

A WOMAN
God
CAN USE

A WOMAN *God* CAN USE

Old Testament Women Help
You Make Today's Choices



ALICE MATHEWS



DISCOVERY HOUSE

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Feeding the Soul with the Word of God

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To Randall
with whom I have walked
these sixty years
hand in hand and side by side
in ministry and love

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Few books, if any, are written as solos. This book is no exception. Behind the words pulled together by one author lie the words and deeds of a full chorus of voices. To acknowledge such a wide-ranging debt is impossible.

In addition to all the voices I have listened to in a lifetime of reading are the voices of special people who have cared enough to push me, challenge me, counsel me, and love me. At the top of that long list of significant friends are

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To these and to others whose names are not here but are carved on my heart, I give my grateful thanks.

INTRODUCTION



These are not easy years in which to be a Christian woman. We have wider possibilities than our mothers had. We have freedoms our mothers never knew. We can make choices that were not options for women in other times. The years ahead of us can be exciting. Or they can be terrifying. We resonate with Charles Dickens when he wrote, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.”

We can choose, but every choice we make brings risk. The Greek word that literally means “a choice” is *hairesis*. It is also the word translated “a *tenet*” or “*heresy*.” We cannot make our choices lightly. A choice can lead us into heresy. Our only sure anchor is the Bible, God’s infallible Word. As Christian women we want to be sure we understand what the Bible says about our choices.

As women, we live today in what historians call “a paradigm shift”—a time when old beliefs and old attitudes are being forcibly challenged by new beliefs and new attitudes. But which of these beliefs and attitudes are firmly anchored in the Word of God, and which are merely products of our traditions? We may need to reexamine beliefs and attitudes about

women's roles, about marriage and family life, about education, about jobs, about personal growth. New ideas are not yet in control. Old ideas are not yet gone. But the shift has begun, and it will continue. That makes our time both frightening and exhilarating.

It is frightening because many of us grew up firmly anchored in the old paradigm. We don't know what to make of the new attitudes and new opportunities. At the same time, we feel a quiver of excitement because we know we have choices women did not have years ago.

As we struggle to find our footing as Christian women in the shifting sand of today's expectations and opportunities, we may think that our times are unique. Not so. A hundred years ago women were going through a paradigm shift every bit as dramatic as we face today.

Victorian women lived within the paradigm Barbara Welter has called "the cult of true womanhood." Inside that paradigm women became the guardians of purity and gentility for the nation. That had not been the case before. In most of Western history, women were seen as dangerous beings—temptresses, witches, or earthbound creatures with no taste for godliness. But with the feminization of the churches after the American Revolution, women were shifted over to the high ground. Once they were considered as morally superior to men, they were given responsibility to promote godliness in their homes. The true woman was pious, pure, domestic, and submissive.

That paradigm was one of strictly enforced separate spheres. The English poet Tennyson put it this way:

Man for the field, the woman for the hearth:
Man for the sword, and for the needle she:
Man with the head, and woman with the heart:
Man to command, and woman to obey;
All else confusion.

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A woman's sphere was the home. It was taboo for her to venture into the public arena. During the nineteenth century women were not allowed to vote, could not enter most colleges and universities, and were barred from most professions. Women, the politicians said, were to use their purity, virtue, and morality to lift men up. They were to remain "above the political collusion of this world." That translated into no real citizenship, no right to own property, and no vote. Scientists told women that their smaller brains could not survive the rigors of higher education and that their reproductive capacity would be harmed by too much thinking. That was the paradigm in the nineteenth century.

But these women, within their separate sphere, took their moral superiority seriously. Godly evangelical women began Sunday schools for poor children to teach them to read. They established maternal associations to teach Christian mothers how to nurture their children. Then came efforts to wipe out prostitution and to enforce premarital chastity. From there women began crusading against alcohol abuse and against slavery. It wasn't long before women's colleges sprang up. When mission boards refused to appoint single women for missionary service, highly successful women's boards were created. And women began calling for the right to vote. In the process, the lines between the public sphere of men and the private sphere of women became blurred.

While many of these changes were carried out within the Victorian paradigm of the virtuous "true woman," women at the end of the nineteenth century found themselves caught in the cross-currents of new freedoms, new opportunities, new possibilities.

Today we stand on their shoulders. We take for granted their hard-won victories such as the right to vote, to earn college degrees, to enter any profession, to own property. We forget—or we never knew—the agony many of these women experienced

as they struggled to find God's will for their lives. They faced a paradigm shift every bit as drastic as anything we can imagine confronting us today. They heard many contradictory voices. They, too, had to turn to the Scriptures again and again to find the path of God for their lives.

But that period was not the first time women had to learn to live within limitations or find ways to do God's will and widen their spheres. From the beginning of recorded time women have struggled with tough choices. They have wrestled with the restrictions fencing them in. They have sometimes bowed, sometimes rebelled against the powerful who ruled them. They have lived out their lives balancing their understanding of God's will for them against the demands others made upon them. Some lived lives of quiet desperation. Others found strength and comfort in their relationship to the living God.

Some made wise decisions. Others made destructive choices. Eve reached for a piece of fruit—just a piece of fruit—and brought upon herself and upon all her sisters since that time the devastating consequences of the fall. Miriam, a prophetess through whom God spoke, chose to rebel against her brother's leadership and became leprous. Esther chose to risk her life for her captive people, and she saved a nation. Rahab chose to hide the Israelite spies and became an ancestress of the Messiah. The widow of Zarephath chose to share her last bit of bread with a starving prophet and was miraculously fed through a long famine. Abigail chose to go against her husband's wishes and saved an entire household. She also ended up marrying the king-designate. Ruth chose to stay with her mother-in-law, Naomi, in an alien land and found happiness there in the arms of a loving husband.

Choices. Life is full of them. We have to make them. So how do we make them well? Like our Victorian sisters, we can turn to the Word of God, the Bible, for help in wise decision-making. There we can learn by precept and by example. In the

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pages that follow we will watch biblical women wrestle with problems that are sometimes different from our own, sometimes surprisingly similar to what we face. As we watch real women fail or triumph, we can find principles that will make the answers we seek clearer.

One last word. When we talk about the freedom to make choices, we discover there are two kinds of women. Some want freedom *to* choose. Others want freedom *from* choice. The Scriptures provide examples of both. In the Bible we find a wider scope for choice than many women realize is there. At the same time, we find biblical fences that keep our choices from becoming heresy. To choose wisely we must know God's Word and apply it well. As we do that, we can become women of worth, wise women, women whom God can use.

Eve

How to See Long-term Consequences in Little Decisions



What are the toughest decisions you have to make? Cafeterias rank high among my more difficult decisions. I *hate* standing in that line, unsure what is ten feet further along in the display case that I'll miss if I decide to take the food in front of me. I go to great lengths to avoid having to eat in a cafeteria.

My hang-up with cafeteria decisions doesn't make a lot of sense. The food generally isn't that expensive—or that good. So who cares if I could have made a better decision? There's always tomorrow!

Maybe you have a tougher time deciding on that new pair of shoes or the menu for Saturday night's dinner party. Whatever it is that we hate about decisions, the fact is that we all have to make them and make them and make them.

We decide *whether* to get up in the morning. Then we decide *when* to get up—early, late, somewhere in between. Then we decide *how* to get up—both literally and figuratively on the right or the wrong side of the bed. Thereafter we *really* get into

decision-making—what to wear, what to put on first, whether to brush our teeth or brush our hair first, what to eat for breakfast, whether or not to wash the dishes, and on and on. A lot of those decisions don't rank high as earth-shaking choices. Often they add up, however, to a good or bad start for our days.

Think about the most important decisions you've made in your lifetime. What were they? For some of you, choosing your marriage partner is probably near or at the top of the list. You've probably made few other decisions that rank with that one in changing the direction of your life.

Perhaps you've struggled with whether to marry at all—or to remarry after a bad marriage and a heart-ripping divorce. Or maybe you are married and can't decide whether to have children. These are major decisions.

What other decisions have you made that seemed momentous to you at the time? You may have agonized over them. Your first date with Mr. Right! What should you wear? Should you shop for a new dress? Should you shoot your budget for the next six months on the "right" outfit for this important event?

Perhaps you're redecorating the living room and can't decide whether to order the white brocade couch or the mauve velvet one. Six months or six years later, you may not even remember some of these decisions because they turned out to be not particularly important at all.

Then there are the decisions we make that, six months or six years later, startle us by their importance when we look back on the results of those choices. You bought your present house for all the wrong reasons, but after moving there you discovered that your new neighborhood changed your life. Perhaps your neighbor is now your best friend. She may have brought you to a Bible study where you were introduced to Jesus Christ. You are now a different person.

Or perhaps you met your neighbor's husband and have been enmeshed in a secret affair that has changed everything for

Eve

you—the dynamics in your own marriage, your relationship with your neighbor, and your own sense of inner integrity. The casual decisions sometimes turn out to be the most dramatic and life-changing of all.

Decisions. We make them. Then they turn around and make us. Sometimes they break us.



Let me tell you about a woman who faced a decision. It was probably not a decision most of us would put in the life-changing category. It was a casual decision about a piece of fruit. The fruit looked and smelled delicious. Someone said it would make her wise.

What's the big deal? The next time you stand in the produce section of your supermarket looking for the right bunch of bananas or sorting through the strawberries, think about this woman and the decision she made about some fruit.

The woman's name is Eve, although we don't find that out until the end of the story. In the story as we read it in Genesis, the first book of the Bible, she is merely "the woman." Actually, at that time she was the only woman, so she didn't have to be called anything else to be singled out of the crowd. She stands at the head of the female half of the human race, and we can learn a lot from the decisions she made.

A lot started with Eve! She's called "the mother of all living." She is also "the mother of all dying." Look at her in Genesis 1:26–28:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created

them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

As the climax to His splendid hymn of creation, God majestically crowned all that He had done with the creation of man—humankind, male and female. Note that the first man and the first woman were created in the image of God.

It is on the basis of this image, this likeness, that Eve and Adam were given dominion over God’s creation. It wasn’t that the man and woman were stronger than the lions, tigers, and hippopotami around them. It was that they stood between God and His created world as His representatives. Imaging God in the world, they had a responsibility to care for everything God put under them.

In addition to ruling God’s creation, Adam and Eve were also told to be fruitful and increase in number. Have kids. Then, as God looked over all He had accomplished, He said, “This is very good!”

So far, so good. We’ve seen creation from a distance. Now as we move into Genesis 2, God takes us back for a slow-motion rerun of what happened in Genesis 1:27, and we discover that God created the man and the woman in quite different ways, and the differences are significant.

Read Genesis 2:7: “The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.”

Adam was created from the dust of the ground, just as his name—*Adamah* in Hebrew—states. If God were making him today, He might call him “Dusty.”

Read through the next verses in Genesis 2, and you’ll discover that Adam had a wonderful life in Eden. In verse 8 we see him placed in a garden of God’s design—surely something to

see! In verse 9 we learn that he had an unlimited food supply that was both nutritious and aesthetically pleasing. In the following verses we read about wonderful rivers for fishing or swimming and about mountains of fine gold and precious stones. In verse 15 we see that God gave him something to do that would keep him active and in good shape. So what was the problem? Read verse 18: “The LORD God said, ‘It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.’”

Adam’s problem was that as long as he was alone, he was only half the story. He needed another person like himself to define him. God created Adam in His image. Adam could go fishing with a rhinoceros, but he could not discuss the next day’s schedule with him. Adam could play catch with one of the newly created cocker spaniels, but they could not admire the sunset together. Adam was created in God’s image and the animals were not. The triune God had built a need into Adam for fellowship with another creature who also bore this image. All that was feminine in the nature of God needed human imaging as well.

Eve was no afterthought. She was indispensable. In God’s words, Adam’s being without Eve was “not good” (v. 18).

With that fact established, you’d think that God would get right on with the task of creating the woman. Not so. Read Genesis 2:19–20:

Now the LORD God had formed out of the ground all the beasts of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them; and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man gave names to all the livestock, the birds of the air and all the beasts of the field. But for Adam no suitable helper was found.

In bringing the animals to Adam, God was setting up an object lesson. He wanted Adam to learn that he did not yet have

any counterpart on earth. Adam had to discover his uniqueness as a human being. God was preparing Adam for the big moment when Eve would be brought to him. Adam had to understand that he and Eve would stand together in a circle of creation nothing else in the world could occupy. Created in God's image, only they could enjoy fellowship with one another and with their Creator.



Now that Adam was set up for it, God made His next move.

So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man (Genesis 2:21–22).

"The man slept through the woman's creation," Nancy Tischler has observed, "and has been puzzled by woman ever since."

Have you ever wondered why God switched methods of creation? Up to this point He had made living organisms from the ground. He made the trees grow out of the ground (v. 9). He made man from the dust of the earth (v. 7). He formed all of the animals and birds from the ground (v. 19). You'd think, once He had a good method going, He'd stick with it. No. God introduced a new method, one that would remove all shadow of doubt that the man and the woman shared an essential identity.

Adam could never say, "Eve, you were formed of the same stuff as I, but so were the animals. Maybe you're more like them than you are like me." No, Adam and Eve were of the same essence. They were both created in the image of God. They both had dominion. They were both to share in populating the earth.

In Genesis 2:23 we read Adam's ecstatic recognition of this: "The man said, 'This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called "woman," for she was taken out of man!'" He knew who she was. She was "womb/man," a part of his own being.

But who was this woman, Eve? She was a flawless woman in a flawless world with a flawless relationship to her Creator and to her husband. In her we see the complete woman. She was free to be human and free to be all that any woman could wish. Eve shows us what humanity was born to be.

Eve also shows us what humanity chose to become. The story continues in Genesis 3. There we find a serpent slithering up to Eve to start a conversation that ended in disaster. But before we overhear the two of them talking, we need to pick up one more detail from Genesis 2:16–17: "And the LORD God commanded the man, 'You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.'"

In the midst of all the opulence of Eden stood a tree whose fruit God had told Adam and Eve they could not eat. Was God playing some kind of game with them? Was He tantalizing them, tempting them beyond their ability to withstand?

To understand that tree, we have to understand one more thing involved in our being created in the image of God. In the heart of the universe, the stars move predictably in their cycles. Springtime and harvest are fixed in the natural course of things. All nature is programmed to respond as God designed it to respond. Birds fly. Fish swim. Deer run. But in the midst of all creation stand a man and a woman who have been created with a difference. They can choose. They can choose to love God and obey Him. Or they can choose to turn their backs on God and go their own independent way. They are the one unprogrammed element in the universe.

God validated choice, and He validated His image in us by giving us the power to choose. The tree was there in the garden so that Eve and Adam could voluntarily choose to keep themselves in fellowship with God.

All of our loves are bound up in choice. Without the power to choose, to say that we love has no meaning. We can demand obedience. We cannot demand love. The tree gave Eve and Adam the opportunity to love God meaningfully. The tree, through its very presence, was a visible reminder to the man and woman that they were creatures, dependent on their Creator.

With that in mind, return now to the conversation in Genesis 3:1–7:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden?’” The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, ‘You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.’”

“You will not surely die,” the serpent said to the woman. “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves.

Choices. What was the choice Eve made? It was just a decision about a piece of fruit. Or was it? Behind our little decisions often lurk big decisions. For Eve it was really a decision to doubt the goodness of God. It was a way of saying that God had misrepresented himself, that He really did not have their best interests at heart.

Eve chose to listen to Satan's lie. She chose to believe that God had lied because He did not want His creatures becoming like himself. Her choice—and Adam's choice, as he took the fruit from her hand and ate it— demonstrates the paradox of being created in God's image: We are free to put our will above God's will. We are free to thumb our nose at our Creator. All around us are people—perhaps in our families and in our circle of friendships—who have decided that they can live without God and dispense with His Word and His will.

Out of that choice made by the first woman and the first man flow three consequences that you and I live with today. The first one we have already seen in Genesis 3:7. Their eyes were opened and they knew they were naked. The symbolism is clear: they realized what they had done. They felt guilt about disobeying God. In the following verses we see their confrontation with the One from whom they were now trying to hide:

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"

He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."

And he said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?"

The man said, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it."

Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?"

The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate" (3:8–13).

Fellowship with God was destroyed. Adam and Eve hid. The first alienation Adam and Eve experienced was alienation from God, their Creator.

But not only the vertical relationship was broken. Note Adam's response to God's question: he shifted the blame to Eve. And when God turned to question Eve, she shifted the blame to the serpent.

Blame replaced trust and love. The human race was now divided. As a result, alienation lurks at the root of every relationship. Psychologists and psychiatrists are kept busy by an entire society trying to deal with the blame, the guilt, the recriminations, and the alienation that separate us from one another. We live in a world full of problems growing out of this horizontal alienation. Our divorce courts testify to that. Our organizations to help the abused and the abusing witness to that. Women face horrendous problems in and out of marriage, in and out of the workplace, because blame and guilt have replaced love and trust.

Disobedience to God broke the vertical relationship between us and God. It also broke the horizontal relationships between men and women, between parents and children, between people bound up in every kind of human relationship.

Third, it broke the harmonious relationship God had created between nature and the first man and woman. The woman would fulfill her destiny in bearing children, but she would now do so with pain. The man would continue as a gardener, but he would have to contend with cursed ground, ground that would produce thorns and thistles. Our relationship to God, our

relationships to one another, and our relationship to the created world around us are all broken by an independent spirit.

Note that neither the woman nor the man was cursed. The serpent was cursed and the ground was cursed. To the woman and the man would come the natural consequences of living in a fallen world and dealing with hostile nature.

Note, too, that the prophecies God made concerning Eve and Adam were a way of turning the tables on their original condition. Eve, equal in Eden, would be ruled by her husband. Adam, who, taken from the ground and placed in dominion over the ground, would now be sweating in painful toil to make the ground produce food for his family. In the end he would return to the ground, “for dust you are and to dust you will return” (3:19).



As we follow the man and woman out of the garden, we meet Eve only two more times. In Genesis, chapter 4 we read that she gave birth to Cain, then Abel, and then a third son that she named Seth. All of her other children remained nameless, and her own death passed without mention. Weary year followed weary year for this woman. Yes, she gained what she had been promised, a knowledge of both good and evil. She also knew toil, pain, loss, and death. She bore two sons whose antagonism ended in murder and exile.

Many women have lived lives of great tragedy. But no other woman has ever known the anguish Eve must have known as she moved from Eden to alienation—alienation from God, from her husband, and from a benevolent environment. To have known the good as she knew it must have made the evil that much more stark in its awfulness. For Eve still reflected the image of God. It was a marred image, but it was the image of God, nevertheless. She was cut off from fellowship with the One she was designed to relate to. She knew the emptiness, the anguish

of remembering what she was designed to be without the possibility of becoming all she was meant to be!

Within the tragic denouement of this story, however, lay one tiny ray of hope for Eve. That tiny ray has become a life-changing beam of hope for us today. Buried in the curse on the serpent was God's word that He would "put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel" (2:15).

Even in the midst of meting out punishments and prophecies for the sin of Adam and Eve, God was concerned with re-establishing a relationship with those who bear His image. He warned Satan that his victory was not forever. The day would come when one would be born of the seed of the woman—an unusual statement when "seed" or semen always came from the man—who would crush the head of the serpent.

Here was the first word of promise, the first hint of a future deliverer from sin. The bad news contained good news. God had not written off His creatures. The play had not ended. The curtain had not yet gone down on the final act.

If you think back to high school or college English classes, you may remember reading plays by Shakespeare and other writers. Some plays were called comedies. Others were labeled tragedies. For many of us a comedy is a funny play with lots of great one-liners. But that isn't the way that comedy differs from tragedy in drama. Both tragedies and comedies follow the same basic plot.

In the first act the writer gets the woman up a tree. In the second act a bear stands at the base of the tree making growling sounds. In the third act—well, that's where we find out whether the play is a tragedy or a comedy. The difference lies in the ending. In a tragedy, the story unwinds without hope. Once it starts, wrong decisions lead to wrong endings. A comedy, on the other hand, also includes bad decisions by the characters. But somehow the crises and the hurts turn around, and, in the end, everything works out for the best.

Eve's story is tragic, not only for her but for the whole human race. For you. For me. Once she made that decision about eating a piece of appealing fruit, she could not change the ending for herself, for Adam, for Cain and Abel, for Seth, or for any of her descendants. But the Author could step into the story and change the ending. God could take all the bad decisions and the pain and sorrow and use them to make a happy ending. He gave the first hint of that in Genesis 3:15 when He promised that a descendant of hers would defeat Satan and his power in the world.

You and I live not as Eve lived, waiting for the fulfillment of God's promise. You and I live with that promise fulfilled. Jesus Christ has come, and through Him you and I can have a relationship with God.

The apostle Paul knew that fact would make a difference in the lives of first-century Greeks living in Corinth. He wrote to them, "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:22).

In Christ I can be made alive. In Christ you can be made alive. In Him we can experience a vertical relationship with our Creator, a relationship Eve and Adam threw away in exchange for a shot at being like God. We can choose to have God write a happy ending to the drama of our lives. We can choose to have Him establish a relationship that is not broken by our independence and our bad choices. We can then watch Him bring healing to human relationships that weigh us down.

We can choose. If you have not already made that choice, now is a good time to choose a vertical relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Eve is not the end of the story. She is the beginning. With her this book begins. The book will end with another woman, one who said "Yes" to God and brought our Savior into the world. Between Eve and Mary stretch thousands of years and thousands of women. This book looks at the ways some of these

women met the tragedies life forced on them as flawed people in a fallen world. It is a story of alienation. It is a story of sin in the world. It is a story of women whose histories remind us that our struggles are not new. But it is also the story of hope. It is the story of choices—good ones, bad ones, and sometimes choices people didn't think were especially important.

As you and I learn from other women, we can choose to be women whose eyes are turned Godward. We can choose wisely and live.



Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion

1. Describe a decision you made that seemed big at the time but had no long-term effect on your life.
2. Describe a decision you made that seemed small at the time but had a major effect on your life.
3. What do you think are the consequences of choosing to live life without taking God's will into consideration?
4. What does "grace" mean and how does it apply to us when we recognize that we have in some way "voted against God" in our decision making?