

What to Do When You're Not Sure What God Wants You to Do

Once again, I have noticed a passage in the Bible that, while I'm positive I've read it before, I never appreciated its meaning. May I say that this is yet another reason for each of us to be diligent about reading God's word daily! Even if you've read it before from cover to cover, your circumstances have changed, and different passages will speak to you in different ways, or things will jump out at you that you did not notice the first time through.

In the book of Ezra, the governor Zerubbabel and the high priest Jeshua led the Jewish remnant out of Babylonian captivity and back to Jerusalem. They rebuilt their homes, planted crops, built an altar to God, and began observing the sacrifices and feast days as prescribed in the Law of Moses.

Now, the previous seventy years had been a period of great turmoil and disaster. The Babylonian army had attacked the city of Jerusalem and burned the Temple to the ground. Many of the records had been destroyed. Families had been separated by death, slavery, exile. An entire generation had been born in distant foreign captivity.

Ezra records the number of people who returned from captivity to Jerusalem. They totaled 42,360. Ezra records separately the number of priests and Levites that were among the returning remnant (2:36–58).

Ezra gives these priests and Levites special attention in the list, because the Law of Moses plainly stated that only sons of the tribe of Levi could serve as priests (Numb. 18). Anytime men defied this rule, God defended His holiness (Numb. 16:40, 1 Kings 12:31). This was a serious matter.

Ezra then records a subset from among these priests, a group of people who had a special problem. It is here that—if you'll stick with me and pay attention—we discover an interesting point.

Of the sons of the priests: the sons of Habaiah, the sons of Hakkoz, the sons of Barzillai... These searched among their ancestral registration, but they could not be located; therefore they were considered unclean and excluded from the priesthood. The governor said to them that they should not eat from the most holy things until a priest stood up with Urim and Thummim (2:61–63).

Now, no one is questioning the devotion of the sons of Habaiah, Hakkoz, and Barzillai. They had taken the great leap of faith to travel 1,000 miles from Babylon

to Jerusalem, to trust in God in order to rebuild the temple and city, to leave an established and comfortable life and endure the hardships of starting over so that God could be glorified in the world. They claimed to be “of the sons of the priests” and wanted to serve God in His temple. Nothing in the passage suggests that they were looking for wealth, ease, or advantage.

But their claim to being descendants of the tribe of Levi could not be verified in the genealogical records. They tried. Maybe the records were destroyed. Maybe these men had gotten erroneous information that trickled down orally through the years of captivity. It’s impossible to know for sure.

But the governor’s decision (likely, Zerubbabel) is instructive. He did not say, “go ahead and serve as priests and we’ll sort this out later.” He did not say, “God won’t mind if you eat from the sacrifices until we find those pesky records.” He excluded them from the priestly service and privileges until the records could be located, or until God Himself intervened with inspired information (Urim and Thummim were kept in the high priest’s vestments, and could be used to gain inspired insight from God, similar to drawing lots).

To simplify, what did they do when they didn’t know what God wanted them to do? They did not plunge ahead. They busied themselves with what they *knew* God wanted them to do, and did not cross the line into what they didn’t know. They waited to see if further guidance would come; and if not, they waited indefinitely.¹

Application

Morally speaking, what should we do when we don’t know what God wants us to do?

Let’s say that I am facing a decision or a practice that is questionable. I am uneasy, and my conscience bothers me. They can be big decisions, such as: should I marry that person even though he or she was previously married? Should I assume the role of elder when I’m not sure how many of my children should be faithful? They can be little decisions, such as: what kind of contact does lasciviousness include? Should I sign up for that questionable video game on line?

The safe and righteous way is to wait. Do some Bible study, and look for sure direction from God. Wait for God’s answer, not a presumption of God’s answer. Ask an older brother in Christ, and gather opinions. Until I have moral clarity gained from passages of truth, I should postpone the decision or activity. I should not barrel ahead, and end up getting entangled in something sinful that becomes

¹ It is possible, by comparing Ezra 8:33, “Meremoth the son of Uriah the priest” with Nehemiah 3:4, “Meremoth the son of Uriah the son of Hakkoz,” to conclude that at least Hakkoz’s claim was eventually verified, and he and his descendants took their places among the priesthood.

much harder to get out of once I later discover that, indeed, God does not want me involved.

How long must I wait? I must wait until I find God's approval. Forever if necessary! If I never find God's approval, then I must never get involved. Remember that an uncomfortable silence from God does not indicate His approval—acting without permission is bound to get us in trouble.

Realize, too, that there is no Urim and Thummim today. I possess God's complete revelation in the Bible (Heb. 1:1–2, 2 Peter 1:3). If I can't find permission in God's word, I am not going to find it. God will not trump His word with a vision or a whisper (Gal. 1:6–9).

Religiously speaking, what should we do when we don't know what God wants us to do? Our elders may be faced with decisions or suggestions, such as: should we introduce instrumental music? Should we take up a collection on Wednesday night? Should we send shoeboxes to Nicaraguan brethren? Sometimes the answers will be clearly yes, sometimes they will be clearly no, and sometimes they will be unclear. Action should always be based on a command, example, or necessary inference from a particular passage of Scripture.

There's a great example of this process at work in Numbers 9:5–8. The Lord had commanded the people to observe the Passover on the 14th day of the first month. But He also said that people who were unclean could not approach Him in worship. Upon the occasion of the first Passover in the wilderness, there were people who had bumped into a dead body shortly before the Passover, and were therefore unclean. They really *wanted* to take the Passover. Their hearts were in the right place. They asked for permission from Moses to partake anyway (9:7). There was no precedent. Moses said,

Wait, and I will listen to what the Lord will command concerning you (9:8).

In other words, they were to do nothing unless God gave new information. They were to wait for an answer, or if no answer came, assume that God's word was sufficient, and that they had no authority to proceed. Thankfully, God did speak to Moses, and provide for another observance on the 14th day of the second month for those prevented from partaking (9–14).

Sometimes waiting can be annoying. But it's better to do nothing than to do wrong. We are never faced with a choice between “wrong” and “nothing,” because there is plenty to do in God's kingdom, more than we can ever hope to accomplish. We must wait for leadership from God “whether it was two days or a month or a year...” or more (Numbers 9:22). And for us New Testament

Christians, that leadership is going to come from His written word (1 Peter 4:11, 2 John 9). —*John Guzzetta*
