

The Deciding Factor:

Making decisions we can live with.

A Question of Conscience

He said to his men, "The LORD forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, the LORD'S anointed, or lift my hand against him; for he is the anointed of the LORD."

1 Samuel 24:6

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The old real estate maxim says the three most important elements of market value is location, location, location. However, as far as location, they are barely there. Two small islands atop a coral atoll with a total land area of less than two and a half miles, sitting midway in the vast Pacific Ocean between America and Asia. But in early June of 1942, they became the most highly valued piece of real estate in the world, and a tipping point of the whole war in the Pacific, and quite possibly the whole of World War Two. The defeat of the American garrison and subsequent Japanese occupation, would allow Japan to position bombers within striking distance of Hawaii, forcing what was left of the American Pacific fleet back to the west coast of North America, isolating the entire Pacific and Australia.

Critical to Yamamoto's plan was finding and sinking the American carriers, which he hoped would be drawn into action to protect Midway. While the first wave of Japanese planes bombed the atoll, search planes scoured the ocean for the Americans. Upon return to the carriers the Japanese planes were quickly armed for an attack on ships, however it soon became apparent that the island had to be attacked again to enable an amphibious assault and as yet the American fleet had not been found. The decision was made to replace torpedoes with bombs for a second attack on Midway. Shortly after, or what must have seemed an eternity in the heat of battle, a report came in that enemy ships—the Americans—had been sighted. The decision was then made to stop arming bombs and rearm with torpedoes. However, the delay in launching meant the Japanese carriers had to first land returning aircraft. It was a decision that couldn't have come at a worse moment for the Imperial Navy. Across the decks of the Japanese carriers sat fully fueled aircraft and a myriad of unsecured bombs and torpedoes. It was then that SBD Dauntless dive bombers from the USS Enterprise stumbled upon the Japanese fleet, and within minutes, aided by an added number of dive bombers from the Yorktown, three of the four Japanese aircraft carriers were in flames. And the war had turned.

I used to have a board game called Midway, that my friends and I played dozens of times. In all the times we played the game, the Imperial Navy always won. They had too. They had more ships, more and better aircraft, more experienced pilots, and better armaments. The game reflected that. Yet, what the game couldn't capture was a decision made in the heat of battle, when the pressure was on and victory or defeat was on the line.

Now, I'm reasonably sure that the decisions with which you may wrestle have less to do with finding aircraft carriers and whether to use bombs or torpedoes, but I'm also reasonably sure that some decisions are accompanied with a good deal of pressure. That's just the way life is.

Often when making a decision it's nice to have lots of time to mull over the pros and cons, to weigh out the benefits and shortcomings. While we don't always have that luxury, there are times when we need to distinguish whether the pressure is real or imagined. A good salesperson knows a customer who walks out the door to think about it usually means a lost sale. Like the good salesperson we are, we too convince ourselves that we need to decide now, we create pressure that squeezes us into the immediate decision. That pressure often leads to bad decisions. Today's question is one better asked before deciding, than lamenting afterwards: Is this decision causing me second thoughts or searching for justification? In other words, am I trying to talk myself into this, whatever this is, rather than giving it sober thought?

There is a moment in the life of David when this question is powerfully illustrated. An antipathy of Saul towards David arises back in 1 Samuel 18 where we read: *"When the men were returning home after David had killed the Philistine, the women came out from all the towns of Israel to meet King Saul with singing and dancing, with joyful songs and with tambourines and lutes. As they danced, they sang: 'Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands.' Saul was very angry; this refrain galled him."*¹ The Bible tells us that from that time forward *"Saul kept a jealous eye on David."*² It's never a good feeling to have someone keeping a jealous eye on you, even less when that person is a king. It is also not healthy for the person keeping the jealous eye. Follow along for a second and you'll see how the bitterness in Saul starts to fester and grow.

¹⁰ The next day an evil spirit from God came forcefully upon Saul. He was prophesying in his house, while David was playing the harp, as he usually did. Saul had a spear in his hand and he hurled it, saying to himself, "I'll pin David to the wall." But David eluded him **twice**. ¹² Saul was afraid of David, because the LORD was with David but had left Saul. ¹³ So he sent David away from him and gave him command over a thousand men, and David led the troops in their campaigns. ¹⁴ In everything he did he had great success, because the LORD was with him. ¹⁵ When Saul saw how successful he was, he was afraid of him."³

Did you catch that? Twice. I think I have a good idea what Saul was thinking, but what was David thinking? I mean, what did Saul say, "Sorry, arm twitch. My bad!" We are also told two times that fear is rising in Saul. In the ancient world, before we had elections to vote the wrong guy into power, the wrong guy would just take the throne. As David's popularity rose, Saul would begin to assume David would one day claim the throne as his own. Saul didn't like that. Let's survey how over the next several chapters the tension and pressure on David begins to grow.

1 Sam 19

The enemies of Israel have been unable to kill David in battle, and he himself has been unsuccessful in killing David, so Saul orders all his attendants, and his son, Jonathan, to kill David. When Jonathan refuses, Saul once more seeks to spear David. Again, he misses, but sends men to stakeout David's home and kill him in the morning when he leaves for work, which ironically seems to be playing the harp to calm Saul down. David manages to escape during the night, and when Saul discovers to where he fled, he sends men to capture him, and then goes out in person to capture David. Perhaps he thought his men were just didn't trying hard enough.

1 Sam 20

Upon finding out that David and Jonathan have covenanted with each other, Saul, enflamed in rage, tries to kill his own son. He is, apparently, not very good with a spear.

1 Sam 21

¹ 1 Samuel 18:6-8

² 1 Samuel 18:9

³ 1 Samuel 18:10-15

David flees to the priest Ahimelech but is spotted by one of Saul's servants. David is so desperate he flees to Gath, thinking that among Saul's enemies he will be safe. That didn't work out, so the next chapter begins with David once again on the run.

1 Sam 22

David moves from the palace to a cave, safeguarding his family with the king of Moab. He then flees to hide out in the forest. Meanwhile, Saul, enraged that the priests gave aid to David, orders their execution.

1 Sam 23

Saul finds out that David has saved the people of Keilah from the Philistines and goes in pursuit. David, learning from the Lord that the people of Keilah will surrender him to Saul, once again goes on the run. We are told:

So David and his men, about six hundred in number, left Keilah and **kept moving from place to place**...David stayed in the desert strongholds and in the hills of the Desert of Ziph. **Day after day** Saul searched for him, but God did not give David into his hands.

1 Samuel 23:13-14

Kept moving...place to place...day after day. Perhaps we hear the anguish of David during these days expressed in Psalm 143, *"The enemy pursues me, he crushes me to the ground; he makes me dwell in darkness like those long dead. So my spirit grows faint within me; my heart within me is dismayed."*

Ever been there? Not pleasant, is it? *Our* enemies aren't an army led by a king with poor aim, but they can just as easily hound us. A roof is in need of repair, but then too, the car has been acting up, and there is that tuition coming up and the mortgage isn't going to pay itself. Your child has just informed you that they are moving in with someone, and you really don't think is good for them, but if you say anything it will cause a rift. The task that was your responsibility has fallen apart and the boss was counting you seeing it through but there may be a way to coverup your mistake. It's the middle of a pandemic and you have COVID fatigue and your missing family and more restrictions have just been announced, how do respond? I listened to Doug Ford's press conference on Thursday, and I really think we would all be a little better off if we never listened too, watched or read anything the news media is trying to sell.

Remember when the news fixated on the white SUV? They would have had a field day with David. By the time we arrive at 1 Samuel 24, David and his men must have been at wits end. They have been on the run for ever. They will never again have a home cooked meal. They will never again see their wives and children, and fearing for their lives as well as that of their own. And now they are backed into a cave, hiding out from three thousand of Saul's best soldiers. There is no where to run. And then the unexpected happens:

[Saul] came to the sheep pens along the way; a cave was there, and Saul went in to relieve himself. David and his men were far back in the cave. The men said, "This is the day the LORD spoke of when he said to you, 'I will give your enemy into your hands for you to deal with as you wish.'" Then David crept up unnoticed...

What must have been going through the mind of David as he slowly crept close to Saul? "Samuel has anointed me the next king." "Many of the people have already shown me their support." "But then I had covenanted with Jonathan to "show [him] unfailing kindness like that of the Lord"⁴ and also to Jonathan's family." "But the men want Saul dead, and if the roll were on a different spool, Saul wouldn't hesitate to take my life (though likely not with a spear)." All manner of conflicting ideas must have been swirling in David's mind. The knife was in his hand. His enemy was completely unaware. The men, his men, were already feeling the relief of never-ending flight, already thinking of being back with family. How could he face them if he didn't give them what they so desperately wanted, and had argued for?

David crept up unnoticed and cut off a corner of Saul's robe. Afterward, David was conscience-stricken for having cut off a corner of his robe.

As David approached and prepared to strike, he relented. Instead of cutting Saul, he cut the robe that had been set aside while Saul relieved himself. Even then, David was conscience-stricken, the Hebrew meaning "the heart of David struck him." For cutting a corner off the robe of the king. One can only imagine the agony of the soul and mind that David would have had to endure if he had killed Saul. What if he had never overcome that primal urge to take matters into his own hands and do to Saul what Saul had failed to do to him. In the psalms David often sang of his reliance upon the Lord.

¹ The LORD is my light and my salvation— whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid? ² When evil men advance against me to devour my flesh, when my enemies and my foes attack me, they will stumble and fall. ³ Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then will I be confident...¹³ I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. ¹⁴

Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and **wait** for the LORD.

Psalm 27:1-3, 13-14

Wait. Other than 'No', is there another word that presents us with such difficulty? Wait. But I want it now. Wait. But there might not be another chance. Wait. But everybody else already has one. again? How could he face Jonathan, knowing that he had broken covenant with his friend and Saul's son? The last time they had spoken, Jonathan affirmed that would be second in the kingdom after David.⁵

Only when David crept back to his men do we see a glimpse of the pressure of that moment upon the young man.

⁶ He said to his men, "The LORD forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, the LORD'S anointed, or lift my hand against him; for he is the anointed of the LORD."

⁷ With these words David rebuked his men and did not allow them to attack Saul. And Saul left the cave and went his way.

⁴ 1 Samuel 20:14

⁵ 1 Samuel 23:17

Quite easily he could have got off the hook by letting one of his men do the deed, but then that would be a poor attempt to justify the killing: "It wasn't me. I told them not too." The language here though is fairly emphatic. The Lord forbid...He rebuked his men...He did not allow.

David would not permit what his conscience was clearly alerting him was wrong. David heeded the red flag. Ever have one of those moments? There is this little voice screaming from somewhere in the back of your mind, there is an uneasiness in your stomach, a quickening heartbeat. Somewhere between leaving his men and returning in that cave, David had refused to give in to the desires of both his men and himself. David had concluded there was no justifying the taking of Saul's life. That would happen in God's time, in God's way.

Let me leave you with three quick thoughts we can learn from this episode in the life of David when making a decision.

First of all, we need to fix our mind on the Lord.

David frames the moment in relation to the Lord. The Lord forbid...the Lord's anointed...the anointed of the Lord. In fact, he will use the phrase "the Lord's anointed" three times in this chapter, and see the Lord's hand in bringing Saul to the cave, in judging between the two men, and vengeance being with the Lord. This is not just a spur of the moment thing with David, for in a later episode when they approach Saul at night in his camp, David will use the term four times.

The writer Hebrews encourages us to 'fix our eyes on Jesus' and Paul urges "in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord." Those two words of advice, like David's declaration regarding Saul, are indicative of an ongoing state, not a mere situational state. If Jesus is Lord of my life, then He is Lord of all my life. Every thought, every deed, every motive...it all must come under the authority of Jesus. Although it may seem simplistic and even trite – the 'What Would Jesus Do?' approach is not without merit. For if my heart is set upon Him, then I am more likely to keep a clear conscience. If I set my eyes upon him, then I can fight off other influences.

Fight off other influences.

David, in his remarks to Saul, hints at what was going on at the back of the cave: "Some urged me to kill you...", David reported. Possibly one of those 'influences' was the voice of Joab. We don't know a lot about Joab, but what we do know is that he thought very little of spilling blood, of eliminating threats. If not, there would be other very desperate men with David who would make a compelling argument. Just do it. Go for it. Here's your chance.

The *pressure* to decide can itself be a harmful influence, and when we feel that pressure we need pause to ask if the pressure is coming from outside—work, society, circumstances, friends—or coming from our own desires—I want it and I want it now. If our minds are fixed on things above, then it becomes much easier easy to fight off those influences that would force us into a decision that ignores the red flags. Remember, it was when took his eyes off the Lord that the storm was able to bring its influence upon the faith of Peter. It was when David lowered his eyes on the balcony that his own evil desires dragged him into an adulterous, and murderous affair.

Although Psalm 51 has been a great comfort to many who have been unable—or unwanting—to fight off those other influences, I'm sure David would have preferred a clean conscience over a song highlighting his weakness. Better, I'm sure, to remain under the Lord's favor. David likely wished later that he had shown the same fortitude on the balcony as in the cave, that time he felt the Lord's favor.

Feel the Lord's favor.

Saul, upon learning of David's mercy, fittingly comments, "May the LORD reward you well for the way you treated me today..."⁶ The implication of course is if David had acted on impulse, had ignored his conscience, these words would never have been spoken, this reality may never have come about. Saul's own trajectory with making bad decisions while under pressure had undermined his own position. He had allowed other influences to direct his path, and was rejected as king.

Have you ever been tempted to do that which you know is wrong? Sure you have. I know I have. And I know the guilt, the stricken conscience, that nagging feeling of regret that comes with being and doing boneheaded. How much more pleasant though is it when we feel the Father's smile? When in the heat of the moment we have fixed our minds on Him and fought off those other influences. When we have written a good chapter in our stories.

Although that day he may not have felt it, later on, upon the death of Saul in battle, when a decision had to be made regarding who would be king, David's reputation, garnered through repeated Godly decisions—and the counsel of a wise woman—made him the natural choice. David could sit on that throne knowing that God had placed him there, and that he had indeed waited upon the Lord.

Only you know the decisions with which you are wrestling. Only you know the battle raging over what to do. Only you know what the pressure, if any, is like. Only you can make the decision. But before you do, fix your thoughts upon the Lord. Pray about it. Meditate upon it. Seek His counsel.

With His help you can fight off those other influences that, if they are not of God, will lead only to misery; the misery of failure, the misery of sinfulness, and the misery of a stricken conscience.

And in fighting off those influences you too can feel the favor of the Lord.

⁶ 1 Samuel 24:19

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty **conscience** and having our bodies washed with pure water.

Hebrews 10:19