**Guidance Core Seminar**

**Week 1**

**Introduction: Anxious or Restful?**

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Welcome to the Guidance core seminar! My name is Rob Satrom. Steven Wall and I will be your co-teachers over the next seven weeks. Our goal will be to look at what the Bible says about decision-making. Out in the wider Christian world, there are some really unbiblical ideas about how God guides our decisions. And yet the Bible gives us some amazing truth about how God *does* guide us. Our hope is that this class will provide some practical, Biblical help.

**Example of Anxious Decision-Making**

When I was a sophomore in high school, I loved playing the guitar. I had just bought a new electric guitar and I was in the market for an amplifier that would make me sound like a pro. I visited all the guitar shops and researched all the best amps to figure out which one I should buy. I finally settled on a small but powerful one – the Line 6 Flextone amp. I thought it was awesome. But after I purchased it, I almost immediately had the feeling that I had made a bad decision. I had never spent that much money on anything in my life and I couldn’t help but wonder if I had chosen the wrong amp. Well, the amp turned out to be fine. It served me well until I sold it to a friend of mine just a few years ago. This was a relatively trivial decision in the grand scheme of my life, but I wonder how many of you can relate to this experience. We agonize over a decision, do lots of research, finally get up the courage to pull the trigger, and then still agonize about the decision.

***Read Luke 12:22***

“And he said to his disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about your body, what you will put on.”

I’m not sure Jesus had the purchase of guitar amps on his mind when he gave this instruction to his disciples, but his message is clear. Don’t be anxious.

This is a class on decision-making. But we’re after more than just good decisions, as the title of this class suggests. We want you to be decision-makers who please God by *resting* in his goodness. Not anxious decision-makers who are constantly terrified about choosing the wrong path for life.

**Question for the class**: why would God be displeased with anxious decision-making?

**Answer**: When we’re anxious in our decision-making, we’re telling God that He is not big enough to guide us according to His perfect will. We’re saying God is not fully trustworthy to lead us where we need to go and provide for us what we need.

OK. So how do we get there? Today, we’ll start by considering how God guides us—looking at unbiblical notions of how he guides us, and then what the Bible says. Then we’ll say out a process we can use to make big decisions. And the rest of this class will simply double-click on different steps in that process.

So…how does God guide us?

**2. How Does God Guide Us?**

I think that Christians generally follow one of three different theories of how God guides us[[1]](#footnote-1).

1. Theory #1: Guidance = Discern God’s Plan. In other words, God has a secret, detailed plan for each of us and our job is to figure it out. We do that by “looking carefully into a combination of circumstances, spiritual promptings, inner voices, personal peace of mind, and the counsel of others (30).” This can sound right at first blush, but this theory has some problems. It sounds kind of cruel of God, doesn’t it—to subject us to this endless guessing game about such important decisions? Is that the God of the Bible? How do we ever know when what we’ve found is *his* plan? What happens if we don’t chose *his* plan? Does that mean we’ve somehow fallen out of his sovereign will? Why doesn’t he just come out and tell us what he wants?
2. Which leads to Theory #2: Guidance = Listening to God. The idea here is that God communicates directly with us and we need to listen to him. He may speak through a small, still voice in our heads or through dreams, or sometimes even audibly. Problem is, for how many of us is this our daily experience? We certainly see this happening in the Bible, but not very often. Should we expect this to be normal for Christians? While God *can* speak audibly to us or lead us through an impression or through a dream, this is not the way God usually operates. Most importantly, we’re *never* instructed to seek God’s guidance this way in scripture.
3. Theory #3: Guidance = Wisdom. In other words, the normal way God guides us is by making us wise. He gives us insight—through his Word, through prayer, through the counsel of others—that equips us to make wise choices.

Which of these most aligns with your practice when you have a big decision to make? What kind of prayers do you pray?

As you might imagine, the Bible’s teaching aligns to that third theory of guidance. Restful decision-making is the decision-making of wisdom. It’s not the decision-making that depends on something God doesn’t normally do (theory #2). And it’s not the anxious decision-making of hunting down an elusive God (theory #1).

What we want you to see through the course of this core seminar is that God usually guides us through His word. He does that by equipping us with wisdom and knowledge of how we should live our daily lives. Some key passages to underscore this are Hebrews 1:1, Hebrews 4:12, and Proverbs 2:1-6. Hebrews talks about how God speaks to us today – through His son and through His word. Proverbs teaches us that we’re to seek after wisdom.

We’ll get more into this in the weeks ahead. But for now I want to emphasize that when we seek God’s guidance, we shouldn’t expect His audible voice, writing in the sky, or a talking donkey. He *has* guided his people in that way, and he *can* guide that people in that way. But he has not *promised* to guide his people that way. In fact, we’re never taught in scripture to ask God to reveal the future to us. Instead, we’re told to seek after God in His word and to seek wisdom. That’s how decision-making should normally work for the Christian.

Any questions so far?

OK. I’ve given you the problems with the first two theories of guidance. But there’s a problem with the third as well.

**3. Our Enemy: Indwelling Sin**

Theories #1 and #2 aren’t particularly affected by sin, are they? Because guidance is something that basically happens *to* us. But if Biblical guidance essentially comes down to wisdom, then indwelling sin is a huge problem. Because it colors all that we do and all that we think. The Bible is riddled with examples of how sin blinds us and keeps us from making wise decisions. Think about David’s sin when he lusted after Bathsheeba. Giving in to those temptations led him to commit adultery and later murder.

[IF TIME PERMITS: SHARE EXAMPLE OF DATING A NON-CHRISTIAN IN COLLEGE AND HOW THAT SIN KEPT ME FROM BREAKING UP WITH HER AND FROM DEVELOPING TRANSPARENT AND HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER CHRISTIANS DURING MY FRESHMAN YEAR]

Think of three basic categories of decisions[[2]](#footnote-2), and how sin challenges our ability to make them well.

1. *Decisions of Righteousness*: By “righteousness” I mean doing what God has told us to do and not doing what he has prohibited. No debating here. But, of course, we all know from experience that even here—where God’s guidance is most clear—we disobey. In our sinfulness, we turn what is black and white into gray. Or we just rebel because we believe sin instead of God.
2. *Decisions of Judgment*: Of course, many decisions in life are legitimately not black and white. This is where we have Christian liberty and where we need to exercise good judgment. So…where to live, where to go to school, what to do for a living, how much life insurance to buy. But even in areas of Christian liberty, our motives and perceptions can be distorted by sin. And the counsel we receive from friends can be distorted by sin.
3. *Decisions of Triviality*: In other words, some decisions just don’t matter that much. But even here, indwelling sin is our enemy because of our tendency to confuse trivial matters with big decisions, and vice versa.

So if it’s true that God normally guides us through wisdom, we’re in big trouble! How can we make good decisions as Christians if our understanding of “wisdom” is so warped by sin?

**4. God Guides Us!**

The amazing news of the Bible is that even though we’re sinners, God truly does guide us.

1. Proverbs 16:33 says that the lot is cast, but every decision is from the Lord.
2. Philippians 4:19 says God promises to meet all our needs in Christ;
3. Matthew 10:30 says He knows every hair on your head;

God is in control, God has a plan for us, and God cares about even the most minute details of our lives. How amazing is that! And it’s even more amazing when you consider who we are in respect to God’s vast creation.

In his book *Step by Step,* James Petty tells us that the universe is 12 billion light years across. He points out that there is a galaxy for every grain of sand on the earth and that doesn’t even include the realms of heaven.

*“Against that backdrop [Petty writes], one person’s decision about a mother’s living situation, a job, a school, or a mate may seem incredibly insignificant outside the tiny, temporary sphere of our self-centered existence. Why would God be concerned with such fleeting details anyway? Why would it matter at all since everyone and everything ends up dead? Are we just living in denial, ignoring all the evidence for the insignificance of our decisions?”*

And then there’s Jeremiah 29:11. “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.”

We are less than a point of a pin in this vast universe. Our perspectives are marred by sin. And yet…and yet we serve a merciful, all-powerful God who knows everything about us, who has ordained every day of our lives, and who will guide us and provide for us according to the power of His will. How encouraging!

**5. A Framework for Decision-Making**

So how does this work? If we shouldn’t normally expect God to speak audibly “marry Sienna, not Jane!” and if we should distrust some of our basic instincts because of sin, how should we make decisions as Christians? Going back to that book by James Petty, he suggests seven steps that you’ll see on your handout. Of course, there’s no rules here; I don’t mean to get you tangled up in a complicated process. But as principles, I think these seven can be helpful. I’ll run through each of them, and then as I said before, we’ll double-click in several of them as we move through the rest of the class.

**1. Consecration**

What does it mean to really consecrate our decision? It means that we need to understand ourselves and God, and how our responsibility relates to his providence. We’ll spend the next three weeks fleshing out this context for decision-making. Next week we’ll consider God’s goals for our decisions, God’s will in week 3, and our goals for our decisions (week 4).

Take a look at Romans 12:1-2 in your handout.

**Romans 12:1-2**

***1****Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.* ***2****Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

This is what we want as Christians – to offer our lives as living sacrifices – to offer our jobs, our talents, our money, our marriages, our parenting – to God. Not to earn his favor, but as an overflowing response to his merciful love. We want to be transformed into His image – not the image of this world.

Amazingly, Paul says only then will we be able to test and approve what God’s will is!

We turn from the world and its desires; we turn from ourselves and our desires; we lay everything before God. We don’t hold anything back: job, spouse, kids, money, our desire for security, power, influence, sexual pleasure, hobbies, sports, entertainment, friends….fill in the blank…nothing.

Jesus puts this succinctly in Matthew 6:33, *But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well*

Seeking God’s guidance is not about using him to attain our own personal view of success. We consecrate our decisions to him, and our number one desire is to love and serve and enjoy him.

Over the next three weeks, we’ll keep much more deeply and practically into what it looks like to have a God-centered, God-sized context for seeking guidance.

**2. Information**

The next step is to gather information.

The most important piece of information to collect is the answer to a simple question. “Is one path of my decision prohibited by God?” If so, job done. We know what to do.

But of course, quite often the answer is “no.” Both options are permissible for a Christian. Should I marry Jane or Jenny? Should I go to law school or business school? How much should I save?

Proverbs 18:17 teaches us the importance of gathering information about our decision: *The first to present his case seems right, till another comes forward and questions him.*

And Paul encourages us in Romans 12:3 to gather information on ourselves.

***3****For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with* ***sober judgment****, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.*

You might think that gathering information is crass and unspiritual; after all, why do we need to gather information if God tells us what to do? Did Moses gather information about the fluid mechanics of parting a great body of water? Of course not. But remember, Moses hearing directly from God is not how God normally guides his people—neither in the Bible nor today. Because his *normal* means of guidance is the wisdom he gives us, collecting information is an important part of Christian decision-making.

**3. Supplication**

But gathering information doesn’t mean we can make decisions ourselves. Because we’re finite beings who are totally dependent on God, the “next step” (really, the ‘daily step’) is to pray. Because we know that God is in control of all things, we must ask God for guidance. Scripture provides specific examples of this:

**Ps. 25:5**

*Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long.*

**Luke 11:13**

*If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!"*

And the Bible reminds us that we should persist in prayer. Remember Jesus’ story of the persistent widow in Luke 18. She got justice from an unjust judge simply by being persistent. How much more will a good God answer our prayers as we persist.

When you have a big decision to make, do you pray every day? Or do you pray at the outset and then lose steam?

PRACTICALLY: what should we pray for? How should we pray?

* Pray for wisdom
* Reveal sin in my heart
* Sanctify my desires

**4. Consultation**

The Bible tells us to get advice from others. Not that the words they speak are revealed words of God to us. But part of wisdom is seeking advice from people other than yourself. This is something we see throughout the book of Proverbs.

**12:15** *The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice.*

**13:10** *Pride only breeds quarrels, but wisdom is found in those who take advice.*

**15:22** *Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.*

Heeding these commands to seek out counsel requires humility. We need humility to seek advice, and humility to heed it. We need humility to listen to advice when we it goes against what we want, and humility to ask people we suspect will disagree with us. We’ll talk much more about seeking counsel in the closing weeks of the class. But some quick advice:

***Who should you ask?***

Ask believing, mature Christians who know you and love you. Develop relationships around you that will come into play in times of guidance. Ask elders, pastors, teachers, and friends. And assume that the quality of advice you will receive is probably somewhat proportional to the quality of the relationship you built before you needed counsel.

***What about getting advice from non-Christians?*** God made non-Christians in His image and their counsel may often be wise. Whether or not you should seek their counsel depends on what advice you’re looking for. But consider the advice they give, what their worldview is, and filter what they’re telling you through the revealed will of God in His Word.

**5. Meditation**

Biblical meditation is nothing more than the process of thoughtfully and deliberately applying God’s word to our lives. Don’t worry, you do not have to learn to sit in that lotus position and hold your hands out for this one.

**Joshua 1:8**

*Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.*

Meditation is turning something over in your mind. It’s mulling God’s word, taking a serious look at it, thinking and praying about it and applying it to our lives. Meditation is what happens every Sunday night at CHBC, as we think together about a passage of scripture and how it applies to our lives.

**Pitfalls**

* Meditation is not seeking a euphoric state or “secret insights.”
* Meditation is not worrying – rather it’s fighting anxiety with God’s word!
* Meditation is not fantasizing – wishing for better life or circumstance.
* **Avoiding meditation** can lead to haste in decision-making. We want to go with our “gut.” Our immediate impressions are important, but they are not the whole story. In other words, don’t skip too fast past the meditation stage.
* **We can get stuck here.** We may blame our inaction on meditation, when the real problem is fear of making a decision.

**What does meditation look like?**

Practically, meditation may come in the form of journaling or an extended time of prayer, as you consider what scripture says, the advice of others, the information gathered and other factors. There is no set way to do this, so find whatever way is effective for you to chew on God’s word and digest it.

**6. Decision – “Just Do Something”**

There’s a time to pray, a time to consult, a time to gather information, but there is also a time to decide. Sometimes this is forced upon us, and sometimes we just must decide and get on with living out our Christian lives and trusting God.

Sometimes we’re asked to make decisions – even large ones – based on less information or confidence than we’d like. But we need to remember that that also is in the control of a sovereign God who loves us. He is about the business of spiritual grown and maturity—and sometimes we simply need to make a decision to the best of our ability and trust him for what happens. He will use what happens for our good, and he will use the difficulty of the decision for our good. The title of Kevin DeYoung’s book on guidance sums it up well – “Just Do Something.”

It’s easy to think that avoiding a decision will be less risky. But the exact opposite is true. Avoiding decisions is usually not “safe,” nor is it usually a good idea. A risk-free life does not exist, and we have no business trying to create it. A strong trust in God’s power and goodness should free us to make decisions without regret or anxiety.

A good piece of secular advice on making decisions is that if a decision is reversible—which almost every decision is—we should make it firmly and then move on. That’s especially true for Christians who trust that every decision we make, whether good or bad, is in the hand of an all-powerful God who loves us, who knows the future, and who is using that future to create for us a paradise beyond what we can imagine.

Boldness and confidence should be the mark of godly decision-making.

PRACTICALLY, how do we make a decision?

* I find it helpful to write down what I’ve learned through the steps of this process.
* Is there any sin in my life that may be blinding me? What information have I gathered? How have my elders and friends advised me? Are there any passages of scripture that specifically apply to the situation at hand?
* I often lay out a list of pros and cons.
* Because I’m married, I always discuss big decisions with my wife before making a final decision.

**7. Expectation**

The last step in our 7-step process is expectation – that is, when we make decisions, we expect certain things will happen.

This comes back to the first step of consecration. What should we expect of our decisions? That if we make the “right” decisions everything will work out as we want? No. We need to have faith that God is doing good, even when our decisions seem to fail. Worldly decision-making is obsessed with whether or not we’ll achieve the outcome we hope for. Will my new job make me happy? Will this investment secure my retirement? It’s obsessed with prospects for failure or success. But Biblical decision-making is obsessed with faithfulness. In light of eternity, will my decision prove to have been that of a faithful steward of the time, money, and relationships God’s given me? It takes confidence in God, that nothing can thwart his obsession with always doing what is best. That’s the faith that makes us restful decision-makers.

Being a restful decision-maker is founded on the promise of Romans 8:28.

*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him,who have been called according to his purpose.*

Don’t confuse these words. The bible does not say that every decision we make will work out as we hope, no matter how much faith we have. It says that God works all things together for our good.

So we make decisions boldly, and we trust God for the rest!

**Conclusion**

The next six weeks will unpack the theology and application of what we’ve talked about today. Next week we’ll look at the doctrine of God’s providence. Weeks three and four will be on God’s will and our faithfulness. Our fifth and sixth class will examine the tools we use to work through these steps: prayer, Scripture, counsel, feelings, and circumstances. We’ll end with a panel in week seven, when you can hear about some decision-making experiences of different members of CHBC. I hope you’ll come back.

**LET’S PRAY**

1. From James Petty, *Step by Step*, chapter 2 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. From *Guidance and the Voice of God* by Jensen and Payne [↑](#footnote-ref-2)