, we will live and do this or that.””* (James 4:13–15, NLT)

Why it works: If you know Who is in charge, it’s easier to reevaluate your choices as needed. Trust that if God allows a different situation (even if it is harder or less pleasant), He is still working to accomplish good for His Kingdom and to help you grow in your faith.

Closing



In the Howell household, we fight an ongoing battle almost every day. Someone asks, “What are we going to have for dinner?” and we start up the worst conversation ever. Maybe you have this conversation in your home, too. It goes something like this:

“What do you want for dinner?”

“I dunno... What do you want?”

“I don’t know...”

[Silence]

“Do you want _____?”

“No...”

“So, what do you want?”

“I don’t know...”

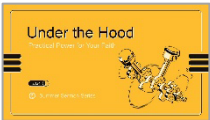
And Etc.

Eventually, we decide because starvation is a worse choice than Taco Bell or pigs in a blanket. But if we could remember the points we covered today, we'd remember that our choices are fine...as long as we've:



- **“Framed the choice”** of whether the decision hurts or helps our relationship with God.
- Relied on the Holy Spirit’s **“power to choose correctly”** if there is a spiritual imperative to follow.
- And **“considered the outcome of our choice”** for its impact on whether we can follow Jesus better.

If none of those apply, flip a coin, throw a dart at the map, or make a winner’s bracket to help you decide. Just remember that the choice that actually matters is all about following Jesus wherever He leads!



Prayer

Invitation

I pray that this series has been helpful for you. Maybe a few items each week prompted you to think, “I could do that!”

In the first sermon, I expressed my hope that these few, small changes would have a big result...and that the subsequent impact would drastically improve our collective experience with Jesus. Six months from now, this church might look different because of what happened here! A year later, you might look different because of what started today.

That remains my prayer. And during our time of invitation, I want to invite you to consider what you’ve learned. If you want to share one change you’re making or plan to make, we invite you to come forward and let us know so we can pray for you and support you as you make these real-world, specific changes!

Please do so as we stand and sing...

Prayer Requests

Notes

How do we make the right choices? (1 Chronicles 21)

Example #1: The Fiery Furnace (Daniel 3)

We need to frame the choice correctly.

Example #2: The Garden (Matthew 26:39)

We need the power to choose correctly.

Example #3: The Covenant (Deuteronomy 30:19-20)

We need to consider the outcome of our choice.

Making the Choice

Experience vs Response

(1 Thessalonians 4:16–18; Proverbs 19:21)

Practical Ways to Make Right Choices

- 1. Choose the right flashlight. (Psalm 119:105)*
- 2. Stay teachable. (Psalm 25:9)*
- 3. Make the most grace-filled choice. (Luke 6:36)*
- 4. Act on the imperfect plan now. (Psalm 119:60)*
- 5. Use pencil on your monthly planner. (James 4:13–15)*

Discussion Questions

Use the following questions based on today's sermon as a starting point for spiritual discussions with your family or a small group of Christian friends this week.

Fellowship—Relationship with a Purpose

- Are you a decisive person or not? How does your attitude toward decisions impact others around you?

Growth—Thinking About Spiritual Matters

- Make a list of Bible stories and characters where a decision was involved. How would three of them have been different if the main character made the opposite choice?
- Read the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in Daniel 3. What choice did they face? Why was it important to frame the choice in terms of obedience to God rather than personal safety? What is one area in your life where you need to focus more on obedience than safety or comfort?
- Share about a time when you knew the right thing to do, but just needed the strength and willpower to move forward. Do you trust God to provide that strength when needed? In what ways does He empower us?
- Read Deuteronomy 30:19–20. What does Moses mean when he says, “Choose life?”
- Do you tend to think about consequences before you decide? Why or why not?
- “Our decisions impact which experiences we will face (wealth, health, family), but it is our response to God *through* the experience that truly matters.” What is your reaction to this statement in the sermon? Talk about it.
- Which of the five “practical” steps in the sermon notes* are you most likely to use? Why did you choose that answer?
 - * *Answers to the blanks under “Practical Ways to Make Right Choices”:*
1. Flashlight; 2. Teachable; 3. Grace-Filled; 4. Imperfect; 5. Pencil.
- Brainstorm three more actions that could improve the way you pursue truth.

Prayer – Taking Your Thoughts to God

- Ask God to help you make the best decisions to follow Him closely each day.