

Coaching People Out of Flat Lives

by Tony Stoltzfus

Years ago I read a well-known book on the life of King David that really made an impact on me – just not one that I think the author intended! While David is probably my favorite Biblical character, I wasn't getting much out of the book until I started to tune into the author's point of view. Each incident in David's life (such as his fling with Bathsheba) was carefully examined in terms of right and wrong choices and the fruit those choices bore.

Then it hit me: there was no hint of any kind of developmental process in how David's life was treated. How could that be? If I had experienced the death of my best friend (Jonathan) or my wife being taken away and given to another man, or my king and my sponsor (Saul) turning on me and trying to kill me, surely it would change me inside as a person. I would (if I responded well) mature as a leader, come to a deeper dependence to God, learn to release many of the clinging things of life that hold us back from full abandonment to God's will. Or if I responded poorly I might become embittered and angry. But one way or another, I would not be the same man afterward as before.

But this book contained no sense of one incident building on another to make David into a new man, and no picture of God as the ultimate builder of character, taking every incident in David's life using it to gradually mold him into a man fully after God's own heart. David was simply a leader going through life, facing one right and wrong choices after another, and reaping the fruit of whatever choice he made. In other words, David was making choices, but his choices did not lead to growth or change in who he was. The overall effect was like looking at one of those life-sized cardboard cut-outs instead of a real, flesh-and-blood person.

Many of the people you will coach lead what I call "flat" lives—they see life as a series of individual, disconnected right and wrong choices. If they make the right choice they please God, and if they make the wrong choice they fail. But no matter which choice they make, there is no awareness of each decision coming to them at a God-designed moment as part of a grand master plan to remake who they are. Life is not a developmental process of becoming like Christ: it is a true-false test where you either confirm who you already are or get dinged when you pick the wrong answer. This type of "flat" life is one that fundamentally misses the point of the Christian faith: it makes life is about doing the right things instead of about becoming a new person.

Coaching Flat-Lifers

One way you can apply this insight in a coaching relationship is in dealing with challenging circumstances. When you have a "flat life" paradigm, there is no real way to deal with the fact that bad things happen to good people, because there is no sense of difficult circumstances being part of a larger plan to produce Christ's character in you. Life circumstances are robbed of much of their positive meaning. If your client loses his job or has a friend turn away from her, flat-lifers will tend to look for the bad choice they made that caused the bad circumstance, or get mad at God for treating them unfairly, or begin to withdraw from God because he seems capricious. The assumption is, if I do things right life ought to work (see Genesis 4:7). If life isn't working the way I expect it to, either I made a wrong choice somewhere or God has abandoned me.

A coach's job in this kind of situation is to help the client regain perspective on life. One practical technique for doing this is to ask the client to make the assumption that God is in this

situation and can leverage it for good (Rm 8:28). Then you ask the person to begin thinking down that path. Here are some examples of these types of questions:

- Let's say just for the sake of argument that this is just the kind of situation you need to grow right now. If that were true, what would you say is going on in this situation?
- Assume for a moment that God is sending you exactly the kind of circumstances you need to open your heart to him in a new way and grow. What would you say he is doing? [Be careful with this one—some circumstances clearly are not from God!]
- If you engaged this as an opportunity to build character and grow as a person instead of an unjust situation, how would that change your responses?

Flat-Life Decision Making

A second application of the developmental perspective is to decision-making. For flat-lifers, every decision is an opportunity to fail. If I make the “right”, moral decision, haven't I done what any good Christian ought to do? I am a Christian and therefore I ought to make right choices as a matter of course. On the other hand, if I make wrong decisions I can really get a lot of negative consequences in my life. In other words, there is no upside for a flat-lifer when making decisions: life is a constant battle to maintain my static position with God. This is a key reason why people get so locked up and stuck when making decisions: they are in a no-win situation. And we wonder why people aren't bolder in stepping out into their life purpose!

The key to getting out of this way of thinking is to realize that (because many if not most life decisions are not matters of moral absolutes), *God is more interested in who you are becoming than what you are doing*. If your client's choice is, do I buy this house or that house, or do I keep this job or quit and find another, how that person meets God in the process of making the decision is usually much more important than the choice itself. Any “teller” can give you a “right” answer: only a coach can help you become a different person through how **you** make the choice. Becoming a great decision maker (becoming a different person) is far more significant than making one right decision (doing it right). The purpose of God in history is not to have a group of people who make the “right” choices—it is to build His people up into a worthy bride for the Son of God.

How do you coach toward this perspective? One technique is to have the client identify a decision from the past, help them rediscover what they learned through that process, and then apply the same learning mindset to the current situation. Another way is to take them a long way into the future and consider the real long-term implications of this decision. Then give them a scenario where they meet God in the decision making process and become a different person through this decision (for instance, by laying down a certain fear). Which will be more significant: the learning and identity shift, or the decision itself? The key to this technique is for the person to identify something internal that is holding them back in the decision-making process, and to have them visualize getting beyond that issue. Usually that will be very significant in the client's eyes!

So be on the lookout for the flat-life perspective in those you coach: getting beyond it can be a life-changing experience!