

## DECISION MAKING

This paper explores the idea that good decision making is a fruit. We are not trying to develop a method of effective decision making where, if a number of steps or principles are followed, good decisions are more likely. Rather it presents the idea that effective decision making flows from the development of wisdom and faith, in a partnership in which God and man are at work to bring about good character and a sure path in life.

### ***How Decisions are Made***

The human faculty for decision making is the will. In the words of Jonathan Edwards, the will is “that by which the mind chooses any thing.” The will is the mind deciding. When a decision is to be made the will is determined “by that motive, which, as it stands in view of the mind, is the strongest”<sup>1</sup>. Thus, according to Edwards, decisions are made on the basis of the *strongest influence*.

It follows that the goal of a man who wants to make good decisions should be to acquire, as it were, the right store of strongest influences. Another way to put this is that such a man should seek wisdom and experience which will guide him properly in his decisions.

It also becomes clearer how God, through His sovereign control over all things, arranges the experience of those He loves so that the strongest influences in us are shaped in a way that will direct future decisions according to His will. In this way He directs our paths, causing various acts of our will to be irresistible, whether they relate to matters of salvation or otherwise.

### ***Renewing the Mind***

Given that the will is the mind deciding, we can understand the biblical emphasis on the renewing of the mind.

“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will.”  
Romans 12:2

We should follow the encouragement of James:

“If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.” James 1:5

And be encouraged that Jesus “grew in wisdom and stature” (Luke 2:52) and was thus a forerunner for all who were to follow him.

The Psalmist describes the plight of a young man seeking to plumb the right course in life.

“How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word. I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands.” Psalm 119:9-10

There are two things I would like to point out from this passage in Psalms.

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<sup>1</sup> Edwards. The Freedom of the Will.

## ***Decision Making and the Law of God***

First, we see that those who want their way to be pure must do so by living according to God's word. Another way of saying this might be that *good decision making is synonymous with obedience to God's Word*.

The Word of God describes the boundaries within which decisions should be made. Jesus clarified these boundaries by pointing out that the Law and the Prophets hang on the following commandments:

"'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" Matt 22:37-39

One thing which is clear from this is that *decision making is to be other-persons centred*. My own experience confirms that, when we think about decision making, we usually think about decisions as they affect us - what we will buy, a choice of career, a job, where we will live. However, the law of God, as it is summarised by Christ, points to others as the proper focus of our concern.

Do we act properly in our decision making as it affects others? The nature of our obligations will vary depending on factors such as gender, maturity and calling, but the duty is binding on us all.

In like manner we need to respond in an appropriate way to the decision making of others. This will mean that we are not obstructing them in their obligation to obey God's law.

A model of other-persons centredness is Christ as He agonised in the garden.

"Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." Luke 22:42

We note the focus was on what God wanted him to do and what was good for others.

## ***Working Together***

The second thing we see in Psalm 119:10 is a partnership between the young man and God. On the one hand the young man makes a commitment to seek God with all his heart. On the other hand he cries out to God to energise him in his pursuit.

This is a model for every man who seeks to keep his way pure and is part of a broader co-operation between the believer and his Maker.

*On our part* this means determining to do things which are positive to a growing Christian life. For example, it is important to surround yourself with good influences, particularly to be on guard regarding the people who lead and shape you. Be discerning about what you do with your time and how you are occupied in your thought life.

Jonathan Edwards, who is quoted earlier, knew this principle from an early age. Between the ages of nineteen and twenty years he developed seventy resolutions which he aimed to read over once a week in an effort to guide his priorities, thoughts and actions. Edwards was well aware of the principle understood by the young man in the Psalm we are looking at, in that he preceded his resolutions with the following statement:

Being sensible that I am unable to do anything without God's help, I do humbly entreat Him by His grace to enable me to keep these resolutions, so far as they are agreeable to His will, for Christ's sake.

The Resolutions of Jonathan Edwards are reproduced at the end of this study.

*On God's part* it means He is at work in us, leading us and causing us to grow in wisdom. We should have confidence in God's faithfulness and intentions for us.

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." Jer 29:11

Earlier I referred to a way in which God directs the believer, by arranging our experience so that the *strongest influences* in us are developed, which will in turn direct our will to make the decisions which are pleasing to Him. There are other ways in which God directs our decisions. These include the limits imposed by the decisions of others; what is possible to do according to the laws of nature; and the availability of resources which are outside our control.

The sovereign action of God in and around does not mean that the Christian does not retain moral responsibility. Rather, we are to exercise our moral responsibility with the confidence that God is at work to help us in this pursuit. We are to proceed with the encouragement that our decisions will, in their natural outworking, be the fruit of the Spirit in us.

### ***A Misunderstanding***

There is a common misunderstanding that we will be directed daily in our decisions by hearing God or by being led by an unction that we sense from His Spirit. Although these experiences may take place from time to time, the Scriptures do not point to this as the norm.

The following joke shows up the lighter side of this issue.

There once was a minister who work one morning, showered, and proceeded to his wardrobe to select some clothes. He opened the wardrobe and said "What will I wear today Lord, the blue suit or the gray one?" A voice responded from heaven, "I'm your Father, not your mother".

One way in which this daily intimacy is referred to is being "led by the Spirit", and is often spoken of in association with being "filled with the Spirit". However it is arguable that a key text often used here (Ephesians 5:18) could be rendered as being "controlled by the Spirit". The sense of it is thus a call for us to yield to God's Spirit and to allow Him to have His way. Further, the idea that the Spirit's work in us has do with the renewing of our mind is reinforced when we look at Colossians 3:16 and note how it complements and adds understanding to Ephesians 5:18.

### ***Decision Making and the Modern Age***

We are endowed differently in our decision making. This certainly applies as we compare ourselves with those around us. Factors such as gender, calling and maturity are relevant here.

In a prosperous, Western nation like Australia we are also endowed differently in our decision making when we compare ourselves with our forebears. Prosperity, technology, a tolerant moral environment and an individualistic ethos means that it is easier to make decisions that were difficult or not possible in earlier times. Decisions such as where we will live, whether as young people we will live with our parents, whether and when we will have children, the job we will have, who we would like to rule over us and what we will buy are easier to make. We seem to have an added measure of control over our circumstances. This brings with it added responsibility and the need to think even more carefully about our freedom as decision makers.

## THE RESOLUTIONS

OF

Jonathan Edwards

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*Being sensible that I am unable to do anything without God's help, I do humbly entreat Him by His grace to enable me to keep these resolutions, so far as they are agreeable to His will, for Christ's sake.*

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### **Remember to read over these Resolutions once a week.**

1. Resolved, that I will do whatsoever I think to be most to God's glory, and my own good, profit and pleasure, in the whole of my duration, without any consideration of the time, whether now, or never so many myriads of ages hence. Resolved to do whatever I think to be my duty and most for the good and advantage of mankind in general. Resolved to do this, whatever difficulties I meet with, how many soever, and how great soever.
2. Resolved, to be continually endeavoring to find out some new contrivance and invention to promote the aforementioned things.
3. Resolved, if ever I shall fall and grow dull, so as to neglect to keep any part of these Resolutions, to repent of all I can remember, when I come to myself again.
4. Resolved, never to do any manner of thing, whether in soul or body, less or more, but what tends to the glory of God; nor be, nor suffer it, if I can avoid it.
5. Resolved, never to lose one moment of time; but improve it the most profitable way I possibly can.
6. Resolved, to live with all my might, while I do live.
7. Resolved, never to do anything, which I should be afraid to do, if it were the last hour of my life.
8. Resolved, to act, in all respects, both speaking and doing, as if nobody had been so vile as I, and as if I had committed the same sins, or had the same infirmities or failings as others; and that I will let the knowledge of their failings promote nothing but shame in myself, and prove only an occasion of my confessing my own sins and misery to God. July 30.
9. Resolved, to think much on all occasions of my own dying, and of the common circumstances which attend death.
10. Resolved, when I feel pain, to think of the pains of martyrdom, and of hell.
11. Resolved, when I think of any theorem in divinity to be solved, immediately to do what I can towards solving it, if circumstances do not hinder.

12. Resolved, if I take delight in it as a gratification of pride, or vanity, or on any such account, immediately to throw it by.
13. Resolved, to be endeavoring to find out fit objects of charity and liberality.
14. Resolved, never to do any thing out of revenge.
15. Resolved, never to suffer the least motions of anger towards irrational beings.
16. Resolved, never to speak evil of anyone, so that it shall tend to his dishonor, more or less, upon no account except for some real good.
17. Resolved, that I will live so, as I shall wish I had done when I come to die.
18. Resolved, to live so, at all times, as I think is best in my devout frames, and when I have clearest notions of things of the gospel, and another world.
19. Resolved, never to do any thing, which I should be afraid to do, if I expected it would not be above an hour, before I should hear the last trump.
20. Resolved, to maintain the strictest temperance, in eating and drinking.
21. Resolved, never to do any thing, which if I should see in another, I should count a just occasion to despise him for, or to think any way the more meanly of him.  
(Resolutions 1 through 21 written in one setting in New Haven in 1722)
22. Resolved, to endeavor to obtain for myself as much happiness, in the other world, as I possibly can, with all the power, might, vigor, and vehemence, yea violence, I am capable of, or can bring myself to exert, in any way that can be thought of.
23. Resolved, frequently to take some deliberate action, which seems most unlikely to be done, for the glory of God, and trace it back to the original intention, designs and ends of it; and if I find it not to be for God' s glory, to repute it as a breach of the 4th Resolution.
24. Resolved, whenever I do any conspicuously evil action, to trace it back, till I come to the original cause; and then, both carefully endeavor to do so no more, and to fight and pray with all my might against the original of it.
25. Resolved, to examine carefully, and constantly, what that one thing in me is, which causes me in the least to doubt of the love of God; and to direct all my forces against it.
26. Resolved, to cast away such things, as I find do abate my assurance.
27. Resolved, never willfully to omit any thing, except the omission be for the glory of God; and frequently to examine my omissions.
28. Resolved, to study the Scriptures so steadily, constantly and frequently, as that I may find, and plainly perceive myself to grow in the knowledge of the same.
29. Resolved, never to count that a prayer, nor to let that pass as a prayer, nor that as a petition of a prayer, which is so made, that I cannot hope that God will answer it; nor that as a confession, which I cannot hope God will accept.

30. Resolved, to strive to my utmost every week to be brought higher in religion, and to a higher exercise of grace, than I was the week before.
31. Resolved, never to say any thing at all against any body, but when it is perfectly agreeable to the highest degree of Christian honor, and of love to mankind, agreeable to the lowest humility, and sense of my own faults and failings, and agreeable to the golden rule; often, when I have said anything against anyone, to bring it to, and try it strictly by the test of this Resolution.
32. Resolved, to be strictly and firmly faithful to my trust, that that, in Proverbs 20:6, «A faithful man who can find?» may not be partly fulfilled in me.
33. Resolved, to do always, what I can towards making, maintaining, and preserving peace, when it can be done without overbalancing detriment in other respects. Dec. 26, 1722.
34. Resolved, in narrations never to speak any thing but the pure and simple verity.
35. Resolved, whenever I so much question whether I have done my duty, as that my quiet and calm is thereby disturbed, to set it down, and also how the question was resolved. Dec. 18, 1722.
36. Resolved, never to speak evil of any, except I have some particular good call for it. Dec. 19, 1722.
37. Resolved, to inquire every night, as I am going to bed, wherein I have been negligent, - what sin I have committed, - and wherein I have denied myself; - also at the end of every week, month and year. Dec. 22 and 26, 1722.
38. Resolved, never to speak anything that is ridiculous, sportive, or matter of laughter on the Lord' s day. Sabbath evening, Dec. 23, 1722.
39. Resolved, never to do any thing of which I so much question the lawfulness of, as that I intend, at the same time, to consider and examine afterwards, whether it be lawful or not; unless I as much question the lawfulness of the omission.
40. Resolved, to inquire every night, before I go to bed, whether I have acted in the best way I possibly could, with respect to eating and drinking. Jan. 7, 1723.
41. Resolved, to ask myself, at the end of every day, week, month and year, wherein I could possibly, in any respect, have done better. Jan. 11, 1723.
42. Resolved, frequently to renew the dedication of myself to God, which was made at my baptism; which I solemnly renewed, when I was received into the communion of the church; and which I have solemnly re-made this twelfth day of January, 1722-23.
43. Resolved, never, henceforward, till I die, to act as if I were any way my own, but entirely and altogether God' s; agreeable to what is to be found in Saturday, January 12, 1723.
44. Resolved, that no other end but religion, shall have any influence at all on any of my actions; and that no action shall be, in the least circumstance, any otherwise than the religious end will carry it. January 12, 1723.

45. Resolved, never to allow any pleasure or grief, joy or sorrow, nor any affection at all, nor any degree of affection, nor any circumstance relating to it, but what helps religion. Jan. 12 and 13, 1723.

46. Resolved, never to allow the least measure of any fretting uneasiness at my father or mother. Resolved to suffer no effects of it, so much as in the least alteration of speech, or motion of my eye: and to be especially careful of it with respect to any of our family.

47. Resolved, to endeavor, to my utmost, to deny whatever is not most agreeable to a good, and universally sweet and benevolent, quiet, peaceable, contented and easy, compassionate and generous, humble and meek, submissive and obliging, diligent and industrious, charitable and even, patient, moderate, forgiving and sincere temper; and to do at all times, what such a temper would lead me to; and to examine strictly, at the end of every week, whether I have done so. Sabbath morning. May 5, 1723.

48. Resolved, constantly, with the utmost niceness and diligence, and the strictest scrutiny, to be looking into the state of my soul, that I may know whether I have truly an interest in Christ or not; that when I come to die, I may not have any negligence respecting this to repent of. May 26, 1723.

49. Resolved, that this never shall be, if I can help it.

50. Resolved, I will act so as I think I shall judge would have been best, and most prudent, when I come into the future world. July 5, 1723.

51. Resolved, that I will act so, in every respect, as I think I shall wish I had done, if I should at last be damned. July 8, 1723.

52. I frequently hear persons in old age, say how they would live, if they were to live their lives over again: Resolved, that I will live just so as I can think I shall wish I had done, supposing I live to old age. July 8, 1723.

53. Resolved, to improve every opportunity, when I am in the best and happiest frame of mind, to cast and venture my soul on the Lord Jesus Christ, to trust and confide in him, and consecrate myself wholly to him; that from this I may have assurance of my safety, knowing that I confide in my Redeemer. July 8, 1723.

54. Whenever I hear anything spoken in conversation of any person, if I think it would be praiseworthy in me, Resolved to endeavor to imitate it. July 8, 1723.

55. Resolved, to endeavor to my utmost to act as I can think I should do, if, I had already seen the happiness of heaven, and hell torments. July 8, 1723.

56. Resolved, never to give over, nor in the least to slacken, my fight with my corruptions, however unsuccessful I may be.

57. Resolved, when I fear misfortunes and adversities, to examine whether I have done my duty, and resolve to do it, and let the event be just as providence orders it. I will as far as I can, be concerned about nothing but my duty, and my sin. June 9, and July 13 1723.

58. Resolved, not only to refrain from an air of dislike, fretfulness, and anger in conversation, but to exhibit an air of love, cheerfulness and benignity. May 27, and July 13, 1723.

59. Resolved, when I am most conscious of provocations to ill nature and anger, that I will strive most to feel and act good-naturedly; yea, at such times, to manifest good nature, though I think that in other respects it would be disadvantageous, and so as would be imprudent at other times. May 12, July 11, and July 13.

60. Resolved, whenever my feelings begin to appear in the least out of order, when I am conscious of the least uneasiness within, or the least irregularity without, I will then subject myself to the strictest examination. July 4, and 13, 1723.

61. Resolved, that I will not give way to that listlessness which I find unbends and relaxes my mind from being fully and fixedly set on religion, whatever excuse I may have for it—that what my listlessness inclines me to do, is best to be done, etc. May 21, and July 13, 1723.

62. Resolved, never to do anything but duty, and then according to Ephesians 6:6-8, to do it willingly and cheerfully as unto the Lord, and not to man: knowing that whatever good thing any man doth, the same shall he receive of the Lord.Š June 25 and July 13, 1723.

63. On the supposition, that there never was to be but one individual in the world, at any one time, who was properly a complete Christian, in all respects of a right stamp, having Christianity always shining in its true luster, and appearing excellent and lovely, from whatever part and under whatever character viewed: Resolved, to act just as I would do, if I strove with all my might to be that one, who should live in my time. January 14 and July 13, 1723.

64. Resolved, when I find those groanings which cannot be utteredŠ (Romans 8:26), of which the Apostle speaks, and those breakings of soul for the longing it hath,Š of which the Psalmist speaks, Psalm 119:20, that I will promote them to the utmost of my power, and that I will not be weary of earnestly endeavoring to vent my desires, nor of the repetitions of such earnestness. July 23, and August 10, 1723.

65. Resolved, very much to exercise myself in this, all my life long, viz. with the greatest openness, of which I am capable of, to declare my ways to God, and lay open my soul to him: all my sins, temptations, difficulties, sorrows, fears, hopes, desires, and every thing, and every circumstance; according to Dr. Manton's 27th Sermon on Psalm 119. July 26, and Aug. 10 1723.

66. Resolved, that I will endeavor always to keep a benign aspect, and air of acting and speaking in all places, and in all companies, except it should so happen that duty requires otherwise.

67. Resolved, after afflictions, to inquire, what I am the better for them, what am I the better for them, and what I might have got by them.

68. Resolved, to confess frankly to myself all that which I find in myself, either infirmity or sin; and, if it be what concerns religion, also to confess the whole case to God, and implore needed help. July 23, and August 10, 1723.

69. Resolved, always to do that, which I shall wish I had done when I see others do it. August 11, 1723.

70. Let there be something of benevolence, in all that I speak. August 17, 1723.