

## **CHAPTER 13**

### **WISE PEOPLE LEARN HOW TO MAKE GOOD DECISIONS**

*Make me to know your ways, O LORD;  
teach me your paths.*

*Psalm 25:4 (ESV)*

<sup>5</sup> *Trust in the LORD with all your heart,  
and do not lean on your own understanding.*

<sup>6</sup> *In all your ways acknowledge him,  
and he will make straight your paths.*

<sup>7</sup> *Be not wise in your own eyes;  
fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.*

*Proverbs 3:5-7 (ESV)*

*A man's steps are ordered by the LORD;  
how then can man understand his way?*

*Proverbs 20:24 (RSV)*

*Where there is no guidance, a people falls;  
but in an abundance of counselors there is safety.*

*Proverbs 11:14 (RSV)*

*I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live,*

*Deuteronomy 30:19 (ESV)*

*“And to this people you shall say: ‘Thus says the LORD: Behold, I set before you the way of life and the way of death.*

*Jeremiah 21:8 (ESV)*

*“.....choose this day whom you will serve.....”*

*Joshua 24:15(b) (RSV)*

*He who meddles in a quarrel not his own  
is like one who takes a passing dog by the ears.*

*Proverbs 26:17 (RSV)*

<sup>24</sup> *By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, <sup>25</sup> choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.*

*Hebrews 11:24-25 (RSV)*

<sup>6</sup> *When they came, he looked on Eli'ab and thought, “Surely the LORD'S anointed is before him.” <sup>7</sup> But the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the LORD sees not as man sees; man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart.”*

*1 Samuel 16:6-7 (RSV)*

*Do you see a man who is hasty in his words?  
There is more hope for a fool than for him.*

*Proverbs 29:20 (RSV)*

*Open your mouth, judge righteously,  
maintain the rights of the poor and needy. *Proverbs 31:9 (RSV)**

<sup>25</sup> *Moses chose able men out of all Israel, and made them heads over the people, rulers of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens.* <sup>26</sup> *And they judged the people at all times; hard cases they brought to Moses, but any small matter they decided themselves.*

*Exodus 18:25-26 (RSV)*

*You shall not be partial in judgment. You shall hear the small and the great alike. You shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is God's. And the case that is too hard for you, you shall bring to me, and I will hear it.'*

*Deuteronomy 1:17 (ESV)*

### **The difficulties which so many people have with decision-making**

A lot of people find decision-making difficult, and even frightening. They therefore delay making decisions, or make bad ones. Or, worst of all, they don't make them at all. On the whole, this has been an area of relative strength for me. I have never been afraid of making decisions, or of getting it wrong, or that others might blame me. I served for three years as a police officer and usually patrolled alone. I had to get used to making rapid, on the spot judgments, often without all the facts, and with nobody from whom to seek advice. At first it was hard and stressful.

I still remember that sense of bewilderment when facing wholly new and confusing situations and having to make my mind up, there and then, as to what action to take, if any. To add to the difficulty, it often had to be done in front of the public, so I did not even have the luxury of privacy when making my mistakes. Then in my second career, as a lawyer, I had to hear clients' problems and then nail my colours to the mast by telling them what *I thought* they should do, and putting it in writing too, as a permanent record, which could be brought back later to haunt me.

Again, this was valuable experience. I learned how to stand alone, take full responsibility, and give decisive, unequivocal advice. The alternative, which I was determined to avoid, was beating about the bush, hedging my bets and effectively offering no real advice at all. That is what too many lawyers do when they lack the courage to put their own necks on the line and clearly spell out what *they* think. I was surprised by how many colleagues, and even bosses, dodged responsibility. They were effectively just giving the client a range of options, with pros and cons, and warnings as to what might go wrong, so as to cover their own back.

But, far too often, it was all done without ever actually giving any real or decisive *advice* to that client. He was still left to work it out for himself and make his own decision. Of course, the primary concern of such lawyers was for themselves, not their client. They wanted to make sure nobody could ever blame them or prove that they had given wrong advice. But they did not seek to achieve that by giving good advice, based on thorough research and sound reasoning. They did it by never actually giving any meaningful advice at all. So it was a cop-out and was done to protect themselves, or so they thought.

They had no regard for the fact that they weren't actually providing what the client was paying for, which was to be told plainly *what they thought he should do*. Such lawyers often hid behind clichés about how the position was "*finely balanced*" and how the client needed to "*bear in mind all the options, with all of their respective pros and cons*". However, what they were really doing was abdicating their responsibility and failing in the first duty of any lawyer, which is *to advise*. You cannot call your words 'advice' if all they amount to is urging the client to think carefully about what *he* is going to choose.

He hasn't paid a lawyer just to give him a series of options. Those are certainly needed, for starters, but he is also entitled to be told which option *that lawyer thinks he ought to choose*. From a very early stage in my career I recognised this problem of my colleagues' wariness about giving clear, unambiguous advice and I resolved never to operate as they did, even though their way would have

been a lot easier. I felt my clients were entitled to expect me to have the courage to take a decisive position and to state my opinion boldly, without any fudge or evasion.

By taking that approach, I made a rod for my own back, making my job harder and more stressful. But it was the right choice and my career blossomed as a result, whereas those who opted for the ‘safe’ approach never got very far. Indeed, they did not deserve to, as they were not providing the most fundamental part of the service they were charging for, namely *advice*. As I rose higher, and ended up managing several teams of lawyers, my day consisted of little else but decision-making. The only difference was that the people who now sought my advice were no longer clients, but lawyers.

**It is sometimes very difficult to tell the difference between good and evil and we need God’s help to do so.**

Sometimes it is obvious that one course of action is right and another is wrong. However, that is not always so, and the higher up you go in management the harder it gets. You sometimes have to choose between options where what is right can seem wrong, and what is wrong can seem right. Or you may have to choose between options which seem very similar and where the distinction is very subtle. I refer to it as telling the difference between pale grey and light grey. Yet the distinction can still be significant, and needs to be identified.

Moreover, if you are promoted to senior levels, you will also have to make many more decisions and ever more rapidly. It can feel as if they are coming at you on a fast-moving conveyor belt and there is not enough time to investigate, check facts and interview people, or to reflect and pray adequately, before you have to decide. Therefore, you may not always feel confident that you can accurately discern which, if any, of the available options is right and whether a proposal is good or bad.

The advice you get from others can also be contradictory, or even non-existent. They too find it hard to separate the relevant from the irrelevant, to correctly identify the issues, and to make sense of it all. King Solomon was well aware of this problem that we all face, especially leaders. Therefore, when he met the LORD in a dream and was offered a gift, he asked for the ability to know the difference between good and evil. That may sound easy, but it isn’t, as Solomon had already begun to realise:

***Give thy servant therefore an understanding mind to govern thy people, that I may discern between good and evil; for who is able to govern this thy great people?”***

*1 Kings 3:9 (RSV)*

For fallible human beings, right and wrong, good and evil, truth and lies, and the relevant and irrelevant, can closely resemble each other, especially when decisions have to be made at speed, or under pressure. The best place to start is to do as Solomon did. Keep asking God for wisdom, and especially for the ability to distinguish between good and evil. Also ask him to reveal to you any evil that you are unable to see, or which is being hidden or disguised by someone. But also ask God to “direct your steps” day by day. We need to do that because nobody is capable of always making the right decisions and always knowing what to do:

***I know, O LORD, that the way of man is not in himself,  
that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps.***

*Jeremiah 10:23 (ESV)*

**Even when they don’t have knowledge or understanding wise people are guided by their integrity.**

You will never be able to handle every conceivable situation, such that you always know exactly what to do and how to handle all people or issues. Some circumstances can be so complex and thorny that you can be baffled, because there is no way forward that does not create problems of one kind or another.

At such times you can, however, be guided by your integrity by asking yourself whether a certain option or route *feels* right to your conscience. Do that when the situation is so complicated that, *in your mind*, you just don't know what to do and your powers of reasoning can't give you the answers you need:

***The integrity of the upright guides them,  
but the crookedness of the treacherous destroys them.***

***Proverbs 11:3 (RSV)***

Our integrity or righteousness is therefore like a lamp which lights up our path and shows us the way to go, when, with our minds, we cannot see the way forward. The wicked have to walk in that darkness with no such help, or at least they are not willing to listen to it. Their main 'guidance' comes from the demons who inhabit or accompany them. But they are very treacherous guides who will seek to cause the wicked to stumble and be destroyed if they can:

***<sup>18</sup> But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn,  
which shines brighter and brighter until full day.***

***<sup>19</sup> The way of the wicked is like deep darkness;  
they do not know over what they stumble.***

***Proverbs 4:18-19 (RSV)***

Our honesty will also make life's choices simpler and clearer. By refusing to be diverted onto any dishonest course we are kept on the straight and narrow road, which God wants us to be on, because all of the dishonest options are automatically excluded. That reduces our options, and makes it easier to choose, because only the honest options remain on the table:

***<sup>24</sup> Put away from you crooked speech,  
and put devious talk far from you.***

***<sup>25</sup> Let your eyes look directly forward,  
and your gaze be straight before you.***

***<sup>26</sup> Take heed to the path of your feet,  
then all your ways will be sure.***

***<sup>27</sup> Do not swerve to the right or to the left;  
turn your foot away from evil.***

***Proverbs 4:24-27 (RSV)***

***The righteousness of the blameless keeps his way straight,  
but the wicked falls by his own wickedness.***

***Proverbs 11:5 (RSV)***

Integrity will also guard and protect us in another sense, because God will personally intervene to protect those who walk in integrity, whereas He will not do so for the wicked. On the contrary, He will oppose them and even cause them to be cut off and destroyed:

***<sup>7</sup> he stores up sound wisdom for the upright;  
he is a shield to those who walk in integrity,***

***<sup>8</sup> guarding the paths of justice  
and preserving the way of his saints.***

***<sup>9</sup> Then you will understand righteousness and justice  
and equity, every good path;***

***<sup>10</sup> for wisdom will come into your heart,  
and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul;***

***<sup>11</sup> discretion will watch over you;  
understanding will guard you;***

***<sup>12</sup> delivering you from the way of evil,  
from men of perverted speech,***

***Proverbs 2:7-12 (RSV)***

<sup>21</sup> *For the upright will inhabit the land,  
and men of integrity will remain in it;*  
<sup>22</sup> *but the wicked will be cut off from the land,  
and the treacherous will be rooted out of it.*  
*Proverbs 2:21-22 (RSV)*

*Righteousness guards him whose way is upright,  
but sin overthrows the wicked.*  
*Proverbs 13:6 (RSV)*

*He who walks in integrity walks securely,  
but he who perverts his ways will be found out.*  
*Proverbs 10:9 (RSV)*

*The LORD is a stronghold to him whose way is upright,  
but destruction to evildoers.*  
*Proverbs 10:29 (RSV)*

There are times when, with your *mind*, you are simply incapable of working out what is for the best. Yet, if you face each option in turn and ask yourself how it *feels*, and whether your conscience *feels comfortable* with it, you will often get your answer. Your conscience is a reliable guide and it also operates when all your other resources have been used up, or are inadequate.

Your conscience can therefore operate far beyond the range of your knowledge and understanding. That is partly because God can speak to your conscience through your *spirit*, which can process things which your mind doesn't even know about, or can't yet grasp. Therefore, by putting God first, maintaining your integrity, and listening attentively to your conscience, you will find that God will make your path straight, even when you are out of your depth or feel confused or unsure:

<sup>5</sup> *Trust in the LORD with all your heart,  
and do not rely on your own insight.*  
<sup>6</sup> *In all your ways acknowledge him,  
and he will make straight your paths.*  
<sup>7</sup> *Be not wise in your own eyes;  
fear the LORD, and turn away from evil.*  
*Proverbs 3:5-7 (RSV)*

So, there might be a business proposal, a job offer, or a possible relationship. It may seem to offer exciting opportunities and you can't *think* of any reason, with your *mind*, why you shouldn't do it. Yet, somehow, it just doesn't *feel* right. When that is the case, make sure you listen to your conscience and do what it says. Never ignore or override it. Far from it, learn to welcome your conscience's intervention. The more you listen to it, the more it will speak to you. But the more you ignore it, the quieter it will become until, eventually, it switches off completely.

### **Your conscience will be of no use to you unless you are willing to force yourself to listen to it**

Your conscience can make available to you a whole new dimension of guidance, which can go beyond your current level of knowledge and understanding. Given that those things will never be complete, at least until after we die, this is a resource which we cannot afford to waste. However, your conscience will not be of much use to you unless you *force yourself to listen to it and then to obey it*. An opportunity may present itself to you which seems attractive and profitable, but it is not what God wants you to do. All sorts of reasons will spring to mind as to why you *should* do it.

Your sinful flesh nature may also have plenty to say in support of the idea and will make sure that its voice is heard. Also, the demons in your life will speak their approval of the idea into your mind, as will the worldly people around you. It may be that, amongst all of that noise, the only voice that is speaking *against* the proposal is your conscience. Thus, it is very easy to find reasons and arguments in support of taking the opportunity that has arisen. Such thoughts will come crowding in. In a situation like that, you must learn to pause and pray along these lines:

*“Lord, this opportunity seems attractive to me. However, please speak clearly to me, through my conscience, as to whether it is actually right. Let me know whether it is what **you** want and help me not to drown out your voice with my own preferences and arguments”.*

Our sinful flesh nature is so strong and intrusive, and we are so used to being guided by it, that it is easy to persuade yourself that any attractive or profitable venture is the right option. That is why most of us opt for such things so quickly with little, if any, internal debate. But train yourself to pause and interrogate yourself robustly and to pray as above. Then you are much more likely to hear the quiet voice of your conscience. I would actually go further and pray along the lines set out below, even if I already think that it is right to go ahead with some opportunity or proposal:

*“Lord, I have tried to listen to my conscience and I now think I should go ahead with this idea/opportunity/proposal. However, if that is not your will, and if I have somehow got this wrong, please intervene and stop me, or stop the idea/opportunity from going ahead. Please block my path in any way you see fit, if I am doing the wrong thing here.”*

Such a prayer will please God and should be used even if you have already made a genuine attempt to listen to your conscience. It serves as a valuable supplement, or as a secondary safety net. However, don't pray this *instead* of listening to your conscience, but *in addition* to listening to it. Subject to emphasising that point, I have found that second prayer to be of great value. God has answered it and has blocked my path many times, thereby preventing me from making wrong choices.

I have needed God to intervene in this way even where I have done my best to use all of my knowledge and understanding and have tried to listen to my conscience. I have to confess that I have not always been pleased *while* He was blocking my path. But I was always grateful for it *later*, when the position became clearer. In this way God has delivered me from many bad situations and wrong choices, firstly because I was guided by my sense of right and wrong and, secondly, because I was willing to give God a final power of *veto*. His Word says that we will be delivered or rescued if we walk with integrity:

***He who walks in integrity will be delivered,  
but he who is perverse in his ways will fall into a pit.  
Proverbs 28:18 (RSV)***

### **Obtaining God's guidance, directly on specific issues, but also by learning the general principles by which He operates**

There is no doubt that God can, and does, give specific, individual guidance to His people, and in various ways. In my own case, He usually does it by a kind of prompting, whereby He causes a person, situation or idea, or a verse in the Bible, to be 'quickened' or to go 'fluorescent' in my mind or spirit. I feel as though He is impressing upon me to do something, or to take care, or to look into a thing more closely. There have even been a few occasions when God has literally caused me to hear an audible voice, at least inside my head, telling me something. I will give some examples:

- a) An audible voice told me that a girl in a prayer meeting, whom I had only just seen for the first time a few minutes earlier, and had never spoken to, was the person I would marry – and she was!

- b) An audible voice warned me that a senior employee at work was disloyal to me and was causing problems and, after a full investigation, it turned out they were.
- c) When I was 10 years old, I fell backwards from a bus shelter onto the pavement. As I was falling, in what seemed to be slow motion, I heard an audible voice repeatedly urging me “*Lift your head up*”. I did as I was told and therefore hit the ground on my shoulder, breaking it. But the point is I sustained no head injury.
- d) As I was driving on a motorway, I heard an audible voice telling me repeatedly, in an urgent tone, to slow down and leave a bigger gap between me and the car in front. About 10 seconds later an accident occurred right in front of me, but the huge gap that I had just created enabled me to stop in time. That prevented me, and also the cars behind me, from crashing, as my slowing down had forced all of them to slow down too.

However, direct audible guidance needs to be seen in its proper context. It does happen, but it is very much the *exception rather than the norm*. Moreover, I would never ask God for it. To make such a request is presumptuous, but it is also to lay yourself wide open to being deceived by a demon. If God wants to speak to you audibly, then He will, but it is not something which you should ever ask for or expect. Leave it entirely to Him as an exceptional, and rarely used, form of guidance.

You can pray for His specific guidance, but leave God completely free to decide *how* to give it. Then He can reveal His instructions by whatever means *He* chooses. God will find one way or another to light up our path, show us what to do, and what not to do, and to reveal His will. Therefore, seek guidance on any issues or decisions that you face, but don’t tell God *how* to answer you. As a general rule, that is not how we should speak to Him. That said, it is not always wrong. There is a time and a place for laying down metaphorical fleeces, as Gideon literally did.

However, such a request can easily turn into presumption if it is made too often, or too lightly, or without proper reverence. Therefore, I would be wary of specifying how you want God to guide you unless you are in exceptional circumstances, as Gideon was. Even then, only use it to seek *additional confirmation* of what you *already* think God’s will is, not to ask for a direct, brand new revelation of His will. The main ways in which God prefers to guide us are by means of:

- a) learning His *general commands* that He makes to all of us, and also the *general principles*, set out in the Bible. We might regard these as what the military and the police refer to as ‘standing orders’ which are meant to be known and applied by *all* personnel at *all* times. Such orders do not need to be said to us individually or re-stated in every different situation we face. Therefore, we don’t need to ask God to give us a specific instruction as to whether or not to lie or steal today, or in this particular situation, because He does not want us to lie or steal on *any day*, or in *any situation*.
- b) our *conscience*, which becomes even more effective when it is strengthened by a growing knowledge of the Bible. It is a kind of ‘smoke alarm’ or ‘carbon monoxide detector’, which operates when a complex issue or choice arises. We may not have enough experience or discernment or knowledge of God’s Word to be able, *with our mind*, to work out what is right and wrong. Yet our conscience can give us an inner prompting, or a sense of a check or warning, which can tell us that something would be sinful, even where we don’t really know *why*.

In such situations you must learn to obey your conscience and to step back, take care, check things carefully, and avoid doing whatever it is that you feel uneasy about. Don’t ever ignore or override your conscience just because you don’t know *why* the ‘carbon monoxide detector’ is bleeping. Take your conscience extremely seriously, and obey it every time, even if you don’t know why the thing would be sinful. As you do that, God will strengthen it and ‘fine-tune’ it to make it an even more effective warning system.

But if you ignore it, especially if you do so regularly, your conscience will steadily weaken, and eventually switch off entirely. When that happens your conscience has become 'seared'. That means it is no longer sensitive, just as skin which has been branded with a red hot iron no longer has any feeling, because all the nerves are dead. If so, that would be a disaster and you must take care never to let it happen to you. The more you study God's Word, and fill your mind with God's general commands and principles, the more well-informed your conscience will become.

In due course, it will not only tell you that something would be wrong, but also *why* it would be wrong and which of God's commands or principles are applicable at that moment. Accordingly, seek to strengthen both your conscience *and* your knowledge of God's Word. Then you are doing everything that you can do to "*be transformed by the renewing of your mind*", as Paul tells us, not just sitting back passively and leaving the task of guidance entirely to God.

You would be actively playing your own part by becoming as well-informed as possible, with as much understanding as you can gather for yourself, by your own effort. By so doing, you will put yourself in a position where, more and more of the time, you already know, or at least have a fairly good idea, what God's will is. You can then operate on the basis of what you know of His commands and principles, only requiring the help of conscience where there are gaps in your knowledge, or where the lines seem blurred.

Then you can do the right thing without God needing to give direct, specific guidance just for you. That is an integral part of growing up and maturing as a believer, increasingly operating for yourself, based on what you know of God's Word, without always needing God to guide you every step of the way. It is not that God is unwilling to 'pick up the phone' or 'answer your texts' when you are in trouble, or face a crisis, or are unsure what to do. He *is absolutely willing*. We know that for sure, because His Word tells us so:

***Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known.***  
*Jeremiah 33:3 (ESV)*

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

*James 1:5 (ESV)*

### **God can even speak to us through ordinary, everyday things, even signs on the side of vehicles**

God is capable of anything, and that includes being able, *if He chooses*, to communicate with us through things which we see or hear, even in our day to day lives, not just in church or when reading the Bible. It could be something on TV or in a conversation, even one between others, which we only overhear. When this has happened to me, *which is only occasionally, not a regular practice*, it has always arisen spontaneously, unexpectedly and by God's initiative, never mine. It is not something that I have ever asked for or tried to contrive.

One example of this is a time when I was feeling very low, even despairing, over a particular situation. Then, quite suddenly, a concrete mixer lorry drove by which belonged to a company called 'Hope' and the lorry stopped right in front of us, with its logo and company name facing us. As I saw it the word loomed out at me, and came into very sharp focus, whereas everything else went out of focus, just for a moment. That is what I refer to as a thing '*going fluorescent*'. The word hope became very prominent and I simply knew that God was speaking to me through the logo of that particular lorry, on that particular day, and in that particular situation.

That said, some months later things had again become bleak and the same thing happened, entirely unexpectedly and unasked for. Another of these lorries stopped in front of us and I knew, just as before, that God was telling us to hope and never to give in to despair and that He was confirming the earlier



message. It was a real help to us to keep going and not to give up. Of course, God could have chosen to speak to us in some other way, but He chose to do so in that way. He is a God of infinite variety, creativity and imagination, and also humour, and He likes to do unusual and different things at times, although *only at times, not as a rule*.

Therefore, don't go looking for this or even asking for it. Leave it entirely to God to decide whether, when and how to speak to you by such unorthodox means. If not, and you start expecting it, or even worse, looking out for it, avidly reading the logos on vans and lorries and trying to see patterns or messages in them, you will be deceived and you will even deceive yourself. Let God decide what to do, or even whether to do such things at all.

Meanwhile, you should focus on the Bible and on good Bible teaching and ask God to speak to you primarily through that. Yet, at the same time, do not close your mind to the possibility that God may, on occasion, choose to speak to you in some spontaneous, even quirky, manner and most probably in a way which is unique to you and to your personality, interests and background. If you do close your mind to this, you will miss out on something good and limit God in His ways of speaking to you.

**Although God is willing to give specific guidance, it is also true to say that He wants you to learn His principles, and grow in maturity, so that you can decide for yourself**

The point is that, although God is willing to give you specific guidance, He also wants you to grow in maturity and wisdom, such that you become increasingly capable of knowing, understanding, discerning and deciding *for yourself*. The more that becomes the case, the less often you will require His specific guidance or intervention. Indeed, there will be times when God will refuse to give you special guidance because He wants you to grow up and to learn how to find the way forward for yourself, as a result of maturing as a disciple and thus learning how to make decisions for yourself.

Such maturity is achieved by developing an extremely good knowledge and understanding of the *whole* Bible, not just those parts which you find easy, interesting or convenient. God therefore wants you to set your heart to study the entire Bible with consistency and diligence, going round it again and again and again. The ideal method is to read it as if you were painting the Forth Bridge, starting again at one end as soon as you finish at the other.

By way of another analogy to explain God's approach to teaching and guiding us, imagine a platoon of soldiers. All of them are raw recruits with little or no knowledge or understanding and no experience of doing their job, especially in combat. Within that platoon there might be a sergeant who has 20 years of experience, and who has seen action in many conflicts. He is shrewd, skilled, battle-hardened and always knows what should be done and how to do it. That sergeant will be entirely willing to answer questions and to give specific advice and guidance when asked, especially in a crisis.

There will also be times when, in the heat of a battle, he will voluntarily approach a young soldier, without even being asked, and tell him exactly where to go, what to do, and how to do it. However, that same sergeant also wants every private to pay close attention in training to all instructions and guidelines and to memorise every 'standing order' and all of the general principles of soldiering and tactics, at least at a basic level. The sergeant's will is that, as far as possible, they should each become *capable of operating independently*.

He wants them to learn how to make decisions for themselves, when under fire, *based on what they were taught in their training*. There is no contradiction there. It is still the sergeant's will to answer specific questions and to give guidance when asked. But it is also his will for his men to become mature, so that their need to ask him for specific guidance becomes less and less frequent. They will achieve that because they have steadily *learned how the sergeant thinks, what he generally instructs, and what he would do in that situation*.

In this way a platoon of raw recruits, who initially know nothing and have to ask questions all the time, can be brought to a state of maturity and readiness, whereby they regularly find that they already know the sergeant's will. Then they can act think and act as he would, without needing to ask his advice at every moment. I have perhaps laboured this, but with good cause, because many Christians make the mistake of thinking that in all things, at all times, they should expect to receive God's specific instructions.

I even heard of a person who asked God what clothes to wear every day when getting dressed. More importantly, I have seen and heard many cases of churches operating on the basis of what they believe to be God's specific instructions to them, which they would claim were given to them by a series of *rhema* words. That is where God speaks directly into the situation, or to the person, rather than through the *logos*, which is God's Word to all of us, as set out in Scripture.

Both forms of guidance are valid, but we are not meant to operate at all times, or even at most times, on the basis of God giving us *rhema* words, directly to us, for our precise situation. That kind of thinking is unbalanced and that expectation is unrealistic and even unhealthy. It can easily lead to a person, or a whole church, becoming misguided, deceived, and even wacky. Therefore, we are not meant to conduct ourselves in that way.

We are, primarily, meant to operate on the basis of a sound and complete knowledge of *the whole of God's Word*. That means knowing *all* of His commands and principles, and holding them all in a healthy tension, at the same time, like the strands of a tennis racquet. Then they are all balancing and counter-balancing each other and forming, when seen in their entirety, a proper and complete understanding of the *whole* of God's will. This verse helpfully expresses this concept:

***The sum of your word is truth,.....***  
***Psalm 119:160(a) (ESV)***

Although every single line of every single verse in the Bible is *true*, it is only the *whole Bible*, taken together, which is *the truth*. An individual verse will give us instruction, but we need to interpret every verse in the wider context of the whole Bible, to gain the fullest, most accurate, understanding of any given verse. So, base your decision-making upon the whole of God's Word, taken together, and held in a proper balance.

### **When making big decisions or forming important judgments about people or situations, be sure to ask for God's guidance**

We are certainly meant to become mature and capable of making many decisions for ourselves, without needing God's specific guidance on every issue or detail. However, God does not want us to go to the opposite extreme either, whereby we never seek His guidance on any issues. There needs to be a sensible balance whereby, when dealing with smaller matters, we decide for ourselves, based on a solid knowledge of God's character, principles and general commands.

But, for bigger issues, such as whether to trust someone, or buy a house, or move jobs, or when choosing a school for your child, always ask God for guidance about it. That request should become a natural part of the process. Ask God to point out anything which you may not have noticed, or about which you might be mistaken or deceived. He will provide such missing 'jigsaw pieces' to those who *ask* Him. It is surprising how many people don't involve Him in any way in the decision-making process, which is a serious mistake. A classic example is the incident when Joshua met the Gibeonites.

They were one of the Canaanite nations, whom God had commanded the Israelites to destroy. The Gibeonites deceived Joshua into believing they were not from Canaan, but had travelled from a far country. They then asked to make a peace treaty with Joshua, which he should not have made, and would not have made, if he had known they were from Canaan. If Joshua had asked God for guidance

before entering into the peace treaty, God would have alerted him to the real facts. But Joshua did not seek God's guidance on that occasion and thus the Gibeonites succeeded in deceiving him:

<sup>3</sup> *But when the inhabitants of Gibeon heard what Joshua had done to Jericho and to Ai, <sup>4</sup> they on their part acted with cunning and went and made ready provisions and took worn-out sacks for their donkeys, and wineskins, worn-out and torn and mended, <sup>5</sup> with worn-out, patched sandals on their feet, and worn-out clothes. And all their provisions were dry and crumbly. <sup>6</sup> And they went to Joshua in the camp at Gilgal and said to him and to the men of Israel, "We have come from a distant country, so now make a covenant with us." <sup>7</sup> But the men of Israel said to the Hivites, "Perhaps you live among us; then how can we make a covenant with you?" <sup>8</sup> They said to Joshua, "We are your servants." And Joshua said to them, "Who are you? And where do you come from?"*

<sup>9</sup> *They said to him, "From a very distant country your servants have come, because of the name of the LORD your God. For we have heard a report of him, and all that he did in Egypt, <sup>10</sup> and all that he did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon the king of Heshbon, and to Og king of Bashan, who lived in Ashtaroth. <sup>11</sup> So our elders and all the inhabitants of our country said to us, 'Take provisions in your hand for the journey and go to meet them and say to them, "We are your servants. Come now, make a covenant with us."' <sup>12</sup> Here is our bread. It was still warm when we took it from our houses as our food for the journey on the day we set out to come to you, but now, behold, it is dry and crumbly. <sup>13</sup> These wineskins were new when we filled them, and behold, they have burst. And these garments and sandals of ours are worn out from the very long journey." <sup>14</sup> So the men took some of their provisions, but did not ask counsel from the LORD. <sup>15</sup> And Joshua made peace with them and made a covenant with them, to let them live, and the leaders of the congregation swore to them.*

*Joshua 9:3-15 (ESV)*

Having sworn an oath not to fight the Gibeonites, Joshua was unable to do anything about it when the deception was later discovered. Fighting them would have meant breaking his oath. So, the Gibeonites remained and lived amongst the Israelites and they later became a source of sin, temptation and idolatry for God's people, all of which could have been avoided if Joshua had sought God's guidance:

<sup>16</sup> *At the end of three days after they had made a covenant with them, they heard that they were their neighbors and that they lived among them. <sup>17</sup> And the people of Israel set out and reached their cities on the third day. Now their cities were Gibeon, Chephirah, Beeroth, and Kiriath-jearim. <sup>18</sup> But the people of Israel did not attack them, because the leaders of the congregation had sworn to them by the LORD, the God of Israel. Then all the congregation murmured against the leaders. <sup>19</sup> But all the leaders said to all the congregation, "We have sworn to them by the LORD, the God of Israel, and now we may not touch them. <sup>20</sup> This we will do to them: let them live, lest wrath be upon us, because of the oath that we swore to them."*

*Joshua 9:16-20 (ESV)*

### **Make it easier for yourself to receive guidance by becoming the type of person whom God will guide**

Guidance is not only given to us because we ask for it, although it is absolutely right to do so. It is also true to say that God gives guidance more often, and more clearly to those whose *behaviour, attitudes and lifestyle please Him*. Indeed, with such people, God is likely to guide and guard them even if they are not expressly asking Him to do so, because He wants to help and instruct to those who think, speak and act rightly. Let's look at some things which the Bible says will result in God giving more guidance and instruction and doing so more clearly. Firstly, He has said that He will guide the *humble*:

*He leads the humble in what is right,  
and teaches the humble his way.*

*Psalm 25:9 (ESV)*

Likewise, He will instruct those who *fear the LORD*:

***Who is the man who fears the LORD?***

***Him will he instruct in the way that he should choose.***

***Psalm 25:12 (ESV)***

***The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him,  
and he makes known to them his covenant.***

***Psalm 25:14 (ESV)***

If we have any common sense, we will look at such verses and resolve to meet the qualifying conditions, so that God will then give us the promised guidance. Thus, *decide* to humble yourself and to fear the LORD, as an exercise of your will, and do not just sit back passively and wait for such heart attitudes to arise spontaneously, of their own accord, as if it was nothing to do with you. Even in a much broader sense, we can seek to become the sort of person whom God will uphold, defend and deliver and on whose behalf He will intervene. Such promises are made to those who “*consider the poor*” and have *integrity*:

***Blessed is the one who considers the poor!***

***In the day of trouble the LORD delivers him.***

***Psalm 41:1 (ESV)***

***But you have upheld me because of my integrity,  
and set me in your presence forever.***

***Psalm 41:12 (ESV)***

With verses such as these, and there are great many of them, get into the habit of:

- a) asking yourself, very frankly, whether you are currently satisfying the qualifying condition which God has specified
- b) if you aren't, then resolve to meet God's conditions from now on, so that the promised help, blessing, guidance, protection etc can then be given to you.

It may be blindingly obvious that we should do a) and b), once we stop to think about it, but the problem is that most of us never do stop to think about it. Therefore, God's qualifying conditions are not met and the help, guidance and blessing etc are not given to us. We are to blame because we have merely glanced at God's Word, without taking it seriously or questioning ourselves about it, as we are meant to, and without acting upon it.

**Even if you think you know God's will, and have prayed for guidance, ask God to block your path, or close doors, if He thinks you are about to do the wrong thing.**

No matter how skilled you may become at making decisions, and even if you pray for God's guidance, there is always the possibility that you will still get it wrong, especially as there is so much deception in the world. A lot of what we think we know is actually lies and misinformation, coming either from people, or demons, or both. Therefore, even if we consider the position carefully, and take advice from others, we could still make a wrong decision because we might be relying on *false data and false people*.

It could be that all the facts appear to be favourable, but one of the people you are dealing with, and whom you trust, is not actually trustworthy. You don't know that when making your decision, but God does. Therefore, even if you have examined all the facts as best you can, and even if you have prayed earnestly for guidance, it is wise to make it your policy, especially when making any large decisions, to pray along these lines as well:

*“Lord, it seems to me that I should go ahead with this proposed project or contract. However, if I am actually mistaken, or have been deceived, or if the facts are not actually as I think they are, or if there is some other reason not to go ahead, of which I am unaware, please block my path and close the doors to prevent this from happening.”*

An example of this was when I was proposing to buy an area of commercial land some years ago, on which to build a new office block for my law firm. I had agreed a price for the land and had made what I considered to be a deal with the owner himself. It was a purely verbal ‘gentlemen’s agreement’ but, if it had been put into writing, I would have signed it. I thought it was a fair deal, and I was pleased with it. However, as it was a major decision, I had prayed beforehand that God would intervene and prevent the transaction from going ahead *if He knew it was a mistake*.

Then, a day later, the seller’s agent/advisor rang me. To my surprise, he began to speak as if I had not already agreed a deal, and a purchase price, with the seller. He was now speaking of a higher price than the one I had already agreed. At first I assumed the agent must be mistaken or confused, or that he was unaware of the agreement I had already made with the seller directly. However, it emerged later that he knew exactly what the position was and that he was simply trying to renegotiate the contract and get a higher sale price.

He thought that his client had agreed too low a price and he was now seeking to rectify that negotiating ‘error’. I initially thought the agent was acting alone, on his own initiative, without the seller’s knowledge. However, it also emerged later that the seller did know, and had expressly authorised his agent to try this trick. However, it backfired badly for him. I simply said that I was no longer interested in buying the land and that I would just stay where I was. So I called the whole deal off.

That surprised the seller because he wrongly imagined that I wanted the land so badly that I would not pull out, even if they were to act deviously. He badly misjudged me in thinking that. More importantly, God had answered my prayer by causing the real character of the seller, and his agent, to be revealed before we exchanged written contracts. As soon as I saw what they were doing, I knew it was an answer to my prayer for God’s intervention and that He was telling me to pull out of the deal. I recognised it as a ‘red light’, or a ‘closed door’, and thanked God for it.

It was, however, another form of guidance too. God used their sneaky attempt to renegotiate the price, and the agent’s pretence that no agreement had already been made, to open my eyes to their *real character*. Therefore, once I realised what kind of men they really were, *I no longer wanted* to do business with them anyway, even if it wasn’t a closed door. Other people’s character is an important form of guidance in itself. Thus, once I realise that someone is crooked or discover that they have deceived me, even on one small point, I try to do no further business with them.

There is an interesting ending to the story, which is that the seller was then completely unable to find anybody else to buy that piece of land. The financial crisis of 2008 burst upon us in the following year and the commercial property market then went into a sustained slump. I used to drive by the land every day on my way to and from work and the ‘For Sale’ sign was there for about *six years* before he managed to sell even part of the land. But it then took him another three years or so to sell the rest of it. I also expect that he had to accept a reduced price in order to eventually get rid of it.

So there are two points arising. Firstly, God saved me from buying a piece of land just before a property price crash. Secondly, I think the seller’s nine years of inability to sell were also a judgment on him. He set a trap for me, but his own bad character caused him to fall into it himself. If he had behaved honestly, he would have sold the land many years earlier, at a better price, and I would have been the one who was stuck with it after the 2008 crash. Therefore, his own deviousness was what led to disaster for him, whereas my willingness to be guided is what saved me from it.

## **Being guided by your ‘gut feeling’, where you just don’t feel comfortable about something, even if you don’t know why**

We have seen how we can be guided by our *conscience*. That tells us when something we propose to do is *morally or ethically* wrong, even if we don’t know what specific law or command would be broken if we went ahead. However, when we speak of being guided by our *gut feeling*, we mean something which is similar, but different in an important respect. This form of guidance is not necessarily about whether the step being considered is *morally wrong*.

It is much broader and includes any situation where, without necessarily knowing why, you just don’t feel *comfortable* about what is being proposed. Or you could *have a bad feeling about it*, a sense of *unease*, or an intuitive feeling that it is not the right direction to go in, or the step you ought to take. By convention, this feeling is spoken of as being in your *gut*, meaning the belly, and for a good reason, because that is often exactly where that feeling of apprehension or unease is felt.

The late Derek Prince made a suggestion as to why this is so, and I think I agree with him. He said that a person’s own human spirit is located within the belly. This theory is tangentially supported by Jesus’s words in John’s gospel when He refers to the belly, which is how it is translated in the King James Version. Later versions use the word ‘heart’, but belly is probably a better way to express it:

***He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.***  
***John 7:38 (KJV)***

We might feel a sense of alarm or apprehension, or that someone is not to be trusted, without knowing why, or being able to put our finger on the point. If so, it could be that our own human spirit is telling us how it views the situation. Some people place no reliance upon this, or even view it with disdain, because it does not originate within their mind, or because the objection is not precisely defined. If so, they would be acting unwisely, as you should put a lot of weight on your gut feeling and take its warnings seriously.

In Book 7 I look at the component parts of a person, i.e. body, mind, emotions, will, spirit (new man) and flesh (old man). All of those are equally part of us and have a vital part to play in how we operate. The phrase I often use is that they are all entitled to use the pronoun “I”. Therefore, it would be foolish of you to insist on listening only to your mind and paying no attention to your emotions or your spirit. They all have their own distinct parts to play, alongside our mind, when we are making decisions. The apprehension we feel at a certain proposal might reflect how our own human spirit itself perceives the situation.

It may also be that God Himself is speaking to us, but *through* our spirit, on this occasion, rather than through our mind. Thus, our own spirit may be receptive to hear what God is saying, when our mind isn’t. Therefore, recognise your gut feeling as a legitimate source of guidance, especially in the *negative*, i.e. where it is giving you a *warning*, or voting no, as opposed to being in favour. So, if your mind thinks that person A *can* be trusted or that proposal A is a *good* idea, but your gut instinct is saying *no*, then listen carefully to your gut.

Be willing to ‘overrule’ your mind, or at least to postpone a decision, while you check the facts and make further enquiries. However, if your mind is telling you that something is *wrong*, based on the evidence, or on God’s Word, but your gut feeling is *positive*, then go with what your *mind* says and, even more so, with God’s Word. Scripture always comes first and must be listened to, and obeyed, ahead of anything and anybody else.

A classic example of this, is where a person wants to marry, or go out with, an unbeliever. They know in their *mind* that that is wrong, and that God’s Word forbids it, but they claim to *feel* that it is right for them, or on this occasion. Most probably it is their *emotions* that are speaking to them, not their *spirit*. However, wherever it is coming from, the fact is they are deluding themselves and they should therefore

overrule what they are feeling, whether it is real or imagined. They should instead go with what they know *in their mind* to be God's will, especially if it is an express command, as in this example.

However, in some other context, if your mind can see no danger and no reason not to go ahead with project X, but your gut feeling is one of apprehension, and it is telling you *not to go ahead*, then listen to *your gut, not your mind*. At the very least, put the proposed project on hold while you investigate it more fully, pray about it, and take advice from carefully selected people.

Let me describe another technique which I have found useful, when facing a major or complicated, decision. At times, the pros and cons are so numerous, and so complex, that you can't "get your head around" all of the facts, evidence and arguments. They may point in so many directions simultaneously that you feel thoroughly confused and unsure what to do. At such times I suggest that you put all the facts and arguments to one side, *just for a moment*, and use this technique.

Imagine each alternative, on its own, firstly as if you were going ahead with the proposed step. Then do the same, but as if you were not going to do so. Then ask yourself *how each prospect makes you feel*. Do you get a *sinking* feeling or a *rising* feeling when each alternative outcome is imagined? It could be sacking a difficult employee, signing an important contract, moving premises, leaving the church you are part of, or whatever. The point is that the way you feel *when you contemplate having already done it* is a very valuable form of guidance.

You might not be able to get this kind of guidance from your mind, or even your conscience, because the disadvantage or danger which concerns you, may have nothing to do with ethics and may not involve sin at all. It may be that your spirit, or gut, can see a hazard or a problem, or some other disadvantage of quite a different kind, of which your mind and conscience are unaware, because they both operate on quite different 'wavelengths' than the one on which your spirit operates.

### **Obtaining guidance by understanding your duties and their hierarchy of importance**

Here is another principle which helps when making complex decisions which involve a range of responsibilities and different levels of relationships with various people. It is to think in terms of the '*hierarchy*' of duties. A number of people, situations or responsibilities may all be involved simultaneously, but their interests do not coincide, and so you feel confused. If so, you then have to decide which person, duty or issue must prevail over the others, or what the 'pecking order' of priorities is in that situation.

Imagine you have a small house, and a wife, and perhaps children as well, but then your elderly mother begins to need your help and comes to live with you. The effort, the time spent, and the sleep lost as a result of caring for her may be taking an increasing toll on your wife due to the stress of sharing a small house with her frail mother-in-law, who might also have dementia. It may also be placing a strain on your children, and their studies may be suffering. On top of all that, it may also put pressure on you in your job.

It could be that you took her into your home because you feel you owe her a duty of care and want to avoid her having to go into a council-run care home, whose standards may be inadequate. However, the situation may have proved to be far more exhausting, and protracted, than you had expected and the strain on your wife and children, and even on you in your job, may now be intolerable. It may even be affecting your health, or your wife's health. In order to decide what to do about this, you could ask yourself this:

*"What duties do I owe here to each of these parties, my wife, my children, and my employer? Also, what duty do I even owe to myself, concerning my own physical and mental health? And, what order do those duties come in, so that I can decide whose interests and needs must prevail and whose must be subordinated, or even set aside?"*

This example actually arose, and I was involved in advising the man concerned. He was stressed out, and his wife was even more frazzled. It had built up over about 18 months as the position became increasingly desperate. Yet, he was deeply reluctant to put his mother into a care home, as he felt it was his duty to look after her. So, he felt trapped and could not see what he should do. I counselled him to look as well at his *other duties*, especially the duty he owed to his wife, which came ahead of the duty he owed to his mother.

So, he began to take steps to find a nursing home for his mother. Of course, that was emotionally difficult too. If it had not been, it would not have been a hard decision in the first place. Yet, it was still the right answer, and the decision had to be made. Having made it, his duty then became to find the best care home available and to make his mother's move as easy as he could make it. But his primary duty, which is the one he owed to his wife, had to be seen as primary, and *treated as such*, when deciding what to do.

The same approach needs to be taken in all sorts of situations where you feel torn between one duty and another and where you can see no way forward which does not involve letting somebody down, or being perceived to have done so. Sometimes there have to be unpleasant consequences, or disadvantages, for somebody, or for some project or objective. Somebody has to take second place. If so, your task is to decide *who it will be*. Of course, in the example given above, the outcome would have been different if the wife had only been experiencing minor stress or inconvenience, and if the mother was in a very bad way, or if no care home was available.

All things are relative and every case therefore turns on its own particular facts. The point is that you cannot always entirely avoid negative consequences in life. Therefore, a mechanism for deciding who or what is your priority in a given situation, and who or what must take second place, and even be let down, is essential. The only alternative is to spend your whole life avoiding or delaying decisions because you aren't willing to view anyone as being in anything other than first place. But, of course, if everything is in first place, then nothing is really in first place, which is a recipe for ongoing confusion and indecision.

**Wise people are objective and face the real facts, even if those are unpleasant. They also prefer advice which is right, not that which makes them feel better.**

Even when we do take advice, there is a strong temptation to go along with whichever advice is most to our liking, i.e. least critical, least painful to implement, and most in line with our own desires and our own flesh nature. However, a wise person will force himself to listen to the truth and to do what is right, not what makes him feel better in himself or makes him look better to others.

In the passage below, Rehoboam has just become King of Israel and is taking advice from two different groups of counsellors. The first group is the old men who worked for his father. They advise him to lighten the burdens on the people and to be reasonable and merciful with them. The second group are his friends, young men of his own age, who advise him to be even more demanding, to increase the tax burden further, and to show the people how strong he is.

Their macho approach appeals to Rehoboam, despite being bad advice, because it makes him feel big and boosts his sense of self-importance. So, despite taking advice, he still goes wrong because he lets his flesh have the deciding say. A wise person chooses the right advice, regardless of his ego. Indeed, as a general rule, if our ego is in favour of something, we should be against it. Sadly, Rehoboam did not take that approach and listened to those who fed his pride:

*<sup>9</sup>And he said to them, "What do you advise that we answer this people who have said to me, 'Lighten the yoke that your father put upon us'?" <sup>10</sup>And the young men who had grown up with him said to him, "Thus shall you speak to this people who said to you, 'Your father made our yoke heavy, but do you lighten it for us'; thus shall you say to them, 'My little finger is thicker than my father's loins.' <sup>11</sup>*



*And now, whereas my father laid upon you a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke. My father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions.'"* <sup>12</sup>*So Jerobo'am and all the people came to Rehobo'am the third day, as the king said, "Come to me again the third day."* <sup>13</sup>*And the king answered the people harshly, and forsaking the counsel which the old men had given him, <sup>14</sup>he spoke to them according to the counsel of the young men, saying, "My father made your yoke heavy, but I will add to your yoke; my father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions."*

*1 Kings 12:9-14 (RSV)*

When making a difficult decision, which would require you to do something unpleasant, or even dangerous, *if* you were to conclude that certain facts are true, there is a strong temptation to believe that they are, therefore, *not true*. Our hearts are deceitful, as Jeremiah said, and we tend to believe what we *want to believe*. Instead we should objectively assess the facts and believe whatever is shown to be true, *simply because it is true*, regardless of how we *feel about it*.

We must do so even though arriving at that conclusion is inconvenient or distressing. This kind of self-delusion is a widespread problem, due to our sin nature, and because most of us do not choose to cultivate what the Bible calls "*the love of the truth*". That basically means having an extremely high regard for truth itself, *purely for its own sake*. If you have the love of the truth you will choose to believe whatever is true, even if that would prove that you acted wrongly, or be to your disadvantage, or result in cost, embarrassment or difficulty.

Whether a proposition is pleasant or unpleasant, and whether it would result in convenience or inconvenience *if it is true*, has nothing whatever to do with *whether it is actually true*. The thing is either true or false. How you *feel* about it being true, or what adverse consequences might follow if it is true, are completely irrelevant factors. Moreover, they must be treated as irrelevant while you are in the process of deciding what is true and false and whether or not to believe a thing.

This applies not only to matters of doctrine, but also in our everyday lives, or in our jobs, or when deciding whether claims or allegations are true or false. If you do not recognise this trait, and force yourself to be objective, you will inevitably make bad decisions. That is sad, because such errors are entirely avoidable if we will only face this problem in ourselves. To consider issues with ruthless objectivity, even when they affect ourselves, goes against all the habits we have learned since childhood. Therefore, this policy has to be imposed on yourself, by sheer force of willpower, like holding a cork underwater.

Your flesh nature will continually want you to revert to your familiar default-setting, whereby you believe whatever is easiest, most flattering and least inconvenient. Few people ever try to be objective, or even realise that this is an issue at all. Most of us never give it any thought, because *not* being objective is so completely familiar. I would urge you however to begin, from now on, to examine how you make decisions, and especially how you choose what to believe. Cross-examine yourself about your underlying assumptions and priorities, and as to whether you are being utterly honest with yourself.

Interrupt yourself, even as you are thinking or speaking to yourself, and say: "*You're arriving at that conclusion very quickly! Why are you so reluctant to believe the opposite?*" Then force yourself to look at the issues again, to review the evidence, and to put yourself and your own preferences to one side. Act as if you were a High Court judge trying someone else's case, rather than your own. Train yourself to be ruthlessly objective, and to make yourself arrive at conclusions that you don't like, if the evidence requires it. Then you will become a vastly more effective decision maker.

**Wise people are prudent and don't take unnecessary risks. But they are not ruled by fear either and will take calculated risks when it is right to do so.**

When I ran a law firm, I regularly had to make business decisions that could cause the firm to make, or lose, a lot of money. They were calculated risks and taking them was a daily occurrence. We all need

to be able to make such carefully balanced decisions, even where they involve risk. That said, wise people do not go looking for any unnecessary risk. Nor do they take excessive risks. Indeed, they try not to take any risks at all unless it is necessary to do so:

***A prudent man sees danger and hides himself;  
but the simple go on, and suffer for it.***

***Proverbs 22:3 (RSV)***

***One who is wise is cautious and turns away from evil,  
but a fool is reckless and careless.***

***Proverbs 14:16 (ESV)***

Prudent people therefore take steps to minimise the risks they face. They also arrange their affairs so that even if things do go wrong they have, at least partly, allowed for it, contained it, and made contingency plans to deal with it. However, although we should seek to reduce the risks we face, it is foolish to imagine that all risk can be avoided in life. Neither should you make risk-avoidance your main preoccupation. Many things which ought to be done or said, are not done or said, because the person focused excessively on the perceived risk.

They then allow that risk, whether real or imagined, to tower over all other considerations, including their duty, and even the need to be obedient to God. Sometimes in life the right thing to do is risky, or even dangerous, but it is still right. Therefore, the existence of a risk, in itself, is not a basis for making no decision, or for taking no action. The question is *whether* to take that risk, and it is wrong to assume automatically that the answer is an obvious no. It may or may not be right to take it and we need to be open to both options, after carefully analysing all the facts.

Therefore, a wise person takes risk into account, and takes all reasonable steps to avoid or minimise it. But he is not *ruled* by the fear of those risks, or by the fear of anything at all. You must never allow fear to be your master. Indeed, fear must not be allowed to play any part in your decision-making at all. If you do listen to your fears, you will make yourself very easy for people, and demons, to control and manipulate by simply planting the thought in your mind of some potential hazard. Their aim is that you will then automatically turn away and do something else instead of what you ought to do.

Most of the people I meet are ruled by their fears to some extent. In many cases, the grip that fear has over them is almost total and they spend their whole lives in fear of this or fear of that, or dreading some potential event. Yet, the things which they fear rarely, if ever, happen. Such bondage arises because they have trained their own minds to fear. It is also because the demons whisper into their minds to create or increase those fears. You have to recognise this power that fear has over you and actively resist it.

Never let yourself be ruled by fear of anything, other than the fear of the LORD. We should always be ruled by that, but not by any other fear. Our decisions should only ever be made on the basis of sound thinking, biblical principles, conscience and duty, even where those lead us to form conclusions which require us to do risky things. Part of a verse from Isaiah is helpful here on the issue of needing to be firm in our faith. If we are, then we can face anything. But, if we aren't, we will become spineless and spend our whole lives running away from things:

***“...If you are not firm in faith,  
You will not be firm at all.”***

***Isaiah 7:9(b) (ESV)***

**When making difficult decisions a wise person grasps the concept of choosing “*the least undesirable option*”. He does not long forlornly for a perfect option, with no disadvantages.**

As a lawyer I regularly came across clients who, wanted to be given a pain-free, cost-free, risk-free, difficulty-free option which had no disadvantages. I often had to haul them back to reality and explain that their real objective was to choose the *least undesirable option* from a range of undesirable alternatives. Every one of those could involve costs, risks, problems or disadvantages of one type or another. At first they would persist in hankering after a perfect solution but my job, sometimes, was to get them to see that no such option existed. I used to say they needed to *choose which set of problems they would prefer to have*, as opposed to hoping not to have any problems at all.

I likened it to going to a café with a sandwich menu which consisted only of rat, snail, slug and cockroach and choosing which of these was *least objectionable*, because the sandwich they wanted was not on the menu. That illustration often helped them, and they would then begin to look realistically at the options which were actually available and try to choose the one with the fewest, and smallest, disadvantages overall. It is not only in legal cases that such unpalatable choices can arise. Many of us waste a lot of time and energy, and miss opportunities, because we are not willing to choose the least undesirable option on those occasions when nothing better is available.

Forcing yourself to be a realist, and to grasp nettles, will greatly increase the speed and quality of your decision making. It may even change you from being a weak, indecisive manager into a strong and confident one. I say that because one of the biggest faults a manager or leader can ever have is not that he makes *bad* decisions, but that he makes *no* decisions. Or it can be that he makes them *too late*, when the right moment has passed and the opportunity has gone.

One common reason why a weak manager or leader does this is because he fears being criticised for making the wrong decision. Or he fears being seen to have failed. He will therefore naively hold out for a perfect solution, which won't involve any risk or disadvantage at all, and for which nobody could ever blame him. Such a manager forgets that the far greater crime is to dodge making decisions, or to leave them until it is too late. Indecision may not seem blameworthy to him, but those who work under or alongside him will be well aware of the problems it causes.

**However, when you are faced with two options, both of which are *sinful*, then you must choose neither of them**

Having said all that, we do also need to distinguish between choosing “*the least undesirable option*” and choosing “*the lesser of two evils*”. These two concepts sound similar, but they are *not* the same thing. The former can be both good and wise, even if it is unpleasant, but the latter is not. The clue lies in the word ‘*evil*’. We have been looking above at situations where all the available options merely involve *disadvantages or unpleasant consequences*. However, if both options involve *sin*, then you must choose neither. Sin is not a mere ‘disadvantage’ and it is never the correct option to choose.

Therefore, rejecting both of the evils on offer, whether they are the greater or the lesser, is not indecision. It is firmness of purpose and is not based on weakness or cowardice, but on strength and courage. That is why it is so important that we are always guided in our decision-making by conscience and the application of biblical principles. If you are, you will quickly recognise when an option involves something *sinful*, in which case, you must reject it *on that basis alone*. That can eliminate a series of improper options, until we are left with one which is at least not sinful, even if it has *disadvantages*.

However, if *both or all* of the options being offered to you, involve *sin*, or going against your *conscience*, or *transgressing a biblical command or principle*, then you can't choose any of them. This narrows down your options, which is helpful when you look at this correctly. If that happens, it is your cue to go back to the drawing board and to re-examine the whole situation afresh to search for an option

which is not sinful because, if the only ones that you can think of are sinful, you are missing something somewhere.

Your excessive desire to avoid other risks or costs which, though difficult, are not sinful, may be skewing your thinking and limiting your imagination. Imposing upon yourself the misguided precondition that the path you choose must not be unpleasant can prevent you from seeing, or being willing to accept, some other option which, though difficult, God wants you to choose. Let this be another form of guidance. Always do what is right, not what is easiest, and do not follow the line of least resistance. Stay on the 'narrow path' which, though hard, is the right path to be on, whereas the comfortable, easy path is rarely, if ever, the right one to take.

### **Wise people will not allow the fear of anything, other than God, to influence their decisions**

The fear of the LORD is essential and brings many benefits. However, we are not meant to fear anything, or anyone, other than Him. For that reason, the Bible commands us 366 times not to fear, by which it means fear of other people or things, not the fear of God Himself, whom we are positively commanded to fear. If you are not yet capable of ceasing to fear people or things, then resolve that, even if you are afraid, you will at least not let yourself be *influenced* by your fears in your *words, actions or decisions*.

That is possible even if we are not naturally bold by nature, because it is a decision of the *will*. Therefore, it does not depend on our *feelings*. Whenever we make decisions it needs to be solely on the basis of facts, logic, biblical principles, duty, God's will, wisdom, conscience etc, *never on the basis of fear*. I resolved many years ago that I would never make any decision based on fear and made it my policy to exclude all such considerations and to treat them as having no relevance. That has made decision-making far clearer, quicker and less complicated.

Instead of agonising over what people might say or do, I only need to work out what is true and false, what is right and wrong, and what my duty is. Excluding fear as a factor did not make decision-making *easy*, but it did at least make it *clearer*. If you let fear influence you, then you will become bogged down and confused. You will then be unable or unwilling to do your duty, or to obey God's commands, or to do what is right. The Bible refers to such fear as a '*snare*', which is a trap in which animals are caught:

***The fear of man lays a snare,  
but whoever trusts in the LORD is safe.  
Proverbs 29:25 (ESV)***

Never fear what other people might say about you, or do to you, even if it inevitable, and would cause serious harm. Even so, do not be afraid. At the very least, never allow any such considerations, to have any *influence* over you, or to play any part in your decision-making:

**<sup>6</sup> *The LORD is on my side; I will not fear.  
What can man do to me?***

**<sup>7</sup> *The LORD is on my side as my helper;  
I shall look in triumph on those who hate me.***

**<sup>8</sup> *It is better to take refuge in the LORD  
than to trust in man.***

**<sup>9</sup> *It is better to take refuge in the LORD  
than to trust in princes.***

***Psalms 118:6-9 (ESV)***

**The wise know they can be deceived by others and that they will be. They also know their own hearts are deceitful, such that they even deceive themselves, and they make allowances for that.**

No matter how wise you become you will never be beyond being deceived. If you think otherwise, you are deluding yourself. Being deceived is inevitable. So, realistically, your task is to minimise it, not to eliminate it entirely. We should therefore be on our guard to avoid being deceived, but not be surprised when we still are. Also, when that happens, openly admit that you have been deceived, rather than pretend you weren't. Moses warned the Israelites to *take care* that their hearts were not deceived. Therefore, he clearly didn't think they were immune to it, or he would not have said that:

***Take care lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them;*  
*Deuteronomy 11:16 (ESV)***

While ever we still have a sinful flesh nature, which we shall all have until we die, our own heart will lie to us, *even if we are wise*. We lie to ourselves about our own motives, our faults and failings, and whether we were right or wrong in the things we have done. Wise people *recognise* that self-deceiving tendency in themselves and *make allowances for it*. They realise how much delusion and self-deception their own hearts are capable of. Jeremiah, one of the greatest prophets in Israel's history, knew that this was even true of himself:

***The heart is deceitful above all things,  
and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?*  
*Jeremiah 17:9 (RSV)***

Therefore, not only should we not trust other people; *we should not even trust ourselves*. Our own heart will lie to us whenever it gets the chance. We therefore need to cross-examine ourselves robustly and say to ourselves: "*Come off it - you are in the wrong here*". If we can voluntarily do that to ourselves, we will prevent many problems. It will also reduce the need for God to discipline us.

Everything is going to be judged, and publicly exposed, in the end anyway. Therefore, you may as well be honest with yourself now and get things out into the open, at least in your own thinking. Consider Solomon's conclusion, at the end of all his writings. He knew that even he had to face God's judgment, despite being the wisest man who would ever live, and that every sin will be judged, even those that we keep secret:

**<sup>13</sup>*The end of the matter;  
all has been heard. Fear God,  
and keep his commandments;  
for this is the whole duty of man.*  
<sup>14</sup>*For God will bring every deed into judgment,  
with every secret thing, whether good or evil.*  
*Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 (RSV)***

**You can even be guided by noticing other people's attempts at manipulation or intimidation and you must resist them whenever they do it**

You can also get guidance by watching out for any sign of manipulation, intimidation or control being used by anyone, whether against you or against someone else. You could be in a situation where you don't know whether a proposal or idea is good or bad, and you can't see anything wrong with it. But then you may notice that the other person is being manipulative or is seeking to control you or others. If so, you need to be extremely wary. In this way, other people's conduct can actually become a source of indirect guidance for you.

You may not know exactly what is wrong with the proposal, or why it is wrong, but the very fact that someone is trying to pressurise or manoeuvre you is, in itself, a warning sign that you must not ignore. An example of this is a man I once employed as a salaried partner. He came for a job interview with me in a very difficult position, having been out of work for two years due to alcoholism, drug addiction, and a nervous breakdown. He was entirely open about this and I felt sympathetic and wanted to give him a second chance in life.

So I offered him a job as an assistant solicitor, on a trial basis, with a temporary starting salary of £25,000 per annum. That was well below the going rate for a senior lawyer at that time, but at that moment, he had been on unemployment benefits for two years, with little chance of finding any other job. Therefore, he accepted it eagerly and he did very well in the job. So, after three months, I voluntarily raised his salary to £35,000, entirely of my own accord, with no request from him.

Six months after that I raised him to £45,000, again entirely of my own accord. After that, I raised his salary, voluntarily again, to £55,000, then £65,000, and then £72,000. I had also made him a salaried partner and added a pension contribution from the firm of £12,000 per annum. That brought his overall pay package to £84,000 (about \$120,000), as well as a generous holiday entitlement of six weeks per annum plus bank holidays. The problem arose on a later occasion when he asked to discuss his salary, which I was happy to do. However, the meeting took an unexpected turn when he demanded a large pay rise.

He said, in a strident tone, as if I had been mistreating him: *“I want a pay rise to £100,000 plus £12,000 pension contribution and, if I don’t get it, I will be resigning.”* I was startled by his words, but even more so by his aggressive tone. He spoke as if I was stingy and had been exploiting him. Yet he was, by then, being paid well ahead of the going rate, at that time, for employed lawyers at his level. So I knew that I was already paying him well. But what bothered me most was that he was *threatening me* by saying that he would resign if I did not do as he demanded.

I had resolved many years before that I would never give in to *any* threat, or to *anybody’s* attempt to bully or manipulate me. Accordingly, when he spoke as he did, it was actually helpful, as it opened my eyes and I knew immediately that I needed to refuse. In that sense, I had gained guidance from *his* words and attitude. So I replied: *“In that case, you had better resign.”* He was stunned by my firm and instantaneous reply, as he had become so misguided, due to his resentment, and an exaggerated sense of his own importance, that he had assumed I would cave in.

He had also misunderstood my generosity in having voluntarily raised his pay repeatedly over the previous years and he had wrongly interpreted it as weakness. So, he was stuck. He had said he would resign if I said no. Therefore, due to his pride, he felt he had to go ahead and do it. Perhaps he still hoped, even then, that I would panic and give in to his demand. But I didn’t. I accepted his resignation without any hesitation, and confirmed it in writing, later that day. He had rashly painted himself into a corner and he then had no option but to leave.

The point is that his words, and especially his manner, were a form of guidance enabling me to see him, and his attitude, as they really were, not as I had wrongly imagined them to be. So his aggressive tone and manipulative approach actually helped me to know how to respond in that situation. Moreover, I did not have to figure out whether to give in to *his* threats, on this *particular occasion*, because I had already resolved, many years before, never to give in to *anybody’s* threats on *any occasion*.

Another example of obtaining guidance from people’s behaviour is a church leader I knew many years ago. I have written about him in Book 6 and given him the name ‘Rick’. He was false, carnal and manipulative, but I had begun to see through him and was challenging him about his attitudes and conduct. As part of that process, I had requested a meeting with him in the presence of two witnesses from the trustees of the church, of which I was the Chairman. During that meeting my concerns grew. Yet, I still wasn’t absolutely certain of my grounds and was not sure how seriously I should take his misconduct.

However, shortly afterwards, Rick came to my office to confront me one evening. The veil then came off my eyes, when I heard him speak more frankly than he had ever spoken before. He tried to dominate me, because his attempts to deceive me were not working and, from his perspective, desperate measures were now needed. I should add, by way of background, that quite a few of the staff in my law firm were Christians. Many were also members of Rick's church, as I also was at that time, and three employees were from Rick's own family.

To complicate things further, I was also having severe problems with Rick's own wife who worked in my firm as a secretary. She was being increasingly manipulative and controlling with other staff, so I had called her in the week before to warn her as to her future conduct. It was probably at this point that Rick concluded that the position between us was deteriorating and that the cajoling approach he had taken up to that point was not working. So he came to see me one evening and said in an angry tone:

*"This firm is part of the church and so I am the God-appointed authority over it. Therefore, any disputes with Christian staff will be handled by me, not by you."*

Up to this point I had felt unsure about what to do with Rick, despite all of my many concerns and the abundance of evidence against him. There was a veil over my eyes and my mind was fogged, most probably due to demonic interference, but also due to human witchcraft and mind control. That has the effect of confusing you and making you mentally numb, and unable to think clearly. However, on hearing Rick speak so aggressively, the fog lifted and I was suddenly able to see. I then said to him, more boldly than ever before:

*"Actually, Rick, you have no authority over this firm whatsoever. It is nothing to do with you. It is my firm, and God has appointed me, and me alone, to run it and that is exactly what I shall do."*

During that conversation, something broke in the atmosphere. My naivety and confusion melted away in a single moment and, from then on, I took a much firmer line. I left Rick's church some time afterwards and also sacked his wife and daughter-in-law. I also told his daughter to move on to some other law firm as soon as her training contract ended, as I did not wish to continue to employ her thereafter. So, I quickly got all of Rick's family out of the firm. But that ability to be so decisive began at the moment when he openly tried to dominate me.

He only took off his mask for a moment, but that was enough to enable me to see what he really was, and how seriously I needed to take it. So, his outburst was a form of guidance in itself and I would have been very unwise to ignore it. Therefore, make it a rule never to let yourself be manipulated, dominated, controlled or threatened *by anybody*. Such things must always be viewed as very serious matters, and must never be tolerated or overlooked. Therefore, such conduct can be the trigger that causes you to wake up, open your eyes, reassess the position, and take decisive action.

**Deciding when it is right to be firm and confront people and when it is better to be diplomatic, seek consensus, or even remain silent.**

A wise person *'knows the time'*. They know when to do a certain thing, when to do the opposite, and when to do nothing at all. We are told in Ecclesiastes that there is a time for everything:

<sup>1</sup> *There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven—*

<sup>2</sup> *A time to give birth and a time to die;*

*A time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted.*

<sup>3</sup> *A time to kill and a time to heal;*

*A time to tear down and a time to build up.*

<sup>4</sup> *A time to weep and a time to laugh;*

*A time to mourn and a time to dance.*

<sup>5</sup> *A time to throw stones and a time to gather stones;*

*A time to embrace and a time to shun embracing.*

<sup>6</sup> *A time to search and a time to give up as lost;*

*A time to keep and a time to throw away.*

<sup>7</sup> *A time to tear apart and a time to sew together;*

*A time to be silent and a time to speak.*

<sup>8</sup> *A time to love and a time to hate;*

*A time for war and a time for peace.*

*Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 (NASB)*

The Bible sets out many *general principles* but, on those same issues, it also gives other *counterbalancing principles* which point in the opposite direction. We then have to work out when to apply one principle and when to apply the opposite one, because they both have times when they are appropriate and times when they aren't.

So, concerning upholding right doctrine, there were times where the apostles felt it was right to be direct and confrontational. Jude speaks of people who cause damage with their false teaching and wrong behaviour. He urges us to stand up to such people and to defend the Church, and the faith, from them:

<sup>3</sup> *Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.* <sup>4</sup> *For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.*

*Jude 3-4 (NASB)*

Likewise, both apostle John and apostle Paul publicly exposed and rebuked certain people who were causing harm in churches, or who were wrong on important points of doctrine or practice and they were willing to name them, for example Diotrephes, about whom John says he will “*call attention to his deeds*”:

<sup>9</sup> *I wrote something to the church; but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say.* <sup>10</sup> *For this reason, if I come, I will call attention to his deeds which he does, unjustly accusing us with wicked words; and not satisfied with this, he himself does not receive the brethren, either, and he forbids those who desire to do so and puts them out of the church.*

*3 John 9-10 (NASB)*

<sup>16</sup> *Avoid such godless chatter, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness,* <sup>17</sup> *and their talk will eat its way like gangrene. Among them are Hymenae'us and Phile'tus,* <sup>18</sup> *who have swerved from the truth by holding that the resurrection is past already. They are upsetting the faith of some.*

*2 Timothy 2:16-18 (RSV)*

<sup>14</sup> *Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds.*

<sup>15</sup> *Be on guard against him yourself, for he vigorously opposed our teaching.*

*2 Timothy 4:14-15 (NASB)*

When writing with advice on how to deal with those who “*persist in sin*”, as distinct from those who lapse into sin or error but then respond well and stop sinning when they are spoken to privately, Paul tells Timothy that such people are to be rebuked publicly, i.e. “*in the presence of all*”. Moreover, he explicitly indicates that one of the reasons for doing this publicly is to deter others from doing likewise, or, in other words, that the fear of God might be produced in them so that “*the rest may stand in fear*”. Do bear in mind as well that this passage, though it applies to all church members, is written in the specific context of how to deal with church *elders*, thereby proving that leaders are also to be publicly corrected when they go wrong:



<sup>20</sup> *As for those who persist in sin, rebuke them in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.* <sup>21</sup> *In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without favor, doing nothing from partiality.*

*1 Timothy 5:20-21 (RSV)*

On at least one occasion, apostle Paul even publicly opposed and criticised Peter:

<sup>11</sup> *But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.* <sup>12</sup> *For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision.* <sup>13</sup> *The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy.* <sup>14</sup> *But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, “If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?”*

*Galatians 2:11-14 (NASB)*

Paul also tells us to watch out for those who cause dissension by teaching false doctrine and to “*turn away from them*”:

<sup>17</sup> *Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them.* <sup>18</sup> *For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting.*

*Romans 16:17-18 (NASB)*

On the other hand, it is not always the right time to be confrontational. There are also times when we should not be. For example, in the book of James, we are told *not to speak against one another*:

<sup>11</sup> *Do not speak against one another, brethren. He who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks against the law and judges the law; but if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge of it.* <sup>12</sup> *There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and to destroy; but who are you who judge your neighbor?*

*James 4:11-12 (NASB)*

Moreover, in Romans, Paul tells us to be *at peace with all men* where possible:

*If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.*

*Romans 12:18 (NASB)*

Paul also tells Timothy, shortly before his death, to remind people to “*avoid disputing about words*”. By that Paul means “*mere words*”, i.e. purely academic, fruitless arguments, which are not about serious issues or points of doctrine, but just peripheral matters. In such cases the aim of those who are arguing is not to uphold the true faith, but just to puff themselves up, or to enjoy an argument, or to be seen to have won:

*Remind them of this, and charge them before the Lord to avoid disputing about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers.*

*2 Timothy 2:14 (RSV)*

<sup>23</sup> *Have nothing to do with stupid, senseless controversies; you know that they breed quarrels.* <sup>24</sup> *And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kindly to every one, an apt teacher, forbearing,* <sup>25</sup> *correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant that they will repent and come to know the truth,* <sup>26</sup> *and they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.*

*2 Timothy 2:23-26 (RSV)*

Paul also tells Titus not to get drawn into *unnecessary* controversies over minor, non-essential matters:

***But avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels over the law, for they are unprofitable and futile.***

***Titus 3:9 (RSV)***

There may appear to be a contradiction here, between all of these verses, but actually there isn't. At any given moment, the question of whether we should make peace, or take a firm stand, depends on all the circumstances and on the relative importance of all the issues, principles or doctrines which are at stake. It also depends on who or what might be damaged or put at risk, either by our silence, or by our speaking out. Accordingly, it is not possible to write a categorical set of rules as to exactly when we should and should not speak out, take a stand, confront a person, create a controversy, or risk splitting up a church.

There are times and places when any one of those options may be the only right course of action. However, there are also times when we should, instead, show forbearance and be willing to compromise, conciliate, overlook a matter, turn a blind eye, seek to build bridges and try to keep people together. An example of when it may be right to overlook another man's error, or wrong thinking, is if we are dealing with someone who is weak in the faith, or lacking in knowledge, or who is only a new believer, as addressed by Paul in these passages:

***<sup>1</sup>Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. <sup>2</sup>One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. <sup>3</sup>The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him. <sup>4</sup>Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. <sup>5</sup>One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. <sup>6</sup>He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God.***

***Romans 14:1-6 (NASB)***

***<sup>13</sup>Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way. <sup>14</sup>I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. <sup>15</sup>For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died. <sup>16</sup>Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; <sup>17</sup>for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. <sup>18</sup>For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. <sup>19</sup>So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another. <sup>20</sup>Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense. <sup>21</sup>It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles. <sup>22</sup>The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. <sup>23</sup>But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.***

***Romans 14:13-23 (NASB)***

***<sup>1</sup>We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves. <sup>2</sup>Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification. <sup>3</sup>For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me." <sup>4</sup>For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope. <sup>5</sup>Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup>that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>7</sup>Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God.***

***Romans 15:1-7 (NKJV)***

**We need to achieve a position of maturity and balance whereby we know all of God's principles and can tell which one is most applicable in a given situation**

A wise person is aware of the different guiding principles in the Bible and also knows how, and when, to apply each one and also *how to hold them all in a healthy tension simultaneously*. At least he knows that he is meant to try, even though it can be very difficult to actually do so. A good overall balance is not achieved by applying every principle every time, but by knowing *which* principle, or which opposite and counter-balancing principle, should be applied at any given time.

A man told me of an argument in his church in which he had given way because he "*wanted to preserve unity and avoid any split in the church*". From what he said, I felt he had possibly made the wrong decision and asked if he had also considered the counter-balancing principle that we are to *contend earnestly for the faith*, and to take a stand, as Paul did when he publicly challenged Peter. I also asked what made him think that preserving unity, and avoiding church splits, was the main objective, given that Jesus told us that He had not come to bring peace, but division:

*<sup>51</sup> Do you suppose that I came to grant peace on earth? I tell you, no, but rather division; <sup>52</sup> for from now on five members in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three. <sup>53</sup> They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."*

*Luke 12:51-53 (NASB)*

This does not mean that everything Jesus said and did will always bring division. Nor does it mean that we should always seek to create division, or always be unconcerned when it arises. It means that if we teach and practise the truth then controversy, division, and even hatred, *will inevitably arise*, no matter how much we might try to avoid them. Consequently, although we should want unity in the church, and take all reasonable steps to maintain it, there are limits. A point can be reached where the doctrine or principle that we are upholding is sufficiently serious to justify allowing, or even causing, a split in the church.

Indeed, there are times when the only way that the true Church can be distinguished from the false church is when a division occurs. At such times the true believers can, and should, separate themselves from the false. Thus, an over-emphasis on unity can actually harm the real Church and undermine the Gospel. It is therefore wrong to pursue unity slavishly, or to pay too high a price for maintaining it, as if it was the most important thing. It isn't. Truth is more important than unity and is, in fact, the only real basis for ever achieving any genuine unity.

Conversely, there is another group which does grasp the need for truth, and for faithfulness to the real Gospel, upholding true doctrine, and asserting the authority of Scripture. But they don't realise that there is also a need to try to preserve the unity of the true Church. The error can therefore be made in either direction, as it can on any other issue. There is something about our fallen nature which causes us to be attracted to one school of thought to the exclusion, or diminution, of all others.

We can then elevate that particular principle and understate, or even completely forget about, any other counter-balancing principles. That is the way most of us are and we need to recognise that tendency and take steps to counteract it. So, some of us are the type of person who can easily see the need for unity and for keeping the peace. Others are more naturally drawn to contending earnestly for true doctrine. But very few of us can manage even to be aware of *both objectives*, and of their importance, let alone to seek to achieve both of them *simultaneously*.

Therefore, some people engage too readily in controversy and defend the truth vigorously on every issue, even if it isn't central, and without regard to the disruption it may produce. Others, however, will seek to preserve unity and peace at all costs, without regard to the loss of truth which that approach can cause. No matter how hard it may be, we should at least aim to have a proper regard to *both* of these

objectives and principles *at the same time*, even if we don't achieve that balance, and even if people don't respond well to us.

Thus, you could say that we are meant to become "*diplomatic contenders for truth*". Or, to give it its mirror image, you could say we should aim to be "*honest and doctrinally faithful pursuers of peace*". Where such a wholesome balance cannot be achieved or where, despite our best endeavours, the controversy is not capable of resolution, then we have a choice. One or other of these two objectives must prevail and which one we choose, in any given situation, will depend on the gravity of the specific issues over which there is disagreement.

In the apocryphal story of the church which split over what colour of carpets to have, the right answer is for you to give way and to let the others have whatever colour they want. Over such a trivial issue, it is more important to preserve peace and unity than to get your own way, even if you are right. However, that is not so if it is a debate as to the nature of the Gospel message, or the authority of Scripture, or an important issue of doctrine such as same-sex marriage. Then a church split is essential if the alternative is for evil to be done or for false doctrines to be upheld.

Thus, if a church has decided that it is going to allow weddings for homosexuals, the members should be willing to leave that church, and to encourage others to leave as well, if they are prepared to do so. Moreover, prior to doing that, they should speak out openly in opposition to the proposals, *even if that causes unrest and ill will*. There should, of course, be no hostility on *your* part. However, you need to be ready for, and be willing to face, the hostility of *others* which will probably arise in response to your principled stand.

We might summarise the right overall balance by saying that we should:

- a) be willing to give way on any *non-essential issue*, which is not an important question of doctrine or practice
- b) use diplomacy, compromise and conciliation *as far as we can*, provided we do not go further than our conscience, or the Scriptures, permit
- c) avoid controversy and conflict *if we can*, but not be afraid of permitting, or even causing, those things, if they are genuinely needed and are unavoidable
- d) be willing to engage in confrontation, debate and controversy if those things are genuinely needed, but *not to desire them, or take any pleasure from them*
- e) not rush to confront others, but begin with tact, diplomacy and persuasion and only go to the stage of confrontation after all peaceful approaches *have been tried but have failed*
- f) even so, not be *timid or reluctant* about the prospect of controversy, such that you *leave it too late* to take a firm stand

#### **Four broad issues over which we can never compromise**

There are four broad issues over which there can never be any compromise and where there is no room at all for differences of opinion. These are, therefore, situations where we need to take a very firm stand and be willing to leave a church and/or break off fellowship with another Christian:

- a) Where the dispute concerns *the identity of Jesus Christ i.e. who and what He is*. For example, if a church is denying that Jesus is both fully God and fully man, that is a clear basis for you to contend with them openly, to "name names", and to leave that church if they will not change their stance. However, if the dispute was only about the precise interpretation of prophecy, or the sequence of

prophesied events, then there is plenty of room for individual opinions and disagreement and no need to break off fellowship. Indeed, it would be wrong to do so.

- b) Where the dispute concerns *the nature of the Gospel*, such that a church is preaching a ‘gospel’ which is false or incomplete. For example, where sin, judgment, Hell, the Lake of Fire or repentance are left out of the message, or are minimised, then that church has a false gospel message. That too is a valid basis for speaking out openly, and for leaving that church if they do not listen.
- c) Where the dispute concerns *the nature and status of God’s Word*. So, if a church is teaching that the Bible is not infallible, or is out of date, or is not divinely inspired, or that one need not obey it, or that God has now “changed His mind”, for example on homosexuality, then that too is a basis for breaking off fellowship. However, disagreements as to the meaning of particular passages, whilst all concerned accept that the Bible is God’s infallible Word, and must be obeyed, is not such a basis.
- d) Where there is *clear and serious immorality on the part of a believer* (not an unsaved unbeliever, an enquirer, or an immature new convert) and also *a refusal to repent*, then a church can and should break off fellowship with him. Therefore, if an established fellow Christian, especially a leader, is engaging in sexual sin, or financial dishonesty, or is telling lies, or dominating people, or engaging in the occult, or other serious sins, then we need to break off fellowship.

But we need not do so where the sins are not gross, or where he is a new convert and does not yet know any better. Neither need we do so where the person is repenting and seeking to put things right, especially if they are not a leader. In such cases, that person needs our help. But if they are continuing in their sin, and refusing to listen or to change, we should either leave that church ourselves, or remove them from the church, if we are able to do so. Here is what Paul says:

<sup>9</sup> *I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with immoral men; <sup>10</sup>not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. <sup>11</sup>But rather I wrote to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber—not even to eat with such a one. <sup>12</sup>For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? <sup>13</sup>God judges those outside. “Drive out the wicked person from among you.”*

*1 Corinthians 5:9-13 (RSV)*

Other than in these four broad areas, we should generally aim to “agree to disagree” and maintain fellowship with a fellow believer or with a church. We should always try hard *not* to break off fellowship with other believers *unless we really have to*. Being realistic, however, there are few, if any, people who consistently know, in respect of every issue and situation, what the right time is and thus, for example, whether/when/how to take a firm stand or give ground.

Yet a wise person at least knows that such questions need to be asked and that, for many issues, there are biblical principles which can point in both directions simultaneously. Conversely, most of us are simple and are only aware of, or only ever emphasise, one principle or another, rather than both or all at the same time, as we should.

### **Knowing when a discussion about other people crosses the line and becomes gossip, and when we can, and cannot, treat a conversation as ‘confidential’**

I have added this short section here in response to a question someone raised with me which concerned a dispute which once arose in their church. Person A was being critical of person B, largely due to envy and insecurity, and therefore person A rang person C and asked to have a conversation *about person B*, on the strict condition that the conversation “*must remain confidential*”. Person C agreed to this and it

then emerged that person A simply wanted to criticise person B and to see if person C had any further negative information to add. He therefore began by saying “*What is your opinion of person B?*”

The whole thing then escalated, and C found herself drawn in to this and began to be contaminated by A’s jaundiced attitude towards B. Her own thoughts towards B then became increasingly negative, harsh, and even poisonous. To be precise, C already had a negative attitude towards B, even before A approached her. In fact, he had discerned that negativity in her, in the carnal, feral sense of discernment. That is why he rang her, and not persons D, E, F or G etc, who were not already prejudiced against B.

Anyway, at a later date, the tension and animosity towards B grew on the part of both A and C, and A eventually left that church. It was only at that point that my advice was sought. I questioned C about her antipathy towards B and she was initially evasive about it and also reluctant to say what she and A had discussed. Her reason for that reluctance was that A had specified at the outset, when he first rang her, that he wanted to talk about B “*in confidence*” and had asked her to agree, in advance, “*not to disclose any of it to anybody.*”

These facts emerged in stages, for the very reason that C felt bound by her agreement with A to keep the conversation confidential and to tell nobody else. However, it all eventually came out when I told her that it was not valid, on that occasion, for A to request confidentiality, or for her to agree to it. She then asked me to define what ‘confidentiality’ is and when it is, and isn’t, valid to agree to it.

I told her that what was wrong with the way that she and A had handled their discussion about B was that it was gossip. It was, therefore, inherently illegitimate, such that any agreement to maintain confidentiality was not only invalid in itself, but also compounded the original wrong of engaging in gossip. I then referred her to Jesus’ words in Matthew 18:15-17, in which He sets out what I call “*the Matthew 18 procedure*” for dealing with conflicts and disagreements within a local church:

***<sup>15</sup> “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.<sup>16</sup> But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.<sup>17</sup> If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.***

*Matthew 18:15-17 (ESV)*

So, there are four distinct stages to the Matthew 18 procedure, which we shall list and discuss below. However, at every stage, even the final one, the aim must always be to at least attempt to resolve matters, to restore relationships and to promote the health of the local church, not to undermine it. That process is not served therefore by gossip, the aim of which is always to tear another person down by spreading rumours or accusations, whether true or false, and behind their backs, rather than to their face.

The problem with gossip is that it is done with the aim of undermining people, not helping them. Therefore, it has the effect of intensifying and entrenching conflict, not resolving it. That was the context in which, and the aim with which, A had rung C. It was also the reason why both the conversation itself, and the agreement to keep it between themselves, were invalid. So, the Matthew 18 ‘procedure’, when properly conducted, operates in the following way, with the following objectives and in the following manner:

**Stage 1** You go to see the person whom you believe has wronged you or offended you, or with whom you are in conflict, and you speak directly *to* him, not *about* him. You also do it with the aim of helping him, restoring relations between the two of you, and promoting peace and unity within the local church. If it works, then that is great and it can all be forgiven and put behind you on both sides.

**Stage 2** If he does not listen, you must then repeat the exercise but, this time, you take one or two witnesses along with you to hear what is said on both sides. They can help both you and him to understand each other better, to address the issues, and to prove or disprove any allegations calmly and

effectively, so as to be reconciled, because that is still the aim. Note also that you are still keeping the dispute and the process of resolution as private as possible, by involving as few people as possible. It is also done with the alleged wrongdoer *present, in the room, hearing everything, as it is said directly to his face, not behind his back*. I have put all of those words in italics because all of that is crucial, and was wholly lacking when A rang C.

**Stage 3** If the person still refuses to listen and if his own evidence and his responses to you have not persuaded you, and the witnesses, that it is in fact *you* who are at fault, then you should bring the dispute before the *whole church*. That means that the discussion is repeated, in front of them all, together with all the allegations and counter allegations, and the evidence of both sides. The local church then decides collectively, as a group, who is right and wrong. Of course, when Jesus gave this instruction His assumption was that you are genuine, and are telling the truth, and that your complaint is valid. However, if that is not the case, then you need to accept what the other person is saying, if it is true, and you must repent and apologise if it is actually you who has done wrong.

**Stage 4** If, however, the decision of the local church as a whole is that the other person is at fault, and if he will not listen to you, or to them, and thus will not repent, or change, or be reconciled, then the local church, as a whole, needs to expel him from membership of that church. Thus, from then on, he will be viewed as an outsider or non-member. That is of great significance, because God regards the local church as being of very high importance indeed, not least because it provides a spiritual protection, or ‘umbrella’, to each member.

This four-stage procedure also demonstrates, by the way, that all local churches are meant to be small and intimate. They should be meeting in houses or barns or small meeting rooms, as the early Church did, and involving only about 10-50 people or perhaps 100 at most. If not, how can the Matthew 18 procedure be implemented, because you can’t discuss a dispute between A and B in front of hundreds, or even thousands, of people.

That would be completely impractical and, therefore, cannot have been what Jesus had in mind when He gave this command in Matthew 18. See my Book 8 for much more detail as to how the Church was organised, conducted and led in the first century because it was the exact opposite, in just about every way, from how churches are structured and led today.

### **Some more guidelines on how to treat conversations which you are being asked to treat as confidential**

Returning to the question of ‘confidential’ conversations, and when they are and are not legitimate, let me set out some sensible guidelines. The first is that you can only agree to engage in a confidential conversation and to maintain that confidentiality thereafter, if the discussion is *exclusively about the person with whom you are speaking*, and does not involve others.

So, for example, if they wish to confide in you about a health issue of their own, or a sin they are committing which involves nobody else, such as internet pornography, then you can agree to speak privately and to maintain confidentiality. However, if the conversation is about others, even indirectly, then you cannot agree to confidentiality as it might become necessary to urge A to speak directly to B himself, or even for you to do so yourself if A will not agree to that. Remember that the whole point of discussing issues is to resolve conflicts, not to enjoy gossiping about people.

However, what if A wants to speak to C about the fact that A is being abused, damaged or lied about by B and what if A is afraid of B and feels unable to go through the Matthew 18 procedure with B? In such a situation, which would be rare, A could legitimately speak to C. However, that would only be the case if A’s aim was to receive C’s help in addressing the issues, protecting him from B, and implementing the Matthew 18 procedure on A’s behalf, where A is *unable* to do it for himself. It would not be valid if it is just an excuse to gossip.

Moving back to the original story, A's position and attitude were not valid. He simply wanted someone to gossip with and had no intention of embarking upon the Matthew 18 procedure, or of asking C to do so on his behalf. A just wanted to speak to another negative-minded person and to attack B's reputation. Indeed, not only was he not seeking for reconciliation, he was expressly forbidding C, from the outset, to do anything to bring it about. Thus, A's phone call to C was wrong, as was their agreement to keep it all between themselves, rather than let it be assessed and dealt with openly and honestly, in the way that Jesus intended.

When writing this I was also asked what one is entitled to do if one has already agreed to keep something confidential, but one later realises that that agreement was illegitimate and even malicious, on the part of the other person, or both of you. I am reminded of an occasion I write about in Book 6 in which a woman I have renamed 'Rhoda' invited my wife over to her house for a chat. My wife was taken by surprise when Rhoda began to criticise a young man whom I have renamed as 'Charles'. She then told my wife to keep her comments confidential.

My wife was not on her guard and did not see the problem immediately, but she saw it later that day and spoke to me. I said that Rhoda was wrong to say those things about Charles and also wrong to tell my wife to keep it confidential. I then said that I would tackle Rhoda about it, together with her husband, 'Stephen'. However, they were both totally unrepentant and would not meet with me under Matthew 18 to discuss what they had said about Charles. Neither would they repeat the accusations to him, directly to his face, or do anything constructive to address their alleged concerns.

My wife did not actually agree to keep it confidential, but she did not refuse either. She was not quick enough in thinking on her feet to see the issue at that moment, or to tell Rhoda to stop speaking. However, even if my wife had agreed (wrongly) to confidentiality, it would still be her duty to correct that error afterwards by telling Rhoda to go to see Charles herself, as per Matthew 18, and/or to get me to urge Rhoda to do so. That does not necessarily mean that my wife should go to see Charles, who had been maligned, to tell him of what had been said. That may not always be appropriate.

However, it would be appropriate for her to go to see the elders of the church to inform them of the gossip and also of Rhoda's refusal to meet to discuss it with Charles. That is what I then did, and I tell the story in Book 6. Sadly, it did not turn out well, as the elders were not interested, so I got nowhere. The main reason why the Matthew 18 procedure is not used in churches today, besides the fact that churches are too big for it to be practicable, is that the leaders *don't want to use it*. They often don't care about resolving disputes, or they are afraid to tackle people. Or, in many cases, they like to gossip themselves.

### **Deciding what the 'time' is for your nation and whether God is currently operating in judgment or mercy for the nation as a whole**

Let's look at another example of 'telling the time', but in the wider national context, rather than what is happening in your own local church, or amongst the people you know. A relevant question today, in the Western nations, is whether the point has been reached where a nation has gone too far in its sin to be spared from God's wrath. If so, then the nation *as a whole* cannot be turned around. Therefore, only *individuals* can be saved and rescued from God's judgment.

The book of Jonah sets out how God warned the whole city of Nineveh to repent and turn from their sin or face His wrath. Then, just as the prophet Jonah knew they would, the leaders and the wider population repented en masse and God spared them. Jonah's reluctance to go to Nineveh was *not* because he was afraid, as so many preachers wrongly assume. It was because he knew they would repent and, as a patriotic Israelite, he *did not want* that to happen, or for God to show them mercy.

The Ninevites had destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC and Jonah saw them as a threat to the southern kingdom too. At any rate, the point is that that was a time in their history when God's



mercy was still available to the people of Nineveh *as a whole*. Jonah knew that, and his issue was that he did not *want* God to spare them. However, about a century later, in the time of the prophet Nahum, things had changed. Nahum therefore prophesied God's impending wrath on Nineveh.

Then, in 612 BC, just a few years later, Nineveh was destroyed by the Babylonians. It may well be that some *individual Ninevites* repented and were saved. However, for *Nineveh as a whole*, it was too late for that. By 612 BC, God's patience had run out and therefore the city of Nineveh could not escape God's punishment, no matter what some of the people did. The people *as a whole* had crossed a line and gone past the point of no return.

Let's now consider another example, from chapters 34 and 35 of 2 Chronicles. It relates to the people of Judah, the southern kingdom. By this stage the sin of the people, and of their leaders, was so bad that God had firmly resolved to pour out His judgment and He was not willing to change His mind. That judgment followed in 586 BC, when the Babylonians invaded Judah and took the people into exile.

In 2 Chronicles 34:22-28, a prophetess called Huldah prophesies the coming disaster and destruction that was going to come upon Judah, as other prophets had also done earlier. What is interesting is that Huldah singles out King Josiah, who was a very godly king. He personally was deeply penitent about the sins of the people, and the sins of some of the previous kings. Josiah therefore repented and humbled himself personally, as an individual, and he also instituted many reforms to remove wickedness and idolatry from the Kingdom of Judah:

*<sup>1</sup> Josiah was eight years old when he began to reign, and he reigned thirty-one years in Jerusalem. <sup>2</sup> And he did what was right in the eyes of the LORD, and walked in the ways of David his father; and he did not turn aside to the right hand or to the left. <sup>3</sup> For in the eighth year of his reign, while he was yet a boy, he began to seek the God of David his father, and in the twelfth year he began to purge Judah and Jerusalem of the high places, the Asherim, and the carved and the metal images. <sup>4</sup> And they chopped down the altars of the Baals in his presence, and he cut down the incense altars that stood above them. And he broke in pieces the Asherim and the carved and the metal images, and he made dust of them and scattered it over the graves of those who had sacrificed to them. <sup>5</sup> He also burned the bones of the priests on their altars and cleansed Judah and Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup> And in the cities of Manasseh, Ephraim, and Simeon, and as far as Naphtali, in their ruins all around, <sup>7</sup> he broke down the altars and beat the Asherim and the images into powder and cut down all the incense altars throughout all the land of Israel. Then he returned to Jerusalem.*

*2 Chronicles 34:1-7 (ESV)*

Huldah points out that although God was pleased with *Josiah personally*, for his own repentance, and also for his reforms, that would not prevent God's judgment from coming *upon Judah as a whole*. The line had already been crossed and the nation as a whole had already gone too far, even before Josiah came to the throne. Therefore, God had irrevocably decided to judge the kingdom of Judah. All that God was willing to do was to spare *individuals*, in particular Josiah himself, from that impending judgment. He was not willing to refrain from judging the nation as a whole:

*<sup>22</sup> So Hilkiah and those whom the king had sent went to Huldah the prophetess, the wife of Shallum the son of Tokhath, son of Hasrah, keeper of the wardrobe (now she lived in Jerusalem in the Second Quarter) and spoke to her to that effect. <sup>23</sup> And she said to them, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: 'Tell the man who sent you to me, <sup>24</sup> Thus says the LORD, Behold, I will bring disaster upon this place and upon its inhabitants, all the curses that are written in the book that was read before the king of Judah. <sup>25</sup> Because they have forsaken me and have made offerings to other gods, that they might provoke me to anger with all the works of their hands, therefore my wrath will be poured out on this place and will not be quenched. <sup>26</sup> But to the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the LORD, thus shall you say to him, Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Regarding the words that you have heard, <sup>27</sup> because your heart was tender and you humbled yourself before God when you heard his words against this place and its inhabitants, and you have humbled yourself before me and have torn your clothes and wept before me, I also have heard you, declares the LORD. <sup>28</sup> Behold, I*

***will gather you to your fathers, and you shall be gathered to your grave in peace, and your eyes shall not see all the disaster that I will bring upon this place and its inhabitants.’” And they brought back word to the king.***

***2 Chronicles 34:22-28 (ESV)***

The most that God was willing to do was to delay the nation’s judgment, for Josiah’s sake, but not to prevent it from happening at all. Consequently, God held back the judgment on Judah until after Josiah had died. He didn’t want Josiah to have to see it as it would have been terribly distressing to him. As it turned out, Josiah died young, at the age of only 39, having reigned since he was 8 years old. Perhaps God allowed his premature death to spare Josiah from having to see the wrath that He was about to pour out on the nation.

Thus it is not always an act of judgment for a person to die before they get old. In this case it could even be seen as merciful. It meant Josiah never saw the horror of what then happened to the people, and to the subsequent kings, when the Babylonians invaded. If we turn to our own day and ask what the ‘time’ is now, my personal belief is that we in the West have crossed the line and have gone too far in our sin and rebellion for God to be willing to have mercy on our nations as a whole.

In particular, abortion is now conducted on an industrial scale. Plus there is the epidemic of homosexuality, ‘gay marriage’, gender confusion, the corrupting of children, and the apostasy in the churches. All of these are now occurring on a scale never seen before in history. Therefore, I personally believe that no matter what our leaders do, and no matter even what the churches do, the USA, the UK and the European nations are doomed to face God’s wrath. Indeed, I believe it has already begun with the mass invasion of Muslims, supposedly as refugees, but actually as jihadists.

The Muslims intend to destroy the West, and all that it once stood for, and to bring it under the control of Islam. Moreover, I believe God might well permit them to achieve that, or to go a long way towards achieving it, as a judgment upon our nations. That is God may well be using the Muslims to judge us, just as He used the Assyrians to judge Israel, and the Babylonians to judge Judah. To have said that even a decade ago, let alone earlier, would have been viewed as exaggerated, or even hysterical. Yet it is now happening before our very eyes.

A tidal wave of aggressive, militant Muslims is pouring in continuously. Yet, much of our population, and most of our leaders, are too blind and deaf to grasp what is happening, let alone what it will lead to. They are too cowardly to resist it anyway. Even the majority of church leaders have no comprehension of how evil Islam is, or of what it will do to the West. Thus, even the better churches are silent, and the worst ones are actively supporting the influx of Muslims, by whom our nations are being taken over.

Moreover, and this would have seemed even more impossible until it actually happened, the USA has had a *Muslim president* and for two terms! Nobody would have believed that possible. Indeed, many still won’t accept that he is a Muslim, even now. Yet, it happened, and Mr Obama spent 8 years systematically destroying America from within. He made a huge number of appointments of Muslims in all areas of the Federal Government, right up to the highest levels. Even the Director of the CIA was a secret Muslim and John Kerry, the Secretary of State, if not a Muslim himself, was strongly supportive of Islam.

Obama also filled the very White House itself with all manner of Islamic signs, objects, carpets, crescent moon ornaments, Korans etc, as well as ordering *all* White House staff to be silent five times per day for the Muslim prayer times! All of that blasphemy was going on at the very heart of the American government and it cannot fail to do great harm, even long after Obama has gone. In addition to that, he also drastically reduced the size, quality and effectiveness of the American armed forces. Therefore, America is now less able to defend itself, or the West, from the advance of Islam.

Christians should certainly pray for our leaders, and also get involved in politics as party members, and even stand for public office. However, even if we do, I believe the decline of the western nations will continue. I hope I am wrong, but I do not expect any large scale revival to come to the UK, USA or Europe. I only have faith for individuals to be saved, here and there. The 'ship' itself is going down, like the Titanic, and only individuals can escape. For our nations, I believe it is the time for judgment, not revival, just as it was for Ninevah in Nahum's day, and for Judah during Josiah's reign.

**Wise people are realistic about the *underlying facts* but, at the same time, are optimistic when deciding *what to do about those facts*.**

I was recently talking to a person whom I felt was trapped in a really negative, defeatist, pessimistic attitude of mind. This had become so thoroughly familiar to them, as their consistent way of thinking, that they had come to regard it as normal and to assume that there was no alternative. However, this person denied being a pessimist and claimed instead to be a '*realist*'. They wrongly assumed that that meant they could not also be a *pessimist*, as if the two things were mutually exclusive. I challenged that assertion and attempted to define the three terms, '*realism*', '*pessimism*' and '*optimism*'.

- a) A '*realist*' is one who forms a correct assessment of the facts of the current situation, i.e. as to what the position is and what resources are available.
- b) A '*pessimist*' looks at those same facts, even if he states them correctly, but then deals with them wrongly *by taking a negative, gloomy, defeatist view* as to whether and how those facts can be handled, what they imply, what is likely to follow from them, and how difficult it will be to resolve the problems or reduce their effect. So, as the saying goes, the pessimist correctly sees that the glass is at the half way point, but he automatically sees it as *half empty, not half full*.
- c) An '*optimist*' looks at the very same underlying facts but, unlike the pessimist, he sees a way forward, or a way of reducing the effect of the problem, and his mind immediately turns to thinking of how best to tackle those facts so as to produce a good outcome. He also instinctively assumes that such a positive outcome is possible, or even likely.

Therefore, a realist simply *sees the underlying facts as they actually are*, without under-estimating, misrepresenting or denying them. So they can see the full extent of the problem and the scarcity of the resources available. However, the point is that being a realist does not mean that you can't *also* be an optimist or a pessimist as well. That said, not every person is even realistic to begin with. Some are mistaken about the underlying background facts, or even delusional.

Thus, they don't actually see the real position to begin with, even before we look at how they might, deal with, or respond to, those facts. Even worse, some are so deeply pessimistic that they not only misjudge how to deal with the facts, but they also wrongly state what those facts are, or they wrongly define the problem, in the first place. Then they are not even dealing with the real facts, but with a jaundiced, even warped, misrepresentation thereof, i.e. false 'facts' which are not even true to begin with.

However, even if a person is realistic about the background facts, we still have to consider whether they are an optimist or a pessimist as to *what can then be done about those facts*. A person can be completely realistic about the facts, and state them accurately, and yet still be a pessimist overall because, when they look at those facts, they see no way forward and no way of changing them. A pessimist is, therefore, already defeated before he even begins to address the problem. Therefore he often sees no point in even trying, because he is convinced, from the outset, that he will inevitably fail and that there is no hope.

Thus, even if you truly are a realist, that fact, by itself, does not mean that you cannot *also* be a pessimist. You can be one, if you think and act negatively, in the way you approach the facts and also in the

assumptions you make as to the prospects of success in tackling them. By contrast, when an optimist, who can equally claim to be a realist, looks at the same facts, he sees options, possibilities, solutions and ways forward. At the very least, he sees ways of mitigating the harmful effect of those underlying facts. Nevertheless, he is just as realistic as any other man as to *what the facts are*.

It is just that to an optimist, who is wearing the '*helmet of salvation*', which is hope, the story does not *end* with the facts. It only *begins* with them. Thus, in 1940, an optimist such as Churchill could see the very same facts that the defeatists and appeasers could see. He was well aware of the huge size of the German army and air force, and the power, quantity and quality of their weapons. He could also see, as well as anyone, the staggering victories already achieved by the Germans in 1939 and 1940, when they overran Poland, Belgium, Holland and France in a matter of weeks.

However, whereas much of the world, looked on and saw Great Britain's defeat as inevitable, Churchill never did. He saw *the very same facts* as anybody else could see. Indeed, he saw them even more clearly than they did, but those facts did not intimidate him. Neither was he fazed or overwhelmed by them. He knew, or rather he *decided to believe*, that there would, eventually, be some way forward. He did not know in May 1940 *what* that way forward would be, or *how* we would win, but he still believed that we *would*.

He was therefore determined to resist in every way possible until the facts changed. If nothing else, he hoped that Hitler would eventually make some mistakes, or miscalculate, or overplay his hand. If so, then our chance would come, if we could only hold on through the darkest days when others, who saw the *same facts*, but through the lens of *pessimism*, had no hope. Moreover, he was right. Hitler did make errors, and very serious ones, for example he:

- a) failed to press home his advantage in May/June 1940 to prevent the evacuation at Dunkirk, despite his generals' advice
- b) invaded Russia in June 1941 against his generals' advice and without any adequate thought about the Russian winter that was only five months away
- c) delayed the invasion of Russia from April to June due to getting involved in unnecessary distractions elsewhere, such as in Yugoslavia. This robbed his own troops of six weeks of good weather, such that they did not reach Moscow before the winter began
- d) declared war on the USA in December 1941 after Pearl Harbor, when he did not actually need to do so. This forced America into the war against him when they might, otherwise, have left Germany alone and focussed only on Japan

In May 1940, Churchill had no way of knowing *what* Hitler's future errors would be. He was simply convinced that he would eventually make some, and that the tide would then turn. When we, at our much lower level, look at the facts in our own lives, the main question is not whether we are being realistic about what those are. The far larger issue is whether we are being an optimist or a pessimist *about how we will react to those facts* and what we choose to *do about them*. A wise person will always choose to be an optimist, because pessimism is so unproductive, and even paralysing.

It cripples the mind, switches off our creative imagination, and saps our morale, resilience, endurance and willingness to fight. However, whether optimism is wise or not, and whether we find it easy or hard, is academic. A Christian must be optimistic, because we are *commanded* to be so at all times, in how we approach, and respond to, the real facts. We know that because Paul instructs us, in Ephesians 6, to put on, and keep on, the '*helmet of salvation*'. This is not defined within Ephesians, but we are told in 1 Thessalonians, that it represents *hope*:

***and take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God,  
Ephesians 6:17 (ESV)***

***But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.***

*1 Thessalonians 5:8 (ESV)*

Paul means that we must fill our minds with hope, which is best defined as *the confident expectation of good*. If you choose to maintain that hope, even when things go wrong, and the news is all bad, and people let you down or turn against you, it is a powerful protection for your mind. We all need this if we are to withstand the turbulence of life and its many hard knocks, disappointments and failures. If your mind is not firmly surrounded with this ‘helmet’ of hope, you will eventually be worn down.

You may also stop fighting and give in, either as a result of the sustained pressure of life, or its sudden shocks and surprises, or both combined. But the stubborn maintenance of your hope will keep you going through it all. Therefore, a wise person *chooses to cultivate hope*, even where he doesn’t naturally have any, and even where the circumstances do not appear to justify it.

He will *train* his mind to be hopeful, regardless of circumstances, even where that positive attitude goes against the grain of his nature. He does not leave it all to chance, or allow himself to be governed by the random emotions that are generated by the ups and downs of life. For that reason, an optimist will never give in, but will fight on indefinitely, always seeking for some way to improve the position, long after others have given up.

The mind-set of the optimist is not caused by the facts being good. It has nothing to do with what the facts are. It is what he chooses *to superimpose upon the facts, whatever those may be*. Thus, an optimist is not ruled by the circumstances that he faces. He rules over them and he *makes things happen* rather than sitting back passively and *letting things happen to him*. I like Churchill’s definition of the pessimist and the optimist and the difference in their mentality:

*“A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity. An optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.”*

*Winston Churchill*

**When making decisions, face the very worst that could happen, and reconcile yourself to it. Then seek to avoid it or improve on it as an outcome.**

What I am suggesting here may sound a bit like pessimism, or even defeatism, but it isn’t. On the contrary, taking this approach when you face scary decisions, and where a lot is at stake, will help you to stay calm. Then you can think straight, rather than panicking or giving way to fear. I have operated in this way many times when handling a crisis that could potentially have disastrous consequences. Therefore, I recommend that you do as follows:

- a) Calculate in advance what is the very worst that could happen. Work out what people might do to you, or how much it could cost if things go really badly, or if you were to get the decision completely wrong.
- b) Then look that potential worst-case scenario straight in the eye and reconcile yourself to it now in the sense of accepting that it could possibly be the consequence of your decision.
- c) Come to terms with it, as if it was already the case, or was already inevitable. Then brace yourself to face it, endure it, and deal with it
- d) Having faced the worst that could possibly happen, and having already come to terms with it, such that you are no longer panicking, try from then on to prevent that bad outcome. Or, at least try to reduce the cost, damage, bad publicity or adverse consequences to the lowest level possible. In other words, try to ‘mitigate your losses’.

- e) At the same time, look for things that you could still do, or escape routes you could still take, if you fail and if the disaster actually happens. Then you are at least partially prepared if the worst does come to the worst.

This approach which I advocate is not pessimism, or even negative thinking. It is actually part of what is involved in being realistic because you are looking frankly and objectively at the current situation, as it really is. You are also recognising what could potentially happen if things do go wrong. However, the point is that you are facing it squarely, head on, rather than:

- a) pretending that this frightening situation isn't happening and therefore refusing to address it, or to take any preventative or remedial action
- b) panicking and taking hasty, unwise actions to try to make sure these bad things don't happen, where such steps may be premature, excessive or inadvisable
- c) ceasing to function mentally, due to your fear, like a deer caught in the headlights, unable to think, decide, or act

In my Book 6 I speak of some very serious threats and legal actions I have faced which would have been extremely damaging and costly if they had gone badly for me. Like anybody else, I found those times stressful and I felt fear about what could happen, or what people might do. However, by taking the approach I recommend above, I was always able to function in a crisis, to think straight, face down my enemies, and never give in to intimidation. Both people and demons will use your fear to manipulate you. They want you to become so panic-stricken that you are unable to fight back.

However, by naming it, and coming to terms with it, *as if it had already happened*, your fear loses the power that it had over you while it was still a shadowy possibility, floating in the air and haunting you with its menace. Once the fear has been faced up to, and accepted, it is robbed of its capacity to intimidate you. Then you are much better placed to fight back and to at least improve the situation. Or you might even achieve a complete victory, whereby the negative outcome is avoided entirely. Either way, your chances of handling it well are maximised if you take this approach and thus avoid being caught in the headlights.

**Always consider open-mindedly whether you are being deceived and be ready to double-check, and triple-check, the things that people tell you**

One of the hardest things about decision-making is that the underlying facts, or *alleged facts*, upon which your decision has to be based, are only as good as the people who provided the information. If they are deceiving you, or if they have been deceived themselves, without knowing it, then all or part of the information that you are relying upon could be inaccurate, exaggerated or even invented. Given that deception is endemic throughout most of the human race, the possibility that you are being lied to is not some remote contingency. It is a virtual certainty, at least some of the time.

Therefore, on any given occasion, as you make your decision, the chances are that at least some of the supposed facts upon which you are relying are not true. Thus, they are not actually facts at all. So, the first step is to recognise that this problem of deception and misinformation exists, rather than denying it, or being oblivious to it. That alone will put you substantially further forward. You will at least be forewarned of the potential problem, and thus better able to address it. Of course, at this stage, you are not aware whether you have been lied to, or about what, or by whom.

You have only got the alleged facts, as they have been presented to you, and probably by several people, because the likelihood that only one person is telling lies is low. This adds to the difficulty when you are assessing a large number of things that have been said, and sorting out the truth from the lies, and the reliable from the unreliable. If you are naïve, as most genuine Christians are, then recognising that

some of the things you are being told could be lies, may make you feel uncomfortable. Nevertheless, it is a necessary assumption to make if you want to be a good decision-maker.

You can't make accurate decisions if even part of what you believe is untrue. The answer, therefore, is to begin, as a matter of general routine, to check, double-check, and even triple-check, at least some of the things that you are told. You will then find, distressingly often, that things which you had fully assumed to be true are not true at all, and that people you had trusted are not actually trustworthy. You must then act upon those unpleasant discoveries and adjust your assessments of people's claims and allegations and also of their characters.

Also, change your view of the reliability of anything else they may have said in the past, or that they might say in the future. Moreover, it is wise to let it be publicly known that you routinely check things, and that you don't just rely on what you are told. Saying that openly will act as a disincentive, at least to some people, to tell you lies. Please refer to my Book 6 in which I go into a lot of detail about dealing with deception and deceivers and how you can tell when, and by whom, you are being lied to.

### **Seek to increase the level of your discernment and also ask God to give you the gift of discerning or distinguishing of spirits**

I deal with discernment in Book 6. I also deal with the gift of distinguishing between spirits in Book 1, in the chapter on the baptism in the Holy Spirit. Please refer to both of those for more detail. When making decisions we need the ability to work out who is telling the truth and who is not. Therefore, we absolutely must develop the skill of identifying lies and liars, and working out who and what can be trusted. The gift of distinguishing between spirits is different from ordinary discernment. It is one of the '*spiritual gifts*' which apostle Paul lists in 1 Corinthians chapter 12:

*to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.*

*1 Corinthians 12:10 (ESV)*

These spiritual gifts are supernatural and, therefore, do not depend on our minds, or our experience, or on learning how people operate. The knowledge is given to us, by the Holy Spirit, and enables us to identify the source of a statement or proposal, i.e. whether it comes from God, or the person, or a demon. This takes us way beyond our own discernment, which we have developed from experience, because the Holy Spirit points us directly to the answer.

### **Be willing to revisit and reassess your past decisions and judgments, especially if the facts or circumstances alter**

If you have made a decision in the past, it must not now be treated as something cast in stone, which can never be questioned or revisited. You should always be open-minded to see whether you still believe what you were told and whether you still think you made the right decision. Be willing to question anything and anybody, even if it was decided long ago and has already been acted upon. Never assume that every past decision or conclusion is reliable.

If you make that assumption you will be slow to spot patterns of deception which may still be affecting your decisions now. I have often reviewed decisions long afterwards, when I have belatedly come to doubt what I believed at the time. Sometimes it was because new evidence arose which called into question that which I had previously relied upon. Unless you are willing to do this you will make it much harder for yourself to correct your past misjudgements. But it isn't only about exposing past lies.

This approach is also necessary where the balance of the evidence begins to alter, as new facts emerge which you had not previously taken into account or which you had under-emphasised. If you regard

your own past decisions and judgments as immovable and unchangeable you put a needless constraint upon yourself. You cannot afford to do that if you want to make reliable decisions now. Therefore, always be willing to question what you have been told in the past, and to reassess the judgments which you have previously formed.

### **It is very hard to find genuinely good advice and especially mentoring**

Advice is particularly important when making a major decision. We need to be willing to listen to advice which is given to us unsolicited, but also to go out and positively ask for it. Of course, it entirely depends on *who* is giving the advice. Not all people are wise, and not all viewpoints are worthy of respect. The reality is that many people, even if they are neither wicked, nor fools, but only simple, have just got nothing worthwhile to say. They aren't equipped to advise you and have nothing to offer, except perhaps factual information, but that is evidence, not advice, and falls into a different category.

What they say has to be assessed on the basis of whether to *believe* it at all, not whether to *respect* it. You should be willing to hear the *evidence* of any person, however small or fragmentary their knowledge may be, provided you firstly weigh it and assess its reliability. But that is very different from being willing to take their *advice*. Accordingly, it is sensible, whenever you are being spoken to on a matter of any importance, to ask yourself the following questions:

- a) Is what is being said merely information, or does it go beyond that and amount to advice?
- b) Is the information, true and how much reliance can safely be placed upon it?
- c) If the person is offering advice, are they generally wise, at least to some extent, or in some area, such that what they have to say is likely to be of value?
- d) Even if they are not wise, and even if their advice would not generally be valuable, have they, *on this occasion*, said something which has merit?

If you aren't regularly asking yourself such questions, you are not likely to be effective in weighing up the things that people tell you. People are not all the same and neither is the reliability of their evidence or the quality of their advice. That said, the value of a person's advice, or of their evidence, does not come from whether they agree with you, or even like you. If they are people of substance and merit, their words should be listened to, though not necessarily acted upon, even if they don't support you.

Indeed, if you are facing a significant problem or decision, go out of your way to obtain the perspective of those who are known to disagree with you. If you only ever listen to those who agree with you, or think along similar lines, you will merely reinforce your own existing views. Therefore, deliberately take steps to have your beliefs tested by exposure to contrary views. Have the confidence, and the humility, to listen to those who disagree with you, or even oppose you, and find out if they have seen any angles which you have not noticed.

Or they may have access to information from other people, who might never be willing to speak to you, for the very reason that they know you disagree with them. Accordingly, don't merely wait passively for unsolicited advice or information to be offered to you. People know that advice is often not well received, and that insecure people tend to 'shoot the messenger', so they won't offer any comment until they are asked to. Therefore, make sure that at least some of the input that you get is from people who don't agree with you, or who have a different perspective, even if they are not opposed to you.

That doesn't mean that you should accept any of their advice, or act upon it, any more than you should with those who agree with you. But you should at least listen, especially to people of experience and merit. Let what they say become part of the overall package of information upon which you base your decision. The problem is that silly advice from silly people is always available, but honest, competent



advice, from wise people, who know what they are talking about, is very hard to find. Therefore, very often, you simply can't get good advice, even if you are eager to listen.

That has been my problem for many years. I have often desperately wanted advice, but could not find any, or at least not wise advice from wise people, because they are so rare. Something which is even harder to find is a really capable and faithful *mentor*. For 30 of the past 36 years since I was converted, I have not been able to find anybody whom I could go to with really thorny problems and get sound advice. There was a three-year period when I was the Chairman of our Conservative Association, during which I had an outstanding man to whom I could turn.

However, apart from that period, and also my first three years as a new believer, I have always had to make my own way, without any mentor at all. I think that is the norm. Therefore, any competent mentoring that you can get should be seized with both hands because you are not likely to have it for long. I don't think God wants it to be that way, but there just aren't enough wise people around, who would be of any use to you as a mentor. Therefore, God often has to disciple us directly, without any human mentor, because there are simply none to be found in your church, workplace or family.

**When making a big decision, write out all the pros and cons and the issues which concern you. By the end, the right answer will often be staring you in the face.**

There is a technique which I have found useful when making a big decision, involving multiple issues which may contradict each other or point in different directions. One can feel bewildered by the scale and complexity of the problem and find it difficult to hold all the facts and issues, and the various pros and cons, in one's head simultaneously, or to assess them as a whole. Most of us can only think of one thing at a time so, if there are several issues and complications to face simultaneously, it can be overwhelming.

You may find yourself unable to see the whole picture, especially if it involves legal, moral, theological, political, commercial and personal issues all at the same time. I find it helpful to write down all the facts and issues and all my fears and unanswered questions in two vertical columns, with all those facts which point in one direction on the left, and those which point in the other direction on the right. Usually there will only be two options, i.e. should I or shouldn't I, or is it or isn't it? However, there could be three or more options available. If so, make one list for each option.

When you then look at the columns in the end, you will usually find that the right answer is staring you in the face. One list will either be much longer than the other or it will contain much more serious or important points, either in its favour, or against the alternative. Beforehand you might have had 20 or more pros and cons, plus miscellaneous issues, anxieties or questions, all swirling around in your mind, like flies buzzing around a room. But you could not get a sense of their relative significance, or how they fitted together.

But now, with them all written down in columns, alongside each other, and perhaps with asterisks by the more important ones, you might see that there are 17 points in favour of the proposed action, 10 of which are major, and only three points against it, perhaps none of which are major. So it may be that the obviously right answer is to go ahead. Yet that may have been very far from obvious prior to that point. It will not always be so one-sided. There will sometimes be situations where it is more finely balanced.

However, when I have done this, one side has usually come out clearly on top, by a substantial margin. Then I was no longer confused or unsure. But it isn't only a matter of seeing which side of the argument has more, or bigger, or better, points for it or against it. The very process itself of writing down every relevant fact, issue, question or concern, and deciding how important it is, and whether it supports or opposes the proposal, helps you in clarifying your thinking and making sense of a swirling mass of information.

**Also write down exactly what you are afraid of and why. The fear will often disappear or shrink when you do so. Or it will be exposed as imaginary or false.**

Sometimes making a decision is harder due to things you fear which prevent you from thinking through the issues, or being able to think at all. You may be ‘caught in the headlights’ and just sit back, paralysed into indecision and inactivity. Some of those fears may not be clearly defined but are just vague, nagging worries, many of which are not even real, let alone likely to happen. However, even if they are both real and likely to happen, you still should not make any decisions based on what you *fear*. It is neither healthy nor appropriate.

All decisions should be based on a consideration of the facts and issues, your duties, what is right and wrong, what is wise and unwise, and on what makes logical sense. What you are afraid of is of no relevance, or it should not be. Thus any such fears need to be identified and must not be allowed to play any part in your decision. But the problem is that fears can be hard to pin down or identify. Your mind might be influenced by one big fear, or a number of separate fears, without feeling able to specify exactly what they are.

At such times, use a variation of the same list-making technique. Force yourself to write down exactly what it is that you fear might happen, or might be done to you, if you were to go ahead with the thing you are contemplating. As you see these things written down and clearly defined, in plain English, as opposed to floating vaguely in the air like phantoms, you will find that the fear shrinks. It is exposed on the page, rather than being allowed to carry on as an undefined anxiety. The fears no longer seem so significant, or as likely, to happen, as they did when they were free to swirl around in your head, unidentified and undefined.

Now that you see them there, exposed on paper as the self-aggrandising imposters that they are, you can strike a line through them, quite literally, and exclude them from further consideration. Imagine you were considering changing the way things are done in your company to increase output or efficiency and you are anxious as to what ‘Fred’, one of your senior employees, might do if you were to go ahead with this. You know he feels threatened by the proposal, and that he might react badly. Alongside all the other pros and cons you could literally write down:

*“I am afraid that Fred might get upset and may get angry, cause a confrontation, or even resign”.*

Until you write it down, and see it on the page in black and white, that vague, unspoken worry buzzes around in your mind. It prevents you from feeling any peace and distracts you from focussing on all the real issues in order to evaluate the commercial case for and against the proposal. But when you see those words written there, with your fear clearly defined and staring at you, the errors in your thinking suddenly become clear. For the first time, you may be able to say to yourself:

- a) *Whether or not Fred gets upset is entirely a matter for him, not me. If he does, it will be up to him to get over it.*
- b) *If, nevertheless, Fred does get upset, and does not deal with it, then I will deal with him and tell him to calm down. But I won’t let him trouble me.*
- c) *If he doesn’t calm down, then I will deal with him more firmly.*
- d) *If he causes a confrontation, then so be it. I will deal with him even more firmly. But I will still not allow that prospect to influence me.*
- e) *If Fred resigns that is, again, entirely a matter for him and I will not seek to dissuade him from doing so. At any rate, whether he stays or goes has no bearing on what I now decide to do for the good of this office/shop/factory, and I will not allow his potential response to influence my decision.*

You might think I am over-stating the position or setting the bar impossibly high by saying that you must not allow fear to influence any of your decisions. Or it may be that you simply aren't capable of getting rid of the fear and you still feel it. In other words, you may say that policy is unrealistic as it requires more self-control than you currently have. If so, then at least work towards that level. Do the best you can, for now, to face your fears. Refuse to yield to them, and don't allow them to have any 'vote' when you are making decisions, even if you are still afraid.

That is you need to resolve that you aren't going to listen to those fears, even if they don't go away. Whether you are currently able to achieve it or not, this is still the right approach and is what you should aspire to. Therefore at least attempt it, even if you don't fully succeed. Your fears are used by other people, and also by the demons, to exert pressure over you. They want you to do what you should not do, and to fail to do what you ought to do, by using your fears to paralyse you into passivity and delay. You must not let any of that be done to you. Therefore, "*take every thought captive*" as Paul says.

That means you decide which thoughts you will let yourself have, or at least which thoughts you will allow yourself to *act upon*. Make it a clear policy that your fears won't get any say from now on in your decision-making. Also put them in writing to make it easier to identify and exclude them. That does not mean that you cannot take any steps to avoid or reduce some hazard which might occur. You do not have to expose yourself to danger, or even unpleasantness, provided the steps you take to avoid those things do not involve any failure to do your duty, or to listen to your conscience, or to obey God, or to do your job as you are meant to.

We are under no duty to expose ourselves needlessly to danger or trouble. It is just that we must not act wrongly or sinfully in order to avoid them. Neither must we allow ourselves to be manipulated, controlled or dominated by any person, or by a demon, as the price for avoiding what we fear. That is wrong in itself, and also a breach of our duty. It is also too high a price to pay for the easing of your fears. Besides that, if you give in to your fears on this occasion, the people or demons who are behind it will quickly see that and take note.

Then they will inevitably be back, again and again, like a blackmailer who has been paid something. They will then use the same levers to control you again in future. Therefore, never submit to, or cooperate with, any such tactics. You may as well refuse now, have the confrontation, and get it over and done with today. If you don't, it will only have to be done later, unless you want to spend your whole life being controlled by other people, or by demons, using the leverage that is given to them by your fears.

**Never be afraid of being wrong or of being blamed. At least don't let such fears paralyse you, even if you can't yet entirely overcome them.**

A common fear is of making a wrong decision, or of being blamed or criticised if things go badly. As a result, many people find the very process of decision-making stressful and intimidating. They will often refrain from making any decision at all, or delay it up to and beyond the last minute, because they fear the disapproval of others. But that is to make yourself the prisoner of other men's opinions, such that you cannot act freely, simply because of what they might say about you, or even privately think of you.

How tragic would that be? Yet that is precisely what millions of people do, getting themselves trapped in the 'snare' of the fear of man, such that they live as slaves, not as free men. As with any other fear, the fear of making decisions needs to be faced up to and overcome. The only alternative is to submit to it for the rest of your life. Ironically, if you do, you will become known as an *indecisive* person.

But they are even more despised than someone who makes *wrong* decisions. It would be doubly sad, therefore, to get a reputation for being indecisive, and thus be viewed with contempt by your colleagues or staff, all because you didn't want to be disapproved of for making wrong decisions. You would be

losing a pound and gaining a penny. If this applies to you, then engage in a much more wholesome and constructive conversation with yourself, perhaps along these lines:

- a) *“If I get this decision wrong, or if people think that I have, and therefore disapprove of me, then so be it. They are entitled to their opinions.”*
- b) *“But, whether or not there is the potential for some people to disapprove of me, I will not let that prospect influence me in any way in the decision that I now face.”*
- c) *“In any case, they would disapprove of me even more, and rightly so, if I misguidedly delayed making a decision, or didn’t make one at all, just to pander to other people’s opinions.”*
- d) *“I have both the duty and the right to make a decision now, to the best of my ability. Therefore, I am going to make my decision, as soon as I am ready, without any regard for what others may think of me.”*
- e) *“That way, whoever does or does not approve of me, I will at least approve of myself. More to the point, God will approve of me for not allowing myself to be ensnared by the fear of man.”*
- f) *“Moreover, whether I get it right or not, I will at least, for what it’s worth, be approved of by some people, for being a decisive person.”*
- g) *“In any case, even if I get this particular decision wrong, I will learn from the mistake and, in the longer term, become a better decision-maker as a result. Thus, even my errors have the potential to help me to grow.”*

### **The worst decision of all is to make no decision.**

Therefore, however good or bad your decisions may be, don’t make the far greater mistake of allowing yourself to become an indecisive person. The worst decision of all is to make *no decision*. By the way, we need to be clear that not making a decision *is a decision*, and it is almost always a bad one. It is a decision not to decide anything, or not to do so yet. That in itself is a decision, and *usually the wrong one*, because it is rare for the right course of action to be to keep on postponing making your mind up and taking action.

At any rate, it would never be right if the reason for doing so is fear of what people might think of you, or fear of anything else. It can, however, be entirely right to postpone the making of a decision, *provided* your reason for the delay is genuinely because you don’t yet have sufficient facts to make the decision. It may be that you are seeking that information as quickly as is reasonably practicable. If, *and only if*, that is truly the case, then fair enough. Your delay in making a decision would then be prudence, not cowardice.

Indeed, in the right circumstances, the willingness to delay making a decision may even be a sign of courage, and also of diligence. It may prove that you are not willing to be rushed into a premature decision just to appease others who are clamouring for an answer. But if that is not your real reason, and it is actually just an excuse to hide your real motive, which is the fear of getting it wrong and being blamed, then we would be back where we started. That reason for delay would be wrong and even disgraceful.

Bear in mind that, in most workplaces, the managers who are the most despised and resented are not those who are brave enough to have a go, but get it wrong. It is those who won’t make any decision at all and leave you waiting for weeks or months while they stew around getting nowhere, forlornly hoping the problem will solve itself, without the need for any decision. If your reputation is of

concern to you, then that is the reputation that you most need to avoid, and it is well worth making some wrong decisions along the way in order to avoid it.