



House Speaker Mike Johnson Shepherds Contentious Foreign Aid Bills Through Congress

The Wired Word for the Week of April 28, 2024

Editor's note: *We generally avoid political stories in The Wired Word. We have selected this story, however, not for its political considerations, though obviously they are part of the story, but to focus on the idea of leadership development, which has implications for those called to lead in many situations of life, including non-political ones.*

In the News

Last Saturday, April 20, the U.S. House of Representatives, under the leadership of Speaker Mike Johnson (R-La.), finally passed three controversial national security bills on a bipartisan basis, to aid Ukraine, Israel and the Indo-Pacific region, and a fourth bill authorizing the seizure of Russian assets to fund the Ukrainian war effort and requiring the popular social media app TikTok to be sold or face a ban in the United States.

The speaker opted to present the bills separately, to win the support of more GOP lawmakers. Part of the \$60.8 billion designated for Ukraine would be a loan, which could be forgiven starting in 2026. The bill includes \$26.4 billion for Israel and humanitarian aid to Gaza, and \$8.1 billion for Taiwan.

The \$95 billion package combined the bills before Johnson sent it to the Senate, where the vote this past Tuesday was 79-18 in favor of the measure. President Joe Biden pledged to sign it "immediately to send a message to the world: We stand with our friends, and we won't let Iran or Russia succeed."

James Michael Johnson, 52, a four-term representative, rose to power following the ouster of Kevin McCarthy (R-Ca.) last October and the inability of other more well-known Republicans to gain enough votes to secure the gavel.

By allowing votes on the funding bills, Johnson angered some hardliners of his own party opposed to aid to Ukraine, including Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Ga.), who filed a motion to remove him from the speakership. Over half of House Republicans, including Ukraine-born representative Victoria Spartz (R-In.), voted against aid for Ukraine, but the bill passed easily by a vote of 311-112.

Some objected to the high price tag, the lack of oversight due to reports of Ukrainian corruption, and a desire to keep the United States from heavy involvement in foreign wars. Others voiced concern that the package should have prioritized U.S. border security over funding for Ukraine. But earlier bipartisan efforts in the Senate to combine a foreign aid package with significant changes in immigration policy went nowhere, after former President Donald Trump voiced his opposition to the bill.

Aid to Israel had more bipartisan support, and passed the House 366-58. Opposition to the Israel aid bill came mainly from far-left progressive Democrats, 37 of whom voted against the aid, citing their opposition to Israel's military actions in Gaza which they view as contributing to the suffering of Palestinian civilians. They were joined by 21 Republicans, who mainly were opposed to the cost.

The Indo-Pacific bill also had wide support, and passed 385-34. A bill that might eventually ban the Chinese-owned app TikTok -- or require its sale -- also had widespread support, passing in the House 352-65, with 50 Democrats and 15 Republicans opposed.

Some on the far right were simply incredulous that Johnson was willing to work with Democrats to arrive at bipartisan agreement on other matters, such as funding the government and reauthorizing foreign surveillance legislation known as FISA. But Mike Lawler (R-NY) said, "The function of being speaker is to try to build consensus, and I think he wanted to find consensus among the conference. Unfortunately, there are some folks that are just unwilling to compromise."

For his part, Johnson, who is second in line to the presidency, said, "My philosophy is do the right thing and let the chips fall where they may. If I operated out of fear over motion to vacate, I would never be able to do my job. Look, history judges us for what we do," Johnson told the press. "I could make a selfish decision and do something that's different, but I'm doing here what I believe to be the right thing. I think providing aid to Ukraine right now is critically important."

"I've done here what I believe to be the right thing, and that is to allow the House to work its will," the Speaker clarified.

Johnson warned that Russia, China and Iran are "a global threat to our prosperity and our security. Their advance threatens the free world, and it demands American leadership. [If] we turn our backs right now, the consequences could be devastating."

The evolution of Johnson's perspective on Ukraine appears to have been shaped by classified intelligence briefings by CIA Director William J. Burns and others in the U.S. covert community, political considerations and personal concerns. Once a strong opponent of aid to Ukraine, he heard from Republicans like Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), Trump's former CIA director and secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, House Foreign Affairs Chairman Michael McCaul (R-Tex.) and two other House national

security panel chairs -- Michael R. Turner (R-Ohio) and Mike D. Rogers (R-Ala.) -- about the urgent need to support Ukraine.

"I really do believe the intel," Johnson said. "I think that Vladimir Putin would continue to march through Europe if he were allowed. I think he might go to the Baltics next. I think he might have a showdown with Poland or one of our NATO allies."

"All of a sudden, he's realizing that the world depends on this," McCaul said. "This is not some little political game on the floor."

Hearing from many European leaders, including Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, and from evangelical Christians in the United States and Ukraine about Russia's persecution of Ukrainian Christians, also moved Johnson, a devout Southern Baptist, whose faith "guides him in every major decision he makes," according to one Republican member of the House.

"He was torn between trying to save his job and do the right thing," McCaul said. "He prayed over it." McCaul said Johnson told him, "I want to be on the right side of history."

"And I think he will be," McCaul said. "I think putting the nation above himself, it's a real profile in courage, what he did."

Johnson has been frank about his personal stake in the outcome of the foreign funding proposal. His son enters the Naval Academy this fall.

"To put it bluntly, I would rather send bullets to Ukraine than American boys," he said. "This is a live-fire exercise for me, as it is for so many American families. This is not a game. This is not a joke."

Johnson also received polling data indicating that a large majority of voters in swing districts favor aid to Ukraine, which made the argument for passage of the bill more palatable to his GOP colleagues up for reelection.

Some have dubbed Johnson an "accidental speaker," who has shown surprising "political courage, notable legislative skill and political dexterity." He has even been compared to British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who reversed Britain's policy of appeasement of Nazi Germany during World War II. Sources near Johnson say he feels that the future of Western democracy weighs heavy on his shoulders. For his part, Johnson sees himself as a "servant leader" in the Christian tradition.

"I'll never forget Johnson one time said, 'I've gone from representing my district only to representing the entire [House] and the country,'" said one member of the House. "For someone to go from where he was to where he is now as quickly as he did ... is remarkable."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[The Evolution of Mike Johnson on Ukraine.](#) *The Washington Post*

[How Johnson Came to Embrace Ukraine Aid and Defy His Right Flank.](#) *CNN*

[House Passes Aid for Ukraine, Israel, Taiwan After Months of Republican Infighting.](#) *USA Today*

[Senate Approves Aid for Ukraine and Israel, Sending It to Biden's Desk.](#) *The New York Times*

[Senate Passes Ukraine, Israel Aid Package.](#) *The Wall Street Journal*

[Why Some Republican Senators Oppose the \\$40 Billion Ukraine Aid Bill.](#) *The Wall Street Journal*

Applying the News Story

There are plenty of biblical figures who didn't feel qualified or prepared to fulfill the role to which God was calling them.

When God commissioned Gideon to deliver the Israelites from the Midianites, Gideon answered, "But sir, how can I deliver Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family." The Lord assured him of his presence and victory over the enemy ([Judges 6:1-16](#)). God further demonstrated that numbers don't matter when the Lord is fighting for you, when he gave Gideon victory over the mighty Midian army using only 300 soldiers blowing trumpets ([Judges 7:1-23](#)).

When Solomon ascended to the throne, God invited him to ask for whatever he wanted. Solomon acknowledged that he was "only a little child [who didn't] ... know how to go out or come in" and that the task of ruling such a great nation with so many people was a bit overwhelming. So Solomon requested "an understanding mind to govern God's people, able to discern between good and evil." God was pleased to grant his request ([1 Kings 3:5-14](#)).

When God called Jeremiah a prophet to the nations, Jeremiah replied, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy" ([Jeremiah 1:4-6](#)). But God assured Jeremiah that his youth and inexperience were not barriers to service as long as God was with him to guide him and give him the words he needed to convey God's message ([Jeremiah 1:7-10](#)).

When the Lord appeared in all his glory to Isaiah, the prophet felt undone by his awareness of his sin and unworthiness in the presence of a holy God, but God cleansed him to fit him for the commission he had for him ([Isaiah 6:1-8](#)).

Paul encouraged his protégé, Timothy, "Let no one despise your youth, but set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity" (1 Timothy 4:12). [?make link?](#)

According to author [Bryan Dik](#), "God equips the called, and He also calls the equipped." God can use whatever skills and training we have, and supplement and make up for whatever experience and knowledge we lack. When God calls us to follow, he will provide us with whatever resources we need in that journey.

As Paul wrote, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" ([Philippians 4:13](#)).

The Big Questions

1. When, if ever, have you been challenged to accept a role or to perform a task for which you felt ill-equipped or unprepared? If you knew that God would provide everything you needed to effectively perform the task to which he was calling you, would you accept God's commission? What, if anything, might lead you to decline?

2. When have you been surprised at the rise of a person from relative obscurity, who emerged as an effective leader? What factors contribute to a person's development as a leader?

3. What is the role of faith in leadership development?

4. What character traits are needed in an effective leader?

5. How can faith communities encourage young people to strengthen God-honoring character traits, adopt positive values that make the common good a high priority, and rise to meet the challenge of God's call?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Exodus 3:11-15

But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" He said, "I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain." But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations." (For context, read [Exodus 3:7-15](#).)

When Moses encountered God at the burning bush, he was far removed from his past life as the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter and a fugitive from justice after he killed an Egyptian who was abusing a Hebrew slave. Forty years had passed, and he may well have expected to live out his days in obscurity, until God appeared, expressing concern for the Israelites still

suffering under Egyptian taskmasters and announcing his plan to deliver them from bondage. To accomplish this goal, God declared that he was sending Moses to Pharaoh to bring his people out of Egypt (vv. 7-10).

But Moses had many objections to this plan: He wasn't qualified, he had a disability (he stuttered), other people were better suited for leadership, he might not be accepted by the people he was sent to help, he didn't know how to prove he had God's authority, etc.

What made Moses effective was not so much his skills or lack thereof, but the fact that God promised to be with him and to equip him for the task to which he had been called.

Questions: How did God change Moses' question, "Who am I?" and how did that redirect Moses' focus?

What is the significance of the way God names himself, as "I AM WHO I AM"? What is the significance of the fact that God identifies himself as the God of the Israelites' ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? Why might understanding that God is the God of our ancestors be important to us as well?

Esther 4:13-16

Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai, "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my

maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish." (For context, read [Esther 4:5-17](#).)

Queen Esther learned that Haman, a high government official, had set a plan in motion to destroy the Jews, in order to steal their property. Mordecai, her relative, urged her to go to the king to plead for her people (for she was also a Jew). To approach the king without having been summoned into his presence was to risk death. With the stakes so high, Esther urged Mordecai to gather all the Jews together to fast and pray on her behalf for three days and nights. Then she said she would go to the king.

Questions: For what, if anything, would you be willing to risk everything, even death? How might you use the role or position you have to advocate for those who do not have your access to resources or power? What was the importance of the role of other Jews who did not have Esther's position or privilege? Why was it important to Esther that the faith community support her in this way?

1 Timothy 2:1-4, 8

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity. This is right and acceptable before God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. ... I desire, then, that in every place the men should pray, lifting up holy hands without anger or argument ... (For context, read [1 Timothy 2:1-8](#).)

In our highly polarized environment, it might be easy to forget Paul's urgent admonition to believers to pray and thank God for "all who are in high

positions." We can easily fall into the trap of panic, anxiety, anger or confusion when we see chaos and evil proliferate around us. But one of the antidotes to such emotional responses is deliberate, active prayer for people who hold levers of power, that they will use their authority for the good of all.

In some churches, every worship service contains public prayer that includes intercession for the president, governor and mayor. All well and good! That's a good place to start, if we haven't done that much yet. But we would do well to lift up members of the legislative and judicial branches of government, on all levels (national, state and local). In addition, we might also pray for cabinet members, ambassadors and other government officials. Whenever possible, we might do so by name.

Then, whenever we have occasion to communicate with people in high positions about an area of concern, we can also let them know that we are praying for them. No doubt, that news would be encouraging to most if not all of them.

Questions: Should we pray that government officials will make decisions according to what we think is right? Why or why not? How can we pray for executives, legislators, judges and other authorities, most effectively? What should we ask God for? Why does Paul say we should pray "without anger or argument"?

Numbers 24:10-13

Then Balak's anger was kindled against Balaam, and he struck his hands together. Balak said to Balaam, "I summoned you to curse my enemies, but instead you have blessed them these three times. Now be off with you! Go

home! I said, 'I will reward you richly,' but the Lord has denied you any reward." And Balaam said to Balak, "Did I not speak to your messengers whom you sent to me, saying, 'If Balak should give me his house full of silver and gold, I would not be able to go beyond the word of the LORD, to do either good or bad of my own will; what the LORD says, that is what I will say'?" (For context, read [Numbers 24:10-17](#).)

[Numbers 22-24](#) tells the story of Balaam and his encounter with Balak, the king of Moab. As the Israelites made their way out of Egypt toward the Promised Land, their large numbers struck fear in the hearts of the Moabite residents who lived there. Balak asked Balaam to come and curse the Israelites, so that he might drive them from the land. Balaam asked God what he should do, and God told Balaam to refuse the request, for the Israelites were blessed.

Balaam relayed the message to Balak's representatives, but the king persisted, sending more officials to persuade Balaam. He promised Balaam honor, but Balaam replied that even a gift of the king's palace full of silver and gold wouldn't be enough to cause him to defy the Lord God. But if they wanted to stay the night, he'd consult with God to see if there were any further instructions. God reiterated that Balaam should only do what he told him to do.

The Moabites pressured Balaam and offered him enticements to come over to their side. Balaam had to decide whether to follow God's instructions, or yield to the Moabites' push and pull, out of fear of what they could do to him if he refused, or out of desire for the benefits they offered him.

Questions: How can you discern what God desires you to do, amid the many voices crying for your attention? Where can you find courage to resist

threats, implied or explicit, and the moral strength to choose the will of God, no matter what the cost?

For Further Discussion

1. Comment on this, from TWW team member Frank Ramirez, about the usefulness of compromise:

"The council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) recognized that believers might well retain ethnically appropriate practices while sharing the same faith. Judging from [Galatians 2:1-10](#), Paul thought he gained more than he gave. While retaining core beliefs it is possible for churches to embrace a both/and attitude toward approaches to practice. ...

"And when the people of God, returning from exile, could no longer be ruled by a king, they compromised and accepted detente as a province in a larger Persian empire.

"As it says in the Book of Mick Jagger, 'You can't always get what you want. But if you try sometimes, you might find you get what you need.'"

What are you willing to compromise to get what you think you need or even what you think God wants you to have? When would compromise be unacceptable, and why? When would compromise be useful and why might it be desirable at times?

2. Read the text of the hymn, ["Once to Every Man and Nation"](#), which is based upon the poem ["The Present Crisis"](#) by James Russell Lowell. First published in 1845 and written to protest the Mexican-American War, which Lowell viewed as part of a push to annex Texas as a state permitting slavery, the poem became an anthem of the antislavery movement. Civil rights leader, Martin Luther King Jr., often referenced the poem in his speeches and sermons.

How often do "moments to decide ... for the good or evil side, ... twixt that darkness and that light" come to every person and nation? Why does it take courage to choose truth and justice over fame, prosperity and profit? What role does "the multitude" play in your own decision-making?

How might the third stanza reflect the experience of Speaker Mike Johnson? Other leaders who faced agonizing decisions due to extraordinary circumstances? How do people "upward still and onward [in order to] ... keep abreast of truth"?

What hope does Lowell describe in the fourth stanza, in spite of the cost of standing up for what is good and right?

3. Consider this: Speaker Mike Johnson told reporters that when times get tough, he takes comfort in a story about former President John Quincy Adams. When Adams was serving in Congress, another legislator asked him why he kept offering the same resolution to end slavery, only to see it fail repeatedly. Johnson said Adams replied: "Duty is ours. Results are God's."

"To me, that's a very liberating thought," Johnson said. "I'm going to do my duty, and the results are not ultimately up to me. I'm comfortable with that. We'll see what happens, and we'll lay the chips down on the table."

4. Watch this video: ["Moses" - Ken Medema in concert at Azusa Pacific University 3/18/13 \(Video 8:45\)](#).

What do you hold in your hand this day? Are you willing to give it to God right now?

Give it up. Let it go. Throw it down.

And see what God will do.

Responding to the News

1. You may want to meditate on how God would have you respond when you are faced with a new challenge, while listening to one of these renditions of James Russell Lowell's hymn.

[Once to Every Man and Nation \(Video 5:25\).](#) *Songs and Everlasting Joy*
[Once To Every Man And Nation - Gospel Quintet \(Video 4:47\).](#) *Classic Hymns*

2. Here's [one tool to guide you in praying for government officials](#). Check online for other resources.

Prayer

God, our Good Shepherd, who leads us to pleasant pastures and through dark valleys, we pray for those in leadership in our churches and civic life. Grant them wisdom in decision-making, humility in interpersonal relationships, and compassion for the people they lead. Help us to learn effective ways to communicate with our leaders, lending encouragement and support while providing truthful feedback that can help them lead effectively toward a future that is fair and just for all. Amen.

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