



## 107: 8 Books for Soulful Decisions

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 107.

This is a podcast about making decisions but also about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or if you just need a few minutes away from the constant stream of information, and the sometimes delightful but also distracting hum of entertainment, you're in the right place for a thoughtful story, a little prayer, and a simple next right step. Another thing you could use, some trusted resources to have on hand when you face decisions and need perspective. In today's episode, I'll share eight books that I recommend for decision making clarity.

Now, if you've been listening for any amount of time, not one of these recommendations are going to surprise you. Most of them I quote from often, and you might even be rolling your eyes at me by the end of this episode. But it seemed fitting for me to have them all in one place and to dedicate at least one episode to some of the books that I've turned to over the years that have helped to shape my own decision making process, path and posture. Listen in.

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How we make decisions is at least as important, if not more important, than the decisions we actually make. That's why, when I recommend books for the purpose of helping you make better, more soulful decisions, they won't focus too heavily on decision making rubrics or, honestly, as you'll soon find out, on decision making at all. That's because my perspective on decision making is less about procedure and more about posture. So the books that have been most helpful to me over the years aren't the ones that tell me how to make a list, but ones that helped me shape my life as a listener. Because really, when it comes down to it, decisions are all about listening. In calling and vocation, relationships and

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conflict, as we choose to stay or to go, to buy or to sell, to agree, disagree, or chart a new path, all these ultimately lead to a choice, but the choice is shaped by how well we listen to ourselves, to God and to one another.

How might God be moving among those of us in our church community? What does my daughter long for in this moment? What story does my life really want to tell? These questions, and more like them, are ones that can't be overlooked in favor of a three-step process, not if we want to make soulful decisions. That's why I've created this list of books that have helped me to become a better listener, more in tune with the way God is moving within me, around me, and between me and others. So first up is two books that will help create space for you to listen to God.

### **#1. *Hearing God* by Dallas Willard**

The subtitle is *Developing a Conversational Relationship with God*. If God has something to tell me, he's not going to let me miss it. That's one of the many things I've learned from reading Dallas Willard. He writes in his book, *Hearing God*, that when he asks something of God, for direction or clarity in some way, he states it simply and then devotes the next hour or so to "housework, gardening, driving about on errands, or paying bills." Basically, things that keep his hands busy but his mind open. That's why, P.S., most of our best ideas often come when we're washing the dishes or in the shower. It's because we're busy doing something, but our mind is free to wander.

But anyway, back to the book. Then, in that same section of *Hearing God*, Dallas Willard says, "I've learned not to worry about whether or not this is going to work. I know it does not have to work, but I'm sure that it will work if God has something he really wants me to know or to do. This is ultimately because I am sure of how great and good he is."

What a beautiful perspective on listening to God, on laying out your request and questions before him, and then making space to hear and to listen and to trust that if God has something to say, he's going to make it clear. This book has helped me to rest, even in the midst of my unknowing. So that's number one.

### **#2. *Invitation to Retreat: The Gift and Necessity of Time Away with God* by Ruth Haley Barton**

Now Ruth writes that we need to pull back from our busy-ness, from life in our culture, from other

people's expectations, and our own compulsions, from whatever is not working in our lives. And I love that perspective that she brings in this small book, *Invitation to Retreat*, because she helps us practically lay the groundwork for what an actual time away with God can look like. Now, I've also learned a lot from a few of Ruth's other books, namely, *Invitation to Silence and Solitude*. That was the first one I read. And also, *Sacred Rhythms*, which is a book about arranging our lives for spiritual transformation.

But back to this book, *Invitation to Retreat*. It's given me practical ways to create space for my soul, for the sole purpose of being with God without an agenda. And listen, when I have decisions to make, I can't think of anything more important.

Alright, my next category of books for soulful decision making is two books that have helped me listen to my own life. This one will come as no surprise.

### **#3. *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* by Parker J. Palmer**

It's a short book. It's easy to tuck away in your bag, or to take with you anywhere. I come back to this one again and again when I need a reminder to pay attention to the shape of my own soul and to let Christ live through me whatever way he wants to.

Here's a favorite quote that I have said here on the podcast, I've put it in several of my books, and I'll read it to you now from *Let Your Life Speak*: "The soul speaks its truth only under quiet, inviting and trustworthy conditions. The soul is like a wild animal, tough, resilient, and yet exceedingly shy. If we want to see a wild animal, the last thing we should do is to go crashing through the woods, shouting for the creature to come out. But if we're willing to walk quietly into the woods, and sit silently for an hour or two at the base of a tree, the creature we wait for may well emerge."

That's just a small taste of the type of wisdom found in this tiny book, *Let Your Life Speak*. This book has taught me a lot, but most especially, it's been and continues to be a kind companion when I have doubts or decisions to make about my vocation.

Alright, that was book three.

#### **#4. *You Learn by Living: 11 Keys For a More Fulfilling Life* by Eleanor Roosevelt**

Okay, first of all, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt wrote this, and wow. She wrote it at age 76, and it reads like matter-of-fact common sense. There are some great quotes in it, and stories, but mostly, the reason I'm including it on this list now isn't so much about what she said in the book. I mean it is, but it's more the way in which she said it. I actually think we would all do well to write a similar book for ourselves, our own personal, you learn by living mantra.

What has your living taught you about life? What vital principles do you now know because you've been paying attention? Then, based on those things, the question is, how will what you've learned by living shape the rest of your life?

Well, that's why I included this book on this list about soulful decision making. She's not necessarily talking in the book about decision making, but the fact that she wrote a book about 11 keys, things that she's learned throughout her life that have shaped her living. Now that is a powerful concept and it's something that I want to keep in mind in my own writing.

Alright, next category. You ready? That's four books that I've mentioned already. Moving on, listening to others. I have one book that I always recommend. You know probably what it is. It's just one book when it comes to listening to others. There are lots of great ones out there, but this one is always top of my list.

#### **#5. *The Listening Life* by Adam S. McHugh**

The subtitle is, Embracing Attentiveness in a World of Distraction. The book covers many categories of listening that I'm talking about in this episode, and then, even more than that, he talks about what it means to listen to our life, listen to God, to creation, to scripture. But when I think back on the gift this book has been to me, it's been what Adam writes about listening to one another in life, and especially in pain. It seems like everyone wants to talk, but no one wants to listen. Think about it, we have a public speaking requirement in college, it's the class everybody seems to dread. What about public listening? I think that could change the world, if we were equally required to take college credit on how to listen. We don't know how to do it. It's an epidemic. Adam's writing is profound, it's lyrical, it's self deprecating in all the right ways.

He writes in the book, and this is a quote from Adam. “People talk past each other, eager to be heard, but somehow deaf to what’s being said. Listening is an essential skill for healthy relationships, both with God and with other people. But it’s more than that. Listening is a way of life.”

Well, if you have decisions to make in your life and you want to have a posture of making them soulfully, I can’t recommend this book highly enough. *The Listening Life* by Adam McHugh, a way to create a life practice of listening as a way of life.

Well, now I’m moving on to some practical books. Well, they’ve all been practical, but, of all the books on this list, this next one might be the most directive, almost like a step-by-step. But I’m including it here because it’s helped me shape my own decision making posture, and that was the criteria for including books in this episode.

#### **#6. *Atomic Habits* by James Clear**

And his subtitle is, *An Easy and Proven Way to Build Good Habits and Break Bad Ones*. I listened to this one on Audible. I started it on a Saturday morning cleaning out my garage, and by the end of the day I was on chapter 14. I just kept not turning it off. I’ve often quoted this statistic that adults make over 35,000 decisions every day. Well, we know all those decisions are not conscious ones, most of them are habitual. So this book on building good habits was compelling to me for that reason.

James Clear writes, “Your habits are modern day solutions to ancient desires.”

Think on that one for just a minute, it’s kind of blowing my mind. Well, this book was almost so simple that it was dumb. I mean, the book wasn’t dumb, but it was almost so simple that I felt dumb reading it and being like, oh yeah, of course. But I think that’s the very reason why we need it. When it comes to making tiny changes that bring about a big difference, it’s vital that we do four things according to James Clear. Make it obvious, make it attractive, make it easy, and make it satisfying. Great advice. You can dig more into it in the book *Atomic Habits*, which is book number six on my recommended list.

Okay, this next book, book seven, is another one that I have quoted from a lot.

### **#7. *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less* by Greg McKeown**

This is a business book and actually I think it is in the decision making category. Basically, the way of the essentialist isn't about getting more done in less time, it's about getting only the right things done. It's a systematic discipline for discerning what is absolutely essential, and then eliminating everything that's not so we can make the highest possible contribution towards the things that really matter.

Now that might sound harsh and it might sound like, oh my gosh, that's going to be cutting out a lot of things in my life. And maybe that's true, which is exactly why this book was really meaningful to me. I have chronic trouble with making decisions, especially when I first read this book several years ago. And after I read it, what it did for me was, it brought things into Claritin-like focus for me, specifically as it related with my commitments, my calendar, and my work flow objectives.

Well, finally, I hesitated to put this book on the list, but I have to because it fits.

### **#8. *The Next Right Thing* by me**

Which is a simple soulful practice for making life decisions. Like I said, on the one hand, it feels weird to include my own book on this list, but on the other hand, I agree with Seth Godin who says, "The book that will most change your life is the one you write," and that has most certainly been true for me in every single case.

So in an episode about what books have been the most impactful on my own life, in making soulful decisions, well, it's been this one, the one I wrote. During one of the busiest seasons of my adult life, as you may already know, I wrote this book, *The Next Right Thing*. We had three teenagers, I was working full time, I was getting my master's degree, and in the cracks and crevices of time, I put this book together. And what I learned, more than anything, is doing the next right thing is not a marketing sticky statement, it's not a cutesy phrase to put on a mug, and for me, personally, it's not a seasonal focus until I come up with my next book idea. Doing the next right thing now, it's a lifestyle. It's a lifeline and it's a prayer, and I hope that it's become that for you as well.

It's gotten me through discouragement, relational conflict, impossible scheduling issues and deadlines, and countless other life situations, both big and small. I wrote this book for you, and I wrote it for me, and I hope if you haven't gotten your copy yet, you'll either think of someone to give it to or grab

one for yourself. But, even more than that, my prayer, as we continue to navigate the path of decision making, that's often foggy and unpredictable, my prayer is that we would remember, more than anything else, that God is with us and he will never leave us alone.

And so with that in mind, may our week be filled with his comfort. If our best efforts fall flat and our decisions don't lead to desired outcomes, may we learn the wisdom of drawing close to God in our weakness as it paves the way for his unshakeable strength. May we remember we were made for more than short answers and clear paths, and may we never be content to settle for less as we continue to simply do our next right thing in love.

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Thanks for listening to Episode 107 of The Next Right Thing. Well, I'll have a complete list of all the books that I mentioned in today's episode in the show notes on my website. You can find those by visiting [thenextrightthingpodcast.com](http://thenextrightthingpodcast.com), where you can also find a link to download a transcript of this episode, as well as every other episode we've ever done.

As always, you can also find me [emilypfreeman.com](http://emilypfreeman.com), or on Instagram @emilypfreeman. And I have to say, I've really enjoyed going through my bookshelf and my book lists and remembering the books that have had a really profound impact on me and my own decision making path and posture. So I hope this has been a valuable episode for you. If you like it, maybe we'll do it again in the new year. We'll come up with a few more lists of books, I'm always reading, so I'm always finding new resources. And of course, here I only scratch the surface of books that have been meaningful for me so, maybe, stay tuned, we'll have more book episodes.

Well, in closing, here's a big picture perspective from Dallas Willard in that first book I recommended in the episode, *Hearing God*. He writes this, "The rivals of God's voice, small, still, and within, continue to be necessary then, and have their place, but once we're earnestly seeking God and get beyond the need to have big things happening to reassure us that somehow we are alright, and possibly that others are not, then we begin to understand and rejoice that as Jesus so clearly lived and taught, the life of the Kingdom is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit."

Thanks for listening and I'll see you next time.

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