

Well today we pick up where we left off two weeks ago, returning to the topic of how God guides us. You'll see from the leaflet outline that we're making use of the really helpful framework Geoff Lin took us through.

Four weeks ago we put the question 'what is God's will for my life?' Into the context of God's big picture plan for the world.

Three weeks ago we were encouraged that while God has and CAN use all kinds of things to guide his people, he PROMISES to guide us through his word.

And two weeks ago, we saw that God doesn't merely guide us by telling us to turn left or right and leave us to it, his great concern is to work on our hearts, by his Spirit, to make us more like Jesus.

And judging from conversations I've been having after church I'd say it's struck a chord with us - it's addressed an issue so many of us want to work through, and it's challenged us in ways we might not have seen coming. So today I'm hoping we can see how it all fits together in the context of discerning God's will when faced with a decision.

To help us see how it fits together I think it will be helpful to do a bit of a case study, just to narrow our focus a bit. We could pick up on any of the big ticket topics we have to make decisions about, but I suspect that most of us have a big cluster of decisions around work or more generally, how God guides us in how we best use our time and abilities.

See even if you don't meet the government definition of workforce participation: perhaps you're retired, or you have limitations due to illness or disability, or perhaps you're at home with kids full time - working flat out but never receiving a pay check for it. God has given each of us time and abilities - how does God help us make godly decisions about how we occupy our time and use those abilities?

I don't think you need me to argue the case that this weighs on most of us - and if it doesn't well, it probably should, which makes it a good example for us to consider together. How does God guide us in our decisions about work and occupation?

So, let's dive straight in. Geoff's three point framework works pretty well as three steps in working these questions through:

So, step one - Consider God's [big picture] so you keep [the goal in sight]. You'll see the outline has space for you to complete the sentence.

Consider God's [big picture] so you keep [the goal in sight].

This might feel like a big ask to do with every question, but it's super important or we run the risk of constantly aiming for the wrong goals.

I remember playing hockey as a kid and seeing one of our best players get all spun around in a really intense passage of play to the point that he was so disoriented that he let rip a brilliant pass down the wing to one of our team mates, only to discover he was facing the wrong way and heading toward the wrong goal. You can have brilliant technique, but find yourself aiming for the wrong goal. And so we need to keep reorienting ourselves to God's plans and purposes so we're kicking in the right direction.

So, how's God's big picture shed light on work? Well, very briefly, the beginning and the end of the story give us some insight...

Genesis 1 and 2 teach us that we are made to work. Work was part of the good creation before the corruption of sin.

Genesis 1:26 Then God said, "Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

Genesis 2:15-17 The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die."

We were made for work, not laziness. We are given a task as God's representatives in creation who are made to work and care for the garden of his creation. Work is not just a necessary evil, it is part of the dignified existence that God gave humanity.

In Genesis 3 we read about what we've all experienced, that this good creation and the dignity of work in it has been marred and broken by human rebellion against God and God's just curse on all creation because of that rebellion. We live in a Genesis 3 world, so work is frustrating and painful. Which means that a hard job does not mean that it's the wrong job.

Yet God's plan is that it doesn't remain this way. Through the work of Jesus, God is taking history forward to the final garden city that he has planned for the glory of his Son, as we read at the end of the story.

*Revelation 22:1-3 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. **No longer will there be any curse.** The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, **and his servants will serve him.***

Then, when Jesus returns, we will be in the new creation, freed from sin and the curse, still working though, serving the Lamb. And so we see the ultimate end for our work: the glory of the Son of God amongst the gathered throng of his servants joyfully serving him.

So seeing God's big picture helps us orient ourselves toward God's goals - the only goals worth kicking for. And the same applies to all kind of decisions. You're only going to be able to rightly evaluate a decision about marriage if you've stopped to consider what God's big picture has to say about marriage. Or what about whether to buy a house or rent - have you paused to consider what God teaches us about where our home really is, or what security really looks like? If you don't keep God's big picture in view you might feel like you're kicking great goals for your investment portfolio or settling down with an ideal life partner only to discover that you're facing in the wrong direction, kicking goals for the opposition. What a tragedy that would be.

So we're trying to make a decision and we want God to guide us, because we want to please him, Step one, see God's big picture so we're aiming at the right goal. Step two, [relish] God's guidance [that we already have] in God's word. **Relish** God's guidance **that we already** have in God's word.

Have you heard the story of the man stranded on a rock in the middle of the ocean, praying desperately for God to show him how to get to shore? A kayaker paddles past and offers to drag him to safety. No thanks, he says, I've asked God to show me the way. Later on that day a fishing boat sees him and offers help - no, he yells back, I'm waiting for God to save me. Soon after that, a helicopter flies over, drops a rope over the side and offers to lift him off - thanks, but no thanks, I'm still waiting for God to reveal the way to safety. Soon enough a massive wave knocks him off the rock and he drowns. When he meets God in heaven he exclaims - "I was praying for you to show me how to get back safely and you didn't answer my prayers" God's response is simple: 'Friend, I sent you a kayak and a fishing boat and a helicopter, what more do you expect?'

Well, sometimes, as we ask for guidance, we're asking questions God has already answered, but whether out of ignorance, or perhaps out of arrogance, or maybe just the business that hinders us from pausing and reading and prayerfully considering things, we're failing to see that God has already given us what we need. God has already spoken through the Bible and given us all the guidance we need for a life that pleases him.

2 Peter 1:3 His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness.

So, we're asking 'What's God's will for me in this decision about work?'

Well, there's a pretty simple question that follows: 'Does the Bible teach that what I'm considering is ungodly?'

Plenty of the time we're asking for guidance when God's already made his will abundantly clear. For example, the Bible makes it very clear that human life is precious to God, that God values truth and integrity, that he upholds justice. So jobs that exploit people, jobs that all about taking advantage of the vulnerable, a job that sits loose with the truth - well these are clearly not within

the scope of God's will for his people. Do not pursue them, even if they pay well. Turn them down, regardless of how exotic and exciting they seem. Stop to consider whether the choice before you is simply ungodly - it goes against the guidance God has already given us in his word.

But sometimes, perhaps often, we face decisions when there seem to be two, or more, good and godly options before us. And so we can feel like God has kept quiet on what we should do, because neither option is clearly 'out of bounds'. At times like this I think we can be tempted to doubt the sufficiency of God's word to guide us. But even here, God has all we need to know his will for what goes on in our hearts.

See, we've now stepped from the godliness of the option itself, to consider the godliness of our motivation. What are your hopes and desires that are bound up in this decision? How does your sense of security, or identity, or worth play into this? Are you looking beyond the horizon of your immediate personal desires and considering the long term eternal perspective?

As an example, a few years ago I realised I needed to re-evaluate my work as a medical doctor working as a rural GP. It was a job with wonderful opportunities to contribute to the good of others and commend the gospel through my professional conduct. But I began to realise that I ran the risk of diminishing the very real temptations I faced in light of the prestige of being a doctor in a small town, the financial security it offered, and the fantastic lifestyle that came with it. There was nothing wrong with the job itself, but there could be all kinds of problems in my heart.

Which is why I am so thankful that

Hebrews 4:12 the word of God is living and active, sharper than a double edged sword, cutting between joints and marrow

which is to say that it gets right into the heart of the matter and the matter of my heart.

So, we need to ask first - 'is this option ungodly?', and then 'is my motivation ungodly?' And even when the Bible doesn't have much to say about rural GPs, it has heaps to say about the temptations of my heart. Which might make a really good job option for one person or at one point in life, it might be a terrible option for me or at another point in life. And God's word is sufficient to show us that.

So, if you'd love God to help you make a decision, by all means ask him to open and close doors. He did a couple of years ago when my wife and I were praying about when she should give notice of resignation from her job as a lawyer to take up full time foster care. God promptly closed a door when her boss informed her the following week that the firm was shutting down. No need to give notice to work, work had given notice to us. God had kindly closed a door and gave great clarity in our decision.

But while God CAN orchestrate circumstances to help you make your decisions, the greater prayer would be good to ask God to do his work on your heart - evaluating your own motives, bringing them into line with his.

Perhaps we could pray like David did in Psalm 25:

Psalm 25:4-5

Show me your ways, Lord,

teach me your paths.

Guide me in your truth and teach me,

for you are God my Savior,

and my hope is in you all day long.

Do you see there that David's not asking to be shown David's way - he's far less individualistic and self centred that we are - David's asking to know God's way. David doesn't just want to know his own path, he wants to know God's paths. All this reflects his God-centered perspective: he wants to know God and his character and the way he operates to inform his own character and the way he will operate in the world. This will mean saying no to ungodly actions, but it will also mean dealing with ungodly motivations. And what an amazing God we serve - that he is so personally concerned for us that he wants to shape our hearts, not just our actions. And this whole undertaking is about a relationship informed by the word and expressed in prayer.

At this point I've found the images on the screen helpful in my own thinking - that God's guidance is less like a map - or SatNav - which tells us whether to turn left or right at a fork in the road. God's guidance is more like a compass, which keeps pointing our hearts to true north, pointing us to his character as revealed through his word about his Son. So on your outline, cross out the satnav and tick the compass.

Which leads to step three. We've considered the situation in light of God's big picture, then paid attention to the very real guidance God has already given in his word, well then, step three, make the call, confident of [God's transforming work in you by his Spirit].
Make the call, confident of God's transforming work in you by his Spirit.

*Gal 5:15, 22-25 ...walk by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh...
...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.*

That's pretty amazing confidence isn't it - walk by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh! This is the confidence that Paul mentioned in Philippians 1:

Philippians 1:3-6 I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

Do you see his confidence again? Confidence that God, who is the one who began his good work in them, God would carry his good work on until the day when Jesus returns. You can't thwart God's plans - you're not going to crash his agenda by deciding to turn left instead of turning right. He will carry on his work in you until Jesus returns.

And how does he accomplish this work? Well the logic of Paul's prayer that we read is very simple - he prays in verse 9 'that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that, verse 10, you may be able to discern what is best. That's guidance language. God guides us, he enables us to discern what is best, by teaching us to love.

And as the letter to the Philippians continues, it is clear that this love is first and foremost our love for the Lord Jesus Christ, which grows as we know him more fully - which can only come as we read the Bible, which is all about Jesus. And from this love of Jesus flows our love for all people, as God uses his word to give us increasing insight into what love really is and how to truly live it out.

So we've got to read the word - and not just the bits that come up on google when you search 'Bible verse about work' - but all of it, as God shows us Jesus and teaches us to love.

So, when you come to a decision about work, or any decision really,
Put it in context of God's big picture,
Listen to the abundant guidance God has given us in his word
Trusting that he is at work in your heart by his Spirit
And step forward boldly, praying that he would teach you to love - because that's how you'll discern what is best.

Lets do that now as we finish:

Lord God, our gracious heavenly Father, we ask that as your Spirit imbeds your word in our heart, you might cause our love to abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that we may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day when Jesus returns, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ. We ask this in Jesus name, for your glory and praise. Amen