

Iain Dunbar & Peter Wilkinson



GOOD CALL



Learning to make decisions with God

‘In a world where we are faced with daily, seemingly relentless, pressures to make potentially life-changing decisions, this timely volume places a strong emphasis on the importance of hearing from God and personal self-reflection – rather than offering a formulaic ‘system’ that can often lead to discouragement and feelings of failure through poor decision-making. I have been privileged to know Iain and Pete as friends, mentors and church co-leaders during the past 40-plus years and can testify to their authenticity, integrity and godly wisdom that will be evident throughout this book. Whether you are facing important decisions now, or at any time in the future (which is a certainty!), I would strongly commend their work to you.’

Andrew Marriott, executive director, Missionary Ventures [MotiVate] NZ

‘I have known Iain and Pete for the best part of 45 years. As I read this book, I hear their voices; the intonation, the stress on certain words, the pain and joys of being who and what they are. We are all different people yet, beneath the differences, our hearts find their resting place in God and one can sense their earnest ‘desires of the heart’ as they engage with the professional and personal frustrations they have encountered. Here are two blokes, wrestling with the transcendent God of Jacob. Their scientific/ engineering/ managerial nature comes through in recounted personal and corporate experiences. Their stories are honest and illustrative and heart meets head as we are taken through the chapters. Iain’s use of scriptural narrative – the ‘story’ written for a reason and with passion by a passionate, storytelling Jewish people – is lively. His plain reading of this story, sitting on top of the exegesis, ‘lives’ and he applies it brilliantly. Pete brings a different felt experience. His methodical, engineering approach is like a strong but gentle hand coming in, guiding the apprentice’s hand at the lathe – ‘Here, let me help you... Just a bit more pressure there... That’s right, see what you can do? Now, try it on your own.’ This book is pastoral in nature, aiming for practical, clear and godly outcomes at all levels of decision-making, accompanied by the peace of God to rule in our hearts and minds.’

Revd J. Andrew Dodd, Baptist minister (retired) and president of Churches Together in Cumbria



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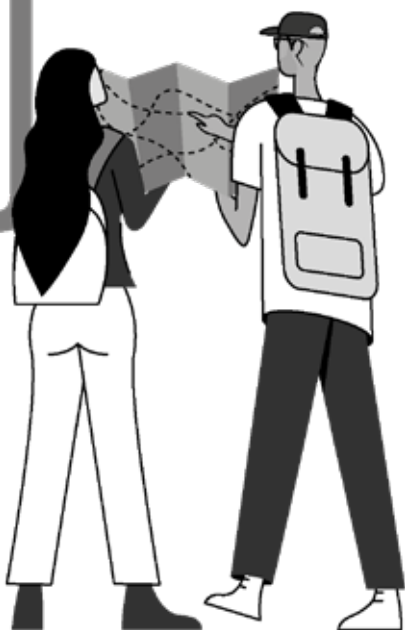
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INTRODUCTION

Pete's introduction

Why write a book about decision-making? To answer that good question, I need to think back to a highly significant phone conversation I had with my good friend Iain. We have known each other since the mid 1970s, when we worked together for several years as youth leaders in a Baptist church that was going through significant growth and upheaval in the throes of charismatic renewal. I have the greatest respect for his clear and logical thinking, biblical knowledge and the authority with which he communicates from the heart of God.

Iain had already published two books during the lockdowns of the Covid-19 pandemic,¹ and he saw the need for a third one on decision-making, but didn't know how to make a start on it. After prayer, he thought he should ask me to work with him on the project. For a few years I had been tussling with a directive steer given to me by a respected friend and mentor, who was convinced that there was something significant for God I should be engaged in with several friends of long standing (Iain being one of them).

I have written many reports in my working career, and I have mostly enjoyed the process of writing. I have long thought that there was a book within me waiting to get out. Into this scenario, enter Iain with a proposal that he put to me in that stand-out conversation. Working with him on a book seemed a golden opportunity to renew our friendship and tie together a few of the loose threads described above. Even though the task seemed daunting, I didn't need to think about it; my spirit had leapt at the opportunity presented to me and I grabbed it gladly.

I'm a systems engineer by training and have more than 40 years' experience working in the aviation industry in the field of human factors. In my last few years, I was undertaking research into control mechanisms for uninhabited air vehicles. We were developing systems that could operate on their own but most of the time needed to be under human control. I had developed a framework that described a spectrum of system control from full human authority to independent machine operation. I became interested in how 'thinking' machines made decisions, how they could explain themselves to the human controller when they needed human approval for proposed courses of action, and the wider subject of collaborative decision-making. I had also developed a special interest in the topic of human error and expertise in the discipline of human reliability analysis. While preparing and giving presentations on this topic, I became well aware that history is replete with bad decisions. For example:

- the fateful maiden voyage of the *Titanic*
- the charge of the Light Brigade
- the Chernobyl nuclear reactor explosion
- the sinking of *MS Herald of Free Enterprise* off Zeebrugge
- hidden software in Volkswagen cars that would 'cheat' the exhaust emissions test
- American Motors continuing production of a car with known fuel tank safety issues
- Microsoft adding the control–alt–delete command to Windows
- building homes on traditional flood plains
- a well-known weather forecaster predicting a storm would not affect the UK
- Decca declining a recording contract with The Beatles
- Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden contemplating forbidden fruit.

You could probably add several others. Analysis of many incidents such as these has classified the root cause as being human error. More recently, development in the field of human reliability analysis has expanded and refined the scope of accident root causes to include human decision-making as a significant factor in human error.

How about you and me? As we look back on our life with honest reflection and the gift of 20-20 hindsight, do we not see more bad decisions than we are comfortable admitting? Are we still living with the consequences of a particular bad decision? Do we carry a sense of guilt, or at the very least sincere regret, about that decision and the aftermath?

On the other hand, as we reflect on life, are there occasions when you know you made a great decision? The outcome was good and positive, God seemed to be speaking and guiding clearly, confirmation of the rightness of the decision was forthcoming and we knew in our heart of hearts that it was the right thing to do. As we look back on that time, we know that we would take the same decision again. Do we not wish that there were rather more occasions like this and that this experience could become the norm?

Yet no one deliberately sets out to make a bad decision. Most decisions are made for what seem like all the right reasons at the time. 'To err is human', so perhaps we shouldn't be too surprised by a plethora of bad decisions. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could consult with an omniscient God, who only has our best interests at heart, about decisions we must make (particularly the important ones). This being the case, why don't we do it more often?

Why then would a lot of Christians admit to finding decision-making difficult? Surely, we have all experienced occasions when a significant decision has been liberally covered with prayer yet we're not sure whether we recognised God speaking into the situation. Most of us can recall decisions that we regret, especially if we're having to live with the unresolved consequences. When the fallout impacts on relationships that are dear to us, then the price of our failure often hurts others as well as us.

There are some good books out there on decision-making, though not many Christians seem to be aware of their existence or have read many, or any, of them. As with most subjects there are also books available that we could not in all honesty recommend. In some cases, we take

great exception to the advice and recommendations given. Quite a few books suggest a simplified process for making decisions in every circumstance. Do A, followed by B and C concluding with D, and Bob's your uncle. If such a formulaic approach were all that is required why do not more of us use this approach regularly and reap the benefit?

At various points in this book, we discuss the good and not so good literature on the subject. In terms of recommending further reading, what we have included in the bibliography is all worth reading. In our experience, it would seem there is not a lot of teaching within the church on this subject. Can you remember when you last heard a sermon on the theme of decision-making?

Let's consider for a moment the wider stage on which our lives are played out. If we take a typical day, we make countless decisions throughout our waking hours (without even being aware of a lot of them). Not all decisions carry the same weight. We decide when to get up (even if this is governed by the start of the working day, an early appointment or public transport timetable). We decide what clothes to put on, what to have for breakfast, how to get to work or the appointments in our daily schedule. If we are creatures of habit or if we like fixed routines, there may be limited or no choice in some of these decisions.

We make choices about where to sit on the bus or train or tube, how fast to drive our car in a 30mph zone, whether to speak to the people we meet on our daily walk. We make further choices about tea or coffee for morning break, at what time, with or without a biscuit or piece of cake, what we will have for lunch, will we take it sat at our desk while continuing to work, play solitaire on the computer or phone or go for a walk as it's such a nice day. The list goes on as the day progresses.

We make some decisions as if on autopilot – our choice is instinctive, reactive and doesn't take much (if any) thought. Other decisions are more deliberate and include much thought and soul-searching. Some decisions might be seen as typical of our nature; others may

raise an eyebrow or two among our circle of friends and colleagues. Some decisions are downright conservative; others are much bolder, imaginative and risk-taking.

We may work in the financial sector, where decisions may be valued in terms of the cost of getting it wrong. Some decisions may be worth thousands or millions of pounds, some may involve the ongoing viability of an enterprise and affect the livelihood of many employees. We may be employed in the legal profession, where our decisions will affect the freedom, livelihood and future of others for a considerable number of years. We may have a customer-facing role, where our attitude and words affect a client's experience of our organisation.

We may be responsible for stocking the shelves in a shop and order too much or not enough of a particular product line. We may drive a public-service vehicle, work in healthcare, operate heavy machinery or a supermarket checkout till and be only too aware of the consequences of making a mistake.

We make choices about where to live, which career path to follow, what job to take, which subjects to study at school, college or university (and when to leave). Many of these decisions have far-reaching and long-lasting effects and shape the rest of our lives. Perhaps we have all considered what life might be like if at some point we had made a different decision.

Having reflected on the many types of decisions that we make, let's also consider how and in what context we make them. We make some decisions on our own, we also make them jointly with life partners and yet other decisions are made in a team. Some are snap decisions, others we ponder over for a while. Sometimes we consult or take the advice of trusted others. Sometimes there is pressure to make a timely decision, sometimes there is not. The choice before us may be either-or; at other times there may be a plethora of options. We may feel we have complete freedom of choice; at other times we may feel constrained or compelled to follow a particular path.

Some of us are quite decisive and find it relatively straightforward to make most decisions. Others are not and can seem to dither over seemingly trivial choices. Some are very analytical and like to think everything through, weighing up pros and cons of options. Others are more intuitive and make decisions with their heart rather than their head. We all make decisions in different ways.

We may be members of a particular church (a significant decision in its own right). Church decisions may be made by all signed-up church members, or they may be made by some form of leadership team, such as a parochial church council, presbytery, eldership or diaconate. Their decision may be open to ratification by others (the laity or even a higher authority) or merely communicated for presumed acceptance by the rest of the congregation.

Is God interested in all these decisions? Does he have an opinion on what breakfast cereal I choose? Does it matter if I get this decision wrong? Indeed, is there a wrong and a right outcome? Do I have time to 'sleep on it'? Should I just go with the flip of a coin?

We see above a wide spectrum of decision events. The simple through to the difficult, straightforward to complex, time-bound through to open-ended, trivial to critical, solo through to team responsibility. We can choose with our heads or our hearts. So, given this seemingly bewildering array of situations and factors, how do we make the right decision?

If upon reading this preamble, you are feeling that you would like to improve your decision-making ability, that you would like to make many more good decisions than bad or indifferent ones, and above all else that you would like to include the Lord our God more in the whole process, then please read on – this is the book for you!

We will take a look at the steps involved in making a decision; we will consider the difference between analysing a situation and feeling our way through it and how to balance the two approaches; we will address

making a decision on our own or with others in different contexts; and finally and most importantly, we will examine how to manage all this as part of our day-to-day relationship with the God who walks alongside. If you're serious about making the most of this opportunity, we will also delve into the world of coaching and enable you to examine your track record of decision-making with a view to improving your performance and changing your life for the better.

Iain's introduction

Opening the debate on this tricky subject, Pete has posed a series of important questions. As you might expect, given that this is a joint effort, he and I have spent many hours discussing these and other related issues. We have known each other for a very long time and, yes, he is one of my most treasured friends but that does not necessarily mean we always see eye to eye on everything. Thankfully, we have the kind of relationship which allows for disagreement, debate, prayerful consideration, back-tracking, rethinking and the emergence of consensus. In other words, the kind of relationship which allows for joint decision-making. It also allows for the kind of experience described in Proverbs 27:17 (NKJV): 'As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend.'

The language here is interesting – 'countenance' means 'face' and Matthew Henry comments on this verse in the following way:

Wise and profitable discourse sharpens men's wits; and those that have ever so much knowledge may, by conference [with another] have something added to them. It sharpens men's looks, and, by cheering the spirits, puts a briskness and liveliness into the countenance, and gives a man such an air as shows he is himself pleased and makes him pleasing to those about him. Good men's graces are sharpened by converse with those that are good, and bad men's lusts and passions are sharpened by converse with those that are bad, as iron is sharpened by its like,

especially by the file. Men are filed, made smooth, and bright, and fit for business (who were rough, and dull, and inactive), by conversation.²

Being ‘filed’ is painful but constructive and life-affirming. The lively conversations, on controversial issues, that have accompanied the writing of this book have frequently resulted in us reaching a combined understanding that was not obvious to either of us at the outset but could be said to be more than the sum of the parts.

Pete is more measured and considerate than I am. He will hear people out and explore several avenues of thought before asking a telling question or voicing an opinion. I am likely to jump in a little quicker, especially if I feel deeply about something. I also have to be careful not to express my thoughts too strongly – I’ve been accused of ‘hectoring’ on a few occasions!

Whereas Pete eloquently calls into question the rightness and efficacy of much of the decision-making going on around us, using word pictures and listing examples, I am more prone to look around and despair! It is amazing how many books on the subject are still being published, by both secular and Christian authors, and dismaying that the evidence from both business and church contexts suggests this avalanche of advice is either not being read or is being read but isn’t effective.

It’s also a little disheartening that so many articles by Christian authors boldly proclaim ‘Five principles for biblical decision-making’ or ‘Twelve steps to make better decisions’, as if all you need is a magic method to solve the problem. We are in the midst of an epidemic of methodologies in the church – everyone seems to want an easy, and preferably painless, way to move forward – and an alarming number of books and articles appear to be promoting self-help methods (i.e. not based either on a thorough understanding of God’s word or on knowing God better).

Pete and I agree that, for us to rely on (i.e. put faith in) a methodology, even if it *doesn’t* fall into the ‘self-help’ category, would be to deny our

desperate need for a dynamic relationship with God. We don't need to remember a series of steps to achieve success; we need to pursue a conversation with the one who made us and have him give us his opinion on the matter.

The related subjects of finding out what God wants each of us to do, how to hear what God might be saying to us as individuals, life partners and corporate bodies, and how to make good and right decisions are rarely addressed in church or at conferences. Whenever they have been addressed, we have been disappointed with the content.

In saying all this we have inevitably let slip something about the position we hold on guidance. So here it is stated more clearly, in the form of question and response.

Is it reasonable for us to expect God to speak to us and to point us in the right direction?

Yes, we believe so.

Does a commitment to 'hearing God', or at least to becoming better at listening, mean we are crossing to the dark side and becoming dangerously fanatical or too intense?

No, we think that is nonsense. It ignores biblical truth from Genesis to Revelation and is actually an insult to the God who made us.

Is the Bible a reliable source of wisdom on this subject?

Yes, we attest to the authority of scripture and hold to it being a vitally important tool in the hands of the Holy Spirit for our enlightenment.

Having pointed to the ongoing need to listen, how do we avoid the imbalance of fanaticism and how do we stay on the right side of 'intense', both in our own thinking and in our interactions with those around us?

In John 10:3–5 Jesus summarised the ideal state of relationship between himself and us when he said, ‘The sheep hear [the shepherd’s] voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.’ This is not ‘intense’; it is a relationship of relaxed dependence and indicates an increasingly instinctive awareness of the one whose instructions lead to the right place. Indeed, so critical do we believe it to be that we each develop an ability to discern what he may be saying, I have already written a workbook on that specific issue, entitled *Someone We Need to Listen To*.³

What difference should God make to our decision-making? Or, to put it another way, since God wants to be intimately involved in our lives and since that means he also wants to be involved in our decision-making, what can we expect him to contribute? And how do his interventions impact our free will?

These are key questions that Pete and I had to ask ourselves in our preliminary discussions before we ever committed to the writing of this book. Hence, they are questions we hope are adequately addressed by the book. You can therefore expect the following:

- We set out the case for consistently good decision-making being dependent on maintaining and developing a relationship with God.
- We try to illustrate arguments using examples from scripture where real people are interacting with God.
- We make every effort not to take biblical references out of context and not to duck or ignore the difficult questions.
- We relate examples from our own lives but make every effort not to exaggerate or even to suggest reasons or outcomes that were not true at the time. Where we ourselves have weaknesses, we declare them.
- We advocate both analysis of the options and sensing/discerning the truth (as God sees it) when faced with a decision. To understand

the role and importance of each, we break down both the natural elements and the spiritual elements into their separate component parts.

We have read many books about decision-making, but there are a few differences to our approach. This book will require the reader not just to read but to do some thinking about your own life so far and your aspirations for the future. We offer you the chance to undertake a few exercises – please don't shy away from them, but be brave enough to admit (perhaps only to yourself) that you have made both good and bad decisions in the past.

Analysing some of those decisions will encourage you to investigate the various faculties that God has given us for use in the decision-making process. Some of our built-in faculties are to help us analyse the options and some are related to sensing/feeling what God might be saying. Understanding the value of those faculties, using them and achieving a balance between the analytical ones and the sensing/feeling ones will help us to become confident to make consistently better decisions in the future.

Herein lies the first of three reasons why this book is different to a lot of the others on this subject: there *is* a way to better decision-making but it's *not* a 'sort it all out in a simple and painless way and then move on to the next, tricky problem' type of solution. It involves adjusting our expectations (because God can be relied upon to speak to us) and behaviours (because we must give him opportunity to speak, and we probably shouldn't move on until he has).

The second reason it is different is that the authors are not claiming to have risen above the issue – we both have the same problem, have both made some dodgy decisions in the past and, unless we are careful, we'll trip up again. Also, not content with just admitting that, we have divulged the details of several of our own decisions, both good and bad, to accompany our theological arguments and recommendations.

Thirdly, our experience of individual decisions, decisions with a spouse or significant other and decisions in a corporate context have led us to some radical conclusions. We will list these in the next section, expound on them in the chapters to follow and finally illustrate them by a real-life example at the end.

How to use this book

In discussion together it became apparent that if we, the authors, were the intended audience for this book, we would set about reading it in different ways.

Iain would take seriously the exercises contained herein, that help us analyse previous decisions, so he would advocate reading the book and 'doing your homework' pretty much as described.

Pete, on the other hand, would be inclined to read the whole book first and, if the contents grabbed his attention (and he agreed with what was written), then return to the exercises later when he had girded up his loins for some soul-searching and self-examination.

There may also be other ways of working through it. So let us give some guidance and make some recommendations:

- *Everything in the order presented.* If you are aware that your decision-making is patchy at best, leaves room for improvement and you are serious about doing what it takes to improve this skill, then we recommend that you pause reading to carry out the exercises while making your way through it. You are exactly the person for whom we wrote this book! As you read, you'll find four exercises: one at the front, one in the middle and two towards the rear of the book (I sound like a flight attendant at this point). Each exercise builds on the one before, so we recommend you complete them in the order in which you find them. As you pause,

pray that the Lord will give you insight, and carry them out fully and honestly before continuing reading. You will need paper and a pen. Our prayer for you is that the Lord will work through this with you, transform your decision-making ability and deepen your relationship with him.

- *Text first, exercises later.* If you opened this book out of an interest in the subject (or perhaps you know the authors), it's perfectly okay to read it through, preferably in the order written, and come back to the exercises later.
- *Dipping in and out.* Various parts of the book stand alone in the sense that they address subject matter you can consider without immediate reference to other parts. This obviously goes for exercise 1 and the 'Theology of decision-making' chapters (chapters 1 and 2). Chapters 4, 5 and 6 probably ought to be read as a contiguous section, because they describe the constituent elements of decision-making and address the balanced application of those elements. We believe chapter 7 to be very important but, equally, we don't believe that you, as an individual, can perform well in a 'corporate context' unless you have appreciated the principles of making decisions with God personally. We'd advocate, therefore, a reading of chapters 1 and 2 (at least) before addressing chapter 7.

Pete and Iain's list of radical conclusions

At the end of his introduction, Iain alluded to us having come to some radical conclusions about the whole problem of making good (as opposed to bad) decisions, and this is as good a place as any to state unequivocally what they are. Look at it this way – if you decide you don't like them, you don't have to read any further. Think how much time that will save!

- 1 Decision-making is not easy and good outcomes do not magically fall out of following a formula or simple set of programmed steps – instead they result from common sense, wisdom and revelation.
- 2 Admitting that you haven't got it all right so far is a vital step towards understanding how to make progress yourself and how to assist those around you (in the family, in the church and in the marketplace) to do it better.
- 3 For the believer, there is no such thing as an 'individual decision' – even the ones you make 'by yourself' should be made by reaching consensus with God. In other words, there is always someone else involved in the decision you make.
- 4 Everything is, in essence, a corporate decision but success in reaching consensus in the family, in the church and in the world needs to flow from you learning to achieve agreement between you and God.
- 5 Every believer has a responsibility not just to influence decision-making in the situations they are a part of (friendship, marriage, family, church, business, social enterprise, etc.) but also to contribute to the training and equipping of others, so that they too are able to make better decisions.
- 6 Understanding the principles, embracing the theological implications and agreeing with the conclusions about better decision-making is not enough. You *have to* alter personal and group behaviours and often put structures in place – even for yourself but especially wherever corporate decisions need to be made – to ensure that a) all those with a contribution to make are properly heard; and b) no individual or small group is allowed to turn the decision into a 'power play'.

When we say it's important that 'all those with a contribution to make are properly heard', we are including the frequently disenfranchised.

Children are often the bearers of startling wisdom, and we do well to pay attention to them. Those who might be considered the least in our churches are often the ones God uses to bring a telling word or to express truth from an unexpected angle; God himself must express his opinion, and many of us lack experience in giving him a fair hearing.

Even if our history of decision-making leaves much to be desired, we should not fear the future. The mistakes, the hastiness, the waywardness and even the downright disobedience of the past need not drag us down, because there is great grace at our disposal, both to cover our previous missteps and to guide us towards future success.

We have decision-making responsibilities towards God and those around us with whom we have ongoing relationships. How we go about reaching conclusions can often be more important than what we decide in the end. God has known about these complexities all along and so there is even greater grace at our disposal. The principle at work here is that the more we recognise our need of him and the more we throw ourselves on him, the more grace he gives.

1

THE THEOLOGY OF DECISION-MAKING

TRANSFORMING OUR NATURAL LIMITATIONS

Iain Dunbar

The word ‘theology’ is being used deliberately – it’s the study of God’s nature and of religious belief. Whenever we find ourselves discussing something as complex as ‘decision-making’, we must state our assumptions and the belief system undergirding our arguments.

If you read the Introduction, you’ll know that we’ve already stated one theological building block: our belief in the authority of scripture. Consequently, we are not interested in theological arguments that can be shown to be contrary to what scripture says, but we do accept that some parts of the argument will be open to interpretation. It is our intention to provoke you into thinking seriously about the claims made and advice given in these pages; rather than just disagreeing with or possibly dismissing an argument, we’d invite you instead to use the contact details provided and engage in discussion with us.

What are some of the other building blocks? Fundamentally, we believe that life decisions should not be made without reference to the one from whom all life proceeds. Hence, it is not okay to live our lives any which way, deciding the route for ourselves. Hence, all the theological principles we discuss refer in some way to the development of relationship with God. Furthermore, we believe that ‘without faith it is impossible to please him’ (Hebrews 11:6) and for us to walk in faith requires

that we listen for his voice. Since faith comes primarily by hearing and believing, good decisions must involve some element of revelation, followed by some interaction with and then obedience to his word.

The best decisions come out of relationship with God

We were designed and built to enjoy a productive relationship with our creator. In our fallen state, our ability to hear his voice, understand his will and follow his instructions is seriously diminished. Remarkably, the shepherd–sheep relationship, as described by Jesus in John 10, is still at the heart of our intended interaction with him.

There are always lots of voices trying to get our attention. There are lots of distractions and choices when we need to decide on something important, and it is hard to sort it through and focus on what is good and right in any particular situation. To have any chance of recognising the shepherd's voice and discerning it from the voice of a stranger, as Jesus puts it, we need a determination to possess the following:

- a healthy fear of the Lord
- a love of his word
- a balanced understanding of God's nature – appreciation of his qualities, especially his ability to hold seeming opposites in perfect balance, such as justice and mercy or judgement and grace
- a clear understanding that life is not all about rest and security – the relationship with God is meant to be dynamic, because he decides the route for my life; he will always seek the lost, including me; he knows where the good pasture is; he is ever on the move; the shelter of the fold is not to be preferred to following the shepherd in the open countryside; encounters with wild animals are to be expected, but he is able to protect the sheep; and if the shepherd decides the route, what I do and how I employ my time and talents must be subject to his will because it's *his* kingdom and *his* work in which he allows me to participate.

If some or all of that is true, we will probably also ask him for direction whenever and wherever and then obey what he reveals/says. But, despite our best intentions, the normal, everyday reality can be somewhat different.

‘Spiritual’ people often make the same mistakes as ‘secular’ people

There is nothing superhuman about someone who believes (or, you might say, who professes faith). We all, believers and non-believers, are weak in many ways. It’s just that the believer has acknowledged their need to be rescued, forgiven and looked after by someone who knows better. The only person qualified to rescue us is the only one to have succeeded in living a life pleasing to the Father; the only one whose decisions always demonstrated the Father’s will. Jesus only ever did what the Father was doing and, if he didn’t know clearly what he was supposed to do, he went and spent time asking the Father for advice. Many times, in the gospels, we read of him going off to a remote place by himself to pray.

Why do we make so many mistakes? There are myriad reasons but here are a few common ones:

- we don’t realise just how weak and dependent on grace a fallen human being really is
- we don’t take all the relevant facts into consideration but base decisions on our ingrained biases or short-term emotion or our material and other desires
- we believe things about the situation that are not actually true, which distorts the decision process
- we either don’t ask God at all or, if we do, are not patient enough to hear his opinion
- we may wait and hear but fail to believe or take seriously the advice he gives.

Recently, over a single 24-hour period, I realised two alarmingly simple things about my own frailty when it comes to analytical skill.

Firstly, I was doing a *Daily Telegraph* Polyword puzzle with my wife. It's where you are given nine letters – eight arranged in a circle around the central ninth letter – and have to make as many words of four or more letters as possible, each of which must contain the central letter. We spent about 20 minutes on it and did all we could, finding enough words to be considered 'excellent', which made us very proud. But then we looked up the answers and came back down to earth. There were a couple of really obvious words that we'd missed, obvious now that we had been told but completely invisible up to that point.

Secondly, I had to pass on a bank account number (not my own) to a business colleague by email. I was aware that all valid UK bank account numbers have eight digits, and the first four digits of the account were 0185. I typed 01865 followed by the remaining digits, making it a nine-figure number. I even double-checked it before sending the email, just to be sure. Soon afterwards, the person to whom I'd sent it informed me the number couldn't be right. So, I checked the account number yet again and saw my error. I'd added the '6' because the telephone dialling code where I live in Oxford is 01865, and I regularly repeat those digits in my head. I had transcribed the figures from my head rather than from what my eye was reading.

These are examples of common shortcomings. It is sobering to admit that we are habitually blind to what is presented clearly in front of us, either not seeing patterns that are plainly there or sometimes thinking we see things that are not there at all.

Asking God has the effect, at the very least, of delaying the making of a decision and makes you revisit the pros and cons of each option. It is embarrassing to go ahead with something only to find later that there was a key factor in plain view which, had you recognised it, would have given you serious pause for thought. However, not everything of importance to a decision is necessarily 'in plain view', neither are

habitual patterns of thinking necessarily simple to spot. God sees all the potential errors and blind spots and is able to trigger thought processes that allow us to approach the issue from a slightly different angle, helping us to 'see' what we were formerly blind to.

Grace is meant to lead us to maturity and applies even when we make mistakes

Having said above that there is nothing superhuman about the person who believes, over against the person who clings only to secular values, a crucial factor comes into play for the former when they develop the habit of appealing to God's grace. He knows that we are weak and prone to making poor choices, but he respects our free will. He therefore wants us to recognise our need and call out to him for help. If we do, he delights to come alongside and, although we may still have to work through the consequences of previous choices, his grace has amazing abilities to redeem a situation.

NO ONE IS EXCLUDED

Jeremiah 31 describes what is called the new covenant, declaring that *all* can know him, from the least to the greatest: 'No longer shall each one teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying, "Know the Lord", for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more' (Jeremiah 31:34). *Knowing* is the foundation of decision-making, otherwise all we are doing is guessing. The God who made us *knows us* but, more than that, he has plans for us and he understands the decision-making journey required to realise those plans. He therefore makes us an offer; we can *know him* and tap into his priceless store of wisdom and knowledge – the vital intelligence we need to make good and right decisions.

HE WANTS US TO BE HIS FRIENDS

Jesus talked about friendship quite frequently, both in parables and when teaching his disciples. For example, he often referred to himself as ‘the bridegroom’ and to those around him (particularly the disciples) as ‘the friends of the bridegroom’. His use of this terminology is then stepped up in John 15:13–14 when he says, ‘Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.’ Now, you may think this indicates his friendship is wholly conditional upon our obedience. Not so, it precedes our obedience and even persists when we fail. Obedience is not unimportant, but Jesus was saying that he, the creator of the universe, was about to declare his friendship by laying down his life for those who have no ability in themselves either to understand his directives or to obey them.

Setting friendship and obedience in seeming competition with each other, as seen in John 15:14, is an example of God being able to maintain two seemingly opposite qualities or requirements simultaneously without any conflict – other examples being justice and mercy, or wrath and grace. Jesus’ commitment to his friends is illustrated again after the resurrection when the disciples, exhausted and unable to embrace their new commission, revert to fishing and catch nothing all night. Jesus appears on the shore of the lake in the morning and calls out, ‘Friends, haven’t you any fish?’ (John 21:5, NIV). Then, in an outpouring of great grace and abundant friendship, he tells them where to find some, adds some of the resulting catch to the breakfast he is already cooking, and renews their commission.

HIS PLANS FOR US ARE INTRICATE

In his excellent *The Book of Mysteries*, Jonathan Cahn quotes some well-known words from Jeremiah 29:11: ‘For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare [peace] and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.’ He points out that one particular

Hebrew word appears in different forms no less than three times in this verse. The word is *makhashabah* and, although it is translated as ‘plan’, it actually means a lot more than that. It speaks of the careful, skilful and intricate weaving of fabric. So, the verse could be translated, ‘I know the meticulously woven purposes that I am skilfully, carefully and intricately weaving together for your future.’ Jonathan goes on to say that ‘he [God] will take every thread of your life... every joy, every mistake, every failing, every victory, every defeat, every gain, every loss, every regret, every wound and every question – every thread – and will knit them all together carefully, skilfully and meticulously to become a perfect tapestry.’⁵

It requires a healthy dose of realism and a dollop of faith to trust him for the redeeming of our mistakes, because first we must admit that we should have done better but then not despair that that’s how it’s always going to be. Admitting failure allows forgiveness, getting up and trying again builds perseverance, and Jesus’ committed friendship injects hope. In the exercise sections of the book, Pete and I have divulged a few of the many dodgy decisions we have made over the years – in every case it has been clear to us how God has sought to redeem the error and, like a sat nav, recalculate the way forward. We would encourage you to attack the exercises, if for no other reason than to learn about our errors!

PRUDENCE IS THE KEY

Ephesians 1:7–8 (NKJV) says: ‘In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace which he made to abound toward us in all wisdom and *prudence*’.

The word translated ‘prudence’ indicates a far-sightedness to God’s applications of grace. Note firstly that if his grace ‘is made to abound toward us’ – that is, be lavished upon us – it means there is enough grace available. And, secondly, he knows what he wants each of us uniquely to become and makes a whole series of far-sighted judgement calls,

applying grace so that, step by step, we can move forward towards what he calls ‘sonship’ (Ephesians 1:5, NIV).

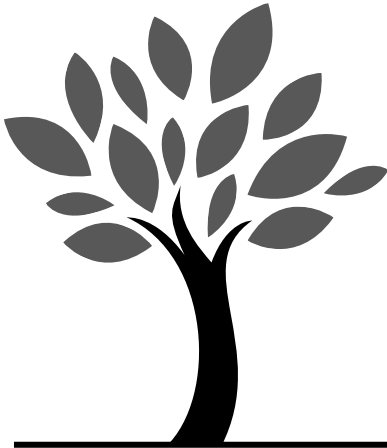
Elsewhere, Paul makes clear that our adoption as ‘sons’ (the word is not gender-specific) has both a present and a future sense: Galatians 4:4–7 says that we *are already* sons because our acceptance of Christ’s sacrifice confers on us a legally adopted status. But Romans 8:23 says that God has also set in motion a process, for all those who ‘have the firstfruits of the Spirit [but] groan inwardly as we *wait eagerly* for our adoption as sons’, intended to bring us bit by bit to maturity. In his prudence (the far-sightedness he displays), God applies doses of grace strategically to each ‘son’ in order to bring about ‘the redemption of our bodies’ – an end to our straining and groaning.

NOTES

- 1 Iain Dunbar, *Someone We Need To Listen To: Hearing from God – a workbook* (New Generation Publishing, 2021); *Something For You To Do* (New Generation Publishing, 2021).
- 2 Leslie Frederic Church (ed.), *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible in One Volume: Genesis to Revelation* (Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1960), p. 781.
- 3 Dunbar, *Someone We Need To Listen To*. Also available by messaging the author via **1Kings5.com**.
- 4 See exercise 2 (pp. 136–41) for an explanation of the distinction between ‘heart’ and ‘spirit’.
- 5 Jonathan Cahn, *The Book of Mysteries* (Charisma House, 2018), p. 243.



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Have you ever experienced conflict between what your head and your heart were telling you to do? Have you struggled to reach agreement with others when making a group decision, or regretted a major decision and had to live with the consequences? Have you ever found it difficult to be sure of God's will in a particular situation?

If so, you're in very good company.

Everybody makes decisions – all the time. Are there 'five simple steps' to the right decision? No, there aren't. Should you stop thinking about it and 'just do something'? No, you shouldn't. But could you expect God to share with you his will and purpose, giving you insight and directions in a way you can understand? Yes, you could.

Iain Dunbar and Peter Wilkinson share their own decision-making history (even the dodgy stuff) and encourage you to look honestly at yours. Borrowing from the world of coaching, they help you evaluate your decision-making to date and develop new and better habits and practices with God at the centre.

Iain Dunbar has a background in business development and operational management for UK, US and Australian companies. He has extensive experience of recruitment, career development, team building, coaching of individuals and leadership groups, and church leadership and teaching in Independent Evangelical, Baptist and Anglican contexts. *Peter Wilkinson* is now retired after a professional life as a chartered engineer working for the largest defence company in the UK. He is actively involved in local Baptist churches in senior leadership roles including preaching, teaching and worship leading.

