

Leadership Qualities: Vision

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October 7, 1916, was a Saturday. But it was not just any Saturday; it was the Saturday of the worst defeat in college football history. According to historian G. Frank Burns, “There’s no such thing as a true account of this game.... The temptation to embroider is irresistible.”¹ The previous spring, Georgia Tech’s baseball team had been humbled by the Cumberland College Bulldogs 22-0. As payback, Georgia Tech invited Cumberland College to play them in football. They should have stayed home.

The score was 63-0 at the end of *the first quarter*, 126-0 at halftime. In the end Cumberland College found themselves on the wrong end of the most lopsided defeat imaginable: 222-0. Late in the game, one of many fumbles occurred in the Bulldog backfield. The ball rolled toward Cumberland player B.F. Paty. The man who fumbled the ball yelled, “Pick it up!” Paty replied, “Pick it up yourself, you dropped it.”

Vision and Hope

Few of us have been beaten as soundly as the Cumberland College Bulldogs were that day, but most of us can relate to B.F. Paty. Sometimes our situation looks so hopeless that we want to quit trying. Life knocks us down again and again; it’s easy to lose hope. But it is often not the flashiest or most gifted people who succeed. It is often the humble, dependable folks who tenaciously refuse to give up. They’re the ones who keep the wheels turning in any organization.

The apostle Paul was that kind of person. In 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, he wrote:

¹ “The Story of the Game of the Century,” by G. Frank Burns, Cumberland University Historian, (www.cumberland.edu/about/gotc/gamestory.html)

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

Paul's outlook allowed him to undergo intense hardship and pain with an unwavering faith in God. For Paul, it wasn't as much a matter of will and determination as it was a matter of vision and perspective. It is painfully obvious that our earth suits wear out, our time on this planet is brief, and none of us knows how many days we have left. However long our stay here is, compared to eternity, it's not even a blip on the screen. But our inner man is actually growing stronger as our outer man is growing weaker. That's how it's supposed to be.

Our hardships on this earth are temporary; the glory we will inherit is eternal. Our troubles are light; eternal glory is weighty. In Romans 8:18 Paul says, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." That is not a perspective we will find reinforced in the pages of the *Wall Street Journal* or *Money Magazine*. That perspective is not found in the world; it is found only in the Word. Rather than reading *The Times*, we ought to be reading the eternities of God's Word. By basing our outlook on what we find in the Bible, we can suffer in hope because we know that God's glorious future for us will somehow reach back, redemptively, into the pain of our past and cause even it to work for our ultimate benefit.

In some ways, we can say that wisdom is the God-given ability to see the true nature of things. In addition to everlasting life with him, God gives us a new way of looking at things in the here and now. He gives us the ability to see things as they really are, to see truth and not merely facts. By the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, the blinders are taken off so that we

can see temporary things in light of eternity. God gives us the gift of vision, and his vision allows us to see our present reality in light of eternity.

Mark Buchanan tells a story of a time he went camping:

One spring weekend, a friend and I took our sons and two of their friends camping on the west coast of Vancouver Island. It turned out to be one of the wettest, coldest weekends of the wet and cold season. We hiked down the muddy trail in slanting gray rain, arriving at our site sodden and chilled. We set up our tents on the beach, between the edge of the forest and the tide line, tucked in behind a rough windscreen of driftwood. But the wind and the rain swooped in on us anyway, merciless. We huddled around the meager warmth of a fire that sputtered in the heavy downpour. The wetness and the sand found its way into our tents, our food, our clothes, our sleeping bags, crusting and drenching everything. We spent most of our time scratching and shivering and trying to stay warm.

And dreaming. Dreaming of our homes: the clean hotness of bath water, the comfort and warmth of dry clothes and beds, the tastiness of food that wasn't damp or gritty or burnt. We were, sure enough, miserable. But how much more deplorable our lot would have been without a clear vision of the homes to which we would soon return. There we would peel off our damp, clinging, scratchy clothes, dance in a hot shower, dress in fleece pajamas, and rest beneath a down quilt, our heads on a soft pillow. What made the camping experience bearable – light and momentary – was knowing what awaited us at home.²

A Vision from God

Few things are more important to effective leadership than vision. Good leaders foresee something out there, vague as it might appear from the distance, that others don't see. Godly leaders who are followers of Christ must first have a vision of who God is and the future he holds for them. They must also have a sense of what God has called them to do.

The apostle Paul had both. Through a miraculous vision, he was taken into heaven where he saw images too spectacular to communicate; images he wasn't allowed to communicate:

I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the

² Mark Buchanan, *Things Unseen* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2002), pp. 183-184.

body or out of the body I do not know – God knows. And I know that this man – whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows – was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say.

2 Corinthians 12:1-6

Paul was given a vision from God – a vision that enabled him to withstand trials and temptations without giving up. But there was a second vision Paul possessed. The first was of heaven, his future home. The second was a vision of his earthly ministry among the Corinthians. He knew God had called him to minister to the Gentiles (Romans 1:5). And he knew that the Lord was directing him to return to the Corinthians a third time. Elsewhere he spoke about his vision to take the gospel to Rome and Spain (Romans 15:23-24).

While God may not give you a vision of heaven like Paul experienced, he will give you one of himself. Through his Word, he will show you what he is like and will give you insight into your spiritual destiny. As you seek him through his Word and through prayer, ask him to show you himself. Ask him to give you a clear image of the work he has called you to join him in accomplishing. A visionary person understands that there is a calling and purpose in his life that he needs to pursue.

The world is constantly trying to get us to settle for less than that. The world would have us authenticate our existence through achievements and accomplishments. Such ambition leads us into a narcissistic pragmatism where the ends justify the means. We begin to use people and treasure things. This is how the world tells us we can find our place in this world. In stark contrast, the Word suggests that God alone can ultimately authenticate our existence. We do

what we do with excellence for him and let him take care of the issues of significance and satisfaction, since he alone is the source of contentment.

After all, where did we come from? Why are we here? Where are we going? These are the fundamental questions. The way in which we answer these questions will determine how we live. Without a revelation from the Creator of the cosmos, these fundamental questions of origin, purpose and destiny would be unanswerable. But Scripture reveals God's perspective on each of these issues and gives us a vision of his eternal plan.

The God of the Vision

We serve a God of vision; as he accomplishes his sovereign purposes in human affairs, he is moving history toward a glorious consummation:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give the drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son."

Revelation 21:1-7

We read these words, but they extend beyond our present ability to grasp. God, unbounded by time and space, assures us that he is preparing a new creation and that he is preparing us to enjoy that new creation. Indeed, "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9). The time will come when all will be

well, and all manner of things will be well. Dante was right – the Bible reveals a divine comedy, not a divine tragedy. This is why Paul was able to say, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18).

Many people claim to believe in a glorious future that awaits those who trust Christ as their Savior, but for some reason this belief is not allowed to penetrate into their daily behaviors. If we live with more integrity – if we allow our belief in God’s promises to really affect the way we order our steps – we will become more visionary.

Until the day when everything that has been upside-down is turned rightside-up, we live with the hope of more than this present world can offer. “He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end” (Ecclesiastes 3:11). God has a vision for his people, and this vision goes beyond anything we could ever imagine. Everything in this life hinges on whether or not we are willing to fix our eyes on the unseen reality of God’s purpose. Paul, again, gives us a vivid picture of what that means in 2 Corinthians 5:1-8:

Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. Now it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

Therefore we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord. We live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.

Compared with heaven, this earth, the beauty of nature, the complexity of the human body – it’s like a tent compared with a multi-million dollar mansion. John Ortberg describes the view of heaven many people have:

When I was in grade school, I sang in a church choir directed by a woman named Sigrid. She had blue hair, a wide vibrato, and several chins, all of which threatened to go off when she directed with vigor. When she got frustrated with us (which we often gave her good reason to be), she would clap her hands and say, “Children, start singing like I told you – because when you get to heaven, it’s all you’re going to do: sing, sing, sing, morning, noon, night – so you’d better get it right.”

Somehow the idea of five to ten billion years in choir robes under the direction of Sigrid and those chins didn’t sound like eternal bliss.³

Our misconceptions of heaven get us into trouble. If heaven is just a never-ending Sunday-morning service – complete with third-rate music and second-rate preaching – most of us would say, “Thanks, but no thanks.” The only reason anyone would choose that option is because they don’t want to go to hell. So, they grudgingly sign up for the great choir recital in the sky.

Another misconception of heaven is that it’s a land where we’ll finally rest in peace. Rest for all eternity? Who needs that much rest? Heaven is not some kind of eternal retirement community. It’s not going to be lounging around on clouds. There is going to be adventure. There’s going to be beauty. There’s going to be intimacy. And there is going to be activity, but think about this: for the first time since man was in the garden, there will be work without any frustration, work with no thorns or thistles or sweat or banged thumbs, intimacy with no fear, nakedness with no shame. Take the wildest thing you can imagine, and the Bible says that’s not enough. We don’t have the cognitive capacity to grasp what a day in God’s presence will be like. Whatever we think heaven is, it’s better.

³ John Ortberg, *If You Want to Walk on Water, You’ve Got to Get Out of the Boat* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), p. 49.

Seeing with God's Eyes

As men and women of faith, we must consider the focus of our lives. Are we passionate for the things of God, or is that passion just a sporadic experience? What are the deepest longings of our heart? Have we come to see that nothing in this life can fully satisfy them? The men and women described in Hebrews 11 knew that they were aliens and strangers on earth (v. 13). They understood the transitory nature of this earthly pilgrimage and looked beyond it to God's reward. With Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Joshua, Rahab, Gideon and the others who are described in this chapter, Moses came to see that, in this world, he would not receive what had been promised (v. 39). However, Moses did not lose heart; he continued to walk in faithful obedience:

By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.

Hebrews 11:24-26

To be people whose vision for this life is compatible with God's purposes, we must develop a passion for the things God calls important. Our faith must be characterized by "being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see" (v. 1). A biblical vision is informed by the person and promises of God, and those give us stability and focus – a stable perspective and clear direction in an earthly context of uncertainty and changing circumstances. By reading and reflecting on the people mentioned in Hebrews 11 we see that these ordinary people found that perspective and allowed it to spur them on to great deeds for God, regardless of the earthly reward.

The majority of church-going people hope in Christ for their eternal destiny, but hope in the world for everything else. "Jesus can take care of me when-I-die-by-and-by, but for the stuff

of this life, I'm going to take charge of that." As we enter into God's vision for our lives, we find him transforming our view of career, family and goals.

Open Our Eyes, Lord!

Leaders have to see things that others don't. Their vision must move beyond the "what's now?" and enter into the "what's next?" Seeing "what's next" sets a person apart as a leader. That person can rise above the tyranny of the urgent and get to the truly important. Burt Nanus wrote, "Vision is central to leadership. It is the indispensable tool without which leadership is doomed to failure."⁴ Oh to be like those prophets who could see into the future! Alas, we are not able to see that far, but being a godly leader does play a crucial role in casting a vision for our organization. Elisha, one of God's great prophets, provides an essential principle for the visionary leader:

When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. "Oh, my lord, what shall we do?" the servant asked.

"Don't be afraid," the prophet answered. "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them."

And Elisha prayed, "O Lord, open his eyes so he may see." Then the Lord opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

2 Kings 6:15-17

Leaders, including most of the Bible's great leaders, aren't prophets like Elisha. They function more like Elisha's servant in this story. So what does the Bible add to the topic of leader-as-visionary? Like Elisha and, eventually, his servant, the biblical leader sees the Reality behind the reality, the Truth behind the facts.

There is something more real, more profound than what we can see with human eyes and hear with human ears. The things we can see and hear and taste and smell and touch – these

⁴ Burt Nanus, *Visionary Leadership* (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 1992), p. 10.

things are facts. We can prove them empirically. But faith often calls us to live above the realm of facts. Truth is not merely composed of facts. Truth is whatever God has said about a given topic (John 17:17). If God has said a certain thing will come to pass, we can rest assured that it will come to pass, despite all evidences to the contrary.

Biblical leaders live with the conviction of a supernatural God who sometimes interrupts the natural world and does things that defy our best explanations. Take the bumblebee, for example. Aerodynamically speaking, the bumblebee should not be able to fly. Leith Anderson reminds leaders:

The God who created the aerodynamically challenged bumblebee also made it fly. God is continuing to make the impossible a reality through leaders who have the will to look ahead and the courage to move ahead. If the first bumblebee had listened to the experts, he'd still be on the ground. But God had better plans for him. Good leaders don't settle for what they know they can do; they envision what God can enable them to do. And sometimes it means letting your feet leave the ground.⁵

Visionary leaders believe God guides through prayer. They have an optimistic and realistic vision of what matters most. Biblical leaders don't sit on the roof of their corporate headquarters in a lightning storm trying to gather next year's Wall Street report. They don't have an inside track on the future. Their vision statements are no more apt to be realized than anyone else's. But the quality of what they envision will be higher. The things to which they commit their organization's resources will reflect belief in a sovereign God. As leaders they know they are God's stewards and realize that they are investing his resources.

Like Elisha and his servant, the biblically guided leader's vision starts and finishes with the *Reality* behind the reality.

⁵ Leith Anderson, *Leadership That Works* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1999), p. 202.

The Priority and Price of Personal Vision

It's crucial for a leader to know how to identify and cultivate a personal vision. But where do such visions originate? According to Burt Nanus, a vision is "a realistic, credible, attractive future for your organization. It is your articulation of a destination toward which your organization should aim, a future that is better, more successful, or more desirable for your organization than is the present."⁶ Nanus contends that the right vision "is an idea so energizing that it in effect jump-starts the future by calling forth the skills, talents, and resources to make it happen."⁷

Over the course of his ministry, Jesus consistently cast an energizing vision of the coming kingdom of God. He repeatedly described the character and conduct that would define citizens of that kingdom. The Lord's vision was so compelling that the twelve disciples left everything to follow his lead. Thousands of others also took their direction from him.

Yet, in spite of the Lord's consistent message, the disciples had a hard time grasping the fact that ushering in the kingdom of God would require suffering. When Jesus clearly explained his impending death, Peter rebuked him for making such an assertion:

[Jesus] then began to teach [the disciples] that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

But when Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men."

Mark 8:31-33

Peter must have been shocked when Jesus abruptly turned the tables on him. Before we jump on the bandwagon and bash Peter again, we should remember that his motives were pure. His

⁶ Nanus, *Visionary Leadership*, p.8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

foolishness was prompted by love – often the most egregious errors are. Peter’s problem was that he allowed his personal and self-centered agenda to box in God’s plan. Such self-serving visions are satanically inspired.

Leaders need to be sure their vision is consistent with God’s purposes. And when crosscurrents threaten to sweep the vision into another channel, they must work to keep it heading in the right direction. They can’t allow self-serving interests – their own or someone else’s – to distort their vision of the future and prevent God’s purposes from being fulfilled.

Leonard Sweet tells a story about a man who was driving on a crowded city street when a small, wounded bird wandered onto the highway:

It huddled on the pavement as the cars whizzed past it and over it, tires somehow missing it. I glimpsed the bird just as the tires of my car straddled it. At that moment, I made a rash decision. I decided to rescue the bird.

I stopped the car, jumped out, and held up my hands to stop traffic. If I should “shoo” the bird over the curb and into the hedge of bushes, it would be safe, at least from traffic. When I approached the bird it scooted away, but it didn’t scoot in a straight line. Whether it was too young to fly, whether its wing was injured, I do not know. But every time I bent down and waved my arms the bird would half hop, half fly in a crazy circle and end up back in the middle of the road. I could not catch it and I could not get it to run into the bushes.

By this time I had a considerable amount of traffic backed up. The close drivers were watching me with quizzical or suspicious expressions. Farther back, horns were honking. I kept thinking, “Just another minute and I’ll catch the little bird or it will run off into the bushes.” So I continued running around in the street, stooped over, flapping my arms, chasing that little feathered thing.

It was only then that I realized the other drivers could not see the bird!⁸

Visionary leaders see things others cannot, but often the fear of looking foolish keeps us from following God’s vision. The cross seemed foolish to Peter. But Jesus would not allow any fear of appearing foolish to keep him from embracing the Father’s vision for him. Only those who have a vision and are willing to pay a price to attain that vision will succeed.

⁸ Leonard Sweet, *Aqua Church* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 1999), p. 132.

Visionary leaders must learn to defer pleasure now for the sake of long-term gain. Of course, this is true not only in business or organizational success; it is true for all of life. Understanding this, we are not surprised by adversity. Rather, we expect that there will be suffering in this present age. The feast isn't now; it is still yet to come. As Bob Dylan said, "Don't go mistaking Paradise for that home across the road."⁹ In other words, don't confuse the here and now for the eternal. What we have here is almost nothing compared to what God has in store for us. But this glorious vision of the future God has prepared for us should shape the way we live in the here and now.

Oddly enough, it is only as we surrender earthly aspirations and pursue what God deems important that we discover real joy and pleasure. Jesus assures us that if we will seek his kingdom agenda first, everything else will get thrown in as a matter of course (Matthew 6:33). If we get the sequence wrong, we miss out on God's kingdom, and we find out that all these other things don't satisfy. Get the sequence right and we get both; get the sequence wrong and we get neither.

Until we get a clear vision of a God who wants to bless us in far greater ways than we can imagine, we will be tempted to do things our own way. Once we see the glory of his agenda, we will be willing to suffer, wait, endure and stand firm in the face of pain, confusion and adversity. Many leaders travel far and wide to find such a vision. They attend conferences and seminars, read books and listen to tapes. But the quest for a personal vision is never fulfilled through these means. "Personal vision," writes Doug Banister, "ultimately comes from one place: intimate communion with God."¹⁰

⁹ Bob Dylan, "The Ballad of Frankie Lee and Judas Priest," 1968, renewed 1996 Dwarf Music.

¹⁰ Doug Banister, *Sacred Quest* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), p. 168.