

# **The Deciding Factor: Making decisions we can live with**

*Pray that the LORD your God will tell us where we should go  
and what we should do.”  
Jeremiah 42:3*

Major Gerald (Gary) Reilly  
Mississippi-Rideau Lakes Corps  
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There's a short video making the rounds on social media that begins with a young boy tugging on the hind legs of a sheep that is face first in a long and deep, narrow ditch. Apparently, the it stumbled into the ditch and was unable to free itself. Finally, the young boy frees the sheep, and after quickly shaking of the dirt and dust, it then bounds away, only to leap face first, right back into the ditch from which it had just been rescued. Stupid sheep. Pulled out of the ditch and then it hops right back in again. People are certainly smarter than that. Hah! Only a few weeks ago I was talking with someone who has had a long struggle with the bottle, and please, don't think I'm making light of this for I know battling addictions is not an easy thing to do. However, once again, their drinking had resulted in a brush—rather, a face-first collision—against the law. A relationship had broken down and they were once again on their own. It was then I was asked a question I've been asked many times by people in similar straights, "Why does this keep happening to me?"

Hmm? I guess he saw my grin and hear the stifled chuckle that betrayed my thoughts, because he immediately replied, "Yeah, I guess I do know." Though I have a terrible memory, one of the maxims that has stuck in my head, and that I shared that day, is this: "If you keep on doing what you've always done, you'll keep on getting what you've always got." I'm unsure from where I heard that, but it is so true. If you are always overspending, you'll always be broke. If you always overeating, you'll always be overweight. If you are always disobeying God, you'll always be out of His favor. And, if you keep hopping into ditches, you'll always be getting stuck.

Even before entering the Promised Land God had laid out a series of blessings that would arise from obedience, and curses that would arise from disobedience. Israel, like a dumb sheep, more often than not, chose disobedience. They just couldn't stop themselves from jumping back into the ditch. For hundreds of years the prophets of Israel warned that the people needed to turn back to God. Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, and others, all pleaded with and begged for the people to come to their senses. All were ignored, all were ridiculed, all told to get with the program or to simply shut up.

One old commentator says of Jeremiah:

"It was Jeremiah's lot to prophesy at a time when all things in Judah were rushing down to the final and mournful catastrophe; when political excitement was at its height; when the worst passions swayed the various parties; and the most fatal counsels prevailed..."<sup>1</sup>

That sounds eerily familiar, don't you think? There really is nothing new under the sun. We'll get back to that later. In this series we were looking at questions we need to ask ourselves in order to make decisions we can live with: Am I being honest with myself? What story do I want my life to tell? Am I trying to justify

myself? Today's question is simply: what is the wise thing to do? More specifically, and I credit Andy Stanley for the formulation of this question that will form the skeleton of today's message:

In light of my past experience, my current circumstances, and my future hopes and dreams, what is the wise thing for me to do?<sup>2</sup>

Let that sink in for just a moment. What a great question. If only Johanan and the remnant assembled with him had stopped to ask themselves that question, they may have spared themselves and their children, great suffering. Here's the context: The king, Zedekiah, rebelled against Babylon despite Jeremiah's insistence that he not. Nebuchadnezzar came and sacked Jerusalem, carried off Zedekiah and other prominent people, and placed a governor in power – Gedaliah. Though warned of an assassination plot, Gedaliah paid no heed and ended up being killed by Ishmael, a man with royal blood, who then carried off the people from Mizpah, where the governor's residence was. Johanan, who had warned of the plot, went in pursuit of Ishmael and rescued the captives. This is when Jeremiah enters the stage.

*<sup>1</sup> Then all the army officers, including Johanan son of Kareah and Jezaniah son of Hoshaiah, and all the people from the least to the greatest approached <sup>2</sup> Jeremiah the prophet and said to him, "Please hear our petition and pray to the LORD your God for this entire remnant. For as you now see, though we were once many, now only a few are left. <sup>3</sup> Pray that the LORD your God will tell us where we should go and what we should do."*

Although we are told 'all' the people, we needn't get too hung up on numbers. We are likely being told that the consensus, the general feeling among the majority of the people was to seek out Jeremiah. The approach of "all the people from the least to the greatest" seems to be genuine enough, and is a reminder that it doesn't matter who you are, or how much money, power or fame one might have—everyone still needs to pray. One of the sad things about this remnant is that they *are* a remnant.

Back in Deuteronomy, Israel was given instructions on how to celebrate the festival of firstfruits. They were told to bring some of the initial harvest to the place the Lord will choose and upon giving it to the priest make a series of declarations, the final being: "*My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous.*"<sup>a</sup>

At that time they were acknowledging that they once been few but had become many, however, now those who were many had become few. The nation of Israel had been reduced to two smaller communities: those taken into exile in

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<sup>a</sup> Deuteronomy 26:5

Babylon, and those left behind who do not know which way to turn. That they arrived in this state should not have been unexpected, for God had warned through Moses that a consequence of disobedience would be:

You who were as numerous as the stars in the sky will be left but few in number, because you did not obey the LORD your God. Just as it pleased the LORD to make you prosper and increase in number, so it will please him to ruin and destroy you. You will be uprooted from the land you are entering to possess.

Deuteronomy 28:62-63

A tragic reversal of fortunes had taken place. Now this tired, anxious, and lost remnant has turned to the Lord for direction, and to get that direction they come to a man who has long spoken for the Lord, and whose words have proven true, which was confirmation that he indeed spoke for the Lord.

*<sup>4</sup> “I have heard you,” replied Jeremiah the prophet. “I will certainly pray to the LORD your God as you have requested; I will tell you everything the LORD says and will keep nothing back from you.”*

*<sup>5</sup> Then they said to Jeremiah, “May the LORD be a true and faithful witness against us if we do not act in accordance with everything the LORD your God sends you to tell us. <sup>6</sup> Whether it is favorable or unfavorable, we will obey the LORD our God, to whom we are sending you, so that it will go well with us, for we will obey the LORD our God.”*

There is a subtle play on words that we should not miss. They ask Jeremiah, “Pray that the LORD **your** God will tell us where we should go and what we should do.” Jeremiah responds, “I will certainly pray to the Lord **your** God...” Only a few commentators think it worthy of note, but I think it provides a little insight into the existence of a dangerous schism. For some reason it would seem that they think the God of Jeremiah is more his God than their God. The statement speaks powerfully to the need for our faith to be our own, and not just the reflection of someone else’s faith. However, the opposite is true, God is just as much their God as He is Jeremiah’s. They do correct themselves when they pledge “whether it is favorable or unfavorable, we will obey the Lord our God. In fact, three times here they pledge to obey, the last being in the emphatic, “Yes indeed!”

However, there is still a flaw in their thinking that hints of what is to come. What exactly do they mean by, “whether it is favorable or unfavorable”? Well, if we go back a little in time, to Jeremiah 41:17, we learn that this group has arrived near Bethlehem “on their way to Egypt.” Although survivors of Mizpah, who had been captured in the insurrection of Ishmael, and rescued from being taken to Ammon,

There is an echo here of previous occasions where Israel promised adherence to the will of God, and yet failed to live up to that desire (Ex 24:3,7 – at Sinai; Josh 24:21, 24 - Shechem; 1 Sam 7:4-8 - Mizpah; 12:19)

they were not going back to Mizpah. They were not returning home. They had already decided, out of fear of the Babylonians, to put Egypt or bust stickers on their luggage.

In their minds Egypt is the best option, it is favorable; the worst option is staying in the land now ruled by Babylon—unfavorable. However, if God wanted them—commanded them—to remain in Judah, was that not the more favorable? They had just been pulled out of the ditch, and now once again they were bounding right back. Since they had come seeking the Lord’s will we can only assume that the logical course of action for them was to do what God told them.

Jeremiah promises that he won’t hold anything back, he will tell them exactly what God commands, whether they like it or not. And so, as Jeremiah enters into seeking the Lord’s guidance, there is an underlying tension, for the answer will not come right away. Their flight is delayed for over a week.

Ten days later the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah. <sup>8</sup> So he called together Johanan son of Kareah and all the army officers who were with him and all the people from the least to the greatest. <sup>9</sup> He said to them, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, to whom you sent me to present your petition, says: <sup>10</sup> ‘If you stay in this land, I will build you up and not tear you down; I will plant you and not uproot you, for I am grieved over the disaster I have inflicted on you. <sup>11</sup> Do not be afraid of the king of Babylon, whom you now fear. Do not be afraid of him, declares the LORD, for I am with you and will save you and deliver you from his hands. <sup>12</sup> I will show you compassion so that he will have compassion on you and restore you to your land.’

Remember, this remnant of people are fleeing what they fear will be retaliation from Babylon over the killing of the Babylonian installed governor. A ten-day period passes of which we are given no details. I can imagine though that some would be getting antsy after a few days. “How long does this prayer thing take?” However, Jeremiah has his own thoughts on which is the best course of action, and he needs to be able to sort out *his* personal preferences from what is God’s will. Some people seemed to be blessed with immediate answers from God—or maybe they just listen better. I fall into the Jeremiah school of discernment. It takes time. Finally, after ten days, Jeremiah calls the people together, “from the least to the greatest.”

“No doubt Jeremiah spent a lot of time in prayer and meditation in those days, but he needed to be sure that when he spoke finally it would be the word of Yahweh and not the promptings of his own heart.”

JA Thompson, NICOT: Jeremiah, 665.

Earlier we read the warning God had given when Israel was entering the Promised land, telling them that disobedience would lead to being ‘uprooted’. The word of the Lord to this crowd is: “*If you stay in this land, I will build you up and not tear you down; I will plant you and not uproot you...*”. They are promised a reversal of their fortunes. They have witnessed themselves the

tearing down and uprooting that came from disobedience, and now God is promising a new possibility is available. They are even reassured that the thing they fear most, the king of Babylon, will show them the same compassion that God is now promising. All they need do is remain in the land. All they need do is trust and obey the Lord. The Word of God continues:

<sup>13</sup> “However, if you say, ‘We will not stay in this land,’ and so disobey the LORD your God,<sup>14</sup> and if you say, ‘No, we will go and live in Egypt, where we will not see war or hear the trumpet or be hungry for bread,’<sup>15</sup> then hear the word of the LORD, O remnant of Judah. This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: ‘If you are determined to go to Egypt and you do go to settle there,<sup>16</sup> then the sword you fear will overtake you there, and the famine you dread will follow you into Egypt, and there you will die.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, all who are determined to go to Egypt to settle there will die by the sword, famine and plague; not one of them will survive or escape the disaster I will bring on them.’<sup>18</sup> This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: ‘As my anger and wrath have been poured out on those who lived in Jerusalem, so will my wrath be poured out on you when you go to Egypt. You will be an object of cursing and horror, of condemnation and reproach; you will never see this place again.’

Seems quite clear, right. After Jeremiah delivers the word of God, he adds a personal plea:

“O remnant of Judah, the LORD has told you, ‘Do not go to Egypt.’ Be sure of this: I warn you today that you made a fatal mistake when you sent me to the LORD your God and said, ‘Pray to the LORD our God for us; tell us everything he says and we will do it.’ Be sure of this: I warn you today that you made a fatal mistake when you sent me to the LORD your God and said, ‘Pray to the LORD our God for us; tell us everything he says and we will do it.’ I have told you today, but you still have not obeyed the LORD your God in all he sent me to tell you. So now, be sure of this: You will die by the sword, famine and plague in the place where you want to go to settle.”

Jeremiah 42:19-22

“Once more Jeremiah had to deliver an unpopular message.”<sup>3</sup> This word though is not unlike that which he has delivered many times before; a word kings, and priests and people had ignored. So here is where our question can be inserted: What is the wise thing for them to do? Chapter 43 gives their response.

<sup>1</sup> When Jeremiah finished telling the people all the words of the LORD their God—everything the LORD had sent him to tell them—<sup>2</sup> Azariah son of Hoshaiah and Johanan son of Kareah and all the arrogant men said to Jeremiah, “You are lying! The LORD our God has not sent you to say, ‘You must not go to Egypt to settle there.’<sup>3</sup> But Baruch son of Neriah is inciting you against us to hand us over to the Babylonians, so they may kill us or carry us into exile to Babylon.”<sup>4</sup> So Johanan son of Kareah and all the army officers and all the people disobeyed

## the LORD'S command to stay in the land of Judah.

We talked a few weeks ago about cognitive bias, that we will only see what we have made up our minds to see. We become blind or deaf to alternative ideas. We wear blinders. Some might call it stubbornness, describing such a person as being “set in their ways.” Though I want to try to keep on focus with our theme of making decisions we can live with, it is here that I see the contemporary mind being demonstrably illustrated. Those led by Johanan had come seeking the will of God, and sought to do so through the prophet Jeremiah, yet when the answer was not in agreement with that which they had already decided, already desired, even though they had promised fidelity to Jeremiah’s prophecy, they claimed he was lying. “That,” they said to Jeremiah, “was not what God told you.” They then attempted some justification by levelling an accusation against Baruch, who is mentioned here for the first time in this episode.

One commentator writes: “Here is a good example of a man who was so persuaded that his own wrong views were right that his mind was completely closed to any other possibility—an age old phenomenon.”<sup>4</sup> Does this text not brilliantly illustrate the modern tendency to see in the Bible only what we want to see, and ignore, or argue away, anything that would prohibit that in which we wish to partake? That which we have sympathy towards? There is a resurgence of views that undermine not just the core doctrines of Christianity, but also the very Word of God as the Word of God, found in the Bible. They are not new, though its adherents claim to be revolutionary, of rediscovering true Christianity. They are deconstructing the errors of the church. However, they are simply rebranding the same heresies that have plagued mankind ever since the snake questioned God’s word in the garden, “Did God really say....?” Very simply put, like Johanan and the remnant in Jeremiah’s time, people today so desperately want to engage in that which is sinful, they want to be seen as tolerant and open minded, and so they say to the church, the body of Christ, “Your lying. That’s not what God said.”

Paul describes them as such:

...in the last days difficult times will come. For people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, slanderers, without self-control, savage, opposed to what is good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, loving pleasure rather than loving God. They will maintain the outward appearance of religion but will have repudiated its power.

2 Timothy 3:1-5

And then encourages Timothy:

Preach the message, be ready whether it is convenient or not, reprove,

rebuke, exhort with complete patience and instruction. For there will be a time when people will not tolerate sound teaching. Instead, following their own desires, they will accumulate teachers for themselves because they have an insatiable curiosity to hear new things.

2 Timothy 4:2-3

Like Johanan, the modern ear wants to hear a message that affirms rather than corrects. As was true of the remnant is true of contemporary society, "...this community is impervious to prophetic counsel and will work its own stubborn way."<sup>5</sup> There is no ditch into which it won't jump. The modern wants a gospel that makes him comfortable, that soothes him with love, and is tolerant of whatever it is that he or she desires. It wants a gospel of grace, but interprets grace as license to do as one pleases. "The church needs to be more like Jesus," they argue, and cite all the times Jesus ate with sinners, touched the lepers, and expressed solidarity with the poor. Yet they fail to grasp Jesus also said those who follow him must take up their cross. Taking up a cross was the farthest from 'comfortable' one could get. Alisa Childers, in *Another Gospel*, quotes Sam Allberry, a UK pastor who has openly written of his struggle with same sex attraction. He writes:

It is the same for us all—"whoever." I am to deny myself, take up my cross and follow him. Denying yourself does not mean tweaking your behavior here and there. It is saying "no" to your deepest sense of who you are, for the sake of Christ. . . . Ever since I have been open about my own experiences of homosexuality, a number of Christians have said something like this: "The gospel must be harder for you than it is for me," as though I have more to give up than they do. But the fact is that the gospel demands everything of all of us. If someone thinks the gospel has somehow slotted into their life quite easily, without causing any major adjustments to their lifestyle or aspirations, it is likely that they have not really started following Jesus at all.<sup>6</sup>

They say, "Your lying, and then run off and do as they please." They jump back into the ditch. Let's apply today's question to our story to see how it would (or should) have directed the response of Johanan and the remnant, and perhaps that can serve as a guide to applying this question to our own lives. First of all -

### **Past Experience**

#### **In light of my past experience, what is the wise thing to do?**

They had the whole history of Judah and Israel from which to draw. They had seen the outcome of ignoring the words of the prophets in general, and Jeremiah in particular. They could look back upon a history of a people who had stubbornly refused to heed the word of God, and had reaped the bitterness of repeated disobedience. Now only a remnant remains. A remnant of a people

who had once been freed from terrible bondage in Egypt. A people who had been rescued *from* Egypt. What then, is the wise thing for them to do? Remember, if you always do what you've always done...

### **Current Circumstances**

**In light of my current circumstances, what is the wise thing to do?**

Jerusalem has fallen, just as the prophets had foretold. Babylon has taken many people into exile, and they are a remnant of those left behind. The assassination of the Babylonian select governor has left them living in fear, anxious about which path to take. Many of them have just been rescued from captivity in the insurrection led by Ishmael. They seem to be taking the right path when they consult Jeremiah, seeking the will of God. And now God has spoken; spoken by the prophet who has demonstrated that he truly speaks for God. And the word from God is trust me. So, what is the wise thing to do?

### **Future Hopes and Dreams**

**Finally, in light of my future hopes and dreams, what is the wise thing for me to do?**

No one wants to live in fear and anxiety. In every culture, in any age, parents want what is best for their children, wanting them to thrive and be happy. They want to live in peace, and to prosper. The Bible often uses the illustration of everyone having their own vine and fig tree under which to recline, and enjoying the peace that comes from having provision.<sup>b</sup> God has now promised:

<sup>10</sup> 'If you stay in this land, I will build you up and not tear you down; I will plant you and not uproot you, for I am grieved over the disaster I have inflicted on you. <sup>11</sup> Do not be afraid of the king of Babylon, whom you now fear. Do not be afraid of him, declares the LORD, for I am with you and will save you and deliver you from his hands. <sup>12</sup> I will show you compassion so that he will have compassion on you and restore you to your land.'

In light then of their future hopes and dreams, what is the wise thing for them to do?

And yet, they did the opposite. They did what they had always intended to do, and they once again turned away from being obedient to the Lord. They jumped back into the ditch.

Let me conclude by placing a very contemporary concern within the framework of this question: Do I get the COVID vaccine or not? Well, in light of my past experience, my current circumstances, and my future hopes and dreams, what is the wise thing for me to do?

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<sup>b</sup> Micah 4:4

### **In light of my past experience, what is the wise thing for me to do?**

Like most people my age I have a scar on my upper arm from receiving a smallpox vaccine. It is estimated that smallpox killed up to 300 million people in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and up to 500 million in the last 100 years of its existence, taking the lives of three out of every ten people that contracted it, and scarring many of the survivors for life. Yet, thanks to vaccines, small pox was eradicated sometime in the 1980's. The Rotary Club, of which I am a member, has long advocated for and supported the distribution of polio vaccines. As a result, polio, which at one time was a scourge among children, has been all but eradicated from the modern world, existing now in only two countries. Over the years I've received various other vaccines, and have made sure to have my own children receive vaccines. They have all worked. That is past experience. So, in light of past experience, what is the wise thing for me to do?

### **In light of my current circumstances, what is the wise thing for me to do?**

Just last week we had a family Zoom meeting. One of my siblings was just getting over having COVID, likely contracted from a workplace, despite taking all the recommended precautions. Let me just say, he looked awful. It obviously took a lot out of him. During that Zoom call we heard of a nurse, a friend of the family, who says that in her hospital COVID is so rampant there are no gurneys left, and incoming patients are treated on lawn chairs, intubated in hallways, and others are being airlifted as far away as North Bay. Then there are the reports we now see coming out of India, where outdoor crematoriums have been set up to dispose of the bodies of those dying from COVID. That is the current circumstance, so in light of that, what is the wise thing for me to do?

### **In light of my hopes and dreams for the future, what is the wise thing for me to do?**

Like some of you, Laurie and I are blessed with grandchildren. Grandchildren are simply the best. Its coming up on two years since I've seen or been hugged by my soon-to-be nine-year-old granddaughter. For the first six years of her life she was always just a short car ride away, and able to spend many a weekend at our house. She is becoming a beautiful young lady and we are missing precious years, and long to see her in person, rather than through social media or Zoom.

We have three grandsons that are equally missed, and yes, we even miss their parents. Speaking of parents, I have a mother I want to visit, and siblings and friends whose company I've missed. And then there is my church family. Though its wonderful we connect via the screen, I miss the sacred rhythm of Sunday worship—in person. I want us to have fellowship meals, Bible studies, and Men's breakfasts. The theme for World Immunization Week, which just

concluded, was 'Vaccines bring us closer'. I want us to be closer, to be able to shake hands like a real person does, to hug and be hugged.

So, in light of my hopes and dreams for the future, what is the wise thing for me to do? What is the wise thing for you to do?

Paul writes:

“Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is.”

Ephesians 5:15-17

The Bible makes some very specific claims about who we are and what we need—we are sinners in need of forgiveness. It tells us very plainly what God has done in response to our need--for God so loved the world that He sent His only Son... There is in all of us a sense that there is more to life than just what we can see, and the Bible promises that for those who seek Him, He will be found, and that one day He will come to take us to where He is. All around us we see and have seen Bible prophecy being fulfilled.

What then, is the wise thing for me to do?

Take some time this week to reflect on this question. Look at your past experiences, your current circumstances and your hopes and dreams for the future. When it comes to your relationship with God, what is the wise thing to do?

Don't be like that sheep that goes from one ditch to another. Don't be like this people that were so sure they were right they ended up in the wrong place. Let us be wise, and make use of the opportunity that God has given us to place our trust in Him, and instead of being foolish, seek His will for our lives.

Prayer

*Wisdom calls aloud in the street, she raises her voice in the public squares; at the head of the noisy streets she cries out, in the gateways of the city she makes her speech: “How long will you simple ones love your simple ways? How long will mockers delight in mockery and fools hate knowledge?”*  
(Proverbs 1:20-22)

Lord, we come to You this day and acknowledge our need for You. Without Your love, mercy and grace, we would be eternally lost. Without Your wisdom we are like the brute beasts. Help us to set aside our petty and simple plans, to release

our grip on the false idols and hopes to which we cling, and enable us to lay hold of the cross and the salvation provided by the death and resurrection of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Help us to discern Your will for our lives, and not to chase after that to which the world blindly stumbles towards. Illuminate our hearts to Your truth, and may we always, through the guidance of Your Holy Spirit, choose wisely.

Thank You for Your word that corrects us guides us on right paths, and we pray as we come under Your wings, that we will find peace in the midst of the storm. We pray for the day to come soon in which we can gather in person, and once again enjoy the fellowship of Your people, the church of our Lord.

Help us make wise choices in unwise days. May our lives and our choices glorify and honor You, so that all peoples will humble themselves and bow before You.

These things we pray, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Moorehead, quoted in Baxter, *Explore the Book* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1960), 259.

<sup>2</sup> Stanley, Andy. *Better Decisions, Fewer Regrets* (p. 130). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

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- <sup>3</sup> Kenneth L. Barker and John R. Kohlenberger III, ed's., *NIV Bible Commentary, Vol 1: Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing house, 1994), 1247.
- <sup>4</sup> JA Thompson, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Jeremiah* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980), 668.
- <sup>5</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 387.
- <sup>6</sup> Alisa Childers, *Another Gospel?: A Lifelong Christian Seeks Truth in Response to Progressive Christianity* (p. 54). Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.. Kindle Edition.