

# WILL YOU CHOOSE WISELY?

TRUST IN THE LORD WITH ALL YOUR HEART AND LEAN NOT ON YOUR OWN UNDERSTANDING; IN ALL YOUR WAYS ACKNOWLEDGE HIM, AND HE WILL MAKE YOUR PATHS STRAIGHT.

PROVERBS 3:5-6



## THE BIG IDEA

In Lewis Carroll's classic children's tale *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, young Alice is wandering through the forest when she comes across the Cheshire Cat and asks for directions. "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" she asks the grinning feline.

"That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," the Cat replies.

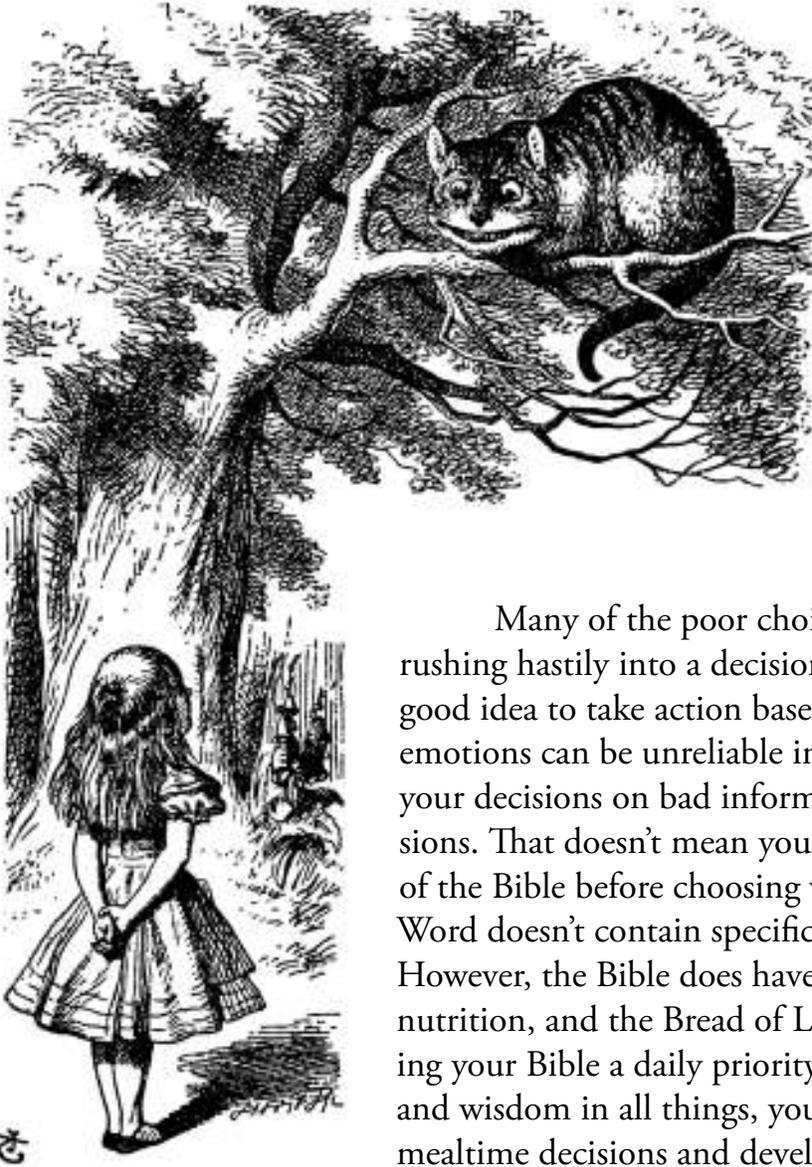
"I don't much care where—" Alice says.

"Then it doesn't matter which way you go," says the Cat.

Decisions, decisions. We all make dozens of decisions every day.

*Which socks should I wear? Which cereal shall I have for breakfast? Which friend will I call? Which movie should I go see? Should I stop and talk with the homeless man who's asking me for money?* Some of these decisions have little or no lasting impact on how we live. Many of the decisions we make seem harmless and insignificant at the time, but they later turn out to be very important indeed. Other decisions that seem monumental or overwhelming when we make them in fact turn out to be of little consequence down the road. Does it matter then which choices we make or how we go about making them? Absolutely!

God never intended for us to wander through life aimlessly, making reckless, arbitrary decisions about where we go, what we do, what we watch, and how we spend our time. God is never reckless or arbitrary, nor does He expect His children—who are made in His image—to live this way. In fact, God gave us an entire book, the Bible, as a guide for how we are to



conduct our lives and make choices. He gave us His only Son, Jesus, to model good decision-making for us. And to those who choose to follow His Son, God gives the Holy Spirit to counsel them and encourage them toward wisdom. He also surrounds us with knowledgeable people who can provide us with godly wisdom and help us find the answers we're looking for.

Many of the poor choices we make are the result of rushing hastily into a decision. As we've discussed, it's not a good idea to take action based solely on how you feel, because emotions can be unreliable indicators of truth. When you base your decisions on bad information, you often get bad decisions. That doesn't mean you need to consult three translations of the Bible before choosing what to eat for breakfast—God's Word doesn't contain specific direction concerning corn flakes. However, the Bible does have a great deal to say about food, nutrition, and the Bread of Life (John 6:35). If you make reading your Bible a daily priority, if you choose to pursue truth and wisdom in all things, you will soon begin to make better mealtime decisions and develop better eating habits.

As you grow up, you will be asked to make more complicated, more difficult choices involving relationships, college, and a career. Some decisions—such as whom you choose to marry—will change your life forever. Although the decisions you make now, when you're young, will probably not have such long-term consequences, you can give yourself a big head start in life by developing good decision-making habits now.

Begin by talking with God throughout the day; put Him first in everything you do and everything you think about. Read from the Bible every day; meditate often on the nuggets of wisdom you find in the book of Proverbs, and you will soon find yourself living truth and making better choices. Recognize that you don't always know what's best; talk to adults you trust about the decisions you're making and ask for their advice. Finally, learn from the mistakes you make; admit when you were wrong and determine to do better next time.

### WHAT YOU WILL DO

- » You will recognize that we choose God because He first chose us.
- » You will practice seeking and applying God's wisdom when making decisions.
- » You will examine how respecting God will help you make wise choices.

## KNIGHTS IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Lancelot. Ivanhoe. Galahad. Lochinvar. Gawain. Noble knights are among the most famous characters in all literature. Although the romantic notions of knighthood were first popularized in books and songs and poetry, the “gentleman soldiers” of the Middle Ages were very real. Knights were elite warriors who were expected to be good men in addition to being good fighters. They swore to fight for justice and order, to protect those who couldn't defend themselves, and to remain loyal to their king or lord.

Knights were considered more important than regular foot soldiers, in part because they had better training and equipment. Most knights came from upper-class families who could afford to purchase expensive armor, weapons, and war horses. Knights had a reputation as excellent riders, and their horses needed to be strong, agile, and unafraid amid the noise and confusion of battle. In addition to his trademark armor, every knight was equipped with a sword and other durable weapons, such as lances for jousting and daggers for close combat.

To become a knight, a boy was sent around the age of seven to be trained as a page in a knight's household. Pages carried messages, ran errands, cleaned the castle, helped care for the horses, and started learning how to fight and joust. After seven years, a page could become a squire. A squire was a knight's personal attendant, carrying his shield or banner into battle, keeping his armor polished, and looking after his horse. After seven more years, a squire could be dubbed as a knight. If he demonstrated particular courage on the field of battle, a squire might be promoted on the spot. He would then swear loyalty to a king or nobleman and join his army of knights.

Around the fifteenth century, guns and rockets were introduced to the battlefield and began to render knights in armor obsolete. Yet many of the medieval orders of knighthood continue to exist in several countries, including the Order of the Garter in Great Britain. Today, the knights of old serve as an example of how to live with honor, upholding the cause of righteousness and sacrificing oneself to protect and care for others.



## THE FEAST

*The trumpets sounded a great fanfare, and the herald stepped forth to make his proclamation. “My lords and ladies, noble knights, good people of Cambridge—it is my unspeakable honor and deepest privilege to present to you a knight who truly needs no introduction. His valor is legendary, his stature extraordinary, his skill with sword and lance unsurpassed. His mighty deeds are known throughout the realm and all of Europe. In the courts of France and Spain, warriors and princes quake at the very mention of his name. His armor shines as the morning sun, and his shield lights the way for the armies of the king. I give to you your undefeated champion: the dauntless, the magnificent, the humble Sir Brandon of—”*

“Put some elbow grease into it, varlet! I want to see my reflection in that floor before the feast!”

Young Brandon was startled from his daydream.

Quentin, the eldest page, nearly two years Brandon’s senior, scowled down at him. Quentin was a full head taller anyway, so that he now towered over the younger boy, who was on his knees and supposed to be scrubbing the floor of the great hall.

“The floor is made of wood, not glass,” Brandon protested. “Besides, it’s going to be covered by a carpet.”

“That’s beside the point, commoner. Do it right, or I’ll have you scrubbing pots and pans for the cooks all night.” This was no idle threat. There was a pecking order among the pages that was determined by age. Quentin was nearing fourteen, at which point he would ascend to the position of squire and train to become a knight. In the meantime, he could make life miserable for Brandon, so long as his orders did



Photo: Misterzee.

not contradict those of a knight or the baron.

The younger page sighed and returned to his work.

Quentin continued to glower at him for a moment, then kicked over the wash bucket, turned on his heel, and marched out of the hall.

Brandon now knelt in a pool of suds and brown water, his breeches soaked. He caught his reflection in the puddle and stared at the dirty face and the brown, matted hair he saw there. *Who am I kidding?* he thought. *I'll never make squire, let alone become a knight. I have no connections, no family. I have a better chance of sprouting wings and flying.*

He gathered up his empty bucket and trudged outside to the courtyard to refill the bucket at the castle well. A family of ducks scurried out of his path, kicking up dust and down that stuck to Brandon's wet breeches.

"Pardon me, kind sir. Will you yield to a lady?" His friend Gwyneth came up from behind him with an empty bucket of her own.

"*A lady?*" Brandon snorted. "Who said you were a lady?"

"Oh my. What's got you in a snit?"

Brandon stopped frowning and allowed himself a smile. "I'm sorry, Gwyneth. It's been a difficult day. The Baron de Lisle is returning unexpectedly from Calais, and everyone is rushing about and working hard to prepare the great hall for a feast."

"Well, that explains why Lady Isabel is all in a lather. William must be accompanying the baron. She's spent the whole day deciding what to wear."



“As a matter of fact, I’ve heard that the feast is to be held in William’s honor.”

“Whatever for?” Gwyneth asked as she drew her water from the well. “I mean, William is wonderful and all, but he’s only a squire.”

“I don’t know. But it will be good to see William again. He’s the only one around here who treats me like a real person.”

Gwyneth tried to look indignant. “Well, thank you very much, Master Brandon!”

“What I meant to say was, he’s the only one whose opinion counts who—”

“I beg your pardon!”

“No, that’s not what I meant—” Brandon stammered. “That is to say, I—”

“I know what you mean.” Gwyneth smiled mischievously. “You’re talking of men and their silly squabbles over rank and titles. Well, I’ll have you know that I *do* count.” She held up her chin. “After all, I am the daughter of a king.”

“A *king*? Don’t be ridiculous. Everyone knows your father is the Earl of Warwick. That doesn’t make you a princess. You’re only an attendant to Isabel, who is herself a lady-in-waiting to the Lady de Lisle.” Brandon took his turn lowering the well bucket into the gloom until a splash echoed from below.

“Oh, but I *am* a princess. I learned all about it this morning in my lessons. I have been adopted into the family of God. My earthly father may possess lands and a manor, but my heavenly Father rules over all creation!”

Brandon turned the hand crank to lift the full bucket. “It must be nice having two fathers,” he said. “I don’t even have the one.”

“I almost forgot you were a foundling. Now it’s my turn to be sorry, Brandon. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.”

“That’s all right, Gwyneth. It’s just that I have no idea who my parents are. Probably some poor peasants who couldn’t afford another mouth to feed. They abandoned me at the gates of a nobleman who couldn’t be bothered with me either, and so I ended up here at Cambridge Castle doing menial labor for the lady of the house.” They both picked up their buckets and began moving slowly into the castle interior.

“But you are a page! Not just anyone is allowed to be a page. And one day you will be a squire, then eventually a knight!”

“If I were born of noble blood, sure! Then my father would arrange to pay my room and board and training fees with the expectation that I would one day earn a knighthood. But I don’t even know who is paying for my upkeep, or whether he will continue paying for it, or if he even remembers that I’m here. Quentin and the others never let me forget this. They call me ‘varlet’ and ‘commoner’ and lord it over me all day long. I have no earthly reason to expect I shall ever become a knight.”

Gwyneth set her bucket down, put her hands on Brandon’s upper arms, and held his gaze steady. “Now you listen to me, Master Brandon. You *will* be a knight—one of the greatest ever. William believes in you. I believe in you. Even Lady Isabel believes in you. Now *you* must believe. If you continue to think of yourself as a lowly page with no prospects for advancement,

surely that is all you will ever be.” She smiled. “But who knows? Maybe a position will open up in the castle for a tinker. Or town crier. Or maybe even court jester!”

Brandon laughed aloud at this, and his mood began to lift. He said, “Without family or connections, court jester may be the highest post I can aspire to. Perhaps I should learn to juggle. Say, what do you call an unemployed jester?”

“I give up. What *do* you call an unemployed jester?”

“Nobody’s fool.”

Gwyneth and Brandon laughed heartily for some time before Gwyneth turned serious once more. “Do not carry this burden alone, Brandon. Seek the Lord in prayer, and He will guide you and protect you.”

“But I have an awful time memorizing the prayers the vicar gives me. For one thing, they’re all in Latin, so I don’t even know what I’m saying.”

“Then talk to God like you’re talking to William. God is so much more than a king—He is your friend. You can talk with him about anything. Be open and honest. Tell Him your fears and concerns. Ask Him for whatever it is you need.”

Brandon looked puzzled by this. “But He is God. Doesn’t He already know what I need?”

“Of course! But He wants you to ask because He wants you to depend on Him for everything. He is our rock, our strength, and an ever-present help to even the greatest of the king’s knights.”

This certainly gave Brandon plenty to think about as he returned to the great hall to scrub floors.



That afternoon, as Brandon was mucking the stables, a commotion arose outside. Boys were shouting and cheering, and above all the noise Brandon heard a familiar voice. *William*. He dropped his pitchfork and ran outside to see William ride into the yard astride his horse, Maximilian, surrounded by pages and squires. They greeted him with questions and shouts of congratulations. William was wearing an oversized knee-length shirt of chainmail and a tunic in the baron’s colors. He spotted Brandon and waved to him, then dismounted.

Brandon stood outside the melee as the older squires pushed forward past the smaller pages. William was all smiles as his friends slapped him on the back in greeting and shook his hand, though he said little. The questions kept coming, one on top of another, until he laughed and held up a hand. “Hold! Hold!” he called. “I will tell you all everything over evening meal.

For now, I have duties of my own to attend to.”

“And a lady to see,” someone shouted from the crowd.

Everyone laughed heartily as William blushed. Then the crowd began to disperse, and the boys went back to their chores.

William walked his horse over to where Brandon stood, but before handing the reins to the page, William offered his right hand. Brandon smiled and shook his hand vigorously. Then he took the reins and led the horse to the stables as William walked alongside him.

“How fare you, Master Brandon?”

“I’m fine, Will, but what about you? And what’s with the hauberk? Chainmail is not exactly standard dress for a squire.”

“That’s true. But then, I am no longer a squire.”

Brandon stopped. “What?”

“You are now addressing a knight of the realm. Sir William, at your service.” He gave a small bow.

Brandon gasped, then grinned broadly. “But how? You’re only just nineteen and will not be of age for two full years.”

William began walking again, and Brandon followed, Maximilian in tow. “I received a field promotion. We left Calais one morning on a standard patrol of the area. The baron was leading our small company through a grove of trees when we were ambushed by a French raiding party. Before we knew what was happening, the baron had been wounded by a lancer and thrown from his horse. Without thinking, I took up the baron’s sword and slew the enemy lancer, then disarmed another and wounded him. Although we were outnumbered, the knights of our company easily dispatched several of the enemy, and the rest turned tail and fled on foot. Baron de Lisle had been pierced in the shoulder, though it turned out to be only a flesh wound. He knighted me then and there in the forest, and he gave me his own chainmail to wear. As you can see from the ill fit, the baron is broader of shoulder than I, but he promised to have it resized for me once we returned to Cambridge. And here we are.”

“Congratulations, Wi— I mean, Sir William.”

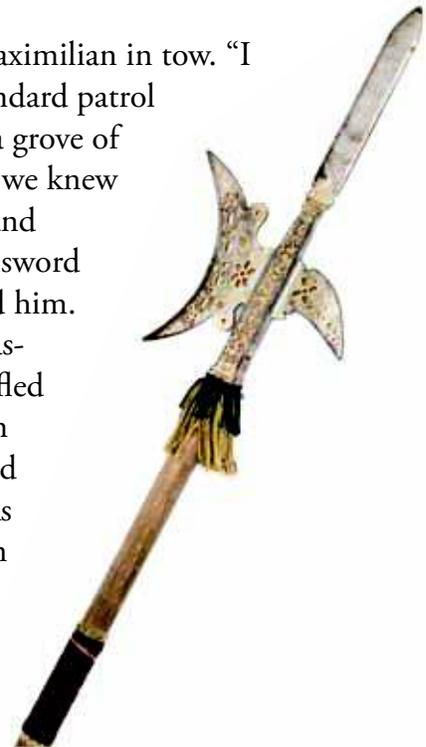
William laughed. “We are friends, you and I. When we’re alone, please call me Will.”

“Yes, Sir Wi— I mean, Will. But what about the ceremony? I was really hoping to see you knighted when the time came.”

“And so you shall. The baron is making an announcement this evening: The king himself will be arriving in a fortnight to perform the ceremony and induct me into the Order of the Garter.”

“That’s wonderful! I’m as proud as if you were my own brother.”

As Brandon led the horse into its stall and settled him in, William turned thoughtful and



serious. “I need your advice, Brandon.”

Brandon snorted. “What could *I* possibly say that would be of any use to you?”

“I must choose a squire to attend me. Whom do you suggest?”

“Well . . . the baron has many good squires with years of training in arms and horsemanship and—”

“Yes, they’re all fine lads, but I am barely older than most of them. No, I have set my mind toward selecting a squire from among the pages—someone I can teach, someone I can trust, someone I can instruct in the faith and in the ways of chivalry.”

“I see what you mean. Well, Quentin is the oldest of the pages and next in line to make squire. He’s tall and strong and comes from a wealthy family, and he—”

“And he makes life difficult for you, does he not?”

Brandon grinned. “I cannot honestly say I’ll be sorry to see him go, should the two of you return to Calais.”

“I’m sure Quentin will make a fine knight one day, once he learns some humility. Arrogance is a dangerous quality to carry onto the battlefield. No, I was thinking of someone with a more teachable spirit.”

“What about Gregory? He’s good with—”

“I was thinking of you, Brandon.”

“Me? But I’m not worthy to— I’m not of noble birth. I don’t even know who my parents are. I— I’m nobody, Will!”

“On the contrary. You are a child of the One True God, the King of all creation, made in His image and crowned with glory and honor. That makes you someone very special.”

“No,” Brandon protested, “I am only twelve. I have no skills, no training, no education. I am little more than a servant.”

“Is that so?” William replied. “You know, Christ came to us as a servant. His mother was young and of lowly birth, from a village of no importance. He held no titles or rank. He was the only begotten Son of God, yet He came to serve, not to be served. Do you believe that He died to pay for your sins, and that He rose again on the third day and now sits at the right hand of the Father?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Good. The Scriptures say that because you choose to believe, you have been given the right to be called a child of God. In his epistle to the Romans, the apostle Paul says that, as His child, you are a co-heir with Christ. If you share in His sufferings, you will share in His glory.”

“Does it really say that?” Brandon asked.

“It does. I see you have much to learn about who you are in Christ. Brandon, our Father



in heaven has a plan for your life. It's a plan only you can fulfill, and its completion will bring Him glory. No one else possesses the unique combination of talents and gifts required to see this plan through. But you must *choose* to do God's will; He will not force Himself upon you."

"What should I do?"

"God has chosen you to follow Him. I have chosen you to stand at my side as my squire. Do you still insist you are unworthy to carry my sword?"

Brandon was silent for a moment. Then he got down on one knee and said, "Sir William, I do have much to learn. But I would be honored if you would take me as your squire and teach me all I need to know to serve you and bring glory to my Father in heaven."

"Excellent!" William clapped his hands and rubbed them together. "As for your age, I will take it up with the baron. In the meantime, we have much to do before the ceremony in two weeks." He pulled Brandon to his feet. "My first command to you is to help me remove this awful hauberk. I do believe this chainmail weighs as much as you!"



That evening, at the feast held in William's honor, the Baron John de Lisle stood and toasted his newest knight, who was seated at his side on the raised dais. The baron recounted for all the tale of the skirmish in the forest and of William's courage. "In the moment after I had fallen," he said, "William had a choice to make. He could see we were outnumbered and his commander was down. He was unarmed, aside from a small dagger, and could not be expected to hold his own against seasoned soldiers. He could have believed his eyes, seen that he was helpless, and

chosen to run and hide. Instead, William saw the situation through the eyes of faith. He knew himself to be more than a squire, that he was a child of the living God, and he was certain that God had a great plan for his life. And he knew that so long as that plan remained unfulfilled, he would not taste death. So William took up my sword and, without hesitating, saved my life."

The great hall erupted in applause. Gwyneth, who stood at the side of the Lady Isabel, jumped up and down, clapping.

The baron motioned for silence and continued. "As you know, William was knighted on the field of honor, but an important step remains. A fortnight from now, the king himself will grace our presence here at Cambridge Castle, and he will induct Sir William into the illustrious Order of the Garter."

The applause turned to cheers, and the air was suddenly filled with hats tossed by their owners. Brandon, grinning from ear to ear, caught William's eye. William smiled and nodded to him. Tomorrow, his training would begin.

### THINK ABOUT IT

- » Brandon's story takes place in the year 1354, during what we call the Middle Ages, or medieval times. How did daily life during the Middle Ages differ from the way you live today?
- » Baron John de Lisle was a real person. He fought in the Hundred Years' War and was one of the founding members of the Order of the Garter. Cambridge Castle was also a real place. Find the city of Cambridge on a map of England. Do you know what the city is most famous for today? If not, look it up online or at your local library.
- » Brandon dreams of becoming a great knight in the king's service, yet when William asks him to be his squire—the next step toward becoming a knight—Brandon feels undeserving of the honor. Why does he feel this way? Who has told him he is unworthy of becoming a knight?

## HEAVY METAL

Chainmail, or *chainmaille*, is a flexible armor made of many small metal rings linked together to form a tight mesh. Forged from brass, iron, or steel, chainmail was the first word in protective wear for knights of the Middle Ages, before the development of full plate armor.

Shirts of chainmail weighed up to fifty-five pounds, depending on their size and length, and could be difficult to move about in. However, the mesh was effective at stopping an enemy's sword or lance or the sharp edge of an axe. Although mail did not protect the knight from heavy blows from a blunt weapon, it generally prevented the skin from being pierced, thus limiting the potential for fatal infections which often followed such injuries in medieval times.

Each garment of chainmail was fashioned specifically for the part of the body it was intended to protect. Differences in size were easy to accommodate, simply by adding or removing rings from the garment. Gauntlets called *mitons* were worn as gloves. Mail shirts came in knee-length tunics called *hauberks*, mid-thigh-length tunics called *haubergeons*, and waist-length tunics called *byrnie*s. If the knight's tunic had a hood, or *coif*, attached, he'd have to almost stand on his head to remove it because the tunic could have no fasteners, which would leave the wearer's neck and shoulders vulnerable to attack.

Today, chainmail still has its uses. For example, it is often worn by butchers who work with meat-cutting machines. Scuba divers sometimes wear it as protection against sharks, and animal-control officers use it to protect themselves from animal bites. Chainmail is also popular for its decorative uses, especially on military uniforms or as jewelry.



## WORDS YOU NEED TO KNOW

- » **God's will:** God's plans and purposes for everything He created
- » **Fear of the Lord:** An attitude of reverence toward God in which I recognize His right to rule over every area of my life

## HIDE IT IN YOUR HEART

*Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. (Ephesians 1:4, NLT)*

*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. (Proverbs 9:10)*

## GOD WANTS YOU!

In 1916, *Leslie's Weekly* magazine commissioned artist James Montgomery Flagg to paint a portrait of the fictional character Uncle Sam for the cover of its July 6 issue. Pressure was mounting on the United States to enter the Great War taking place in Europe, and the magazine was calling on readers to begin doing their part immediately to prepare for the coming war effort. Less than a year later, the U.S. officially entered the war, and Flagg's painting was used to create what he later called "the most famous poster in the world." Four million copies were printed of the poster depicting a stern Uncle Sam pointing his finger at viewers and declaring, "I Want YOU."

Flagg's poster was a recruiting tool for the U.S. Army, a way to encourage young men to volunteer to fight for their country. Today, the Lord God is looking for a few good men and women to follow Jesus, serve one another, and carry the good news of salvation to every corner of the world. Many will hear the call of God—Romans 1:18–23 tells us that the truth about God has been made obvious to everyone, and therefore



Painting: James Montgomery Flagg.

no one has an excuse for not following Him—but sadly, few among us will truly listen and respond to God’s call (Matthew 22:14).

Have you answered God’s call? Have you chosen to accept His free gift of salvation? If you believe Jesus is the Son of God and that He died for your sins and was raised from the dead, if you call Him Lord and have chosen to follow Him, you are a bona fide child of God. You are royalty! John 1:12–13 says you have been born again into the family of the King of kings, the Most High God. You know what’s really amazing? This was no accident. God *chose* you:

*Even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes.* (Ephesians 1:4, NLT)

*Brothers, the Lord loves you. God chose you from the beginning to be saved.*  
(2 Thessalonians 2:13, ICB)

If you have chosen God, it’s because God first chose you. Let that sink in for a moment. God chose you! He chose you before He created the world so that you would choose Him and want to live your life for Him.

Why you? Good question. Perhaps you feel unworthy to be called a child of God. Maybe you have a shortcoming you think disqualifies you from serving in His kingdom. If so, you’re in good company. Moses stuttered, and Jacob was a liar. Abraham and Sarah were too old, and David was too young. Miriam was a gossip, and Hosea’s wife was a prostitute. Elijah was burned out, and Lazarus was dead. Gideon had doubts, and so did Thomas. Peter was afraid, and Jonah ran from God. Noah got drunk, and Paul was a murderer. Yet God used every one of these people for His glory.



The Tomb of Lazarus as it appeared in 1893.  
God chose to use Lazarus even though he had died!

You see, God is not interested in your report card or your résumé. He doesn’t care how much money your parents make, how many friends you have, what kind of car your family drives, or whether you graduate from an Ivy League school. It doesn’t matter to Him what you look like or how well you speak. He’s not worried about the mistakes you’ve made or the mistakes you *will* make. He doesn’t require you to take a test or interview for a place in His kingdom. If you have chosen to follow God, your position is secure: You are a chosen one.

Again, you may ask, “Why me?”

Ephesians 1:5 says that God chose you *just because He wanted to*.

And every choice God makes is absolutely perfect.

### GOD WANTS YOU TO CHOOSE WISELY

Every kid feels powerless now and then. After all, so many decisions that affect you each day are made by someone else. Somebody else tells you where you’re going to live, what you will have for dinner, what time to get up in the morning, which songs to sing in church, and which subjects to study for school. Sometimes it seems as though every important decision in life is beyond your control.

It’s true that God, in His great wisdom, places children in families and gives them parents and other adults to guide them, teach them, and make many critical decisions for their benefit. That’s because children do not yet have the knowledge, experience, or maturity to make wise decisions about such things as meeting the family’s housing and nutritional needs or making a household budget.



Someday you will be required to make these kinds of choices for yourself and *your* family. Until then, you must learn and practice good decision-making skills by choosing to live each day in a way that is pleasing to God. Now, many of the decisions you will be asked to make as a child may seem small and insignificant. But the Bible teaches that we “should not think that small beginnings are unimportant” (Zechariah 4:10, NCV). Jesus said, “If you are faithful in little things, you will be faithful

in large ones” (Luke 16:10, NLT).

Jesus showed us the right way to make decisions. As we have seen, He had the same feelings and passions we have. He had friends who trusted Him to make good decisions and who counted on Him to lead them. And He had enemies who insisted that He change His way of doing things. Jesus had to make some tough choices. Yet He always knew the right thing to do because He kept His focus on God the Father: “For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me” (John 6:38).

The truth is, even as a child you are not powerless. You, too, have decisions to make. Although God has a plan for your life, you have a responsibility to choose wisely. Every day, every hour, every minute, you must choose to do what is right or to do what is wrong. You must choose between actions and words that are wise and those that are unwise. You can choose to do what you want to do or what God wants you to do. How will you choose?

### MAKE A NOTE OF IT

List five decisions you've made today. Now write a brief paragraph about each of these decisions: What were your options? Why did you choose the way you did? What were the consequences of your decision? For example: Let's say you decided what to eat for breakfast this morning. What were your possible choices? Did you make your choice based on flavors, nutritional content, the color of the box it came in, your energy needs for the day, or a combination of factors? How did your decision work out for you? Did you have good energy all morning? Or did you get hungry again an hour before lunchtime?

## WHY DO PEOPLE MAKE UNWISE CHOICES?

Knowing the wise thing to do in most situations is really not all that difficult. We have defined wisdom as knowing, loving, and obeying God's Word and applying that knowledge to make good decisions. If you and I will read and study the Bible and carry its words in our hearts and minds, we should be able to make the wise choice every time.

So why don't we? The Bible says that even those people who choose not to read God's Word know about God and His holiness (Romans 1:18–20). And we were all created with the ability to think and reason and understand the difference between right and wrong. So why do people make so many unwise decisions?

We often make poor decisions in part because "the heart is deceitful above all things" (Jeremiah 17:9, NKJV). We can talk ourselves into doing just about anything. We can find any number of "good reasons" for doing things we really know are wrong: *My friends are all doing it. I'm not hurting anyone, and there's no law against it. Besides, nobody's going to find out.* So often people make choices based not on what is wise but on what they think they can get away with. And so to justify their poor choices, they must lie to themselves.



Why do you suppose so many people make unhealthy choices when it comes to what they eat? It's not because they lack information about what's in the food. It's no secret that a McDonald's Big Mac sandwich contains 560 calories and 30 grams of fat. (That's before you add fries and a soda!) And you don't have to look far to learn that Taco Bell's Burrito Supreme has 440 calories and 18 grams of fat. If you're an eleven-year-old girl, you probably need about 2,200 calories per day, depending on

your activity level. As for the prepackaged food we buy at the supermarket, nearly every item these days is labeled with nutritional facts. These facts include the number of calories per serving and a complete list of ingredients. Look closely and you will see that many of America's favorite foods contain chemicals and coloring agents that are known to be potentially harm-

ful to humans. So why do we continue to consume foods we know may be hazardous to our health?

Much of the reason is that we simply refuse to acknowledge the truth of what the foods we eat are doing to our bodies. We lie to ourselves. We like the way it tastes, so we ignore the labels and eat it anyway. No one is saying these foods aren't delicious or fun to eat, but are a few moments of fun worth the long-term consequences that can lead to obesity, illness, or even death?



Likewise, when making decisions people tend to ignore the flashing warning signs. We conveniently “forget” the wisdom and truth of God’s Word. We see something that looks good, smells delicious, or sounds fun, and we want it. So we tell ourselves, *It’s okay, it’s just this once*, and we dive in without giving any real thought to the consequences of our actions. But poor choices—like sins—have a way of multiplying. You may quickly find yourself making more poor choices to cover up the mistakes you’ve already made, until a pattern of poor decision-making is established.

How can you break this pattern and begin making wise decisions? First you must face the facts. You must acknowledge the truth and stop lying to yourself. If you want to make good choices, if you ever hope to be healthy both physically and spiritually, you must be honest with yourself and admit that you already know in your heart what God would have you do. Know the truth, choose the truth, and the truth will set you free (John 8:32).

### MAKE A NOTE OF IT

Go to your cupboard or kitchen pantry and find a box of breakfast cereal. If you don’t eat cereal, any packaged food product will do. Write down the complete list of ingredients listed on the side of the box. Now, with the help of a parent, go to the Internet or your library and look up each one of the ingredients. Find out what it is and what it does. Are there any health warnings or advisories connected with this ingredient? If so, talk with your parents about replacing the cereal with a healthier alternative.

## HOW TO MAKE A WISE DECISION

Knowing the wise thing to do is not always as simple as reading the Surgeon General's warning on a package of cigarettes. We cannot always be sure of the consequences that may result from choosing between two seemingly good options. For example, should you join the church choir or help care for the babies in the nursery? Should you take piano lessons or learn to play the guitar? There's not always a right or wrong choice, but there are some important strategies for making good decisions. Let's look at a few.



### ASK GOD FIRST

No decision is wise if you make it without first talking to God. After all, He knows everything there is to know—past, present, and future. “To God belong wisdom and power; counsel and understanding are his” (Job 12:13). He knows the consequences, large and small, of every decision you make. And like all good fathers, He wants only the best for you, His child.

When Jesus needed to choose twelve apostles from among His many followers, He could have simply selected the twelve handsomest or the twelve best public speakers or the twelve who had displayed the greatest measure of faith. Instead, Jesus went off to a mountain and spent the entire night in prayer, asking God whom He should choose (Luke 6:12–15). King Saul, on the other hand, did not wait for an answer from God. Confronted by an advancing army of angry Philistines, Saul was afraid. So he went to a medium, a psychic, and asked *her* advice (1 Samuel 28). For this, the Lord put Saul to death and gave the kingdom of Israel to David (1 Chronicles 10:13–14).

This does not mean you must wait for an angelic visitation before deciding to go camping. God speaks to His children in many ways—in His Word, by the Holy Spirit, through the advice of godly counselors, and through our past experiences. Your heavenly Father cares about every detail of your daily life, and He will never leave you to face your dilemmas alone. When you have a difficult decision to make, pray about it. Spend time reading the Bible and meditating on its words. Then listen for God to answer.

Keep in mind that God will never contradict Himself. If you think something you saw on TV or heard in a sermon is God's way of trying to tell you something, compare it to what you find in the Bible. You can always trust what you read in God's Word.

*In His will is our peace.*

**Dante Alighieri**

1265–1321

## LISTEN TO THE HOLY SPIRIT

One of the ways God speaks to us is through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God's special gift to every person who chooses to follow Christ. The Holy Spirit is called the Counselor or Helper, and He lives inside every believer. Jesus said, "He will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I have told you" (John 14:26, NLT). In fact, the Bible says, "He will guide you into all truth" (John 16:13). And when you are facing a difficult decision or temptation and don't know what to pray for, the Holy Spirit will even pray *for* you (Romans 8:26–27)!

Remember, the Holy Spirit is God, and He lives in perfect unity and harmony with God the Father and God the Son, so He will never contradict God's Word. He will never lead you to lie, steal, or gossip, for the Bible has already told us these things are not godly. But if you will allow the Holy Spirit to guide your life and control your thoughts, then you will not give in to temptation and choose what your sinful nature wants (Galatians 5:16; Romans 8:5–6).

## SEEK WISE COUNSEL

Not long after Solomon was crowned king of Israel, he found himself a bit overwhelmed by his new responsibilities. Then one night, the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream and made him an offer: "What do you want? Ask, and I will give it to you!" (1 Kings 3:5, NLT). Imagine God appearing to a young man nowadays and offering to give him anything he wanted. What would most people ask for? What would *you* ask for? Good looks? A great singing voice? Chicken pox for the neighborhood bully? A horse of your own to ride in the Kentucky Derby?

Here's what Solomon asked for:

*"O LORD my God, you have made me king . . . but I am like a little child who doesn't know his way around. . . . Give me an understanding heart so that I can govern your people well and know the difference between right and wrong."* (1 Kings 3:7–9, NLT)

Solomon made the smart choice: He asked for wisdom. The Lord was so pleased the young man had asked for understanding instead of riches or fame that He made Solomon the wealthiest, most famous person in all the world *and* gave him wisdom beyond that of any man or woman who ever lived (1 Kings 3:10–13). Solomon later became an architect, poet, phi-



*Judgement of Solomon.*

osopher, scientist, and scholar—a truly remarkable person. Yet he would write often about the importance of asking for and listening to good advice:

*A wise man will hear and increase in learning, and a man of understanding will acquire wise counsel.* (Proverbs 1:5, NASB)

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

*Without wise leadership, a nation falls; there is safety in having many advisers.*  
(Proverbs 11:14 NLT)

Why did the smartest man in the world make such a big deal out of seeking counsel and advice from others? *Because* he was the smartest man in the world! Even after God granted Solomon extraordinary wisdom, he continued to surround himself with trusted advisors. Wise people know when they don't know something, and they're not afraid to ask those who *do* know. Only fools believe they have all the answers.

Proverbs 1:5 (ESV) says, “Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance.” No matter how successful you may become, no matter how many college degrees you may earn, no matter how many young people you may teach one day, you will never outgrow your need for good advice. So begin to develop good decision-making habits now by asking for help from trusted adults. When you're having trouble making a decision, talk to your mom and dad, your Sunday school teacher, or your pastor. Ask what they would do in your situation. Ask them to pray with you about the issue and help you find answers in the Bible. Ask them to recommend a good book that might help you evaluate your choices.

I know it's hard to believe, but the adults in your life were once your age. And they probably had to deal with the same kinds of problems you're facing now. In October 1962, the youngest-ever president of the United States was confronted with a grave decision of his own. The Soviet Union had delivered nuclear missiles to the island nation of Cuba, just ninety miles off the coast of Florida. President John F. Kennedy demanded the missiles' immediate removal. Tensions were high and people were scared, as the U.S. and Soviet Union stood on the brink of a deadly war. Instead of rushing into action, President Kennedy picked up the telephone and called three men who had served as president before him—Herbert Hoover, Harry S. Truman, and Dwight D. Eisenhower. Kennedy asked for their advice, and each man had valuable insights to offer. After discussing the options with his closest



President Kennedy receiving advice from advisors on his executive committee during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. Photo: Cecil Stoughton.

## LINCOLN'S CABINET

The President's Cabinet is the name given to a select group of high-ranking officials in the American government. These people are chosen by the U.S. president to advise him or her on how to run the country and execute our nation's laws. The president relies on these men and women to provide him with good information and good ideas to help him make decisions that will benefit the whole country.



*First Reading of the Emancipation Proclamation* by Francis Bicknell Carpenter.

Every person who serves on the Cabinet is appointed by the president but first must be approved by the U.S. Senate. Currently there are fifteen Cabinet members and each is in charge of a different government department—state, treasury, defense, justice, interior, agriculture, commerce, labor, health and human services, housing and urban development, transportation, energy, education, veterans affairs, and homeland security. The first president, George Washington, appointed a Cabinet that had only four members.

Proverbs 15:22 says, “Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisors they succeed.” When Abraham Lincoln was elected president, he knew he was going to need a lot of help. The nation was divided, and a bloody civil war was inevitable. Lincoln wanted to get the opinions of the smartest people of his day on how to see the country through this crisis, even if those people didn't always see eye to eye with him. So instead of choosing men for his Cabinet who would agree to his proposals without question, he chose to appoint his political rivals, men who had run against him in the race for president.

A less confident man might have surrounded himself with personal supporters, but President Lincoln said, “These were the very strongest men. I had no right to deprive the country of their service.” This decision, along with a great deal of prayer, helped Abraham Lincoln bring the United States through the Civil War and secured his place as one of the most respected presidents in American history.

advisors, including his brother Robert, President Kennedy chose a course of action that reduced the tension between the two countries while causing the Soviet leaders to rethink their position. War was prevented.

James 1:5 says, “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.” One of the ways God will provide you

with the wisdom you need is through the counsel of others. But like Solomon, you must first understand that you don't know everything and then ask God for wisdom. Then talk with godly men and women you know and listen to what they have to say.

## CHOOSE CHRIST

The Gospel of Luke tells the story of sisters Mary and Martha and how Jesus visited them one afternoon in the village of Bethany. Martha welcomed Jesus to their home and then immediately set about preparing dinner. She was determined to honor their guest with a clean home and a sumptuous meal. Meanwhile, Mary sat down at the feet of Jesus and listened to Him talk about the kingdom of heaven. Martha needed her sister's help getting dinner ready and probably let her know exactly how she felt long before she said anything. There was probably some glaring, a few pointed remarks, and a lot of banging of pots and pans to remind her sister there was still work to be done. But Mary barely noticed and never moved from her spot.



*Martha and Mary* by Tintoretto.

Martha's frustration mounted until finally she had had enough. "Lord," she said, "doesn't it bother you that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to come and help me!"

Jesus simply smiled and said, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about so many things, but only one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen what is best, and it will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:38–42, CEV).

Notice that Jesus did not criticize Martha or say, "Why can't you be more like your sister Mary?" He did not say that old-fashioned hard work is unnecessary or that being a good servant is not important. Scripture clearly states that we are to do our chores to the best of our ability as though we are "working for the Lord" (Colossians 3:23).

But Martha and Mary both had a choice to make. Jesus Christ was in town and coming to *their* house! The sisters could choose to hang out at the village well and spread the news of their good fortune. (Talk about having

friends in high places!) Or they could choose to rush about cleaning house and preparing the finest gourmet meal anyone in Bethany had ever seen. Or they could choose to take the opportunity of a lifetime to worship and learn at the feet of the Master.

Martha made a good choice. But Mary made the *best* choice.

Put Jesus first in everything you do and everything you say. Spend time with Him every day by reading His Word. Obey His commands. Remember what He has done for you. Allow the Holy Spirit to guide your thoughts and actions, and He will help you become more and more like Jesus. Worship Christ for He is King!

### WHAT SHOULD I DO?

When Solomon wrote, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10), did he mean we are supposed to be afraid of our heavenly Father? No. Solomon was talking about keeping a healthy respect for God and choosing to obey His commands. We must remember who God really is—the all-knowing, all-powerful, ever-present Creator of all things. When we consider the awesome grandeur of God, if we truly understand how amazing He is and the incredible depth of His love for us, the only appropriate way for our hearts to respond is to show reverence for Him. Deuteronomy 13:4 says, “It is the LORD your God you must follow, and him you must revere.”

We demonstrate reverence for God by worshiping Him through prayer and praise, adoring His perfection, and giving Him first place in every area of our lives. We need to acknowledge His right to rule over everything He has created and surrender to His will for us. As we surrender our lives to Him, He will reveal more of Himself and His wisdom to us. And the more we understand of God’s character and wisdom, the greater will be our ability to make good decisions.



#### A PRAYER

*Dear God, thank you for choosing me to be your child. Thank you for creating me and for giving me the ability and freedom to make choices. Please give me the wisdom to make good choices and help me to remain in your will. Guide me and teach me through your Holy Spirit. Help me to always remember and obey your commands. Thank you for sending godly people into my life to teach me about you. Thank you especially for sending your Son, Jesus, to save me from the punishment I deserve for my sins. Help me to always choose Him. In Jesus’ name. Amen.*



Photo: NASA.

## WORLDVIEWS IN FOCUS

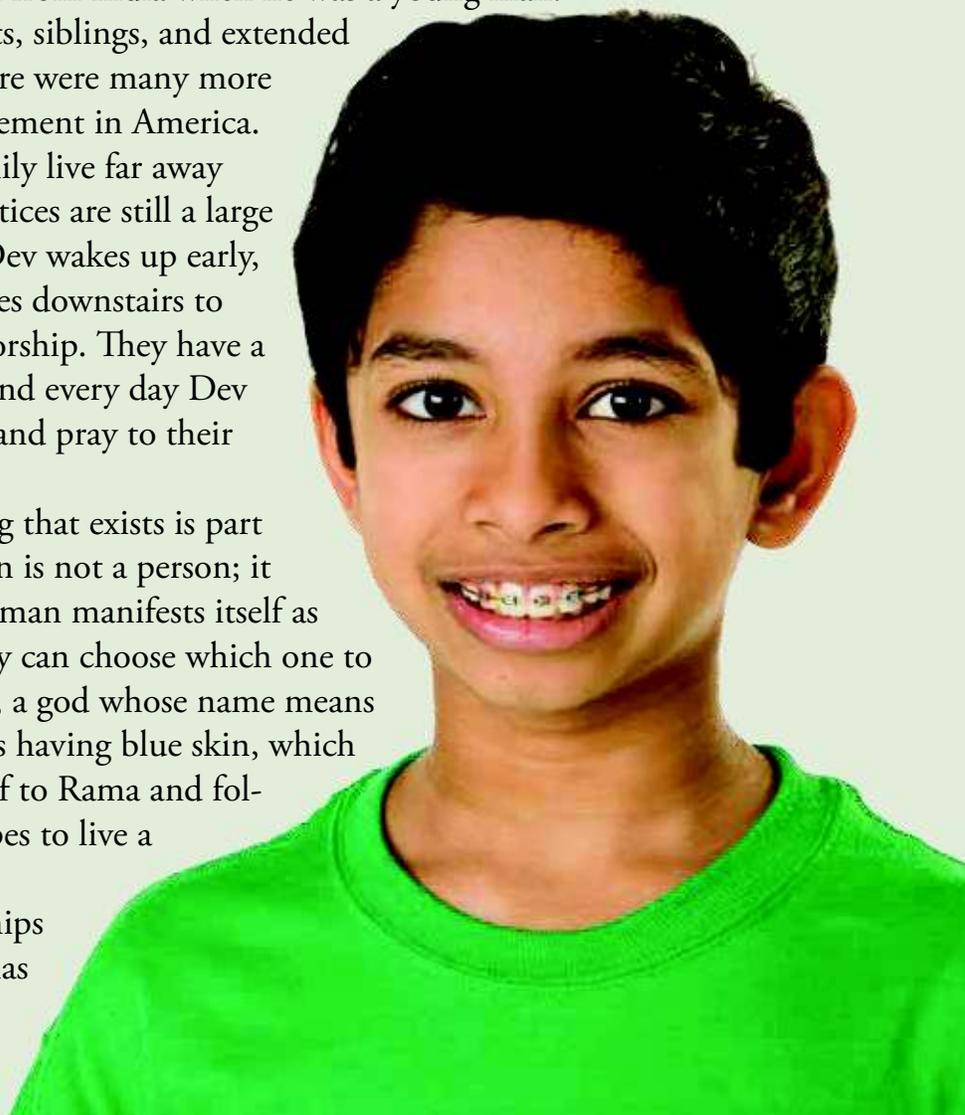
## MEET DEV

Dev is an eleven-year-old boy who lives in New York City. He lives with his father and mother, his older sister Chandra, his younger brother Rajani, his baby sister Bina, and his grandmother Nani. Dev's father emigrated from India when he was a young man. Although it meant leaving his parents, siblings, and extended family, Dev's father believed that there were many more opportunities for wealth and advancement in America.

Even though Dev and his family live far away from India, Hindu religion and practices are still a large part of their lives. In the morning, Dev wakes up early, bathes, and gets dressed. Then he goes downstairs to meet with his family for morning worship. They have a special prayer room in their house, and every day Dev and his family gather there to kneel and pray to their gods.

Hindus believe that everything that exists is part of a god they call Brahman. Brahman is not a person; it is everything. They believe that Brahman manifests itself as different, personal gods and that they can choose which one to worship. Dev's father prays to Rama, a god whose name means "lord of virtue." Rama is described as having blue skin, which is a sign of deity. By devoting himself to Rama and following his example, Dev's father hopes to live a perfect life.

Although Dev's mother worships Rama along with her husband, she has taken the goddess Sita, Rama's wife, as her example and guide. The love



story of Rama and Sita is one of her favorite tales. Long ago in India, Princess Sita married the Lord Rama. When Rama was exiled from his kingdom, Sita volunteered to join him. Then she was kidnapped by an enemy of Rama. Through many hardships, she remained faithful to Rama and was eventually rescued by him. For Dev's mother, the story of Rama and Sita is the perfect picture of loyalty and virtue between husband and wife. She wants to be as faithful to her husband as Sita was to Rama.

The prayer room in Dev's house contains colorful statues of both Rama and Sita. Dev's father and mother recite *mantras*, or chants, to honor the gods. They meditate to clear their minds of distracting thoughts and attitudes. Sometimes they use yoga to help them focus. Afterward, Dev's mother lays an offering of fresh fruit and flowers in front of the gods and asks them to watch over her family.

After morning prayers, Dev and his family eat breakfast together, sitting on cushions around a low table, before they leave for their day. Dev's father works as a sales representative, while Dev's mother works several afternoons a week as a hostess in a nearby restaurant. Because her job helps bring in money to feed her family, Dev's mother doesn't feel that working outside the home goes against her responsibility to care for her family. Many middle-class Indian women work part time, and Dev's mother is grateful that there are so many opportunities open to her in America.

Dev likes living in New York City. Although it is not as colorful as some of the cities he has visited in India, Dev prefers the bustling excitement of New York, where there is always something to do or see. Often Dev's father takes the whole family to visit a famous landmark, like the Empire State Building, or to see a matinee of a play or musical. Dev's father



Times Square in New York City. Photo: Michael Danser.

says that he wouldn't want to move back to India because there are so many more opportunities, freedoms, and things to experience in the United States. For example, here Dev and his family have a home of their own, while in India they would have only a few rooms to

themselves, sharing a communal kitchen with their large extended family.

Dev and his brother attend public school, where they learn subjects like math, spelling, and history. Dev's father wants him to learn about the world so that he can understand the many ways people think and believe. In addition to regular classes, Dev takes special classes at the Hindu community center a few blocks from his house. He studies Indian culture, food, and music and learns to speak Hindi, the main language of India. Dev's father wants to make sure that Dev learns all he can about India so that he understands the rich heritage of Hinduism. Dev also takes yoga classes there. The yoga teacher says that although some people just enjoy the physical benefits of yoga, its true purpose is to allow each person's spirit to get in touch with Brahman.

Dev's most important subject is Hindu religion. Dev's father volunteers as one of the religion teachers at the community center. He tells Dev and his classmates that Hinduism is the oldest living religion in the world, tracing back thousands of years. Dev's father says that he is proud to be a Hindu because it is such a welcoming religion. Hindus believe that all paths to faith eventually lead to Brahman, so no one religion is better or truer than any other.



Statue of Ganesha. Photo: Lalbal.

Dev and his family attend Hindu services at the Ganesha Temple on Sundays. Although Hindus don't have a set day of the week for worship like Dev's Muslim and Christian friends do, Hindus often meet once a week to worship together and learn more about how to be a good Hindu. When they arrive at the temple, Dev and his family take off their shoes and leave them outside. This is to show respect to the Hindu gods. Dev's father always brings a small gift for the gods, like fruit or flowers, and as they leave the temple Dev's mother always gives a little money to help the poor.

Dev likes how colorful everything is in the temple. The shape of the building reminds him of buildings in India, and the brightly colored pictures and statues representing the many Hindu gods and goddesses make the temple a cheerful place. There are many gods in Hinduism. The god Ganesha, for whom the temple is named, is one of Dev's favorites because he grew up hearing his grandmother tell many stories about him. Statues and paintings of Ganesha depict him as having four arms and the head of an elephant, and often he is shown dancing. Hindus believe that Ganesha removes obstacles in people's lives to help them become better people, so Dev honors Ganesha at the temple and at home with special chants.

The temple teacher, who is called a *guru*, explains that although Hindus worship many lesser gods such as Ganesha, the source and essence of the universe is Brahman, described as

infinite consciousness and being. The guru teaches that the ultimate goal of all Hindus is to realize they are the same as Brahman and to become one with it. He explains that in order to become one with Brahman, a state the Hindus call nirvana, they must first understand that they are not really individuals with bodies, thoughts, and feelings. The guru says these are only illusions or tricks of the mind.



Next the guru explains that with careful guidance—using meditation, mantras, and other Hindu rituals—people can escape from their illusions and reach the goal of nirvana. They can, at last, experience oneness with Brahman. The guru helps Dev understand this idea by having him imagine his life as a drop of rain. One day that drop will fall into the ocean. When it does, it will lose its own identity as it becomes part of the immense

ocean. In the same way, by following the right Hindu rituals and thinking, Dev will one day join the vast ocean that is Brahman and become one with it. He will have reached nirvana.

Dev knows how important it is to follow the guru's teaching because he has also been taught a frightening Hindu belief called reincarnation. According to this belief, until people reach nirvana, they will die and be reborn over and over. Dev's father says that reincarnation gives people many chances to escape the cycle of rebirth and to reach nirvana. This might sound like good news, but it also means that people fail many times in their goal of becoming one with Brahman.

Dev has learned that people are not always reborn as people, but sometimes as different kinds of animals. This happens because they did not make right choices or follow all of the Hindu teachings and rituals in their past life. As the guru explains, people earn either good or bad credits in each life, a belief called *karma*. By making right choices, they earn good credits, which give them good things in their next life. By making wrong choices or not following Hindu teachings, they earn bad credits and may be reborn as a poor person or even a rat or snake.

Because he never wants to be reincarnated as a rat, Dev works hard to be a good Hindu and make right choices, a way of life Hindus call *dharma*. Since the goal for all Hindus is to become one with Brahman, they believe that following the principle of dharma—pursuing what is righteous and avoiding what is evil—is very important. Dev's father wants very much for the whole family to live perfect lives, so he is constantly encouraging and correcting Dev.

Throughout the temple ceremony, Dev copies his father carefully as he chants mantras and prayers and bows low before the statues of the gods. He also listens as his father recites verses from the *Bhagavad Gita*, one of the holiest Hindu books. On special holidays, Dev enjoys watching dancers at the temple perform stories about the Hindu gods. He also enjoys listening to sacred songs or special readings from the *Vedas*, another set of holy books.

Dev's favorite holiday is *Diwali*, also known as the "festival of lights." For five days, Hindus celebrate the triumph of good over evil in the world and within themselves. Dev's family lights small clay lamps filled with oil, decorates their home with colorful paper lanterns, and makes bright intricate designs called *rangoli* with colored powder on the floor. Diwali comes at the end of the traditional harvest time, so it is a holiday when Hindus celebrate bounty and wealth by visiting their friends' homes for special dinners. Dev especially loves the tradition of stringing colored lights and setting off firecrackers to celebrate. The Diwali celebrations in America aren't as elaborate as in India, where Diwali is a national holiday, but that doesn't stop Dev from enjoying the traditions, excitement, and good food each year!

Although Dev enjoys going to the temple, he's always glad when it's time to go home and eat. At home, Dev's mother mixes modern American cooking with traditional Indian foods. The only thing she is careful to avoid is beef. Because Hindus believe that cows are sacred animals, they cannot eat steaks, hamburgers, tacos, or anything else containing beef. Although not all meat is forbidden for Hindus, Dev's mother prefers to make mostly vegetarian dishes. Dev loves when she fixes *curry*, an Indian dish of rice, lentils, and vegetables cooked in a spicy sauce, and serves it with fresh *naan* (flatbread). Sometimes she even lets Dev and Rajani eat traditional style—with their fingers! After dinner, Dev's mother likes to drink a cup of strong tea, while his father prefers coffee.

Even though Dev's parents agree about many things, they definitely have different opinions about other things and aren't afraid to express them. They enjoy discussing bits of news from India or arguing comfortably about American politics. But Dev can see that his father is in charge of the household and knows that his mother would never contradict him in public. Being a strong family and maintaining family honor are very important to



Hindus. Dev understands that because he is the eldest son, he will one day need to take care of his parents, so he carefully watches how his father makes decisions.

One of Dev's father's most important tasks is taking care of his mother. Hindus believe that there are four stages of life. Dev is in the first stage—student life—and is learning all he can about Hinduism and how he should live. Dev's parents are in the second stage—household life—where they are in charge of raising a family and taking care of their elders. Dev's grandmother Nani represents the third stage—retired life—and spends her time relaxing from everyday duties and passing on her wisdom to the younger generation. Eventually, she may decide to enter the fourth stage—secluded life—and renounce contact with other



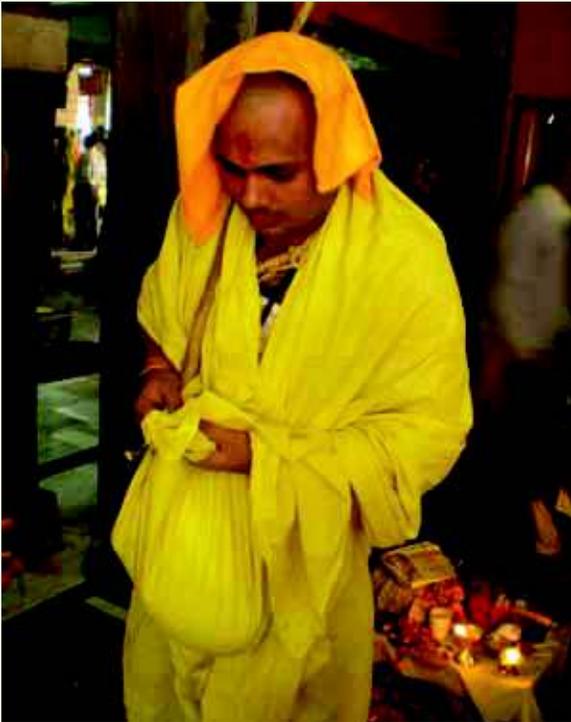
Indian wedding ceremony. Photo: Yann Forget.

people in order to meditate on becoming one with Brahman. It is rare, though, for people to make this decision.

Within a few days, Dev's sister Chandra is getting married and will move into the second stage of life. In Hindu families, marriage is very sacred, so most marriages are arranged. It is more important for Hindu husbands and wives to be compatible and respect each other than to be in love. This is because family is such an important part of Hindu life.

Although he is happy to be getting a new big brother, Samir, Dev is getting tired of all the wedding fuss. Almost every friend the families know is invited to the wedding, and there will be many special treats and gifts. Dev's mother and her friends have been sending invitations, gathering decorations, and preparing food for weeks. Chandra has been shopping for jewelry and a *sari* for her wedding outfit. Last night, her girlfriends painted her hands and feet with elaborate designs in the traditional fashion. The henna dye will stay on her hands for a week or so before fading away. Dev thinks it looks like she is wearing gloves and socks made of brown lace!

The actual wedding will last all day, as there are many small ceremonies and rituals that Chandra and Samir will have to perform. One of the most important rituals is the *saptapadi*, where Chandra and Samir will take seven steps around a flame, reciting to each other promises about their life together. Once the wedding ceremony is performed, with all the correct promises spoken between bride, groom, and their parents and all the correct prayers recited for a happy life together, the reception can begin! Everyone will dance and eat and have a marvelous time celebrating the start of a new family.



Upanayana, or thread ceremony. Photo: Raidurgesh.

Even though most of Dev's extended family is still back in India, they call and write often. Dev's family also visits India regularly, so that Dev and his brother and sisters can learn about the colorful culture of India, their homeland. Sometimes they also visit sacred sites and Hindu temples, leaving offerings so the gods will bless them.

This year, the trip to India will be a special one because Dev is preparing for his sacred thread ceremony, called the *upanayana*. This ceremony will mark his transition from boyhood to manhood. After bathing and putting on special clothes, Dev will receive a cord made from three threads that goes over his left shoulder, across his chest, and is tied near his waist. Then Dev will be given a special prayer and a new spiritual name in exchange for his promise to study the sacred Hindu writings. Dev's father says that the sacred thread ceremony proves

Dev's commitment to Hinduism. By giving him the threads, it shows that the men in charge of his spiritual education, like his father and guru, think he is old enough to seriously study Hinduism. By accepting, Dev promises to keep his thoughts and actions pure and righteous, as every devout Hindu should. After the ceremony, Dev and his friends and family will party!

Dev will wear a thread like this for the rest of his life. When he marries or has children, he can add more threads to it, symbolizing the new responsibilities being added to his life. Once a year, he will trade the old cord for a new one. He is excited about the ceremony because it will show everyone that he is growing up. Dev's father says that after the ceremony, he will start teaching Dev important grown-up skills, like managing money.

Although Dev knows becoming a grown-up is inevitable, he still enjoys the day-to-day childhood opportunities to play with friends, go to school, the community center, and the temple, and especially to spend time with his family. He doesn't imagine his life being any more satisfying than it is right now even though he looks forward to the day he'll be a serious Hindu man like his father.

## WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

- How is the way Dev lives different from the way you live? How are your lives similar?
- What do you think visiting a Hindu temple might be like? What would you expect to see there? What would Dev think of your church if he visited it?
- Hindu gods and goddesses are depicted in many unusual ways in statues and paintings. Ganesha has the head of an elephant, Hanuman is a monkey, Vishnu has four arms, and Brahma (not to be confused with Brahman) has four heads—and that's after losing one! What does the Bible say about the practice of making statues of gods? According to the biblical Christian worldview, what does God the Father look like?
- Dev has been taught that people are trapped in a constant cycle of rebirth called reincarnation. What does this mean for the way Dev lives each day?
- If Dev's sister lived in India, her parents may have decided to choose a husband for her, as is the Hindu tradition. What would that be like, having such an important decision made for you? How is the Christian wedding ceremony different from a Hindu wedding?
- How is the way Dev sees himself different from the way you see yourself as a child of God?