

Decisions...decisions

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[0 : 00] Thanks, Adrian. Good morning, everyone. Decisions, decisions. Life is full of decisions. Studies show that the average adult makes an average of 70 conscious decisions per day.

And that's not including all the subconscious decisions our mind also makes, but just the conscious ones where you actually weigh up pros and cons and decide on a course of action. 70 times per day on average.

Now that's a lot of decisions, and that's a lot of decisions that you're going to be making in your lifetime, isn't it? 70 per day means over 14,000 per month, 1,400 per month, which over an average lifetime you'll make in the region of 15 million conscious decisions.

Now, to be fair, many of those decisions are just not that important, like what socks you're going to wear this morning. Although, I mean, that might be important if they're socks that your mother-in-law gave you and you're going to see her that day, then maybe it's important that you choose what socks you're going to wear.

But most, let's assume for argument's sake that three-quarters of the conscious decisions you make are not really that important. They're just inconsequential. That still leaves about 10 to 15 decisions per day, which are in some way important.

[1 : 15] They in some way affect your life or the lives of the people around you. That still adds up to three and a half million choices in your life, which are significant. Scary thought, isn't it?

3.5 million times you're going to make a decision that matters. Now, tell me, how many of those three and a half million decisions are going to be the right ones?

How many of the ones you've already made have been the right ones, looking back? Because let's be honest, lots of decisions we make aren't the right ones in hindsight, are they? We look back on decisions we've made and we go, that was stupid.

That wasn't the right decision. I'm sure you don't have to think that far back to remember a poor decision that you've made. And you think about this. It's all of those decisions.

You might look back and say, okay, yeah, I made some poor decisions. But if that trend continues, at the end of your life, you're going to be where you are because of all of those decisions. All of those decisions that you make add up to determine where your life goes and where you end up.

[2 : 22] And so the question I want you to think about this morning is, how can you make sure you are making the right decisions in your life? It's a more important question than we normally give it credit for.

But how can we make sure that of all those three and a half million decisions we're going to be making in our lives, we are making the right ones? Now, I can say with some confidence that you've made at least one good decision in your life, and that is to be in church this morning.

Because the decision to sit under God's word is never the wrong decision. Let me tell you that. In fact, that's a good rule of thumb. If you ever go through a day where you know you've just messed it up, you've made all the wrong decisions, there is always one right decision you can make before you go to bed, and that is to open God's word.

Remember that. And it's the right decision that you came to be here this morning because you're also, this particular morning, going to learn how to make better decisions in your life.

If you listen carefully, I can assure you that by the end of today, you'll know how to make better decisions. Let me tell you why. Because this morning, we're going to be looking at Isaiah chapter 9, verse 6, which is part of our Old Testament reading this morning.

[3 : 39] In fact, this whole month of December, including Christmas Day, we're going to be looking at that one verse. Isaiah chapter 9, verse 6. And it goes like this. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders, and he will be called Wonderful

Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Now, I've chosen to focus on that verse because it's a very Christmassy verse, isn't it? Very popular verse at Christmas time. There's hardly a carol service that goes by where you don't hear Isaiah 9 read out.

And yet, it wasn't originally a Christmas reference. In fact, God gave it to Israel 700 years before the first Christmas even happened. And so we've got to understand the situation in which it was originally written.

And if you look back to Isaiah and you look back to Kings, which is the history book in which Isaiah was set, you'll find that Israel, the nation of Israel to which it was originally given, was in a very messed up state because of some really bad decisions that their leaders and also the people in general had made.

They had chosen to turn away from the God who had revealed himself to Israel, and they had chosen to follow the idols, the gods of the other nations. And so the true God would have been totally justified to just leave them to the consequences of those decisions, which is death and judgment, to turn away from the life-giving God.

[5 : 05] It can only result in death and judgment for both Israel and for any of us who choose to turn away from the God who made us. And God could have totally just left them to rot in that circumstance, but he didn't.

He didn't. He sent a prophet. He spoke to them still. He didn't turn his back on them. And despite all the bad decisions that got them into this sorry state, God still wanted to give them a way out of it because that's the type of God he is.

He's a God of grace, undeserved favor. He's a God of rescue. He's a God who saves. He's a God who wants to save people even from the consequences of their own stupidity.

And that we see in the nation of Israel and the history of Israel in our Old Testament. And so here he makes a promise to them through Isaiah. Isaiah and this promise he makes in Isaiah 9 is that he's going to do something new to change their situation.

And they've just got to look out for it and respond to it when it comes. So a few verses earlier, verse 2 of Isaiah 9, if you've got it open in front of you, we get the first glimmer of this promise that God is making of a new situation.

[6 : 18] Isaiah says this, verse 2. Remember, he's under the inspiration of God. This is not his idea. This is something that God has revealed to him. And he's looking forward.

He's seeing glimpses of what's to come. And he says this, The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in the land of deep darkness, a light has dawned.

Okay, so what God is promising to do through Isaiah is he's promising to send a light into their messed up, confused situation to show them a way out of it. It's the picture of imagine for a second that you're stuck in a dark cave.

You've been following a group of people who you thought they knew where they were going. And yet you find yourself in this dark cave and you don't know any way out.

Total pitch darkness. You know, you put your hand in front of your face, you can't see it. That dark. I don't know if you've ever been in a cave that's been that dark. But imagine you've been following these people thinking they're leading you on the right path and you end up in this pitch dark cave.

[7 : 21] You realize no one's got any torch as well. And to make matters worse, you start hearing scurrying noises around you. Some creatures in the darkness that have taken an unhealthy interest in your group.

How do you feel? You feel helpless. You don't know which direction to go. You don't know what to do. You're just frozen on the spot. Well, that's the situation Israel found themselves in when Isaiah wrote.

Their leaders had led them down a dark path of moral decay. And to make matters worse, the Assyrian army was scurrying on their borders, getting ready to invade. And they were stuck. They didn't know what to do. And so God told them what he was going to do. And he promised through Isaiah that he was going to one day give them a light out of the darkness, to show them a way out of the dark situation that their own sins had led them into, because that's the type of God he is.

But now what was this light that God was promising? What was this light going to be that was going to help them to get out of the situation that their sins had landed them in? Was it going to be

instructions to get them out, new laws for them to follow, to show them how to change their ways?
[8 : 33] Is that what God was going to do, give them a list of instructions? Well, think of it. You're in a dark cave. You can't even see your hand in front of your face, and somebody gives you a map of the way out of the cave.

That's not going to help. You can't read it. You have no ability to follow it. Well, that was the case in Israel. God wasn't going to give them new laws to help them to get out of their situation of sin, because they had no ability to follow it.

They had proven that. They couldn't even keep the old laws that God had given them. That's why they were in this mess in the first place. And so the solution isn't more laws. You know, that's always confused me about works-based religions, by the way.

So, you know, people will go to the priest or the imam or the rabbi, and they will say, I've confessed. I've broken God's laws. I feel guilt. What must I do? And what does the religious leader do?

Well, he gives them even more rules to keep to make up for the old ones that he's broken. That doesn't help, does it? But that's work-based religion for you. But it doesn't help, because what happens when you can't keep those new rules?

[9 : 37] And so that's not what God does with Israel here. The light that he promises is not more rules to keep. Rather, it turns out this light is going to be a person.

Because that's what the prophecy goes on to say in verse 6. For to us, a child is born. A son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders.

So this promised light is not going to be a new list of laws. This promised light is going to be a new leader who will be able to lead God's people out of the darkness that their current leaders have led them into.

A leader who knows the way out. A leader who is able to get out of the darkness. So even though you can't, in your own strength, get out of the darkness, God is sending someone who, if you follow him, you can.

That's what this prophecy is saying. And then, silence for 700 years. Until a Jewish carpenter arrives on the scene.

[10 : 39] After a birth which not many people noticed, and yet some amazing things happened. And then when he starts his ministry, Jesus Christ says these words in John 8.

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. Suddenly, what he says there in John makes sense.

In light of Isaiah. Excuse the pun. Because Jesus is referring to Isaiah's prophecy there. And he's saying he is the one who God promised to send to light the way out of the darkness.

But there's a twist. Because he doesn't just say he's the light for Israel. What does he say? I am the light of the world. And so, we realize this problem, which we saw in the nation of Israel, is actually indicative of the problem of the whole world.

The whole world is actually in darkness, stuck in the cave with no way out. As a result of our sin and separation from God. Each and every one of us, by default, is in that cave.

[11 : 50] Darkness. Darkness. And even if we're given the map, we can't read it. We can't. Even if we're given laws, like those Ten Commandments up there on the wall, we can't follow them.

Because of the sin that's in our hearts. Human society today is really not that different from Israel's situation in the time of Isaiah.

Yes, we might have smartphones now and cars and planes. But, really, the situation hasn't changed. Our society is chasing after idols, still. Turning away from the living God who gives us life and chasing after money and pleasure.

And all the other kind of gods that the world creates. We've drifted far away from our Creator. We have no respect for His laws. We fail to keep them. And the average person on the street doesn't even know what they are.

And our leaders? Do they help the situation? No. Because they're just as lost as everyone else. They have no idea how to get us out of this situation that we're in as a modern society.

[12 : 59] And God would be totally justified just to leave us like this. But He doesn't. He wants to give us a way out of the darkness because that's the kind of God He is.

He wants to give you a way out of the darkness that your sins have caused in your life. And all your bad decisions have landed you in.

And so how does He do that? Does He give you more rules to follow? No. No. No. No. Actually, He gives you a person to follow. The person of Jesus. But now how can Jesus be your light in your life? And we talk about this. Jesus says, I'm the light. And we must follow Him. But what does that mean? How is He the light? How does Jesus actually, in your particular life, show you the way out of the darkness?

Well, Isaiah goes on to tell us. By giving Him four different names. In verse 6. Look at it again. Now, this is such a well-known Christmas verse.

[14:11] I said earlier, it's read so often during Christmas time that I think, to some extent, it's lost its significance. Kind of like if you've lived in Cape Town for a long time.

You don't see the mountains and the sea anymore, do you? I mean, you come from Joburg and it's amazing. It's beautiful. And it just strikes you. You can't help, like, when you're driving, looking up at the mountains.

But Cape Townian, been here for a few years. You don't even notice it anymore. You actually got to make a conscious effort to appreciate the beauty that is around us. Well, in the same way, that's what I want us to do with this verse in Isaiah.

I want us to make a conscious effort to re-appreciate what it really means. To understand what each of these names mean to get a better idea of who Jesus really is to us. And how he's uniquely qualified to lead you out of the darkness that your sins have and your bad decisions have put you in.

And so today, I just want to focus on the first name. Wonderful Counselor. Because basically what that name implies is that Jesus is the one who has been sent to help you stop making bad decisions.

[15:17] That's essentially what the word counselor means. Someone who guides you on a path of wisdom. I mean, you have counselors in various aspects of life, don't you?

Presidents have counselors. You've got psychological counselors. You've got all kinds of different counselors who supposedly guide you on the path of wisdom.

Now, what is wisdom? Well, we discovered when we studied Proverbs a little while back. Wisdom is the ability to make right decisions that result in the best outcome.

And so you can have wisdom in any area of life depending on what your outcome is. You can be wise in how you invest your money if your outcome is to get rich. You can be wise in how you care for your health if your outcome is to live long.

A military general can be wise in how he commands troops if the outcome is to kill the enemy. Because wisdom is making right decisions for the best possible outcome, whatever that outcome may be.

[16:20] But then we carry on reading Proverbs, which is one of the books of wisdom in the Bible. And we discover that actually the ultimate wisdom is making the right decisions for the best eternal outcome.

But that wisdom can only come from God and not from ourselves. We can't figure it out because we can't see beyond this life. And so we don't know what decisions to make for the best eternal outcome in and of ourselves.

Should I be a Muslim? Should I be a Buddhist? You know, the confusion of all the different religions in the world is proof that we really don't know the way out of the darkness. Different people try different paths.

But we're still all in the same spiritual darkness. But we don't need to stay there. Because God has given us a way out because that's the kind of God he is.

God has sent someone to light the way. A counselor. But no ordinary counselor. Although we're told he is a wonderful counselor. A wonderful counselor. He's not the same as your psychological counselor.

[17:30] He is a wonderful counselor. Now, I think we've really destroyed the word wonderful in how we use it today. We typically use it to describe the socks we get from our mother-in-law. Oh, they're wonderful.

Thank you. Or the nativity play that our kids wear. Yeah, it was a wonderful play, wasn't it? But actually, what the real word wonderful actually means, it's not cushy and fluffy like that. The real word wonderful means full of wonder or something extraordinary that you can't explain.

Something supernatural beyond human understanding that leaves you speechless. And so what this name wonderful counselor really means is someone who not just gives us wise advice for this life, but wise advice for eternity.

Wisdom that is beyond our ability to work out for ourselves. That is wonderful. That is beyond our own explanation. Beyond human understanding. That's the kind of counsel this counselor gives us. You see, Jesus came to bring us wisdom from heaven. He came to bring wisdom from heaven into your life. He came to bring eternity into your life.

[18 : 41] And wisdom for eternity. And people could tell that the moment he came and started his teaching ministry. I mean, there's this encounter recorded in Mark when Jesus taught at a local synagogue.

Mark chapter 1. I'll just read an excerpt for you. It says, when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.

So the words that came out of his mouth when he taught, when he spoke, were different from anything else these people had ever heard before. They were different from what the normal religious teachers taught.

They were full of wonder because they contained wisdom from heaven that no one else had. The words of Jesus contains wisdom from heaven, from eternity, that no one else has.

Least of all Google. But even all the other religious teachers put together, they do not have the kind of wisdom that Jesus can give you if you listen to him. And that's why in Colossians, the New Testament reading this morning, the Apostle Paul writes this to the people he's ministering to.

[19 : 53] Colossians chapter 2. He says, my goal is that they may have the full riches of complete understanding in order that they may know the mystery of God.

The mystery. What's a mystery? Something that you can't work out. But Paul knows these people now can. The mystery can be solved.

The previously unknown wisdom from heaven can be found out. And he goes on to explain how, namely Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ Jesus. All that you need to know to make the right decisions in life for the best possible eternal outcome, you have to look no further than Jesus Christ.

Because all of that wisdom is hidden in him. And so if you learn to follow Jesus, and I mean really follow him, not just pay him lip service on a Sunday, but let him come in and take over your life as your Lord and Savior.

[20 : 57] As your master daily. That is to follow Jesus. I mean those disciples in the Gospels. It was emphasized when they chose to follow Jesus, they dropped what they were doing.

They walked away from their old life. Following Jesus wasn't just a matter of meeting up with him for coffee, you know, from time to time and hearing some advice, but then going back to their lives.

No, following Jesus is a 24-7 thing. And so if you learn to follow Jesus properly. He says, And only Jesus can lead you out of that darkness.

Why only him? Because the way he leads you. Now listen carefully. The way he leads you out of the darkness isn't just by giving you wise advice and rules to follow.

Don't make that mistake. Don't think the New Testament is just more rules. Yes, there's instructions of how to follow Jesus. Yes, there's instructions of how to follow Jesus more effectively. But the way he leads you out of the darkness is by dealing with the sin that put you there in the first place.

[22 : 30] By dying on the cross to pay for your sins in his body to open the way out of the darkness for you. That's how he did it. And so the way you follow him out of the darkness is not just to listen to his instructions.

But it's to follow him to the cross and put your trust in what he did for you there. And then being born again, as he says, and following him into a new life.

That's what the word repentance means. Turning away from the old and putting on the new. And that is why he is the wonderful counselor. Because he is the only person who can ever show you the right path out of the darkness and the confusion of this life.

And the darkness of your own heart. If you trust and follow him. And so I said earlier, you're going to see how you can make better decisions in your life. I assured you that you would if you listened carefully.

So do you see now? Have you listened carefully? You do that. You make better decisions in your life by following the wonderful counselor that God has sent to give you true wisdom for life and eternity.

[23 : 43] By trusting in him. By submitting to him. By following him in reality daily in your life. Because unless you do that, every decision you make, even the wisest decisions in your life, will still be foolish.

Because you will stay in darkness and end up in hell if your sins are not dealt with on the cross. If you don't make the decision in the short span of time that God has given you on this earth, you will look back on this life and you will say, I was a fool.

I don't want anyone here to say that. You see, trusting in Jesus is the wisest decision you will ever make. And what's more, that one decision will in a flash wipe out all the stupid decisions you've made.

Not to say you'll never make another stupid decision, but the decision to follow Jesus wipes out your stupid decisions or the consequences of those. Because even those stupid decisions can't affect your eternity if you're in Christ.

That is the assurance we have of salvation through faith alone. But now even if you've done that, you may well have done that already.

[25 : 00] Even if you've truly trusted in Jesus as your Lord and Savior and you are following him. Remember not to drift away from the light that you've seen. You know, if a rescuer comes into that dark cave with a light to lead you out, you're not going to let him out of your sight, are you?

In fact, he's the only thing you can see. But you're not going to drift away. You're not going to, you know, he's over there and you're going to, oh, I want to explore this cave a little bit more. No. If the rescuer has come to bring you out of the darkness, you're going to keep your eyes fixed on him. And yet Christians think that once we're safe, once we're following Christ, well, now we can look around, we can relax, we can get distracted by the things of the world.

Well, you can't. You can't. Not for a second. As Hebrews says, you've got to fix your eyes on Jesus. Keep them fixed on him.

And it's easy once you've decided to follow him once in your life back then, it's easy to lose your focus on him. Don't do that.

[26 : 06] Because he is still the only one who can carry on leading you out of the darkness of this world and of the sin that is still in your heart. And so he's got to be your first and primary counselor in all your life.

Not your friends or your family or your husband or your wife or your pastor or your doctor. Because if those people don't lead you to find your ultimate counsel for life in Jesus, then they are only blind guides, as Jesus puts it.

And Israel had a lot of blind guides. And so Israel had to go through a lot of drama to realize that they needed a new counselor to lead them.

That they were incapable of leading themselves. Let me ask you, how much drama do you still need to go through in your life before you realize that about yourself?

How many more bad decisions do you need to make before you realize that following Jesus daily is not an option, but it's a necessity? How many more? How many more? And so as we're starting to supposedly wind down for the year, preparing for the end of the year, preparing for Christmas season, I hope that your devotion to Christ will not wind down.

[27 : 21] It tends to do that in holiday times. Be careful. I hope that you will take this opportunity this season to renew your devotion to him after maybe a busy year.

Realizing that despite all the Christmas lights you'll see this season, the world is still in deep darkness. And Jesus is the only one who can lead you safely out of it when you follow him.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we thank you for the prophecy of Isaiah to give us these new aspects on just who you are.

Thank you for being our wonderful counselor sent to lead us out of the darkness of sin and confusion. We look around in this world and we see it in so many ways.

The darkness is just covering this world. Thank you, Lord, that you've given us a way out. Help us to be disciplined, to follow Jesus, and not just to follow him as our light, but to show other people who are trapped in that darkness how they can get out as well.

[28 : 29] And so help us this season to renew our devotion to the wonderful counselor that you've given us. Amen.