

Leadership Qualities: Decision Making

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There is a thought-provoking scene in Lewis Carroll's classic children's tale, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Young Alice comes to a fork in the road and asks the Cheshire Cat which direction she should take. "'That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,' said the Cat.

"'I don't much care where –' said Alice.

"'Then it doesn't matter which way you walk,' said the Cat."¹

Life is filled with decisions, many of which never even reach our conscious level. Which socks to wear? Should the shirt button from the top down or from the bottom up? Which lane to drive in? Most of these decisions are made out of habit.

On the other hand, there are some decisions that you spend time thinking about. What sounds good for lunch? Which voicemail needs to be answered first? Can the haircut wait until next week? These decisions may seem small and insignificant, but woven together, they form the tapestry of our daily lives.

Then there are life-altering decisions that cause you to struggle. Which career path is most in line with your unique skill-set and calling? Should you marry or remain single? Which church will allow you the best opportunity to grow and minister to others? These are often hard choices that deserve a great amount of thought.

Often the same decision-making process we use for minor issues is used for major decisions as well. So the question is: How do we choose wisely? What criteria do we use to evaluate, to discern the best course of action? Clearly, gathering information and carefully

¹ Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1984), 89.

analyzing our options is essential. Beyond that, we need wisdom and clarity of thought in order to make prudent decisions based upon the facts at hand and our understanding of God's will.

Many bad choices are made simply because we move through the decision-making process too hastily, basing our conclusions on emotions, bad information or impulses. There is something to be said about "gut reactions," but basing our every purchase on our feelings leads to a lot of buyer's remorse. The opposite extreme would be to automatically rule out any emotional factors in our decision-making method. We should allow an inner sense of conviction to serve as a "red flag," without allowing ourselves to fall into the "paralysis of analysis" when it comes to determining our next move.

The complexity of this issue shows how important it is to not make decisions in a vacuum. Particularly on very important matters, it is wise to seek counsel and advice from others who are experienced and godly. The only basis for really good decisions is correct thinking. This kind of wisdom comes from above and is given to us through four primary avenues – God's Word, God's Spirit, God's Providence and God's people. In other words, to ensure good decision-making habits, we must be people whose minds are consistently being renewed by God's Word. We must also be people who walk in step with the Spirit of God, paying attention to his promptings and leadings. We must watch carefully and understand how God works providentially in our circumstances. And we must live in community with other faithful believers.

The Decision-Making Process

Decision making is one of leadership's core competencies. In fact, decision-making ability differentiates between poor and good, and between good and great, leaders. Decisions reveal

values and intelligence. They require obedience to and dependence upon God. They demand wisdom. Making decisions affects just about everything else leaders do.

Where can a leader go to get help in this essential component of life and leadership? To begin with, let's examine a leader who depended upon God and had a proven track record in the decision-making business. Of all the Bible's leaders, Nehemiah provides one of our best patterns for doing it right:

In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.

They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire."

When I hear these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. Then I said:

"O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

"Remember the instructions you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.'

"They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man."

I was cupbearer to the king.

Nehemiah 1:1-11

Nehemiah was faced with a huge challenge. The walls of Jerusalem were in disrepair, and the returned exiles were vulnerable and disheartened. When Nehemiah got this news, we see his four-step process to approach the problem. First, he carefully studied the situation (vv. 2-3). Second, he empathized with those who were hurting (v. 4). Third, he humbled himself before God (v. 4). Fourth, he prayed (vv. 5-11). And what a prayer! Nehemiah adored God (v. 5), confessed his nation's sin to the Lord (vv. 6-7) and finally petitioned God for help (vv. 8-11).

Ultimately, Nehemiah knew what every great leader knows: All wisdom comes from God, and using his wisdom to make good decisions is something God wants to help us learn to do. Prayer, then, must become a permanent part of our decision-making process, even in the arena of business. The fact that it may strike us as an odd notion to pray over business decisions reveals how we have fallen prey to the false notion that there is a distinction between the sacred and the secular. As fully developing followers of Jesus, however, our calling is to do *everything* in the name of the Lord (Colossians 3:17). That would include making decisions.

The Power of Prayer

God is sovereign – at times, inscrutably so. That being the case, in what sense can we say that the Sovereign Lord, the One who transcends all imaginable boundaries and who knows all things, makes decisions? In his timeless plan, God has conceived all possible scenarios and has thought of every possible contingency. There has never been an event that took God by surprise, and there never will be.

There is great comfort in this, because we come to realize that as imperfect creatures living in an imperfect world, we can never really disappoint God. We can grieve him, but we cannot thwart or frustrate him. In spite of how our world appears to us, because of God's

supreme sovereignty and wisdom, it is exactly the way he knew it would be, and we are right on schedule in the unfolding of his plan to bring us to the best of all possible worlds. God has even incorporated the foolish, sinful decisions of people into his divine scheme. Things that were meant for evil and harmful purposes, God weaves into his good will to accomplish his program in our world (Genesis 50:20). Because he is omniscient, his plan is based not on appearances but on consequences. Because he is omnipotent, he is able to fully accomplish his purposes. Because he is omnipresent, his dominion continually encompasses the created order. Because he is not bound by space and time, he views all things from the perspective of an eternal *now*; a particular moment to us can be an eternity to God, and yet the entire life span of the cosmos can be an instant to him (2 Peter 3:18).

Though the Lord our God sits enthroned on high, he “stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth” (Psalm 113:6). He is transcendent and majestic, but he is also imminent, attentive and compassionate. Even though God is all-powerful, all-knowing and ever-present, the Scriptures portray his very real interaction with his people in earthly time and space and affirm that our prayers make a difference in the outworking of God’s purposes. As Philip Yancey writes:

God is not a blurry power living somewhere in the sky, not an abstraction like the Greeks proposed, not a sensual super-human like the Romans worshiped, and definitely not the absentee watchmaker of the Deists. God is *personal*. He enters into people’s lives, messes with families, calls people to account. Most of all, God loves.²

God is not a man, nor does he change his mind (1 Samuel 15:29). However, the Bible does not shrink from attributing emotions to him. No one has expressed his more eloquently than Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel:

² Philip Yancey, *The Bible Jesus Read* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), p.33.

To the prophet, God does not reveal himself in an abstract absoluteness, but in a personal and intimate relation to the world. He does not simply command and expect obedience; He is also moved and affected by what happens in the world, and reacts accordingly. Events and human actions rouse in him joy or sorrow, pleasure or wrath.... Man's deeds may move Him, affect Him, grieve Him or, on the other hand, gladden and please Him.

[T]he God of Israel is a God Who loves, a God Who is known to, and concerned with, man. He not only rules the world in the majesty of his might and wisdom, but reacts intimately to the events of history.³

Of course, before God was the God of Israel, he was the God of Abraham. The story of Abraham's prayers on behalf of the few righteous people in Sodom illustrates the biblical truth that God mysteriously incorporates our prayers into his eternal plan. Abraham founded his intercession on the unswerving justice of the Ruler of the world:

Then the Lord said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know."

The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the Lord. Then Abraham approached him and said: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing – to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

The Lord said, "If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake."

Then Abraham spoke up again: "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, what if the number of righteous is five less than fifty? Will you destroy the whole city because of five people?"

"If I find forty-five there," he said, "I will not destroy it."

Once again he spoke to him, "What if only forty are found there?"

He said, "For the sake of forty, I will not do it."

Then he said, "May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only thirty can be found there?"

He answered, "I will not do it if I find thirty there."

Abraham said, "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only twenty can be found there?"

He said, "For the sake of twenty, I will not destroy it."

³ Abraham J. Heschel, "The Divine Pathos," in *Judaism*, vol. 11, no. 1 (January 1963), p. 61.

Then he said, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak just once more. What if only ten can be found there?”

He answered, “For the sake of ten, I will not destroy it.”

When the Lord had finished speaking with Abraham, he left, and Abraham returned home.

Genesis 18:20-33

Theologians from many different backgrounds find common ground in the important role of prayer. John Wesley is frequently quoted as saying, “God will do nothing in the affairs of men except in answer to believing prayer.” John Calvin affirms that the providence of God does not exclude the exercise of human faith. While God neither sleeps nor slumbers, Calvin says, “He is inactive, as if forgetting us, when He sees us idle and mute.”⁴ Jack Hayford says, “You and I can help decide which of these two things – blessing or cursing – happens on earth. We will determine whether God’s goodness is released toward specific situations or whether the power of sin and Satan is permitted to prevail. Prayer is the determining factor.”⁵ As Walter Wink is fond of saying, “History belongs to the intercessors.”⁶

The Bible often uses language that ascribes human form or attributes to God, and because of this, it appears that God changes his mind in light of new input. If this were true in an absolute sense, it would mean that at least some of God’s decisions were initially inadequate or ill-informed and in need of revision. Based on God’s perfect character, we know that isn’t true. So it appears that these passages provide us with a relative – rather than an absolute – perspective to stress the dignity of human choice and interaction with God.

Men of Issachar

Every human being has made at least one poor decision. Most of us have a catalogue of bad choices, and we revisit them from time to time, imagining how things might have been different

⁴ See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book III:XX:2-3.

⁵ Jack W. Hayford, *Prayer is Invading the Impossible* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1983), p. 57.

⁶ The first time this phrase appeared was in his article “Prayer and the Powers” in *Sojourners*, October 1990), p. 10.

if we had chosen wisely. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a painter and poet whose works were focused almost exclusively on his beautiful wife Elizabeth, was overwhelmed with grief when she took her own life just two years after their wedding. Rossetti took his poems, put them in her coffin and buried them with her. Years later, after his grieving process was over, Rossetti wondered if some of his greatest poetry should remain underground like that. With great effort, he finally persuaded the authorities to exhume the coffin and retrieve those poems. In 1870, they were published to great acclaim, as his greatest works.

Unlike Rossetti, however, we rarely have the chance to un-do foolish choices. We make decisions every day, and the patterns established by the small decisions shape the course of the larger ones.

From 1 Chronicles 12:32, we find two key prerequisites for good decision making: “[M]en of Issachar...understood the times and knew what Israel should do.” This little nugget is tucked away in the middle of a listing of the men who had volunteered to serve David and who supported his anointing as king over all Israel. The description of these unique men underscores two essential components of effective decision making: awareness and decisiveness. Good decisions require adequate information and careful analysis of all of the pertinent facts. Although there is a place for spontaneity, important decisions generally should not be rushed, since they require sufficient time for gestation. But, once made, such decisions should be decisively communicated and implemented. Like the men of Issachar, leaders need to understand the times and be well aware of the cultural climate in which they live and work, so that they may become transformers rather than conformers.

Pope John Paul II established the Pontifical Council for Culture in 1982 because of his conviction that “the destiny of the world” hinges on “the Church’s dialogue with the cultures of

our time.” Admitting that theology must be contextualized, Pope John Paul insisted that “the synthesis between culture and faith is not just a demand of culture, but also of faith. *A faith which does not become culture is a faith which has not been fully received, not thoroughly thought through, not fully lived out.*”⁷ We are not to be bound by our culture; we are to transcend it and transform it.

The old adage is true: There are two sides to every issue, but there are also two sides to a sheet of flypaper, and it makes a big difference to the fly which side he chooses. At the end of the day, we all have to make choices, and once those choices are made, we have to live with them. This was Hamlet’s difficulty – determining a course of action – as evidenced through his lines from the famous “To be or not to be” speech:

And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pith and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action

Hamlet, Act III, Scene I

What the young Prince of Denmark is saying is that he waffles back and forth. He fluctuates between two options and cannot decide on a course of action. By not making a choice, he, in fact, chooses badly. In any area, this is true: no decision is a decision to remain in the status quo, to shirk an opportunity for growth, to make ourselves and our image of God a little bit smaller.

Deciding Wisely

Good decisions require accurately processed information. Technology has made it relatively easy to gather information. Computers crunch data and give it to us in digestible bits, but the

⁷ Pope John Paul II, letter to Agostino Cardinal Casaroli, secretary of state, May 20, 1982, as quoted in *Inculturation: Its Meaning and Urgency*, by J.M. Waliggo, A. Roest Crolius, T. Nkeramihigo, and J. Mutiso-Mbinda (Kampala, Uganda: St. Paul Publications, 1986), p. 7. Quoted from letter to Agostino Cardinal Casaroli on the occasion of the creation of the Pontifical Council for Culture, *Osservatore Romano* (English edition), June 28, 1982, p. 7.

human mind must still analyze that data and make the decisions. Because Solomon knew that leaders must make good decisions, he urged them to attain wisdom and mental discipline and to understand words of insight:

The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: for attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight; for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair; for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young – let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance – for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise.

Proverbs 1:1-6

In an age in which computer technology helps us to gather and analyze incredible amounts of data, the pithy bits of wisdom found in the ancient book of Proverbs are more important than ever. Decision makers must understand complicated matters, but they also need God's perspective in deciding how to act. The book of Proverbs helps us do just that.

A leader must develop a disciplined and prudent character so that he or she will do what is right and just and fair. The rub comes when the leader doesn't know what is just and right and fair – or when any conceivable decision appears unjust, wrong and unfair. That's why Solomon cautioned that the unsophisticated need prudence. The young need knowledge and discretion. In fact, everyone needs to foster learning and seek guidance on a daily basis.

Proverbs isn't a decision-making textbook, but this wisdom-packed book is God's gift to help us make the best decisions possible. The introductory verses tell us that the proverbs that follow will help the reader develop the mental sharpness needed to process complex information. Even though technology helps us to gather and manipulate information, a sharp mind must still apply solid logic and keen insight to that information in order to make good decisions. Bill Hybels writes:

[H]uman judgment is always limited and sometimes wrong. Sometimes our best notions about what ought to be said or done are ill-advised, dangerous, even destructive. When it comes to the key decisions in our lives, we almost always need deeper insights and a broader perspective than mere human wisdom can offer us.

What we desperately need is God's mind on the serious matters of life. He offers it to us through the teaching of his Word and the inner guidance of his Spirit. Our job is not to question it or to assume that we know better...but to trust that God does know better how to make our lives work. A helpful spiritual rule of thumb might be "When in doubt, always, always, always trust the wisdom of God."⁸

The proverbs help us to accomplish this goal in a godly manner. They sharpen the mind and reveal God's insight to ensure that our decisions may be in sync with his eternal perspective.

The Danger of Excluding God

No decision is wise if it's made independently of God. In Joshua 9, the people of Israel made a terrible decision because they left God out of their plans, and had to live with the consequences of a decision which God did not approve:

Now when all the kings west of the Jordan heard about these things – those in the hill country, in the western foothills, and along the entire coast of the Great Sea as far as Lebanon...came together to make war against Joshua and Israel.

However, when the people of Gibeon heard what Joshua had done to Jericho and Ai, they resorted to a ruse: They went as a delegation whose donkeys were loaded with worn-out sacks and old wineskins, cracked and mended. The men put worn and patched sandals on their feet and wore old clothes. All the bread of their food supply was dry and moldy. Then they went to Joshua in the camp at Gilgal and said to him and the men of Israel, "We have come from a distant country; make a treaty with us."

The men of Israel said to the Hivites, "But perhaps you live near us. How then can we make a treaty with you?"

"We are your servants," they said to Joshua.

But Joshua asked, "Who are you and where do you come from?"

They answered: "Your servants have come from a very distant country because of the fame of the Lord your God. For we have heard reports of him: all that he did in Egypt, and all that he did to the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan.... And our elders and all those living in our

⁸ Bill Hybels, *Making Life Work* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 203.

country said to us, ‘Take provisions for your journey; go and meet them and say to them, ‘We are your servants; make a treaty with us.’” This bread of ours was warm when we packed it at home on the day we left to come to you. But now see how dry and moldy it is. And these wineskins that we filled were new, but see how cracked they are. And our clothes and sandals are worn out by the very long journey.”

The men of Israel sampled their provisions *but did not inquire of the Lord*. Then Joshua made a treaty of peace with them to let them live, and the leaders of the assembly ratified it by oath.

Joshua 9:1-15, *emphasis added*

The Israelites gathered data (vv. 7-14), but they missed a crucial step in the process. “The men of Israel...did not inquire of the Lord” (v. 14). Many years later, James spoke to this very same issue when he wrote, “[Y]ou ought to say, ‘If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that’ (James 4:15).

In *Decision Making by the Book*, Haddon Robinson comments on James’ statement: “James is not against making plans...he is not taking a cheap shot at charts or making an argument against commitments.... What James warns us about is that our freedom to make plans is not a license to live free from God. To come to that conclusion would be arrogant.” In fact, Robinson asserts, “The phrase, ‘If it is the Lord’s will,’ ought to infect our thinking. It ought to be a standard part of our vocabulary.”⁹

In this instance, Joshua failed to consult God and made a bad decision. In the end he was obligated to hold himself and his people to his commitment to the Gibeonites – a commitment that prevented Israel from fully conquering Canaan. While Joshua did, finally, make the best of a bad situation, the end results were far from optimal. James urges anyone who believes in our Sovereign God to consult him before making decisions. Robinson reminds us again: “You and I are never free from God. We must make our decisions in submission to His sovereign will.”¹⁰

⁹ Haddon Robinson, *Decision Making by the Book* (Grand Rapids: Chariot Victor Publishing, 1991), pp. 64-66.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Ronald Reagan is credited with saying, “America was founded by people who believed that God was their rock of safety. He is ours. I recognize we must be cautious in claiming that God is on our side, but I think it’s all right to keep asking if we’re on His side.”¹¹ If we blithely assume that God is always on our side, we will fall headlong into foolishness. We should search ourselves regularly to make sure our thinking is in line with his will. We should strive to develop the character and conviction to make decisions that are products of our relationship with God.

¹¹ This quote is taken from his 1984 State of the Union Address.