

"When I was a boy, my father, a baker, introduced me to the wonders of song," tenor Luciano Pavarotti relates. "He urged me to work very hard to develop my voice. Arrigo Pola, a professional tenor in my hometown of Modena, Italy, took me as a pupil. I also enrolled in a teachers college. On graduating, I asked my father, 'Shall I be a teacher or a singer?'

"'Luciano,' my father replied, 'if you try to sit on two chairs, you will fall between them. For life, you must choose one chair.'

"I chose one. It took seven years of study and frustration before I made my first professional appearance. It took another seven to reach the Metropolitan Opera. And now I think whether it's laying bricks, writing a book--whatever we choose--we should give ourselves to it. Commitment, that's the key. Choose one chair."

What is one of your greatest abilities? When I was a kid, I wished it was the ability to fly (part of me wishes it could happen). One of your greatest abilities is the ability to choose. There is power in each choice you make. Now, this power can be destructive or constructive. Potential energy is energy that is stored. It is waiting to be unleashed.

It's like the power in an engine. That power is just waiting for someone to unleash it. But it can be used for harm or good. Now an engine isn't bad. It is just an engine. It was invented for doing good. What you do with that engine determines whether it will be used for good or bad. If you are drunk and drive into another car, there is destruction. If you are transporting kids to church camp, then the results are life-giving.

The same is true about choice. The idea of "choice", in itself, is somewhat neutral. Apart from being acted upon, it really was originally meant for good. God desires for us to choose to love Him. He is thrilled when we choose to worship Him. God gives us all the ability to choose. What we choose is what determines whether choice is good or bad, life-giving or destructive.

We are all faced with choices each day. Some we really never give much thought to:

- Blinking
- Breathing
- Brushing our teeth
- Taking a shower

Others, we have to really give thought to:

- Getting in the Word
- Eating healthy
- Exercising
- Reading this study guide (hopefully you do)

God gave us the ability to choose. He does not want us to choose the wrong thing. In fact, look at what Deuteronomy 30:15-19 NIV says:

15 See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. 16 For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.

17 But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, 18 I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

19 This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live.

According to the last part of that passage, God wants us to choose life. This is like a warning to us. God is saying, "There are good choices and bad choices. There are those choices that bring destruction to your life and others that bring prosperity. I want you to make the best choice. I want you to prosper and be blessed."

I don't think God is complicating this. He is not trying to trick you or make decisions difficult. There are plenty of warnings and examples in the Word that show us the benefits of making wise decisions and the consequences of making dumb ones.

Do you want the Good Life that God has designed? It just doesn't happen. How do you choose the Good Life?

POINT #1

"A life of blessing and reward doesn't happen by CHANCE, it happens by CHOICE."

You don't just stumble on the Good Life. You must choose it. Now, it isn't just a onetime decision you make at the beginning of life. It is a daily effort.

Take a look at Joshua 24:15 NKJV

15 And if it seems evil to you to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that *were* on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."

What does he mean "if it seems evil to you to serve the Lord..."? After all, who would think that? You'd be surprised. The Lord commands us to go to church every week, but some people apparently think that is evil and don't. God desires us to grow in His word, but some neglect it and never open their Bibles. Apparently a worship lifestyle seems evil to some, especially when it comes to not gossiping or lying.

You have to make a choice to follow the Lord – in everything. When you choose things that are against the Word of God, you align yourself with the statement "serving the Lord seems evil." You must declare what Joshua said – "as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

Joshua said we must choose who our God will be. There were three choices – 1) the gods of their fathers, 2) gods of the Amorites, or 3) the Lord. The "gods of their fathers" may not have seemed so bad. After all, it was what their dads and granddads followed. It wasn't the Lord, but at least it wasn't as bad as the god of the Amorites. Their gods were blatantly opposed to the Lord and even evil.

That is how we justify not following God. We say things like, "at least I'm not as bad as..." or "that isn't that bad, it is just a "small" sin." If you do not choose to follow the Lord, you will either be complacent, following nothing but selfish desires or you blatantly follow another who claims to be the Lord (another religion, atheism, etc.)

You must choose Christ to inherit the Good Life!

No one is immune from making choices. You must make choices that will affect your family, marriage and other relationships.

POINT #2

“God doesn’t make our **CHOICES**, we do.”

C.S. Lewis said this about choices:

When the author walks onto the stage, the play is over. God is going to invade, all right; but what is the good of saying you are on His side then, when you see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream and something else comes crashing in? This time it will be God without disguise; something so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror into every creature. It will be too late then to choose your side. That will not be the time for choosing; It will be the time when we discover which side we really have chosen, whether we realized it before or not. Now, today, this moment, is our chance to choose the right side.

It is up to us to choose. The Holy Spirit can prompt and convict, but ultimately, we have to make the decision. The question is will we side with the Holy Spirit or ignore his plea?

POINT #3

“Your power to choose starts with your **NON-NEGOTIABLE REALITY**.”

I think of the life of Joseph when I think about life circumstances that you cannot avoid. Some things happen to you, not because of your own doing, but that is just what life handed you. But how you respond to them can determine the difference between life and death.

Joseph was wronged. Despised by his brothers, he was sold into slavery. Compounding the pain was the fact his father suffered the loss of his child. In Egypt, Joseph overcame the odds and found a good position as a trusted servant in a good house. Even here when he could have thought life is improving, he is wrongfully accused and sent to prison. Now even less a slave, a prisoner. In prison God still uses him to interpret dreams. When he successfully interprets the cupbearers dream he asks to be remembered when he is restored to his position. Then what happens? He sits two more years. Joseph hit rock bottom and wallowed there two years. Why? What was God doing? To find the answer, we must look at Joseph before and after prison. After prison he was generous and kind to those who wronged him. He showed them love. He even showed his brothers how to face their father. He gave them the exact words to say to their father. Wow! What a relief to the brothers. After the initial shock of seeing Joseph alive, the brothers had two concerns. One, what will Joseph do to us. Joseph answered that quickly as he hugged, cried and then ate with them. Two, what are we going to tell our father? Genesis 45:9 "Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, "God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay." No accusation. No "wait til I tell Dad!". The brothers wouldn't know what to say. Joseph gave them the words. Before prison Joseph was at the least naive and at the worst arrogant as he wore his father's coat and told of grandiose dreams. It's subtle and by our standards minor, but in prison Joseph had not yet forgiven those who wronged him. Genesis 40:14-15 Joseph tells the cupbearer, "Only keep my in mind...for I was in fact kidnapped from the land of the Hebrews, and even here I have done nothing that they should have put me into the dungeon." Joseph still carried the wound. He still had the pain of bitterness. Maybe it took two more years for God to win his heart over and for Joseph to totally forgive those who wronged him. Why do I say this? If Joseph had spent those two years in bitterness and self pity he could not have responded

the way he did when faced with his brothers. He didn't spend those two years plotting revenge. He didn't spend those two years feeling sorry for himself. He spent those two years slowly breaking down his own will and putting himself into God's hands. Only a man at peace with God could say to his brothers, "do not be grieved or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you..."

QUOTE

"The last of the human freedoms is to choose one's attitude in any given circumstance --- to choose one's own way."

Joseph could have chosen to get revenge on his brothers. He could have chosen not to interpret the dreams of the king. He could have chosen the wrong way, but he didn't. He didn't let his circumstances determine his life. He let his power of choice determine his life.

Film maker Walt Disney was ruthless in cutting anything that got in the way of a story's pacing. Ward Kimball, one of the animators for Snow White, recalls working 240 days on a 4 1/2 minute sequence in which the dwarfs made soup for Snow White and almost destroyed the kitchen in the process. Disney thought it was funny, but he decided the scene stopped the flow of the picture, so out it went. When the film of our lives is shown, will it be as great as it might be? A lot will depend on the multitude of "good" things we need to eliminate to make way for the great things God wants to do through us. The choice is ours.

Proverbs 8:10 NIV says this:

Choose my instruction instead of silver, knowledge rather than choice gold.

QUESTION #1: What entices you more – the things of this world or the things of God?

The CPR Formula

"C" Stands for CIRCUMSTANCE

You cannot always determine your circumstances but you can choose to overcome them. Life is 10% of what happens to you and 90% of how you respond to what happens to you.

Think about this story:

Many years ago A.J. Gordon went to the World's Fair. From a distance he saw a man pumping water with one of those old hand pumps. The water was pouring out and he said as he looked, "That man is really pumping water." But when he got closer, he discovered that it was a wooden man connected to a pump powered by electricity. The man was not pumping the water, the water was pumping him.

QUESTION 1: What circumstances have been "pumping" you? What circumstances have you been hiding behind? What do you need to do concerning those circumstances?

Read these Bible verses about overcoming your circumstances:

Philippians 1:12-18 NKJV

12 But I want you to know, brethren, that the things *which happened* to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel, **13** so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that

my chains are in Christ; **14** and most of the brethren in the Lord, having become confident by my chains, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

15 Some indeed preach Christ even from envy and strife, and some also from goodwill: **16** The former preach Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my chains; **17** but the latter out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel. **18** What then? Only *that* in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice.

John 16:33 NKJV

33 These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.

“P” stands for **PERSPECTIVE**

Your perspective actually is the key to surviving your circumstances.

James 1:2-4

“Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

Now that is a great perspective on your circumstances!

“R” stands for **RESPONSE**

If the circumstances we are facing are overwhelming us, we will talk about the situation we are facing. We might complain. We might share our sorrows and woes feeling we just need a shoulder to cry on for a while. We might seek their advice on how to deal with things. We may even ask them to pray for us. All those responses are common among all people, even Christians. Though a Christian should not be a complainer, the other responses may be fine. We need to be able to speak freely with one another about the tough issues we may be facing and receive advice and be prayed for. But there is a better way, and Paul shows it to us by his response.

Paul does not overlook his hard circumstances for he plainly states in this passage that he wants his Philippian brethren in the Lord to know the things related to him, his circumstances (vs. 12). He is in prison (vs. 13) and there are other believers who out of their selfish ambition and envy seek to cause Paul additional distress in his imprisonment (vs. 15-17). But Paul is not overcome by these circumstances, and he does not dwell on them. Instead, he is overcoming them by focusing on what God was doing in the midst of them, and in this case the gospel was being spread. Circumstances, whether bad or good, when joined with a godly perspective will result in rejoicing. (The opposite is also true. Good circumstances when joined to an ungodly perspective will result in a host of negative attitudes and actions).

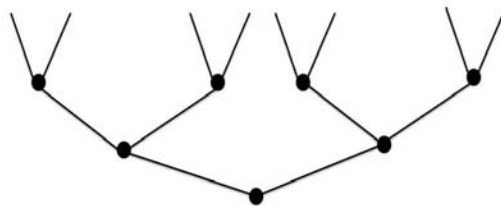
While this may seem like an unattainable level of Christian maturity to some, it is actually only living out the truths Paul and James had already presented. The tough circumstances, trials and tribulations we face as Christians are used by God to mature us into Godly people.

Paul did not let his own circumstances get him down. He did not let the efforts of others to purposely try to cause him distress bother him. Paul overcame his circumstances by keeping his focus correct. He rejoiced that Jesus Christ was being proclaimed regardless of the motives of those doing the preaching. To be sure, he would rejoice even more if everyone had true motives, for that would demonstrate godly maturity on their part that would be glorifying to God. But even if they were preaching Christ with wrong motives, Paul was glad the message of Jesus Christ was going out. Paul stressed that point by repeating that *"yes, and I will rejoice."* His resolve to rejoice over the proclamation of Jesus Christ would not waver regardless of any personal attacks and hurt he would suffer from those who were doing so with wrong motives.

That is an important lesson for all of us, because ministry is not about us. It is about Jesus Christ and His glory. Paul did not have to follow their example and envy them for not being in prison or seek any kind of revenge for their cruelty toward him. Paul was confident in God, and he would leave them and their wrong motives in God's hand for correction. We can do the same with those that might treat us in a similar manner. If Jesus wants us to love our enemies and pray for them (Mt. 5:43-48), then certainly we can do the same to those who because of their wrong motives seek to be our rivals. We do not have to let our circumstances overcome us. We can overcome our circumstances by keeping a godly perspective and looking for what He is doing even in the midst of the trials and tribulations we go through. Jesus is always with us (Matt. 28:20), and God does work all things for good for those that love Him and are called according to His purpose (Rom. 8:28). Those are not Christian cliches, but Biblical truths that allow us to rejoice in what God is doing regardless of any circumstance we might be in. So the next time things get tough for you, start looking to see how God might be glorifying Himself in the midst of what you are going through as well as what He is doing in you personally to make you more like Jesus Christ.

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The "Dot" and "V" of life



In the diagram above, each dot stands for a situation or circumstance in your life. The lines stand for the choices. The lines to the left stand for Godly choices and the lines to the right stand for ungodly choices. Everyone starts out on a "dot". Where you end up, depends upon your choices.

QUESTION: Where do you want to end up? Are you making the right choices to get there?

When you are faced with choices, remember these words of Dr. Charles Stanley:

1. **Don't allow your appetite to rule you**—Everyone has inborn needs, such as the desire for food, sleep, and pleasure. While these are natural and God-given, they can become the driving force in our life if

we are not careful. Believers should have the spiritual fruit of self-control, which governs these yearnings (Gal. 5:22).

2. Don't be blind to what's truly valuable—The Lord's priorities are contrary to what the world considers important. Unless we guard our heart (Prov. 4:23), we can easily be lured by pursuits with no lasting worth.

3. Don't fail to Consider Consequences—Eve didn't contemplate what might ultimately happen if she ate the forbidden fruit; she focused solely on the immediate benefit (Gen 3:1-19). Nor did Samson think about repercussions from interactions with Delilah, and he paid dearly (Judg. 16:16-23). How easy it is to make a rash decision because the immediate benefits seem good. The Lord wants us instead to pause, pray, and evaluate the possible outcomes of our actions.