

When it comes to big decisions, how much do we need to rely on God to tell us what to do?

# Making Decisions: Agency <sup>VS.</sup> Revelation

By Erin Rider

Every day each of us faces many decisions. Some are more mundane, like, “What should I wear?” “What should I eat for lunch?” “Is it time to buy a new car, or can I hold on to my old one a little longer?” But every so often we come across a big decision—“Should I go back to school?” “Should I accept this job?” “Should I move to a new city?” “Should I buy a house?” “Should I date this person?” “Should I marry this person?” and so on.

When confronted with big decisions, we tend to—appropriately—take a little longer to make a choice. We follow the advice given to Oliver Cowdery in Doctrine and Covenants 9:8–9, where the Lord says:

“But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right.

“But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought that shall cause you

to forget the thing which is wrong.”

Although this is certainly good counsel, when it comes to big decisions, sometimes we rely a little too much on the part where God tells us what is right and not enough on the part where He tells us to study it out in our minds. We become so bogged down waiting for God to confirm our decisions that we let incredible opportunities pass us by. We may even recognize the role of agency, but we’re terrified of making a decision that could take us off course from our predetermined “plan” and end up assuming that anything other than a burning in the bosom or a voice from heaven means that our decision is wrong. For many of us, this unspoken tension between agency and personal revelation leads to one significant question: What is God’s role in helping us make decisions?

## God’s Role in Our Decision-Making

Perhaps this question is best addressed through the story of the



brother of Jared. There's an interesting pattern of growth in this story that teaches us about the way God expects us to make decisions. After the languages were confounded at the Tower of Babel, Jared asks his brother to inquire of the Lord whether they should leave the land, and if so, where they should go (see Ether 1:36–43). The brother of Jared asks, and the Lord leads them to the seashore. As they travel, the Lord speaks to them in a cloud and directs every step of their journey. Eventually they reach the seashore, where they stay for four years.

At the end of the four years, God tells the brother of Jared to build barges and to get ready to cross the ocean. When the brother of Jared realizes the ships will have no air, he follows the same familiar pattern of going to God to ask what he should do. As expected, the Lord responds by giving him detailed instructions to make holes in the tops and bottoms of the ships. Notice the pattern of revelation so far: God gives them a plan, they ask questions about how to fulfill the plan, and God responds with detailed and definitive answers.

But after he makes holes in the ships, the brother of Jared realizes that the ships will have no light. He once again asks God what he should do. Instead of answering, however, God asks, "What will ye that I should do that ye may have light in your vessels?" (Ether 2:23). Rather than giving detailed instructions as He had



before, this time the Lord waits for the brother of Jared to decide what to do.

This kind of answer from the Lord is perhaps the hardest to understand when trying to make a decision. We are taught to pray and wait for an answer, so naturally we worry when we hear nothing in response. Often we wonder if the lack of a clear answer qualifies as a “stupor of thought” indicating our choice is wrong. Other times we wonder if it means we are not righteous enough to hear the answer or if we are not asking with “real intent” (see Moroni 10:4). But there is a third option that sometimes we don’t consider—maybe, like with the brother of Jared, God is waiting for *us* to make our *own* decision.

## Making a Decision

I recently encountered a situation that challenged the way I thought about agency and personal revelation. As I was

nearing the end of graduate school, I had a few different job offers in different cities and could not decide which one to take. Like the brother of Jared, I had experienced many moments where I had prayed about a major decision and God answered with a pretty definitive response. Relying on those prior experiences, I began to pray and ask God to help me decide which job I should take. I was also doing my part by learning about each job opportunity and counseling with many people. But no matter how much I prayed or fasted, the heavens stayed silent, and I received no answer.

The deadline to make a decision was approaching, and I began to panic. Surely this was the kind of decision the Lord must care about, so why wasn’t He answering? Maybe He didn’t care about which job I chose, but He must care about which city I moved to since it would

undoubtedly have an impact on my life. The Lord had always cared about my decisions in the past, so why would He not care about this one too?

Yet no matter how hard I tried, no answer came. I started to wonder if I had drifted far enough away from God that I could not hear His answer. I also wondered if I could not hear because I subconsciously did not *want* to hear the answer. Finally, the day before the deadline, I knew I had to make a choice, so I used my judgment and made a decision. That night I simply prayed, asking if He would tell me if my answer was wrong. Still no response came, so I went ahead and took the job.

Several months later, I was still questioning my decision, so I asked for a priesthood blessing to receive reassurance. In the blessing I was told that I didn’t get an answer to my prayer because the Lord was happy with any decision I made.



This blessing reinforced advice previously given to me by my mission president, who told me that oftentimes it doesn't really matter what decision we make. God wants us to learn how to stand on our own two feet and decide how to live our lives. My mission president also reminded me that God, as our Heavenly Father, won't punish us and take away promised opportunities if we are sincerely trying to figure out what to do.

The brother of Jared likely could have suggested almost any solution to lighting the barges, and the Lord would have been fine with it. The point of the experience was not only for the brother of Jared to strengthen his faith but also to learn how to make a decision.

### **Exercising Agency**

From an eternal perspective, exercising agency is a necessary component to

personal growth. Without it, we cannot make the kinds of decisions that will help us achieve our full potential. Growth, like everything else in the gospel, comes "line upon line, precept upon precept" (2 Nephi 28:30). God wants us to be a prepared people, not a paralyzed people, and He expects us to use our agency to live our lives as best we can.

Once we learn to find the balance between agency and revelation, we can experience true spiritual growth. This is what happened to the brother of Jared. After thinking it through, he worked to molten 16 stones out of a rock and asked God to touch them and make them glow (see Ether 3:1-5). This time, when God responded, everything changed. Rather than hearing the voice of God in a cloud, the brother of Jared actually *saw* the Lord, who not only appeared in person but also showed the brother of Jared

incredible visions of the world and everything that was to come (see Ether 3:6-26). It is possible that the brother of Jared would not have been spiritually prepared to receive that vision if he had not first experienced the personal growth that came from making his own decision.

As we make decisions, we should certainly follow Alma's advice to "counsel with the Lord in all [our] doings" (Alma 37:37). When the Lord needs us to make a specific decision, He will let us know and help prevent us from going astray. But we must also be prepared to stand up and move forward in faith, whether or not an answer comes. As long as we are keeping our covenants and staying true to the gospel of Jesus Christ, we can feel confidence in our righteous decisions and peace that the Lord is pleased with our efforts. ■

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