

FREEDOM IN CHRIST

FREE TO DECIDE

By George Creach, M.A., L.P.C., H. M. Motsinger, Ed.D., L.P.C.
Edited & Arranged by Buck Griffith

I. Introduction

Part of being human is being free to make our own decisions. From the beginning God allowed man this freedom. The most important decision was whether or not to obey God and not eat from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Adam and Eve made the decision to disobey God and ate the forbidden fruit (Genesis 3). Every decision we make has a consequence. Some consequences are good, some bad, and others are neutral. When a decision is made, we should be aware of the possible consequences, and we should be prepared to accept responsibility for the decision.

We rarely hear of people refusing to accept responsibility for their decisions when the consequences are positive. They want the glory and recognition that goes with making a good decision.

It is an altogether different matter when a bad decision is made and the consequences are negative. There is also the chance that even a good decision *can* result in bad or negative consequences. Too often, when the consequence is negative, people try to shift the blame to someone else. They do not want to take responsibility for the consequences of their decisions. To escape this difficulty, many people allow others to make their decisions for them. They think that if they did not make the decision, they cannot be held responsible for the consequences. Life, however, is not a game of pinball where someone else controls the levers. Each of us controls his own life. Whether we like it or not, we are responsible. Nobody else can be responsible for us. When we try not to accept responsibility for our lives, we have made a decision. We have decided to allow others to determine what we do in this life and where we will spend eternity. Too often, clients of psychologists have surrendered the control of their lives to others and are unhappy about the consequences. We may think we can shift the blame to others, but God does not allow it. We cannot escape. We are responsible for our decisions. Another way we try to avoid making decisions and accepting the consequences is by shifting the blame to society, environment, or heredity. Harry Emerson Fosdick rejected this escapism when he said:

“On its highest level man’s contemporary desire to escape responsibility expresses itself not in emphasis on luck, or in emotional submission to fate, but in a thoroughgoing deterministic theory ascribing all personal qualities to heredity and environment.”

Our only choice is to accept certain facts. Once we accept these facts, we can get on with the job of living the kind of lives God created us to live . . .

- I am responsible for my life
- My decisions determine what kind of life I will live on this earth
- My decisions determine where I will spend eternity
- My decisions influence and affect the destiny of others

II. The Decision Making Process

Decision making doesn't just happen. It is an *intellectual* process. Most of our decisions are so small that we usually don't think about them. These include routine actions (like combing our hair, driving to work, etc.), but without doing them we could not live. Other decisions - important ones - require a great amount of thought. They require a conscious, deliberate intellectual process. Unfortunately, most people drift through this process without a structured technique. Failure to make a deliberate, reasoned, structured decision leads to bad decisions and negative consequences. Sidney Johnson has developed an excellent decision making model. It has five different parts, each one done in successive order. They are the following . . .

A. Define Your Needs

Before we can make a decision, we must identify our needs. What is our goal? In decision making, needs should be specific. We must ask ourselves exactly what we want. Focusing on what we want to accomplish is better than using the general *shotgun* approach. If your goal is to lose weight, the focus is on how many pounds to lose. Make it a definite number of pounds - say twenty pounds within the next 60 days. In this way you not only have a goal, you will know when you reach it.

B. Gather Information to Learn All Available Options

Normally, there is not just one way to do a thing. There are several different ways. After we have defined our needs, we start looking for ways to satisfy them. As we look for ways to do something, we notice the different ways available to us. When we have looked at our different options, we need to collect information about them. If we collect the information, it will tell us a great deal about our options. Will this option meet my real needs? Who has the information I need? How much information do I really need? What does the information tell me about the option? What are different ways to lose 20 pounds? We can diet. *Which* diet? We can exercise. What type of exercise? We can use a combination of diet and exercise. What combination? Do we need to see a doctor to have our overall health checked first? Do we need to join a health club or weight reduction center? Can we lose the weight on our own? Another option is to forget about the entire thing. As we start looking at different diet and exercise programs, we learn which meet our need for losing weight in a way that fits our personality. This is an important aspect of looking at options. If we force something extremely different from our personality, we will eventually reject it. In other words, it should be tailored to fit us. Just because something worked for someone else doesn't mean it will work for us.

C. Think Through the Options

In thinking through options, we also look at the results of each. Does it meet our goal? Are there negative side effects? Are there positive side effects? Are the side effects worth the risk? What would the results have to be to reach my goal? Have I considered all my options? Do I have all the information I need? Have I thought this through? Can I afford it financially? Can I afford it emotionally?

Do I really want to do this? This is one of the major sticking areas when we are making a decision. We either do not think it through thoroughly, or we analyze it to death. Cover all the ground, but do not deliberate the issue. Use common sense.

In the example of losing twenty pounds, you can spend months and years trying to devise a method. Set a time limit on how long you will think through the options. Then spend that time considering them instead of waiting until the last minute.

D. Make Prudent Use of Intuition

Making prudent use of intuition is more than just going on a “gut feeling.” It is a question of how comfortable I am with the different options and the possible results. Johnson says, “Successful decision makers avoid decisions based on fear, since fear doesn’t bring good results.” Does a certain option make us feel stressful? Does it make us feel comfortable or peaceful? Do we clearly understand it? Is it confusing? Does it energize us? Does it drain our energy? Does it feel right? If a decision feels right and is within our range of comfort, it is probably the right decision for us. Remember that we try to match the decision with our personalities. There will be times, however, in which the correct decision will not feel right and comfortable. Decision-making is not restricted to intuition or logic. It is a combination of the two.

E. Base Decisions on Convictions

Decisions must be based on our convictions. When we violate our convictions, the decision will always be bad, and regardless of the outcome, we will always regret it. Principles, values, and morals are more important than gaining a temporary advantage in some area of life whether it is business or personal. When we sacrifice our principles, we are really stating they are unimportant. If we cannot make a decision based on our principles, we need to determine if we really need them.

III. Biblical Examples of Decision Making

The Bible provides us with examples of people faced with having to make decisions, what decisions they made, and the consequences of their decisions. Some of their decisions were to obey God, while others were to disobey God and do what they wanted to do.

A. Adam and Eve

In Genesis 3, Eve was tempted to disobey God by eating the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Apparently Adam offered no resistance when Eve offered him the forbidden fruit. They thought that they needed to be as wise as God (Genesis 3:5). They looked at their options. One was that they could obey God and remain as they were. The second was that they could disobey God and become “like God” (Genesis 3:2-5). As they thought through their options, they saw that the fruit looked good and would make them wise (Genesis 3:6). The Bible does not even

mention that they considered not eating the fruit and remaining faithful to God. They seemed to ignore one of their two options. Although the Bible does not tell us how the option of eating the fruit affected their comfort level, from verse 6 we can assume that it made them feel good.

Also, they seemed to throw their principles and values to the wind in a desire to be as wise as God. They made a decision to eat of the forbidden fruit. They chose rebellion over appreciation for the free fruit and beautiful garden. In fact, Adam was quick to focus the blame on Eve! What were the consequences of their decision? How did it affect their destiny? The immediate consequence of their decision was that they lost their innocence. They became wise, but not like God. They rejected God's wisdom for the wisdom of Satan and the world. The long-term consequence of their decision was a series of curses placed upon them personally and upon mankind in general (Genesis 3:16-19) and their eviction from the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:24).

Other examples of people deciding to disobey God are Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 2), Moses and the striking of the rock (Numbers 20:7-12), David and Bathsheba (Second Samuel 11:1-12:25), Solomon and his wives (First Kings 11:1-13), and Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11). Take some time to study these five accounts and look at the decision-making process. Where did the characters in these stories go wrong? Was it in determining their needs, thinking through the options, or some other error? After you better understand why they made their decisions, look at the consequences. Were they good or bad? How many other people were affected - either positively or negatively - by the decisions?

B. Naaman and Elisha

In Second Kings 5 Naaman had leprosy. He was a great warrior, hero, and commander of the army of Aram. As bad as leprosy is, Naaman was blessed to live when Elisha, one of God's greatest prophets, lived. His need was to be cured of leprosy. His options were limited. There was no cure for leprosy. Until he found out about Elisha, he had no options. He was destined to live a painful, miserable life resulting in a slow death. After learning of Elisha, he had two options. One was to remain as he was. The other was to seek Elisha and be cured (Second Kings 5:3). Naaman's first mistake was in not gathering all information about his options. He assumed that if Elisha were so great a person, he would live at the King of Israel's court (Second Kings 5:5-6). Also, he assumed that Elisha was a showman (Second Kings 5:11). So, he visited the King of Israel and demanded to be cured. The King of Israel thought that Naaman and the King of Aram were trying to start a war.

Naaman did not realize that normally the prophets were in opposition to the kings for their wicked, tyrannical ways and refused to be a part of the royal court. Elisha saved the Israelites by sending word to the King telling him to send Naaman to him. When Naaman got there, Elisha gave him a command. He was to go and dip in the Jordan River seven times (Second Kings 5:10). Naaman's basic need remained being cured of leprosy. His options had changed. Now, he could either wash in the Jordan River and be cured, or he could return home a leper. He thought through his options. His intuition initially was one of great discomfort. He called Elisha a

charlatan and started home in a rage (Second Kings 5:11-12).

After a servant challenged his comfort level, Naaman reconsidered his options and decided to do as the prophet commanded (Second Kings 5:13-14). Naaman's decision was made within the limits of his convictions. The consequence was that Naaman was cured of his leprosy (Second Kings 5:14) and became a "secret believer" in the Lord (Second Kings 5:17-19).

Other examples of people deciding to obey God are Solomon and his request for wisdom (First Kings 3:7-14), Joshua (Joshua 24:15, 29-31), Joseph and Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39:7-23), and Cornelius (Acts 10). Take time to study these accounts and look at the decision-making process. What did the characters in these stories do right? Was it in determining their needs, thinking through options, or something else? After understanding why they made their decisions, look at the consequences. Were they good or bad? How many others were affected: positively or negatively?

IV. Major Decisions We Make Today

Our decisions today are not different from those we read about in the Bible. Human nature does not change. Man's basic struggles have not changed since the Garden of Eden. The most important struggle is whether or not to obey and serve God. Once we make that decision, the other ones are easy. They might not seem easy, but they are. If we decide to obey and serve God, we will act in a certain way toward our employers or employees (First Peter 2:18). We will act a certain way when we manage our business (James 4:13-17). We will choose a certain type of person to be our spouse (First Kings 1-11; Proverbs 31:10-31). We will treat our spouse in a certain way (First Peter 3:1-7). We will educate our children in a certain way (Hosea 4:6; Psalms 1:1, 2; 119:97; Second Timothy 2:15; 3:16-17). When we decide to obey and serve God, we will conduct our lives in accordance with His will. When we decide not to obey and serve God, we will conduct our lives according to the laws of the flesh (Satan).

V. Conclusion

The lust of the flesh (good for food), lust of the eyes (pleasant to look at), and the pride of life (desire to become wise like God) that faced Adam and Eve still pose difficult choices for us today. In the Bible account of Ananias and Sapphira, Peter asks the question: "Weren't you free to do what you wanted to do with your property?" Obviously, the only answer was *YES*. Today, we are still asked that same question: "Are you not free to do whatever you want to do?" As then, the answer is still - *YES*. The real question is what are we going to do with our lives? Are we going to obey and serve God, or are we going to disobey God and serve Satan? Each of us must make that decision for himself. No one can make it for us. All decisions have consequences. The biggest decision in life - serving God - will determine where we spend eternity (Second Corinthians 5:10).

STUDY QUESTIONS

Name _____ Date _____

Address _____

1. There is a "consequence" every time we make
 - (a) a photo album
 - (b) brownies
 - (c) a decision
 - (d) a hole-in-one
2. Making a decision is a process involving
 - (a) the intellect
 - (b) money
 - (c) in-laws
 - (d) sports
3. The first step in the decision-making process is to define your
 - (a) words
 - (b) identity
 - (c) salary demands
 - (d) goals
4. The second step in the process is to gather information to learn all available
 - (a) courses
 - (b) races
 - (c) options
 - (d) associates
5. While weighing options, consider the possible
 - (a) scales
 - (b) results
 - (c) fins
 - (d) fines
6. The use of "intuition" considers
 - (a) the cost per hour
 - (b) educational pursuits
 - (c) how comfortable I am with options/results
 - (d) how comfortable others are
7. When we violate convictions, we make bad choices and regardless of outcome, we
 - (a) rejoice
 - (b) brag about it
 - (c) deny it
 - (d) regret it
8. An Old Testament example of one not gathering all information about his options is:
 - (a) Abraham
 - (b) Naaman
 - (c) Nathan
 - (d) Cornelius
9. Man's basic struggles since the Garden of Eden are the same since human nature
 - (a) does not change
 - (b) always changes
 - (c) evolves
 - (d) resolves and reserves
10. The biggest decision in life, serving God, will determine where we will spend
 - (a) our free time
 - (b) our money
 - (c) eternity
 - (d) none of these