

Leadership Qualities: Long-Range Planning

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The great American philosopher Yogi Berra once said, “Prediction is very bad, especially when it’s about the future.” Indeed, as Leonard Sweet says, “He who lives by the crystal ball is bound to eat glass.”¹ But looking ahead into the future, that great unknown, is an essential characteristic of effective leadership. Although, as a leader, you may not possess a crystal ball to foretell what the future *will* bring, you can and should be planning for what it *may* bring.

God’s Great Plan

God demonstrated his ability to foresee the future in Genesis 3:15. After the sin of Adam and Eve, God looked far into the years ahead as he spoke to the serpent and declared what would come to pass: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.” Satan would strike Christ’s heel, referring to the painful death of Christ on the cross. But that was not the end of the story. Christ would crush the head of the serpent. While Satan would appear to have won when Jesus died on the cross, Satan would be the ultimate loser in this great spiritual battle.

In his book *Children of Crisis*, Robert Coles quotes a young child from Mississippi: “The Lord made me. When I grow up, my mama says I may not like how He made me, but I must always remember that He did it and it’s His idea. So when I draw the Lord, He’ll be a real big man. He has to be to explain the way things are.”²

God is big. He’s all-powerful, all-knowing and sovereign. He not only made the universe, he rules it to this day and will throughout eternity. The fall of man in the Garden of

¹ Leonard Sweet, *SoulTsunami* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), p. 25.

² Robert Coles, *Children of Crisis* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1967), p. 71.

Eden didn't catch God off guard. God looked far into the future and saw his glorious victory over all the forces of evil, those mighty forces that were unleashed as a result of one little bite of a piece of forbidden fruit. Back then, God unveiled a plan that would unfold thousands of years later on a cross outside of Jerusalem. As the ultimate leader, he made certain that the direction of the history of the human race was headed toward our salvation.

Without question, God is the ultimate long-range planner. His purposes encompass the whole range from eternity to eternity and extend to every part of his dominion. From a short-range perspective, things may appear to be out of control, but God is ordering all things in such a way that they will reach a glorious consummation. Euripedes was right when he said, "The way of God is complex, He is hard for us to predict. He moves the pieces and they come somehow into a kind of order."

The French philosopher Voltaire wrote a satirical novel titled *Candide*, in which the heroine goes from one tragedy to the next. Yet she keeps telling herself that this is the "best of all possible worlds." It seemed so ridiculous to Voltaire that the evils of this world could have any redeemable value that the very idea that any of this was God's plan seemed laughable. Obviously, injustice and cruelty of every kind abound. Ours is not the best of all possible worlds. However, since God is in charge, his plan is the best of all possible plans. J. Monsabre wrote, "If God would concede me His omnipotence for twenty-four hours, you would see how many changes I would make in the world. But if He gave me His wisdom too, I would leave things as they are."³ Ours is not the best of all possible worlds, but ours is the best of all possible Architects, and he has chosen from the best of all possible blueprints that will lead to the best of all possible worlds.

³ Frank Mead, ed., *12,000 Religious Quotations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), p. 179.

Although the people of Israel often looked at their circumstances and questioned whether the Lord knew what he was doing or whether he had their best interests at heart, God affirmed through his prophetic messengers that he knew exactly what he was doing. For example, through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord said, “Have you not heard? Long ago I ordained it. In days of old I planned it; now I have brought it to pass, that you have turned fortified cities into piles of stone” (Isaiah 37:26). Later, God would say, “I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please” (Isaiah 46:10).

God’s active involvement in the affairs of people and nations is not capricious or reactive but purposeful and deliberate. His timing is perfect, and his purpose cannot be thwarted. “The Lord works out everything for his own ends – even the wicked for a day of disaster” (Proverbs 16:4). J.I. Packer observes, “His hand may be hidden but his rule is absolute.”⁴ Since God is in control, we would be fools not to align ourselves with his stated purposes in our world. In fact, all of our plans must rest squarely on the bedrock of God’s eternal plan. Sidney Lanier conveyed this concept in his poem “The Marshes of Glynn”:

As the marsh-hen secretly builds on the watery sod,
Behold, I will build me a nest on the greatness of God:
I will fly in the greatness of God as the marsh-hen flies
In the freedom that fills all the space, twixt the marsh and the skies:
By so many roots as the marsh-grass sends in the sod
I will heartily law me a-hold on the greatness of God.⁵

God’s Sense of Timing

God waited to send his Son until “the time had fully come” (Galatians 4:4). He chose the ideal circumstances for the coming of Christ and the propagation of the gospel. By the first century,

⁴ J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1993), p. 34.

⁵ Sidney Lanier, *Poems of Sidney Lanier* (New York: Charles Scriber’s Sons, 1904), p. 17.

the Roman Empire had brought a universal peace, a common language and the best roads the world had ever known. The proliferation of false religions had created a spiritual hunger for something authentic. The political, religious, economic and social conditions were ideally suited to the rapid spread of the message of hope and new life in Christ.

One of the reasons we have difficulty grasping God's sense of timing is because our language is impoverished. The ancient Greeks had several words related to timing. Beyond having a word for the common passage of time, *chronos*, from which we get our word "chronological," they also used a different term, *kairos*. This word, for which we have no counterpart in English, is the word Paul used in Galatians 4:4. It speaks of a time of opportunity, a moment pregnant with significance and possibility. A pregnant woman may alert her husband of the impending birth of their child by saying, "It's time." She doesn't mean, "It's noon; time to have a baby," she means, "We have reached the fullness of time." *Kairos* time is a point in time that demands action.

We tend to think that life's most defining moments come in the form of personal achievements or milestones: graduation, marriage, promotion. The reality is that these are usually not the most influential moments in our lives. Truly defining moments shape the contours and destiny of our lives. These moments are rarely written into our appointment books, but their potency is such that they become the things we most remember and are most remembered for. The Bible teaches that within every life God provides such *kairos* moments for us to seize and exploit.

God "works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will" (Ephesians 1:11). He waits patiently to do the right thing in the right way at just the right time. In his book *The*

Knowledge of the Holy, A.W. Tozer gives this simple but helpful illustration of the plans of our sovereign God:

An ocean liner leaves New York bound for Liverpool. Its destination has been determined by proper authorities. Nothing can change it. This is at least a faint picture of sovereignty.

On board the liner are scores of passengers. These are not in chains, neither are their activities determined for them by decree. They are completely free to move about as they will. They eat, they sleep, play, lounge about on the deck, read, talk, altogether as they please; but all the while the great liner is carrying them steadily onward toward a predetermined port....

The mighty liner of God's sovereign design keeps its steady course over the sea of history. God moves undisturbed and unhindered toward the fulfillment of those eternal purposes which He purposed in Christ Jesus before the world began. We do not know all that is included in these purposes, but enough has been disclosed to furnish us with a broad outline of things to come and to give us good hope and firm assurance of future well-being.⁶

Even the crucifixion was part of God's long-range planning (cf. Acts 2:23; 4:27-28). As we've just seen, God revealed his plan to Adam and Eve. As amazing as that is, Revelation 13:8 gives us something even more astonishing. There the apostle John is describing to his readers the beast, the sworn, eternal enemy of God, and he says, "All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast – all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world." According to this passage, Jesus is the Lamb that was slain *before the beginning*. Peter says the same thing in 1 Peter 1:20, "He was chosen before the creation of the world."

This wasn't Plan B. God doesn't have a Plan B, because he doesn't need one. Before he started creating anything, in eternity past, he knew what would happen. He knew that if there was a creation, there would be a fall. And if there was a fall, there would need to be a sacrifice.

⁶ Aiden Wilson Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy, The Attributes of God: Their Meaning in the Christian* (New York: HarperCollins, 1961), p. 111.

This was not a murder plot cooked up by a group of men. The cross was in God's mind before he said, "Let there be light!"

The Importance of Planning

Spontaneity is valuable and sometimes necessary, but the consequences would be disastrous if most of our life's directions were left to serendipity and happenstance. We live with the fictitious belief that somehow a better future is just going to happen. Our fantasy is that rewards will come without hard work or planning. Perhaps we'll win the lottery. We stand a better chance of Aladdin's genie showing up to grant us three wishes!

Why is such a thoughtless mindset so pervasive? It certainly does not correspond to reality. No one ever drifts into better circumstances. Banks don't mysteriously lose their records. Fat doesn't melt away by itself. The exact opposite is what usually happens. The natural flow of life is down, not up. People who sit passively find themselves drifting into more dangerous circumstances.

In a world that often endorses the image of a carefree vagabond who stumbles upon good fortune, the book of Proverbs can seem a little harsh. Solomon calls these people sluggards. What an ugly word! A slug is a snail-like creature without a shell. Sluggards are lazy; there is no pretty way of wording that. "How long will you lie there, you sluggard? When will you get up from your sleep? A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest – and poverty will come on you like a bandit and scarcity like an armed man" (Proverbs 6:9-11).

Sluggards master the arts of procrastination and excuse-making. "There is a lion outside!" the sluggard says in Proverbs 22:13. "I will be murdered in the streets!" Certainly, a lion is an obstacle, but the wise person faces the problem with a well-conceived plan of action. There will always be "lions" in the streets. We live in a fallen world filled with thorns and

thistles. There are always going to be challenges, obstacles, “dangers, toils and snares.” God wants to know how you will respond to these difficulties. Will you plan wisely, or will you procrastinate and make excuses? Planning and evaluating performance with long-term goals and objectives in mind requires discipline, but this discipline inevitably leads to greater freedom.

The plant and animal kingdoms offer innumerable examples of long-range planning, particularly in view of the cycle of the seasons. Nature abounds with illustrations of animals and insects that store up provisions during times of abundance in preparation for times of scarcity. Ironically, animals that are instinctively driven consistently do what humans sometimes fail to do in spite of their rational powers. We need to be exhorted, as in the book of Proverbs, to save wealth without spending it as soon as we get it, to prepare for times of adversity during times of abundance and to maximize opportunities while they last. Solomon advises: “Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest” (Proverbs 6:6-8).

The ant, unlike the sluggard, is a self-starter. He doesn’t need someone to prod him and keep him moving forward. The ant plans ahead and determines what needs to be done when. The ant neither procrastinates nor offers excuses.

Joseph was an excellent example of a long-range planner. His advice to Pharaoh about storing excess grain during the coming seven years of abundance in preparation for the following seven years of famine not only saved Egypt but also provided deliverance for his own family (Genesis 41:25-40). The apostle Paul was also a long-range planner. He made plans to visit Rome on his way to Spain (Romans 15:23-32) and prepared for future ministry after his release from imprisonment (Philippians 1:19-26).

It is easy to focus so much of our attention on short-term goals and objectives that we overlook the bigger long-term picture. If this is true of temporal concerns, this kind of thinking is even more prevalent in view of our decades of life on this planet in comparison to our eternal destiny. James Emery White suggests that, when viewed from an eternal perspective, “your earthly life makes up a single *kairos* moment, a moment that determines everything that will occur during the eternity that lies in wait.”⁷

Bringing God into Our Planning Sessions

Leadership suggests movement. “Where are we heading?” is a question which every responsible follower must ask and every responsible leader must answer. How, when no one can know the future with a high degree of certainty, can anyone have the courage to summon others to “Follow me”? Isaiah 30:1-5 illustrates one critical variable in the process:

“Woe to the obstinate children,” declares the Lord, “to those who carry out plans that are not mine, forming an alliance but not by my Spirit, heaping sin upon sin; who go down to Egypt without consulting me; who look for help to Pharaoh’s protection, to Egypt’s shade for refuge. But Pharaoh’s protection will be to your shame, Egypt’s shade will bring you disgrace. Though they have officials in Zoan and their envoys have arrived in Hanes, everyone will be put to shame because of a people useless to them, who bring neither help nor advantage, but only shame and disgrace.”

Israel’s leaders had a plan. Undoubtedly it looked good to them on paper, but they had overlooked one major component of the equation – God. They didn’t ask whether their blueprint fit into his revealed will for them. Failure to bring God into their plans led to shame and disgrace; the same is true for us today.

Whether the term of choice is “planning,” “futuring,” “forecasting” or something else, the wise leader knows just how tentative the strategy really is. There is inevitably an element of

⁷ James Emery White, *Your 10 Most Life-Defining Moments* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2001), pp. 196-197.

guesswork involved, because no one can see beyond the now. But woe to the organization whose leaders don't project into the future, don't set goals, fail to anticipate opportunities and obstacles and neglect to design today's strategy based upon tomorrow's anticipated outcomes.

There is one essential step leaders can take as they consider the future of their organizations. They can – and must – ask themselves and their team members whether the values, the vision, the mission, the strategic action plan, the projected outcomes are all consistent with what God has revealed in his Word about ethics and justice. Do the plans reflect a dependence upon God? Does the projected use of organizational resources include the development of people? Is there a dedicated attempt to honor the bottom-line commitment to shareholders? Does the whole planning document honor God or ignore his existence?

Flexibility and Balance in Our Plans

Planning is crucial. But sometimes leaders need to respond to and take advantage of changes in the environment. Paul did this. In Romans 15:22-29, we read:

This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you.

But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to see you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to visit you while passing through and to have you assist me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while. Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there. For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings. So after I have completed this task and have made sure that they have received this fruit, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way. I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ.

Paul took the long view, concentrating on the big picture. He preached with passion and intensity, as if he might never be given the opportunity again. At the same time, he practiced the

wisdom of Solomon, who said, “We should make plans – counting on God to direct us” (Proverbs 16:9, TLB). In the passage above, Paul is talking about finally completing a plan he had been working on for years – to visit the church in Rome. In his restatement of the plan we see a snapshot of his long-term desire for the church in Rome – that they might assist him on his journey to Spain. Paul would eventually realize his plan to get to Rome, although it would happen in a way he had not anticipated. But, as a man who lived as a servant, he understood that all his plans were subject to God’s direction.

According to Karl Albrecht, “There is a better way to think about the future. We need to change the vocabulary we use to think and talk about guiding our businesses, and those we lead, into the future.” Albrecht believes that “planning” is useful when “you have certainty about the situation in which the actions will take place and nearly full control of the factors that ensure success in achieving your outcome.” But for those entering uncertain markets or facing competitive changes, he suggests using the term “futuring.”⁸

The Apostle Paul had no question about his ultimate destiny. He knew he would be with Christ (Philippians 1), but he lacked certainty about his immediate future. He knew that God had called him to preach the gospel to the Gentiles (Galatians 1), but he wasn’t certain about how precisely that would work out. Consequently, his daily ministry involved a kind of “futuring” in which he adapted his strategy to each particular situation without ever compromising his primary mission. Often, this is the part that is lacking for us. We continue to seek vision when strategy is what is most needed.

In all of this, there must be a healthy balance. God calls us to walk by faith rather than sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). Jesus tells us not to worry about tomorrow, because today will have enough worries of its own (Matthew 6:34). But we’re also told to be shrewd and clever like

⁸ Karl Albrecht, *The Northbound Train* (New York: AMACOM, 1994), pp. 60-63.

serpents (Matthew 10:16). The message of Jesus' parable of the Shrewd Manager (Luke 16:1-9) is that we should face life realistically. God's plan for our lives is rarely that we sit back passively. God's desire is that we address the problems in our lives by admitting them, formulating a realistic plan and taking decisive action.

Sometimes people think passivity is a guarantee of getting God's will done in their lives. They believe passivity is spiritual. That's like saying, "I'm not going to buy any groceries or fix any food or go to a restaurant. That way, if any food makes its way into my body, I'll be sure it's from God." More often than not, God's will is for us to take initiative, exercise sound judgment, accept responsibility, make wise choices and humbly learn from the consequences of our mistakes when we make them.

God is the perfect model of one who takes initiative and makes thoughtful long-range plans. He fashioned the heavens and the earth, calling forth light from darkness, molding our planet and shaping our solar system. He filled the earth with water and sky and fish and fowl. He scattered an endless variety of plants and animals across the globe. Then he tenderly breathed into a biodegradable corpse the breath of life, animating humanity, calling a man and a woman to tend the garden and live in unbroken community with one another and with him.

Then he watched as man and woman rebelled against him. He watched his creation spiral down further and further into the depths of sin. He could have sat idly by and watched the world deteriorate. Instead, he responded with love. He took the initiative and provided a long-range plan that would take centuries to unfold. And his plan is still unfolding – to our constant amazement – for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.