

FACETS OF MANHOOD

Polishing Our Character

John W Nichols

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DECISION-MAKING: CHOOSE THE RIGHT OPTIONS

Facet: Decision-Making

Definition: Applying common sense and research to choose between bad, good, good enough, better, and best.

Writers are fond of the startling statistic that the average adult makes 35,000 decisions a day though the quote is usually qualified with “it is said” or “research shows” or even “Internet sources estimate.” I am convinced that the number 35,000 was plucked from the air by the first writer who needed to add some pizzazz to an article, and subsequent authors quote it blindly because it sounds so impressive. Don’t believe me? Do the math. We find 86,400 seconds in each day (24 hours * 60 minutes/hour * 60 seconds/minute). Assuming that I sleep for eight hours (and that I am not making conscious choices in my dreams) that leaves 57,600 seconds for the remainder of the day. Do I really make decisions at the rate of 1.6 per second (57,600 seconds / 35,000 decisions)?

Not if I can help it, but I do make a great many decisions in a typical day.

The alarm on my iPhone fires at 5:21 a.m. Assuming I can locate the device without knocking my glasses off the nightstand I must decide whether to hit SNOOZE or STOP.

Next, I stumble to the bathroom where my choice wavers between showering or postponing that event till later because I have a full day of gardening chores planned. Then comes shave or not? And I must decide on clothing —work pants or jeans, t-shirt or something warmer, socks or those ankle-thingies that highlight

my well-muscled legs? Boots or other shoes? Wake Shawn or leave her sleeping?

The decisions are piling up, and I've not traveled down the hall to my office yet. Consider some general thoughts on decisions and the art of making them.

- ❖ Some decisions are determined without thought. We make our choice out of habit or training. I don't think about brushing my teeth, and I do not carry on a debate with myself over the pros and cons of that necessary maintenance item. I just do it.
- ❖ Some decisions carry more life-affecting weight than others. For example, the color socks I chose for the day versus waking Shawn before she is ready. Seriously, consider decisions such as: What will I study in college? (Assuming I go to college!) Who will I marry? How will my faith shape my daily life? Should I take that job across the country or stay put? Is it time to retire? What will I do after I retire?
- ❖ Some decisions should be delayed for example when we are overwhelmed with the number of choices, or we have not gathered enough data to make a sound decision or we are being pressured by external forces to "Choose this option now!"
- ❖ Many decisions are cumulative. The effects will compound as the initial decision gives rise to other subsequent decisions.
- ❖ Many decisions are repetitive. We will make the choice more than once. Consider faithfully supporting the Kingdom of God through the practice of tithing. That seems easy when the income is greater than the outgo, but what about when I face a couple of months of stretching to make ends meet? Do I still tithe?
- ❖ For the married guys, decision making is not a solo event. My wife needs to be and should be included. Her input and buy in can make or break the outcome.
- ❖ Poorly-made decisions may not manifest consequences straightaway, but those consequences will come.
- ❖ Some decisions are easily reversed. Others not so much.

- ❖ My failure to make a timely decision becomes a decision in itself though I may dislike the default option and the results it brings.
- ❖ I will likely find that my decisions become more sound with experience. Decision-making follows a learning curve.

The pages of Scripture abound with accounts of men like us who made decisions. Some did a good job at the task like Gideon whose story is told in Judges 6-8. He grew up in a time when his nation endured oppression by a powerful army, the Midianites, who raided at will, plundered thoroughly, destroyed completely, and in general left Israel struggling for survival. The Israelites resorted to dwelling in dens and caves in the surrounding mountains. Certainly not livable conditions for an agricultural-based society!

Gideon entered the story as he threshed wheat under an oak tree in a wine press to hide it from the enemy. That snapshot clues us in that the amount of wheat to be gleaned was small. Wheat was usually threshed in a large area by having oxen dance on it. Gideon cowered in fear of the Midianites as he flipped his wheat just high enough to turn the stalks and free the grain but not enough to raise a cloud of chaff on the breeze that someone might see.

The angel of the Lord visited Gideon and addressed him (Judges 6:12), “The LORD is with you, O valiant warrior.” The angel’s message was that Gideon had been chosen by God to defeat the Midianites and deliver Israel.

Gideon faced an opportune moment to put his faith into practice. The decision he had to make was binary, only two choices:

1. I will follow God and see what He has planned.
2. I need to finish this wheat and crawl back into my cave before someone sees me.

Gideon waffled on the decision. Uncertainty roiled his heart. He needed more data, even a push in the right direction. He spelled out his concerns:

- ❖ If God is with us why are my people struggling with all this adversity?
- ❖ Where are all the miracles we heard about from our ancestors when God called them out of Egypt? Nobody’s parting any Red Sea around here.

- ❖ God has abandoned us and given us over to the Midianites. This is all His doing.
- ❖ Besides, I am the youngest in my family.
- ❖ And my family is the least important family in the tribe.
- ❖ Are you nuts?
- ❖ Me?

Encouragement floods my heart as I observe God's patience with Gideon. God does not expect instant perfection from us, guys. He is looking for our continued learning as we experience life. Yes, we will blow it, seemingly as often as we nail it, but overall, we should be maturing in our decision making. Walk through Gideon's progress with me.

God does not expect instant perfection from us, guys. He is looking for our continued learning as we experience life.

Not only had God chosen Gideon the plan was for Gideon to overwhelmingly destroy the Midianites. Note the promised progression: "I will" and "you will."

The LORD said to him, "I will be with you. And you will destroy the Midianites as if you were fighting against one man."

Judges 6:16 NLT

Gideon decided to perform an act of submission and worship and ran to prepare a food offering for the angel. Hospitality extended to strangers was an expected responsibility no matter one's level of poverty. The angel touched the food with his staff, fire sprang up to devour the offering, and the angel drifted away with the smoke.

Can you hear the whirring gears inside Gideon's head? He realized that this had been a face-to-face encounter with God, and he expected to be killed any second. In some way God spoke and calmed Gideon's fears. The valiant warrior made a decision to break away from the idol-worshiping practices of his father, and he built an altar to the Lord.

God's next instruction would make Gideon's commitment to abandon Baal worship in favor of God worship a matter of public record. "Tear down your father's Asherah totem and his altar. Build an altar to the Lord, and use the wood from the Asherah to offer a sacrifice to the Lord your God."

What would be Gideon's decision? The choice carried dire consequences either way. Disobey God and feel His wrath or anger the Baal followers? Gideon choose wisely.

Then Gideon took ten men of his servants and did as the LORD had spoken to him; and because he was too afraid of his father's household and the men of the city to do it by day, he did it by night.

Judges 6:27

Gideon did not have to wait long to confront the Midianites who rumbled into the land of Israel and camped near his location. The entire army of them! How convenient was that? The valiant warrior sent out a call for volunteers to join his cause and prepared for what looked to be a lopsided fight.

Once again, we observe God's patience as He shaped this mighty warrior. Gideon decided to run a couple of experiments with fleeces and morning dew (Judges 6:36-40) to make double-dog sure that God had called him and intended to give a victory. God graciously participated in Gideon's tests, and confirmed His intentions.

God pointed out a problem in Gideon's war preparations, though. The general-to-be had collected 32,000 soldiers to battle a superior Midianite army of 135,000. Gideon's crew was outnumbered about 5:1. God dismissed all who were "afraid and trembling," and Gideon's army shrank by 22,000. God whittled the ranks a second time, bringing the size of Gideon's army down to a manageable 300. Midian now outnumbered Israel about 450:1.

God knows our inner workings better than we know ourselves. He knew the fear and uncertainty which percolated inside Gideon and graciously offered another sign of confirmation. He sent Gideon on a reconnaissance mission into the Midianite camp. Note God's extra helping of understanding, "Afraid? Take a friend."

"But if you are afraid to go down, go with Purah your servant down to the camp, and you will hear what they say; and afterward your hands will be strengthened that you may go down against the camp." So he went with Purah his servant down to the outposts of the army that was in the camp.

Judges 7:10-11

Gideon made another decision and obeyed God. Crouched in the darkness with his servant, Purah, Gideon overheard two Midianite soldiers discussing a dream and its interpretation. Imagine! Standing on the cusp of war against a hostile force with superior numbers and hearing one of those soldiers share this testimony:

His friend replied, "This is nothing less than the sword of Gideon the son of Joash, a man of Israel; God has given Midian and all the camp into his hand."

Judges 7:14

Gideon's next steps were significant. He finally grasped what God intended to do as the doubts settled to the bottom of his churning stomach. In the original 1969 western *True Grit*, U. S. marshal Rooster Cogburn, played by John Wayne, delivered a memorable quote, "Courage is being scared to death, but saddling up anyway." Gideon stood up, manned up, and prepared his men for battle with a strategy unlike any before it.

When Gideon heard the account of the dream and its interpretation, he bowed in worship. He returned to the camp of Israel and said, "Arise, for the LORD has given the camp of Midian into your hands."

Judges 7:15

Gideon divided his army into three companies and surrounded the Midianite camp. Each soldier had a trumpet and a blazing torch concealed inside a clay pitcher. At the precise moment that the Midianites were changing their sentries, Gideon struck.

When the three companies blew the trumpets and broke the pitchers, they held the torches in their left hands and the trumpets in their right hands for blowing, and cried, "A sword for the LORD and for Gideon!"

Judges 7:20

Upon hearing the sound of the shouting soldiers and the blast of the trumpets, upon seeing the blazing torches flashing around

the camp the Midianite army feared they had been overtaken by a massive army and turned against each other in the dark.

Was Gideon's master strategy at work? Maybe a tad, but the record is clear as to Who gave the victory.

When they blew 300 trumpets, the LORD set the sword of one against another even throughout the whole army; and the army fled as far as Beth-shittah toward Zererah, as far as the edge of Abel-meholah, by Tabbath.

Judges 7:22

Piecing together the clues from the book of Judges I learned that before the dust settled Gideon led his army and his countrymen to a complete victory. The entire Midianite army of 132,000 was destroyed! What had God promised? Total destruction! Did He keep that promise? Indeed. He did!

Note the way that Gideon's decision-making ability matured as his confidence in God increased. Even though the choices became heavier with consequences should he chose wrongly, Gideon learned to trust God's at His word.

We ought to get to know Bible characters and their decisions. The lessons they learned are ours, free for our taking, and in fact God intends that very action on our part.

Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

1 Corinthians 10:11

Let me share a few practical pointers for making sound decisions. These work...if only I remember to follow them...

Practical pointers for making sound decisions.

Know that God is the Source of wisdom.

He promises to share that wisdom, if we (1) recognize that we need it, and if we (2) ask Him for it.

But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.

James 1:5

What might I say when I approach God in prayer?

- ❖ Lord, I do not have a clue and need Your guidance.
- ❖ Please, either open the door wide as I make the decision and go through, or shut it tightly and lock it so I know to turn to another option.
- ❖ Help me to see any hidden “gotchas” in the choice.
- ❖ If I am thinking in the right direction, please give me a sense of peace about the choice I am considering. (Read Colossians 3:15).
- ❖ Grant illumination so I can see which option will most honor You.

God’s Holy Spirit guides us through His Word, the Bible, and often through a still, small voice we sense inside. Perhaps His guidance comes through an urging that won’t subside. His leading is easy to quench and overlook so we must develop our spiritual listening skills. Know for sure and certain that God will never lead us in a direction contrary to what is revealed in His Word.

Understand the decision to be made and the options before choosing.

What is the issue to be decided? Can I state the issue in a single sentence? We need to invest the time to define the issue and understand the problem. Nothing is to be gained by fixing the wrong thing or messing with something that isn’t broken in the first place.

Ask, “What if I do nothing?”

Do circumstances dictate that a decision with its encompassing changes must be made now? Or will the status quo be acceptable for a time?

Brainstorm solutions.

Get outside the narrow confines of thinking within a prescribed box.

Research and keep notes in some format.

For each possible solution try to identify positives and negatives. Consider longterm impacts and how the choice will obligate me. Ask lots of questions. Dig for relevant answers.

Consult others for advice when appropriate.

But know that all people are not neutral in their responses. Some may give advice that benefits themselves and their agenda rather than yours. Be careful. As a safeguard I ask two questions:

1. What does this person have to gain if I respond as he counsels?
2. Has he given me advice in the past, and what was the result when I followed it?

Draw on past experiences, skills gained, and stuff you've witnessed.

What have I faced before that might apply in this deliberation?

Proceed slowly.

The bigger the decision and consequences of the possible solutions the more time one requires in prayer and investigation. If pressured externally to make a fast choice or to commit without due process just say, "No!"

Proceed slowly in any plan that is irrevocable and unchangeable at any time or under any circumstances after it begins.⁹⁰

The plans of the diligent lead surely to advantage, But everyone who is hasty comes surely to poverty.
Proverbs 21:5

Bound the solutions with realistic constraints.

For example, if I need to replace the family car and the budget will not allow payments for the gold-plated SUV with dual back seat

⁹⁰ Wanamaker, John. Maxims of Life and Business. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1923. p 5.

video monitors, a turbo and heavy-duty towing package then scale the considerations back to reality.

Put together the proposed solution and review thoroughly.

Verify any calculations and double check the availability of funds. Run through the list of positives and negatives for the chosen solution. Let the collected data sit as you pray over it. Read the list to God in prayer, and ask His input.

Pull the trigger.

Now we can pull the trigger and implement our strategy. Make the choice. Know that it is likely that no decision is perfect. Life changes fast. Unknowns which are not revealed until after the decision point may arise. We can't see the future, so complete the due diligence as outlined above then choose.

A man may own a farm and yet go to the poorhouse, if he does not prepare his land for planting and then do the actual planting.⁹¹

Nothing comes merely by thinking about it.⁹²

Move forward.

The decision is made. We did the upfront work and made the best decision we could with the data at hand at the time. My dear wife reminds me of these points often as I am prone to second guessing.

The nation of Israel exited Egypt to cross an inhospitable desert on their journey to the Promised Land. They left behind slavery, regular beatings, and the murder of their newly-born sons, but their decision to vacate Egypt included much waffling. God not only had to convince Pharaoh to let them go, He had to convince Israel through Moses that leaving was the best and only option. The

⁹¹ Wanamaker, John. Maxims of Life and Business. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1923. p 24.

⁹² Wanamaker, John. Maxims of Life and Business. New York: Harper & Brothers. 1923. p 25.

Israelites became the poster children for the debilitating backwards-looking uncertainty of dwelling on, “If only...”

Nothing stops forward progress faster than planting our feet in an extended session of rehashing a done decision. Maybe we can learn something from Israel’s example?

1. Shortly after the exodus from Egypt while facing the Red Sea on one side and the charging Egyptian army on the other, Israel took their first backward look. The journey had been easy till now. God had even given them back wages as they carried much wealth away from Egypt. In fact, the Egyptians offered them treasure if they would make haste and depart. But now with Pharaoh in hot pursuit?

As Pharaoh drew near, the sons of Israel looked, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them, and they became very frightened; so the sons of Israel cried out to the LORD. Then they said to Moses, "Is it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? Why have you dealt with us in this way, bringing us out of Egypt? "Is this not the word that we spoke to you in Egypt, saying, 'Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians'? **For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.**"

Exodus 14:10-12 (Emphasis added)

2. The desert waste land offered no highways or strip malls with convenient fast-food restaurants sporting large “Buses Welcome” signs. The food carried out of Egypt dwindled away. Now what? Had God forgotten about empty tummies?

The whole congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The sons of Israel said to them, "**Would that we had died by the LORD'S hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full;** for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

Exodus 16:2-3 (Emphasis added)

3. By definition a desert is a dry place, right? Water comes at a premium. The canteens ran dry, and thirst spread through the camp. God had the situation well under His control, but Israel opted to reconsider their already-made decision.

Then all the congregation of the sons of Israel journeyed by stages from the wilderness of Sin, according to the command of the LORD, and camped at Rephidim, and there was no water for the people to drink. Therefore the people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water that we may drink." And Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the LORD?" But the people thirsted there for water; and they grumbled against Moses and said, **"Why, now, have you brought us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?"**

Exodus 17:1-3 (Emphasis added)

4. Manna for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. It fell around the camp generously for six nights, fresh from God's griddle, and a man could stuff himself. On the day before Sabbath the instructions were to gather twice as much as usual to cover that day as God did not spread manna on the Sabbath. And, of course, the people grew tired of eating manna and longed for the menu they had enjoyed in Egypt.

The rabble who were among them had greedy desires; and also the sons of Israel wept again and said, "Who will give us meat to eat? "We remember the fish which we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic, but now **our appetite is gone. There is nothing at all to look at except this manna.**"

Numbers 11:4-6 (Emphasis added)

5. Encamped beside the Jordan River, ready to cross and claim their new homes, Israel waited expectantly for twelve spies to return with a report. Two spies urged the people to rise up and conquer while the other ten spewed gloom and doom. "Giants, walled cities, fierce untamed armies. Oh, my! We looked like bugs compared to them. We will be annihilated." Was the condition of the Land of Canaan a surprise to God? Of course not, but Israel once again rehashed the past and concluded that they had made a mistake in leaving Egypt. A coalition began to form a "Return to Slavery" crusade.

Then all the congregation lifted up their voices and cried, and the people wept that night. All the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron; and the whole congregation said to them, **"Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness!"**

Numbers 14:1-2 (Emphasis added)

These examples are sufficient to demonstrate the disastrous consequence of ruminating over the woes of, “If only!” We can’t turn time back, and for the most part, once a decision is made undoing it may prove impossible.

Guys, the heaviest decision we will make, the one with the greatest consequences, is the one voiced by the wimpy Roman governor, Pilate. He asked, “What shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?” One’s eternal destiny hinges on the answer. If you are not sure how to answer please drop a pin here and move to Appendix A and Appendix B.

“What shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?” One’s eternal destiny hinges on the answer.

Polish My Decision-Making

How can the development of good habits streamline your mental design-making apparatus?

What encouragement do you draw from God’s patience in dealing with Gideon?

Many Bible characters faced hard choices. Which of those men and his experience resonates with your heart?

What makes asking God for wisdom so hard?

In what ways does looking backward with a longing “If only I had...” affect our future progress? Can that backwards look ever be a positive?

MEET JOHN W NICHOLS



I'm a work in progress with some of my facets reflecting a dazzling sheen while others need serious work. But I keep trying as you should also.

I do my writing in Raleigh, North Carolina, where I enjoy the company of my wife and best friend, Shawn. We are empty-nesters with two precious daughters, two wonderful sons-in-law, and two outrageously adorable grandchildren. The triple roles of husband, father, and grandfather drive my quest to improve as a man. My family deserves the best as does my Lord. I am a follower of Jesus, and my writing reflects lessons I learn from all these relationships.

I would love to hear from you.

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The majority of the material on this site is original content. I have published articles for magazines and have created content for

church publications. I have several books available and ordering information may be found at:

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- ❖ Unmasking Satan
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- ❖ Small Group or Sunday School?
- ❖ Tell Me About God's Will
- ❖ Quest for the Perfect Wife
- ❖ Never Give Up: Honch Wilson Adventure #2
- ❖ Go Eat the Cheese
- ❖ Go for the Gold: Honch Wilson Adventure #1
- ❖ Help! My Daughter's Getting Married!
- ❖ Who Ate My Cheese?