

# 3

## DECISION MAKING



### PREPARATION

- Read Chapter 3 'Tough Decisions' from the "God at Work" book
- Watch the conversation starters: "Right Decisions" and "Smart Decisions" at [www.gotatwork.org.uk/conversations](http://www.gotatwork.org.uk/conversations)

### SESSION OBJECTIVE

Learn about different methods that can be used to reach wise choices when making tough decisions.

If you have not yet discussed the weekend, do so now and arrange location, times, who will drive and who will cook, etc.

### WELCOME

### PRAYER

### STATEMENT

We have more access to knowledge today than ever before. But this does not make decisions any easier.

What are your thoughts on this statement?

Start a short discussion on this statement and ask two or three participants to briefly share their thoughts.

And then share the following quote from Ken Costa:

We are long on knowledge, but short on wisdom.

## THE INTERACTIVE INTRODUCTION – PART 1

### HOW TO MAKE CHOICES IN MY CAREER?

On the path towards our goals we are frequently faced with decisions. These may be small decisions that can quite easily be made based on the information at hand, or crucial decisions, with far-reaching consequences for ourselves and others. What is the best way, as a Christian, to deal with these decisions? The following aspects play a role in the changes and choices that we face.

#### IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS

- What are the consequences of my decisions for:
  - God
  - those around me, family, friends, colleagues, suppliers and others
  - society and creation

An example:

Imagine being able to achieve great financial progress by pursuing a career abroad.

You sell this idea to your family by telling them that there will be more opportunities and that the work will be more fulfilling. And you solemnly promise to be home more often. This should be possible, because you will after all be the manager of all overseas activities within this company and will be able to set your own schedule.

In your heart, you know that this may not actually be possible. A new job always takes up a lot of time. Your schedule is not determined by your family, but by your own ambition. You hope that your partner and children will adjust quickly (and feel at home), but you know that a sense of security and stability are important conditions for your family to actually be able to feel at home.

God does not play a role in this decision, because you can serve him anywhere, right? You feel the pressure that these choices present. Is this where you want your family and ideals to be in ten year's time?

Share a far-reaching choice that you have had to make in the past.

#### IMPORTANCE OF TIMING

- It is not desirable or necessary for everything to happen immediately. Things need time to be understood and processed. There is a reason why we are told in Ecclesiastes 3 that everything has its own time.

- We need time to distil and consider new insights.

I am the Lord; in its time I will do this swiftly (Isaiah 60:22)

You cannot squeeze a fruit ripe. God's timing is crucial.

If you are no longer fulfilled by, or feel called to your current job, remember that we are not just called out of situations but we are also called into new openings and challenges. Paul tells us:

Each person should remain in the situation they were in when God called them. Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you— although if you can gain your freedom, do so. (1 Corinthians 7:20–21)

The process of guidance is as important as the guidance itself. This is how we truly learn to trust and listen. Do circumstances give rise to a change of course? Think, for instance, of cultural changes, changes in competitive relationships or changes in our personal situations.

Try to illustrate this with an example from your own life.

#### IMPORTANCE OF VALUES

- Our decisions and values need to be consistent if we aim to act with integrity. Our actions should be based on our values.
- It is important to realise that there should be no distinction between our personal values and the values that are employed at the workplace.

If our personal values are not in line with the values employed at our workplace, this creates inner conflict.

Share with the group another example from your own life.

#### DECIDING WITH GOD

Each decision requires wisdom, reasoning and insight into God's Spirit to make the right choice.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. (Proverbs 1:7)

For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding. (Proverbs 2:6)

Our main reference point when making decisions should be our relationship with God, developed by:

- praying regularly
- reading the Bible regularly
- implementing God's words

The Lord confides in those who fear Him; He makes His covenant known to them. (Psalm 25:14)

Asking God for guidance when making decisions is not a sign of weakness, but an interactive process between us and God, a process that deepens our faith.

## INVOLVING GOD IN OUR DECISIONS

There are two ways in which we can involve God in our choices:

- Passively
- Actively

Note: You cannot replace either one of these ways with the other. They often complement each other and depend a lot on a person's character. There are people who prefer a passive approach when making decisions, and who do not often take an active approach. And there are people who first apply an active method, but who test their decisions using a passive approach. Everyone has their own way, based on their personal convictions and background. The nature of the decision also plays a role here.

Neither one of the two methods is better than the other.

### PASSIVE DECISIONS WITH GOD

When we make decisions it is good to test these choices. We have six beacons to guide us here.

To steer a boat into the harbour, it is important that the captain and the pilot keep a careful eye on the beacons at the harbour entrance. When these are aligned, the boat is set on the right course and there is no danger of getting stranded on a sandbank. As Christians we have six beacons, which need to be aligned as it were, so that we might discover God's will.



These six beacons are the following:

1. the Bible
2. prayer
3. peace with God in our conscience
4. common sense, ratio and logic
5. counsellors
6. circumstances

We can gain more confidence regarding God's will by applying these six different, but corresponding, aspects. It is only through God's influence that these six aspects can provide one and the same signal. This approach is comparable to that of a ship being led by beacons. When all beacon lights are aligned we know that the ship is on course.

### 1. The Bible

The Bible provides the greatest test of them all. Nothing should be in conflict with what is laid down in God's Word. His Word provides a test that is objective and pure. This does not refer to any text or verse in particular, but to the principles that run through the Bible.

We realise that each Bible text can be used separately (see for instance 2 Timothy 3:16–17). But because the Bible does not always give ready-made answers to dilemmas of everyday life, it is important that the following five beacons are aligned with the Bible.

### 2. Prayer

When we seek out God's help in making the right decision, it is important that we enter into prayer. Praying does not mean only asking God for help, but also means listening to God. What thoughts do we receive while we are praying? Some people even receive dreams, words and images.

When entering into prayer it is important not to focus on the problem or the difficult issue that we face, but to first focus on God:

- start by praising and thanking God
  - ask God to give you insight into your own heart, your own requests and desires
  - ask for forgiveness, confess your sins, and acknowledge God's sovereign power
  - be contented with the simple and the good
  - do not fear the silences and take time to listen
- It is easier to hear God's voice within our own thoughts if we adopt this attitude than if we are full of our own desires, ambitions and worries.

### 3. Peace with God in our conscience

Do we feel at peace with the thoughts and signs that we receive, or is there confusion or doubt? Be wary of attributing your own desires to God. Test your conscience. The church father Augustine once called this 'a kind of silent clamour of truth ringing inside'.

### 4. Common sense, ratio and logic

God created us and gave us abilities to think and use our common sense (2 Timothy 2:7). So, the decision we make must match common sense, ratio and logic.

If we abandon common sense then we get ourselves in absurd situations. John Wesley, the father of Methodism, said that God usually guided him by presenting reasons to his mind for acting in a certain way.

### 5. Counsellors, wise people who understand God and who have proven themselves through the lives that they live

These are spiritual counsellors who have wisdom and insight. Think of the role that men such as Jethro played for Moses, Paul for Timothy, Daniel for various kings and Samuel for Saul.

And do not forget the prophets. These people are at times annoying and say critical things; they hold a mirror to our lives, sometimes seem to be able to look straight into our hearts and point out our 'false' business motives.

It is good to surround yourself with these kinds of people, mature Christians, who are wise and have proven their walk with God. Make sure that you have a number of these people in your council, on your board, in your circle of friends and also among your work colleagues.

Do not forget your partner, if you have one. Your partner knows you well and often accounts for 50% of God's wisdom in your life.

### 6. Circumstances and events

Do circumstances and events confirm our choices? We read that Joseph and Moses arrived at Pharaoh's court through a series of different events and were given the opportunity there to learn much and be a blessing to those around them. We also read that certain doors were closed to Paul and others were opened.

#### ACTIVE CHOICES WITH GOD

Not all choices can be made by taking a passive approach. Sometimes nothing happens. And as a result, we are easily paralysed. This paralysis comes from

the thought that we cannot make the right choice without God's guidance, from an expectation that God will make our decisions for us. Experience teaches us that God sometimes wishes to know the desires of our own hearts. See for example the many stories in the Bible about the people of Israel.

*There the Lord issued a ruling and instruction for them and put them to the test (Exodus 15:25)*

God gave His creation freedom and equipped us with reason and intellect. We are given the freedom to use our common sense, ratio and logic to make the right choice, choices that are in line with the principles in the Bible. A ship cannot sail until it leaves the harbour and catches the wind. A rudder does not start functioning until there is movement.

Once we have made a step of faith, God will often confirm this step. It is as though we sense God's voice behind us saying:

*This is the way; walk in it (Isaiah 30:21)*

Sometimes God makes it clear to us in some way or another that the path we have taken is not really the right path. These instances are characterised by a sense of inner turmoil. But know that God is always there for us if we have made our choices with 'honour and a clear conscience'. We can then return to the signs that we use to test our passive choices.

In Judges 6:36–40, Gideon laid a fleece before the Lord to test whether he had made a right decision. It is important to note that the fleece was laid after a decision had been made – it was not a way of shirking responsibility.

Requests for signs should be confirmatory rather than predictive.

Share from some of your own experiences and from choices that you have made in your own life. Did you make these choices with or without God's guidance?

#### EXERCISE 3.1

1. Think of one or two difficult decisions that you have had to make at work recently. Note these down.
2. What approach did you use for these decisions?
3. What steps did you take before making these decisions?

Share your answers in your small group after this introduction.

## THE INTERACTIVE INTRODUCTION – PART 2

### A FEW WISE AND PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

Give examples from your own life for each of these following aspects.

#### TAKE A STEP BACK (TWO DAYS OUT)

When facing a major decision with a deadline it is best to take a step back. Take two days out, for instance. We presume here that you already have all the necessary information and that you have considered the possible consequences, etc.

- Take the first day to relax. Consistently churning an important decision around in our mind can be draining.
- Note your thoughts down on a piece of paper and put this piece of paper away.
- Take enough time to sleep and relax.
- Talk to your partner or a friend and have a cup of tea or go for a walk together.
- Take time for God, as a routine habit in your day. Praise, pray, thank, but do not constantly talk about your decision.

On the second day, take time again to relax and then make your decision.

- Make time for God and follow His wisdom.
- Consult the wisdom of your spiritual counsellors.
- Take time to relax again.
- Make your decision with 'honour and a clear conscience' and know that God will always stay with you whatever the result and choice.

#### MAKE THE COMPLEX SIMPLE

We often complicate decisions by collecting mountains of facts and giving these too much weight. Always look for the simplest form. Two questions here:

- What is it really about?
- What interests does my choice serve?

Try to write the issue down and search for a description that requires a minimum number of words. For example, 'If I make this choice, I lose X in the short-term and win Y in the long-term'.

We need to realise that besides the technicalities, decisions also have underlying moral components. In the words of General Omar Bradley:

*We have become a nation of technological giants and moral pygmies.*

#### LISTEN TO THE QUESTION

- What is the real question?
- What lies behind the question and what interests are being served?
- Know that you do not need to answer every question that you are asked or every choice that is placed before you.

#### THREE EXAMPLES FROM THE LIFE OF JESUS

##### 1. Not every questions needs to be answered

In Luke 20:2 we read that Jesus is questioned about His authority.

*"Tell us by what authority You are doing these things," they said. "Who gave You this authority?"*

Jesus answers this question with another question and asks the Pharisees with whose authority John the Baptist conducted his baptisms. The Pharisees avoided the question by saying: 'We don't know'. Jesus therefore declined to answer their question. Jesus teaches us here that not every question has to be answered.

##### 2. We do not have to restrict our answers to the options offered to us

Later on in the same chapter, Luke 20:21–22, Jesus is asked whether it is right to pay taxes to Caesar. His reply in verse 25 shows that even if we are presented with a polarity of the questioner's choice, we do not have to restrict our answers to the options given; we can choose from other options.

##### 3. We can give clear and honest answers

At the end of this chapter, the Sadducees ask a complicated but honest question about a woman with seven husbands. Jesus gives them a plain and clear answer. We can learn from this that when the real objective of a question is to elicit a straight answer, then we should give a clear and honest answer.

#### CONSIDER THE CONSEQUENCES

The possibilities of wise decisions can be blocked if we focus on the short-term implications of these decisions. The short-term effects often leave those involved with a good feeling, a sense of there being decisive action that will have a positive effect. This triumphalism does not always turn out to be a good thing in the long-run.

Try to identify the implications of the choice in terms of five and ten years. What do you see?

Jesus encourages us to consider the long-term. For example, in Luke 14:28, He says:

Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it?

It is important to manage the down-side risks. Those who stand to profit will always point out the profits and the benefits, and often too much attention is given to these. But the potential costs if things go wrong should be carefully considered.

Always have an alternative plan. Just in case things do not go as you expect. Not all plans succeed. It is important to know how, when we do not succeed, to choose another path with minimum costs and consequences. However, never let this escape route be a way to torpedo good plans and know that it is good and necessary to take risks; but do also give these risks the consideration they require.

In his book "How the Mighty Fall", Jim Collins gives us three questions to assess important decisions:

- What is the upside, if events turn out well?
- What is the downside, if events go badly?
- Can you live with the downside?

It is remarkable how few takeovers in the automotive industry have been successful. Driven by expansion, synergy and cost reduction, takeovers have driven numerous industrialists to the brink of ruin.

Think of BMW's purchase of the English car industry. And of GM and Fiat, where the roles were reversed within 10 years and Fiat bought out GM. And Porsche who wanted to take over Volkswagen, but was itself bought out by Volkswagen.

### THE 'WHY' OF THE CHOICE

Ego today is sometimes more important than reason. We hire advisers to rationalise our desires so that we can pursue our own selfish objectives. Wise are those who gather around them as shields sensible counsellors and advisers.

Ask God for a pure heart and for protection. Be honest in your choices and willingness to follow God. If you allow yourself to be double-minded (God and your own pride), then you miss out on God's wisdom.

If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do. (James 1:5–8)

Before making a choice it is good to ask yourself 'Why do I want/have to make this choice?' Is it because others expect it of me? Or is it because things will otherwise come to a standstill? Am I doing it to prove to others that I am steadfast? Is it even really me who should be making this choice, or is it actually someone else's responsibility?

### IMPLEMENT THE STRATEGY

[B]e as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves (Matthew 10:16)

Daniel 1:3–16 provides a good example: Daniel had a clear set of values.

As a Jew, he did not want to eat the food that the Bible had prohibited.

#### **Daniel was prepared to put his neck on the line**

He was determined not to eat the King's food, even if this would cost him his life.

#### **Daniel requested; he did not demand**

Instead of demanding, Daniel asked the chief official if he could be excused from eating the food from the King's table.

#### **Daniel understood the concerns of his direct manager**

Daniel realised that this issue affected not only him. His direct manager would be held accountable if Daniel ended up looking unhealthy.

#### **Daniel suggested an alternative and pragmatic course of action**

He suggested a 10 day trial period.

#### **Daniel trusted that God would bless his decision**

During this whole process, Daniel steadfastly believed that God would bless his choice – and God did.



