

Foundations

Genesis 1 – 11

How Our Choices Shape Our Desires

Genesis 1:1 – 2:24

Introduction: Choices and Desires

Grace Jhe, at the time of this sharing, was a senior at Boston College. She shared her testimony about how her choices, motivated by her love for God, led to her desire to love others more, and even guided her directions about her major and career. [This is Grace's outline, from which she spoke:]

During her freshman year, Grace was an overly ambitious premed, taking classes that were designed for upperclassmen. She ended up not liking most of her classes and struggled academically. Those academic struggles made her question why she was at BC, and what she was supposed to do. She thought she knew what she wanted to do in the future, but now wasn't sure anymore. Over winter break, Grace did a lot of self-reflection and, since she grew up in a very devoted Christian family, prayed about her life. She still didn't know what she wanted to do exactly, but started to take some small steps. Starting from 2nd semester, she learned to be more humble, enjoy her classes, and manage her time better.

During her sophomore year, Grace was very excited to meet all the new freshmen. Being an extrovert, she started to meet up with some freshmen and realized that I could actually use this for God's purpose. The more she met up with people, the more she wanted to be there for them and share God's love with them by listening to their struggles, encouraging them, etc. She wanted to serve God by helping my brothers and sisters in Christ grow. She also became friends with some non-Christians who she wanted to see come to Jesus. It was really a good year overall. Then during the summer, Grace worked as a counselor at a residential treatment program for adolescent girls with emotional, behavioral, and learning disabilities. Grace saw how much these girls lacked consistent care, love, and attention in their lives, so she wanted to give all she could. She thought she would be very good at working with them. But she clearly didn't know how to deal with them. The girls tested Grace's tolerance and she had to physically restrain a girl on one occasion. After a month, Grace broke out into hives from the stress, went to the emergency room twice, and had to take a break from work for a week. She thought to herself, 'God, is this really the right path that you have prepared for me?' Overall, she got used to the girls and didn't end up quitting. However, she told herself that she would never go back to that place *or* work with adolescents again, ever. 'Maybe I could if I were more intimidating,' she thought.

During her junior year, Grace continued to serve on campus by constantly meeting with people and keeping them accountable. She really prayed a lot for people around her. Realizing how much she valued serving people, Grace thought about how to serve people in the future. She prayed and asked God for clear guidance. Soon afterwards, Grace became interested in clinical psychology. Before she knew it, God put her in a research lab. She never thought she would get into research, but she did. And somehow, she decided to do a thesis. Things that she never thought she would get herself into happened. These things happened so naturally w/o me going out of my way to find things to do. That summer, Grace received a research fellowship from Boston College, with a strong recommendation that she continue to work in the lab over the summer. It was only a part time position, which was financially difficult. She applied to other internships and jobs, but they only offered full time positions. So, the only option Grace had was the treatment program that she worked at during the previous summer. She really had no choice but to go back. The supervisor encouraged her to come back. The first day of work, Grace couldn't walk in the door. She had to pray before walking in. The girls that were still at the program from previous summer remembered her and were very welcoming. That summer, she actually enjoyed working with these adolescent girls. By going back to the same workplace, she could feel how much she had personally grown over a year. She believed that God made her go back to help her realize that she can work with adolescents.

This is how Grace entered her senior year. She says, 'Towards the end of the summer, I got accepted to a very competitive psychology internship at Children's Hospital. I wanted to work with children, but I'm with adolescents again. But now, I really appreciate it. Adolescence is a very crucial developmental stage and I am very thankful that God is training me in this field. During past three years, I made a choice to dedicate a significant amount of time to serve God on campus by meeting up with people and keep them accountable. I made this choice because I

wanted to share God's love for me with others. As a result, I started to develop even more compassion for people and through this passion to serve God more, He has been blessing me and leading me more and more.'

Relevance:

What I'd like to do is to reflect on Grace's experience and why that happened. What Grace's story illustrates is how our choices shape our desires. Some of you have also had that experience. Why? God designed us that way. A lot of the time we think that we have desires and therefore we make choices. For example, isn't it true that when you feel hungry, you choose to eat; when you feel thirsty, you choose to drink; when you feel like you have to pee; you choose to pee. Well, of course that's true. Your desires lead you to make choices. That is obvious. But if you think our desires are constant, then you look at Jesus and think, 'There are things about him that I don't desire, today, like I'd have to be more truthful, or more sober, or more sexually pure, or more generous, so I really don't want to go further with Jesus. In fact, he scares me.' In other words, we assume that our desires stay constant. So you assume that Jesus calls you to choose against your desires all the time, and your life will be miserable, so why come to Jesus?

But that's not true. What is not obvious – at least in our culture – is the flip side: your *choices* shape your *desires*. You have a say in what kind of person you become, how much of Jesus you experience, and how much of God you know.

Now before I get into the spiritual implications of this, let me demonstrate how this is true in one particular way. Physiologically, your choices shape your desires. If you're a man (I'm not sure how this works out for women) and you take cocaine, play lots of video games, or watch pornography, which are all escapist and fantasy and withdrawal from reality types of activities, the same pathways in your brain get stimulated. What does that do? Then your body produces more testosterone, which causes the hemispheres of your brain to become more separated. What does that do? That hurts your capacity for deeper emotional life. That means you'll be drawn into the same fantasies as before, and more strongly so. So you have the same desires for love, and meaning, and relationship, but you have these addictions to falsehoods that never satisfy you.

Your *choices* shape your *desires*. It's not just that your desires stay constant. Your desires change, and you can shape them. In particular, you can allow Jesus by his Spirit living in you, to shape them.

What I think is at stake here is (at least) two different models of people development. If I may generalize, the campus frequently assumes that students – people aged 17 to 22 years – develop as people and gain discernment about their future – how? By reading lots of books, engaging in some discussion about them, and listening to their professors' interpretations of this material. The average student repeats this dozens of times over the course of four years or so. They are supposed to emerge with clarity about what they are going to do for a good portion of the rest of their lives. This would of course imply clarity into one's own self. Given the staggering amount of money students and their parents are paying for college tuition, this is a significant expectation students have. Whether the university is a liberal one stressing a universal humanity, or a technical one stressing a technological humanity, the effect is usually the same. This model of people development leaves a lot to be desired.

I like to articulate Jesus' relationship with us as involving his model of people development. I contrast this with the university's implicit or explicit model of people development. Knowledge of certain subjects plays a part, but the greater framework is Jesus and his love for others. In Jesus' model, he calls us to himself. He often gives us the sense that he knows us better than we know ourselves, since he renamed Simon 'Peter' when he first met him (John 1:35 – 42) and knew what insights would raise Nathaniel's eyebrows (John 1:43 – 51). On numerous other occasions, Jesus seemed to know people and their needs in a striking way. In the larger biblical narrative running from creation to redemption, we find that Jesus is restoring in us the true 'image of God' (Genesis 1:27; Colossians 3:11) because he has restored it first in himself, in his own flesh, through his life, death, resurrection, and ascension to the right hand of the Father (Colossians 1:15 – 20). So it is in relationship with Jesus by his Spirit that we come to know ourselves, our truest selves, in addition to coming to know God. This doesn't happen all at once, and it is not always easy. It certainly involves trusting Jesus and loving people with him, which is always costly in some way. Jesus said it will feel like dying in some sense ('take up your cross and follow me'). Sometimes we only sense a next step for ourselves for the near term future. Yet, as we do this with him, Jesus continues to lead us, and shows us glimpses of what we are made to do, as Jesus did with Grace at Boston College. The road may be uncertain, but it is full of his love and joy. This leads us to the need to articulate what Jesus will do with our desires over time, and

how our choices intersect with our desires. Let me demonstrate this by looking into Scripture. What do we see in Scripture about how God created humanity? I'll look first at eating, then at loving.

Scripture: Genesis, Eating

God made us to eat. That seems like a no brainer. He put Adam and Eve in a garden, and said, 'From any tree of the garden but one you may eat.' But I want to look deeper at that. When you eat, you choose to take something into yourself that becomes part of you. The saying, 'You are what you eat,' is partially true. In the documentary *Supersize Me*, Morgan Spurlock goes on this 30 day diet eating nothing but McDonalds. See: <http://freedocumentaries.org/theatre.php?filmid=98&id=1016&wh=1000x720>, go to 1:30.34 – 1:31.30). What struck me is that he craved McDonalds. That is gross. Yet it's true. Eating bad food makes you crave it. You know when you eat starches and sugars, you start to crave those things. You train your body to take that in. But when you eat healthy food, you start to desire other healthy food. Your choices shape your desires. We were made that way.

Before the fall, humanity was actually supposed to eat from an amazing garden of food, and spread it in more varieties. Did you ever notice the apparent contradiction between Genesis 1 and 2 on that issue? A lot of people point out the apparent contradictions between Genesis 1 and 2, all of which can be resolved. But they don't point out this one. God told Adam and Eve in Genesis 1, 'spread out and subdue the earth.' At the same time, God told Adam in Genesis 2 to tend the garden where fruit trees gave fruit. How was humanity supposed to tend a garden and spread out over the whole earth? By turning the whole earth into a garden. The good but wild earth was designed by God to have humanity tame it and make a good and ordered garden. And as they did that, God and humanity together would make more and more types of food for humanity to eat. It would have been nutritionally good, not any of this junky fast food. And the more they did that, the more they would have been motivated to obey God more: 'Let's turn this land into a garden, too! Let's make more kinds of fruit and food!' Our choices would have shaped our desires. It would have been an upward spiral of awesomeness. We would have been more and more appreciative of this God who let us garden with Him.

Scripture: Genesis, Loving

So I covered eating. Now we'll look at loving. First, when God created Adam and Eve, they were supposed to choose to love one another within the love of God, which would have led to more love and more desire for God and for each other. How's that? Just as God made human life, Adam and Eve were supposed to make more human life. They weren't going to do it in exactly the same way as God did, of course; Adam and Eve were supposed to do it by having sex. They were supposed to make love. What would have happened then? They would have loved each other even more. They were not fallen, flawed human beings; this was in the paradise, in the garden, in Eden! There was no self-centeredness, no personal insecurities, no hidden feelings, no distrust, no jealousy – all the things that we struggle with, they didn't have. So their marriage would have just gotten deeper and deeper with every choice they made to love each other within the love of God. And every time they physically made love to one another, it would have just gotten better! They would desire each other more! They would desire God more!

Not only that: Out of that love would come children. When you have a good marriage relationship, kids increase the love. When each of my two kids were born, I loved my wife even more. Even when she was spending less time with me and more time with the kids, it didn't make me insecure. When Ming cradled them, smiled at them, lost sleep and looked tired because of them, my love for her deepened. That's the nature of healthy love, and especially being in the love of God. Love grows. It doesn't diminish or lose something. A choice to love deepens our desire, matures it, helps it grow in the right direction. This is how God created us.

Let's apply this to today, in our fallen world but with Jesus. Look at how this is true in friendship in general. Let's say that you are Person #1. And you are friends with Person #2. But you can't stand Person #3. Person #3 gets on your nerves. You don't like being around them. Or maybe it's the other way around. Person #3 doesn't like you. But either way, Person #2 is friends with Person #3. For some reason you can't understand, they are friends. Now apart from the love of God, your response to Person #2 is probably something like this: 'I don't really understand how you can be friends with Person #3.' That's the befuddled response. Or, it could be: 'I don't think you should be friends with Person #3, for your own good.' That's the semi-parental response. Or, it could be: 'I'm mad that you actually spend time with Person #3.' That's the insecure, jealous response. Or, it could be worse: 'I'm not going to be your friend if you're friends with Person #3.' That's the *Mean Girls* response, right? But in the love of God, you would look at that friendship more positively. You would say, 'I'm really glad that you're friends with

Person #3, because I can't be that friend, at least right now.' Or, you would say, 'I admire you for being friends with Person #3. I want to get there, too.' Or you would say, 'I admire you, and I'd like to learn from you how are you able to be friends with Person #3 while I am not?'

If you choose to be in the love of God, then He will shape your desires. If you choose to be in your own selfishness, then your selfishness will shape your desires. Your desires are always being shaped. There is no such thing as neutrality. You are either traveling on an upward spiral towards God, or a downward spiral away from God.

Here's another example of that. In book 7 of Harry Potter, Dumbledore explains to Harry why the Dark Lord Voldemort is actually quite dumb. Despite being the most powerful dark wizard ever, he is dumb. Dumbledore says, 'And his knowledge remained woefully incomplete, Harry! That which Voldemort does not value, he takes no trouble to comprehend. Of house-elves and children's tales, of love, loyalty, and innocence, Voldemort knows and understands nothing. Nothing. That they all have a power beyond his own, a power beyond the reach of any magic, is a truth he has never grasped.' (J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, p.709 – 710)

If you are a careerist, and your ethic is 'work hard, play hard,' if you are here fundamentally to get all you can out of BC, then you will really only get to know people to the extent that they help you study and party. Do you ever have the realization that you don't know something about a friend? Why does he call his sister every weekend? *You don't know*. Or why does she care about the black community? *You don't know*. These are the most important and precious things about people, and you did not know them because *you didn't care to know*. You're like Voldemort. Voldemort didn't care to learn about other things and other people – and know them truly – because he chose to be self-centered. When you're self-centered, you miss really important things about people and life. And, you'll miss things about Jesus, because you'll *only* be 'interested' in Jesus to the extent that *he helps you advance and have fun*. But your advancement is not a valid criterion of truth.

Another example: In *The Lord of the Rings*, Sauron never considered the possibility that someone would destroy the Ring. Why? Because he himself would not. He wanted power. And he assumed that everyone is as self-centered as he is. So that is why he could not conceive of anyone trying to destroy the Ring. But Gandalf and others could understand how this would be Sauron's weakness. Good can understand evil, but evil cannot understand good. The more you resist alcoholism and peer pressure, the more you can understand why escapism or people-pleasing is tempting. Good can understand evil. But the more you give into alcoholism and peer pressure, the less you can understand the person who does not. Evil does not understand good. If you're a philosophy major, you can put it this way. Your ethics determines your epistemology. Your posture determines what you can know. We are not neutral. We don't just take in information as it comes to us. We are biased one way or the other. If you choose the love of Jesus, you will *know* certain things. If you choose the love of self, you will 'know' certain other things. You make choices, and those choices affect your desire to know things. The only way to truly know people and things is to love them appropriately, with Jesus.

Even when you feel unloved. Let's go back to Grace's story. I know that not every person in her life has been easy to love or befriend. The same is true for you. But you actually do have to make a choice to love God and love people. Here's what happens when you don't.

Let me give you an illustration from my own life. My parents' marriage was never really good. During my sophomore year in high school, they started arguing about divorce. I would sometimes go to school and start crying. Early on, during a lunch period, I went to go talk to my old biology teacher who was really good at listening and really encouraging. I knew she would say things that would make me feel better. I told her what was happening at home. Sure enough, she said some really encouraging things. Then I went a bit further. I told her how I was trying to focus on school and swimming. I knew I was fishing. Being the nice person she was, she said, 'Mako, I really respect how you're trying to hold things together.' Then the bell rang. As I left the room, I heard a voice in my mind say, 'Mako, you can turn any situation to your advantage, can't you?' I thought, 'Who said that?' Looking back, I think that was Jesus. But I ignored him. Even though three friends of mine were loving on me and praying for me to get to know Jesus, and even though I had started reading the New Testament, in the deepest place of who I was, I decided that was I was going to be the solution to my own problems. Somehow. Then, the following year, I started dating this girl. She also had family problems, so I thought we could relate. She cut her arms, which surprised me but I could kind of understand it. Since I had tried to be the solution to my own problems, I thought I could be the solution to her problems too. *But I just made it worse*. At other times, I thought *she* could be the

solution to her own problems, and *then I scorned her for being so weak*. I had chosen not the love of Jesus. I had chosen to love myself. As a result, I wanted her to validate me. But I did not understand at the time that I was only making things worse for her and for me. It was only after we broke up and Jesus helped me to see the truth. Even when we feel unloved by everyone else, Jesus' call is to love him and be loved by him. Otherwise, we choose ourselves in a deeper way and we make bigger mistakes. *Our choices shape our desires*.

Psalm 109:18 reflects on how this dynamic can be negative:

But he clothed himself with cursing as with his garment,
And it entered into his body like water
And like oil into his bones.

Scripture: Genesis, Becoming

When you choose to exercise, you grow your capacity and usually desire for more exercise. It feels better. When you choose to eat healthy, you develop a taste for healthy food. It tastes better. When you love Jesus and others by the love of Jesus in you, you desire more of him. Proverbs 2:1 – 10 reflects on this dynamic.

1 My son, if you will receive my words and treasure my commandments within you,
5 Then you will discern the fear of the LORD and discover the knowledge of God.
9 Then you will discern righteousness and justice and equity and every good course.
10 For wisdom will enter your heart and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul;

Illus: I now live in the 2nd highest crime area in Boston with my wife Ming and our two kids, along with other dear friends who live in our three story house. But if you had told me that I'd be doing this 20 years ago, I would have said, 'No way!' How did this happen? Here were the major steps: I went to Mexico my junior year of high school. That's where I came to Jesus. I started to care about poverty. My sophomore year of college, the Rodney King incident happened in Los Angeles. I was really affected emotionally by that, because I grew up in the LA area. Also that year, the U.S. decided to give reparations checks to Japanese American survivors of the internment, so because of those two things, I chose to care more about race relations in the U.S. I soaked myself in Scripture and knowing the teaching of Jesus and the heart of God, especially for the poor. Then when I graduated, I chose to be mentored by a wonderful couple named Jose and Jennifer Espinosa, in a city called East Palo Alto, and they taught me a lot about the Mexican immigrant community there. I came to feel so strongly about this type of life and ministry that I broke up with a girl I dated who had a hard time with it. It was a criteria for marriage, for me. Then I met Ming, and she felt the same, so I married her! Now, we live where we do. My choices shaped my desires.

The Trinity and Human Experiential Knowledge

Why did God create us this way? I would dare say it's because God cares about *our experiential knowledge*. God cares that we grow in our experience of love and goodness, because as a Trinity, God is always experiencing the love and goodness between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Between each of the three divine Persons of the Trinity, love is being given and received in complete freedom and utter joy. I don't know if we can say that God, within Himself, 'grows' in His experience of that love. But it is certainly the case that human beings were meant to *grow* into the experience of His love. We were meant to bring forth more human life, and experience a sliver of the joy God has in bringing forth human life. In fact, our joy at becoming parents is a concrete personal knowledge of God's joy over us in being our heavenly Father when we were conceived and born. Also, we were meant to love the creation in similar way that God loves it: Therefore, we were meant to spread the garden of Eden across the wild creation and bring forth more order and beauty. God brings forth life, order, and beauty. He called us to bring forth life, order, and beauty. If human beings had simply done that, we would have fallen more and more in love with this God, living within His love. God cares about our experiential knowledge. He wanted, and wants, us to know what it's like to be Him. Because we were meant to be like Him: experiencing more and more love. So we deepen in His love with every choice.

Spiritual growth is not something you can put into a microwave. You don't get it fully cooked. It's slow. It takes time. It is a series of small and sometimes challenging decisions to live life with Jesus. Yet I think at no other time has the world out there needed the love of Jesus.

Discussion:

1. Do you see this dynamic being true in your life? Where your choices shape your desires? Share a story.
2. What one thing will you do this week to increase your desire for Jesus?