

# How Do I Know? Leader Notes

## A Simple Approach to Complex Decisions

by Rev. Dr. Ryan Peterson

We all face daily decisions in life, but sometimes our decisions seem to have significant and even life-altering consequences. How do we know if this decision is the right one, especially given the many voices that seek to influence our decision-making process? This four-week study will give a Biblical filter for its readers to consider as they look forward to future decisions.

### INTRODUCTION TO THE SERIES

There are some mornings when I look at the boxes of cereal in our pantry, debating on what I'm "in the mood for today." It is a decision, even a morning decision. Sometimes morning decisions are tough. But let's be honest: this decision is not going to make or break your day, your week, or even your life. Some decisions are more serious, with greater potential to alter the course of your life. This series will challenge you to think about a decision in your life now. If you do not have one that you're facing, that's okay. You will. Someday. The tools and process described in this study will guide you when that day comes.

Study One forces you to wrestle with the power and promises of God's Word as you confront your decisions. Even baptized believers struggle to put into practice the teachings of God's Word. If you have struggled in the past, don't give up. This study will encourage you in some new ways.

Study Two invites you to invite the right people into your life for connection. You were not meant to live life alone. Why does it matter what others say or think? It does...sort of...depending on what they say and how they can or cannot help you.

Study Three is the place where you will slow down, think about, and meditate on what Jesus teaches about prayer. This study will explore the why and what of prayer, and also give you specific models of prayer to use in your daily life.

Study Four will ensure that you never make a mistake or bad decision! Actually, that's not true. You will make mistakes and bad decisions. However, every decision is also an opportunity to trust in Christ alone. He is the One in whom our identity is formed and sustained through every hill and valley of life.

Ready to jump in? Let's go!

### HOW AND WHERE SHOULD I USE THIS STUDY?

This study can be used in a variety of settings. You might spend four weeks during a Sunday morning youth Bible study time or maybe even four consecutive youth nights focused on this topic. Another great option would be to build an entire overnight or weekend retreat centered on this important topic. This could be excellent for graduating seniors as they begin their transition to life after high school. Consider your context, your ministry, and determine the best way to engage youth around this topic.

*Leader notes are in red throughout.*

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## SESSION 1: CONFRONTING YOUR DECISIONS

### Opener

We all know the famous and very competitive game of “Rock/Paper/Scissors.” To begin this study, let’s have a R/P/S Tournament! March Madness might be a big deal, but this tournament will be the talk of your group for years to come!

- Everyone pair up and play—make sure to agree on the rules before you play.
- Keep playing until there is a champion!

The point is that **you have to make a decision!**

But not every decision in life can be made that quickly. And most decisions have greater rewards and consequences than rock/paper/scissors.

*Leaders, consider sharing a big decision of your own, or share the story here:*

A few years ago, my family was faced with a huge life decision. While we were content, happy, and fulfilled in our current living and ministry situation in the St. Louis, Missouri, area, God led the leaders of Concordia University in Ann Arbor, Michigan, to extend to us a call to serve there. We wrestled with that decision. We struggled. We listed pros and cons. We visited, we talked to others, and we prayed about it. But ultimately, what were we supposed to do? We had to make a decision.

So, here is the question we are asking:

What do you do when you’re staring a decision right in the face?

The goal of this study is to give you a filter to process daily decisions, including the big decisions you will face throughout your life.

***Make it personal: What is a decision you are facing right now?***

Have that in the front of your mind as we walk through this four-part study.

### Digging Deeper

The theme of the 2019 National Youth Gathering was Real. Present. God.

#### **REAL.**

Real life is messy.

Real life is filled with hard decisions that can be confusing and challenging.

And yet, the writers of the Psalms bring their full and real selves to God. We can do the same!

Read Psalm 46:1.

***Why can we have confidence in bringing our full and real selves to God, including our struggles with decisions?***

The first part of the filter that we will focus on is: **TURN TO THE WORD.**

Read 2 Timothy 3:1-4.

***Even though these words were written many years ago, what sounds familiar about them?***

**Key Point:**  
Not every decision in life can be made quickly. And most decisions have greater rewards and consequences than rock/paper/scissors.

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Read 2 Timothy 3:14-15.

***What has been your experience with the Bible?***

***Did anyone teach you the Bible, or was that not a part of your background?***

Read 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

***What have been some of your struggles/obstacles in regularly turning to the Word of God?***

***Why are these verses so critical in trusting the Bible to be true?***

Now look at the following passages.

***What does each of them teach us about God's Word and God's action in that Word?***

2 Peter 1:20-21

*The apostle Peter is the author of this letter, reminding his readers not to be lured by the false claims of teachers who would emphasize their own teachings over and above the Gospel. He wants people to hear the Gospel alone. The Biblical authors (sometimes called secondary authors, since the Holy Spirit is the primary author) wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Thus, the starting point for Holy Scripture is not human thinking, but God himself.*

Isaiah 55:11

*Admittedly, sometimes it is hard to understand the ways of God. Youth will resonate with that admission. However, we can always trust the truth of God's Word, especially that it will do what it says. The Word is efficacious, and will do what God wants done. There is confidence in it.*

The promises of Jesus allow you to begin making decisions with a proper perspective.

In Christ, we receive promises that define our identity and reflect God's character.

Pick one person in your group—maybe the one whose birthday is closest to today—and ask them to read these words of Jesus out loud. If anyone wants to close their eyes because it helps them focus, invite them to do so.

*"I am with you always, to the end of the age." Matthew 28:20b*

*"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" John 11:25-26*

*"I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." John 15:5*

*"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart; I have overcome the world." John 16:33b*

If you closed your eyes, you may open them again.

We can relax a bit. We are not the masters of this universe. God made it, God sustains it, and God frees you to live as His child.

The promises of God allow you to begin making decisions with a proper perspective.

But He doesn't leave us to live it alone!!! That's why we need to TURN TO THE WORD.

Read Acts 17:10-12.

*This section of Scripture includes Paul's second missionary journey. Per their regular practice, upon arriving in a new city, Paul and his companion (in this case, Silas) went into the Jewish synagogue. This allowed them to begin on common ground, as he would preach the Gospel*

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The promises of Jesus allow you to begin making decisions with a proper perspective.

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*first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles. Those in the Berean synagogue were open to Paul's message, but they used the Old Testament scriptures as a litmus test.*

**What is noteworthy about how the Bereans respond to Paul?**

**What can we learn from their practice?**

## Putting into Practice

Each study will give you the opportunity to put these ideas and thoughts into practice.

As you TURN TO THE WORD:

- Be consistent: do it often, put it on your calendar.
- Be flexible: don't think you have to do it like everyone else.
- Be open: what is God teaching you?

*"We must know the Scriptures first and foremost for the sake of our salvation. But besides this, there are ample reasons that make this requirement exceedingly urgent. How, for example, shall we ever attain certainty and confidence in our personal and church activity if we do not stand on solid Biblical ground? It is not our heart that determines our course, but God's Word. But who in their day has any proper understanding of the need for scriptural proof?" Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together, p. 54-55*

Read John 8:32.

**Why is it so important to know the truth?**

We TURN TO THE WORD to know the Truth, because it is the truth that sets us free. End your study in prayer, thanking God for His Word where He reveals Himself and speaks to us.

**Key Point:**  
We TURN TO THE WORD to know the Truth, because it is the truth that sets us free.

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## SESSION 2: CONNECTING THROUGH THE DISCERNMENT PROCESS

### Opener

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Invite everyone to think about these questions for two minutes: Who was your childhood best friend, and what did you enjoy doing together?

Now consider the benefits of making a decision on your own (without asking friends, parents, youth leaders, teachers, coaches, etc.). What are some of the benefits?

*Possible answers might include:*

*It's quicker.*

*I don't need to answer to anyone.*

*I can do what I want, not what they want me to do.*

*I think I know myself best.*

Sometimes it is “easier” to make a decision on your own. However, in the decision making process, there is a true blessing in connecting. The second study makes the connection that we are in the immediate presence of God through His Word and through His people (mutual consolation of brothers and sisters, the communion of saints). God’s presence is our refuge and strength, no matter what. This assurance gives us confidence to connect with others through the discernment process.

### Digging Deeper

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The second part of the filter is: **REFLECT WITH THE RIGHT PEOPLE**. The goal is not to find just anyone to talk with or hang out with, but rather the right people. In order to **REFLECT WITH THE RIGHT PEOPLE**, you must be in the right places. This includes regular worship and engagement in a church community.

Read Hebrews 10:23-25.

***What is the “confession of our hope?” If you need help, look at Hebrews 3:1.***

***Why is encouragement from others so important?***

***How important is “meeting together,” in your opinion?***

Read the following quote, and discuss this question:

***When have you helped someone by speaking the Word to them? When has someone helped you by speaking the Word to you?***

*“The more we learn to allow others to speak the Word to us, to accept humbly and gratefully even severe reproaches and admonitions, the more free and objective will we be in speaking ourselves... But the humble person will stick both to truth and to love. He will stick to the Word of God and let it lead him to his brother. Because he seeks nothing for himself and has no fears for himself, he can help his brother through the Word.” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together, p. 106-107*

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**Key Point:**  
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Read Proverbs 15:22. This is a MUST MEMORIZE verse. Type it into your phone, write it on your bathroom mirror, and say it aloud a lot.

***When have you seen this to be true in your life?***

***When have you ignored the wisdom of this proverb, and suffered negatively because of it?***

The third part of the filter, but equally important in this connecting process, is: **UNPACK YOUR MOTIVES**. Some people might encourage you to just “follow your heart.” That’s a bad idea! The Bible encourages us to guard our hearts (Proverbs 4:23).

Read Psalm 119:9-11. The Psalmist asks a really REAL and honest question in verse 9.

***How does the answer to the question enable a believer to live a God-pleasing life?***

Let’s use some examples of decisions and circumstances you may find yourself in:

Should I get involved in this relationship?

*What’s leading you?*

Should I buy that car?

*What’s leading you to do that?*

Where should I go to college?

*What values are most important to you?*

Should I take this job offer?

*Check your heart.*

Though the Bible will not say, “Buy that brand new, overpriced, really great car,” it does have a lot to say about your motives, values, and priorities. As we pray the Psalms, Christ takes our thoughts captive, revealing their hidden motives and conforming them to His mind, which is why it is a great book to dig deeply into as you’re unpacking your motives.

### **WHAT ABOUT REALLY DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES?**

Read Hebrews 12:1-3.

***What are the most important words in those verses?***

***Why is it important not to try and understand God based on circumstances, but rather on the reality of the empty cross and Christ’s sitting at God’s right hand?***

Too often we seek to change our circumstances, when in fact God is seeking to change us.

God’s view of our life, and of our circumstances, is so much greater than our own. Sometimes, the interpretation of what is happening in our circumstances doesn’t come until years later.

That’s why it’s crucial that we always focus more on Christ than our circumstances.

Read Romans 8:31.

*The apostle Paul is writing Romans 8:31-39 as a conclusion to an entire section in his letter to the church at Rome, where he is focusing on a believer’s life in Christ. Since God has done everything for our salvation, what assurances do we have? What certainties do we have? His concluding statements lead the readers to acknowledge the victory (super victory) that is theirs “through him who loved us.” Therefore, because of the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

***How do Paul’s questions help believers to think about their response to God’s work of salvation for them?***

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**Key Point:**  
Too often we seek to change our circumstances, when in fact God is seeking to change us.

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Now read Romans 8:34-39.

***What happens when we view life through the cross of Christ?***

### Putting into Practice

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God is present in His Word and through His people. As we put into practice what we've studied, it is important to answer these three questions. Take time to actually write down responses to each of these.

*This is a great place for leaders to share their own struggles and successes with this practice. Of course, share to the level of your comfort, but I would encourage leaders to share specific times in their life when they may or may not have done this well.*

***Are you reflecting with the right people?***

***Are you in the right places to know those people?***

***Who are those right people in your life?***

There is value in having 5 adults in your life that you can go to for questions, conversation, support, accountability, and encouragement.

***When you listed those "right people," were you able to include 5 people?***

An important part of putting this study into practice includes being brutally honest but also humbly secure, knowing your identity is in Christ.

End this study in prayer, specifically that the Holy Spirit would bring wise counselors into our lives and open up many conversations for encouragement and strength in Jesus Christ.

## SESSION 3: CONTEMPLATING BEFORE COURAGEOUSLY STEPPING OUT

### Opener

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As a group, play a game of “This or That.” Use these as some starting examples, but feel free to add your own. If possible, have everyone stand up and move to “this” or “that” side of the room.

- Breakfast or dinner
- NCAA Final Four or Super Bowl
- Instagram or Snapchat
- Blue or red
- Milk chocolate or dark chocolate
- Hip hop or country
- Beach or mountains

This game forced you to make decisions. By this point in the process, it is tempting to just hurry up and make the decision, rather than completing the filter. Keep going with this study and continue to dig into God’s Word with others!

### Digging Deeper

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The third study allows us to reflect deeply on the Psalms. For Luther, the Psalms gave an opportunity to slow down, stop and think about the words of Scripture, meditate, and pray them. As the participants contemplate a decision in life, they can pray various Psalms as they soak those decisions in prayer.

The fourth part of the filter is: **SOAK IT IN PRAYER**. Like a good marinade on a juicy piece of steak that you are ready to grill, we must soak decisions in prayer. I certainly do not claim to be a master griller, but I love devouring steak or chicken that has been soaked in a good marinade. Why? Because marinades make the food more tender and flavorful. However, it takes time. It takes time (sometimes even overnight) for that marinade to do what it does. One summer night, I was rushing to get dinner finished because our kids were “so hungry.” You probably can’t relate. I simply grabbed some chicken breasts from the fridge and threw them on the grill. They were done quickly, they tasted okay, but that was it. I distinctly remember other times when I planned, took the chicken out of the fridge the day before, put a great marinade (even ranch dressing!) on those raw pieces of meat, and then grilled it the next day. They were amazing! But again, it took time.

Do not settle for “flare” prayers. Rather, soak your decisions in prayer.

Nehemiah was a person who prayed. After the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem (including the Temple, the wall, and leading thousands into exile) in 586 BC, Nehemiah was filled with sorrow and pain for that once great capital, Jerusalem.

*Who was Nehemiah? He was a former cupbearer to the king in the Persian palace, but is most noted for his courageous leadership in helping to restore the city of Jerusalem following its fall to the Babylonians. Specifically, he led the rebuilding efforts of the wall of Jerusalem—in only 52 days! Nehemiah was not a priest (like Ezra). He was a leader who led with conviction, courage, and prayerful energy.*

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**Key Point:**  
Do not settle for “flare” prayers. Rather, soak your decisions in prayer.

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Read Nehemiah 1:1-4.

***What needs of others are on your heart today? Hit “pause” on this Bible study and take them to the Lord in prayer.***

Now read Nehemiah’s prayer in 1:5-11.

***What is significant about the way Nehemiah begins his prayer? Where is his focus?***

Nehemiah didn’t only pray. He prayed AND acted. Read Nehemiah 4:7-9.

***In addition to prayer, what else did they do? Why is it important to pray AND keep living as God calls?***

The apostle Paul was also serious about prayer. His 13 epistles highlight the importance of prayer. Read Philippians 4:4-7. We are invited to speak with God at His invitation.

***What are some of your prayer practices?***

***What are some of your greatest obstacles to a consistent prayer life?***

***Who in your life models a consistent practice of prayer?***

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18. Notice that these words are near the end of Paul’s letter.

***How does prayer also connect to gratitude?***

The Explanation of the Small Catechism asks a series of questions and then answers them. Those are especially helpful here:

***What should be the content of our prayers?***

*In our prayers we should ask for everything that tends to the glory of God and to our own and our neighbor’s welfare, both spiritual and bodily blessings. We should also praise and thank God for who He is and what He has done.*

Read Psalm 136:1.

***Why should we give thanks to the Lord?***

***How does God answer prayer?***

*God hears the prayers of all Christians and answers in His own way and at His own time.*

***What is comforting about this, and what is challenging about it?***

Some people struggle with “how” to pray. Thankfully, Jesus gave us the Lord’s Prayer. Read Matthew 6:9-13.

*Included in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives His disciples a model for prayer, one that is used still today. The gospel of Luke also includes the Lord’s Prayer. It will be most helpful for the leader to look at each petition carefully, even going line by line (or petition by petition), asking questions or seeking insights from youth. The Lord’s Prayer Bible study will give additional resources for “how” to pray.*

***How do the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer provide a helpful outline to keep us focused in our prayers?***

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These models or outlines might also be helpful to you, especially if you struggle with knowing what to say or how to say it. Remember, God is inviting you to speak, and He promises to listen!

## **ACTS Model of Prayer**

- Adoration
- Confession
- Thanksgiving
- Supplication

## **PRAY Model of Prayer**

- Praise
- Repent
- Ask
- Yield

## **TACOS Model of Prayer - who doesn't love tacos?**

- Thanksgiving
- Adoration
- Confession
- Others
- Self

## **Collect Model of Prayer**

Address: Addressing God, "Gracious God our heavenly Father..."

Ascription: The "Who" statement, "Who lifted up Your Son to Your right hand..."

Petition: The "Grant" statement (or whatever), "Direct our minds to things above..."

Purpose: The "so that" statement, "so that we may ever be anchored where true joys are to be found..."

Doxology: "Through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen."

## **Luther's Morning Prayer**

I thank You, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that You have kept me this night from all harm and danger; and I pray that You would keep me this day also from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please You. For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me. Amen.

## **Luther's Evening Prayer**

I thank You, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that You have graciously kept me this day; and I pray that You would forgive me all my sins where I have done wrong, and graciously keep me this night. For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me. Amen.

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### Putting into Practice

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For many of us, the practice of prayer sounds great in theory, but is hard in reality.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“It feels weird to talk to someone I can’t see.”

“How can I be sure He is listening, or even cares?”

The Psalms are a prayer book. As you put into practice and take a next step from this study, PRAY Psalm 46. That’s right. Put your Bible in front of you, slow down, read slowly, and even pause between lines. When you get to the end of verse 11, before saying “Amen,” add other prayer requests, personal concerns, needs of others, or words of thanksgiving.

You may also do the same with other Psalms, especially Psalms 8, 13, 51, 95, 100, and 121.

## SESSION 4: CONTENT IN YOUR IDENTITY

### Opener

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As a group, play an “Unpopular Opinions” game. Divide into groups, and then each group must convince another of their unpopular opinion. Here are some popular “unpopular opinions,” but feel free to also come up with your own.

- Pineapple on pizza
- Winter is the best season
- Milk in the bowl first, then cereal
- Puzzles are fun

### Digging Deeper

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The fifth and final part of the filter is: **TAKE A STEP OF FAITH**. Ultimately, it is time to move and take a step of faith, even if that step is hard, uncomfortable, or stretches you beyond what you think is possible. Because God is truly present always, we can courageously step out in faith knowing that He is with us.

Read Galatians 5:16-25.

*These verses in Galatians follow a section where Paul emphasizes Christian freedom. “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1). However, some were abusing or misusing that freedom. Paul is reminding the Galatians and reminding us of the Holy Spirit’s power in our lives. Christian freedom’s foundation is in our Baptismal identity, where we have been united with Christ. Though the opposition of the flesh is real, Paul keeps pointing us back to Jesus.*

**How does a believer in Jesus Christ walk by the Spirit? Hint: in the original language of the New Testament, Greek, “walk” means to “be in line with” or “keep in step with.”**

**What is challenging when the desires of the flesh are involved?**

Write down the fruit of the Spirit, found in verses 22-23. Look at your study Bible or find a good commentary.

**Why is it important NOT to understand this list as a check list or a long list of things to do?**

Read verse 25.

**After everything we have studied over these past weeks, what does it look like to “live by the Spirit?”**

The book of Psalms shapes the way we relate to God. Despite the challenges around us, the Psalms ground us in our identity. They lead us to be content in an identity centered in Christ.

Read Psalm 40:1-3.

**When have you felt like you have waited patiently for the Lord?**

**What new song can God put into our mouth?**

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**Key Point:**  
Because God is truly present always, we can courageously step out in faith knowing that He is with us.

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Remember this statement: Every decision is an opportunity to TRUST in Christ alone.

Living in God's grace, we have the privilege of trusting in His Word and promises for life and salvation, including our lives lived on earth. It is not all on you, because Christ already put it all on himself.

The theme of the 2019 National Youth Gathering was Real. Present. God.

***In your decision making, why is it important to be REAL?***

***In your decision making, where is God present?***

***In your decision making, what do you know about God?***

Go back to Galatians 5:25.

***What confidence do baptized believers have regarding the Holy Spirit?***

*Students may not feel as comfortable (or knowledgeable) talking about the Holy Spirit. Assure them the Holy Spirit is the source of our spiritual life, the one who grants faith. The Holy Spirit also sustains believers in the one true faith.*

As you TAKE A STEP OF FAITH, be content in your identity.

You are loved.

You are valued.

You are who HE says you are.

Rest in the assurance of your identity in Christ, even when the results of your decision may not go as planned. God is far bigger and stronger and far more personal than we've ever dreamed of. God is all powerful and all personal and this God is for us in Jesus.

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**Key Point:**  
Living in God's grace, we have the privilege of trusting in His Word and promises for life and salvation, including our lives lived on earth. It is not all on you, because Christ already put it all on himself.

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## Putting into Practice

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At the beginning of this 4 part study, you were asked to consider a decision that you are facing right now. Maybe that decision has already been decided, or maybe another one is more significant or overwhelming right now.

***What is a decision you are facing right now? Write it down***

Now, walk through the filter we have studied these past weeks:

**T**URN TO THE WORD

**R**EFLECT WITH THE RIGHT PEOPLE

**U**NPACK YOUR MOTIVES

**S**OAK IT IN PRAYER

**T**AKE A STEP OF FAITH

If you're comfortable, share with others in your group, or share with your leader, how you used the filter to help you with a decision you are facing right now.

*"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." Psalm 46:1*

*"Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!" Psalm 46:10*