

# The Promise of Choice

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[ 0 : 00 ] So one of the great distinctives, I think, of the time and culture in which we live is the veneration of choice. Where a wide range of choices are offered, this is seen as an unequivocal good thing.

Where there's limited choice or no choice at all, this is seen as restrictive and controlling. The way we've bought into streaming entertainment on platforms that offer us so much choice is an obvious testament to that.

But I think especially the way we use language to frame this idea of choice. Because the way we use our language suggests choice means freedom and reflects an attitude that is non-judgmental. People ought to be free to choose how to live their life. The opposite of choice is tyranny in the modern imagination. If you restrict someone's choice, you are restricting their very person, even denying their identity.

We have a right in our culture to choose what's best for us and to have no pushback that would deny us that right. Our culture venerates choice and the belief that all choices are equally valid and equally good.

[ 1 : 21 ] Now, in many ways, we are blessed to live in an age that affords us the ability to choose certain things that our ancestors didn't have the opportunity to choose.

Jobs or marriages, places to live, etc. But the problem is not so much the choosing, but rather the veneration of choice.

The conviction that all choices are of equal value and goodness is, in fact, I think, dangerous. Because, and here's the rub, not all choices are good.

We're looking at the third servant song in Isaiah. Continuing to see these songs as a servant manifesto from God about what Jesus would do to fix the world.

The thing about manifestos is you can choose to get behind them or you can choose to reject them. And this song, like any manifesto, offers us a choice. This choice is a binary choice.

[ 2 : 22 ] And more than that, there is an objectively good choice and there is an objectively bad choice. Now, in the servant song so far, what we've seen is that Jesus is the servant spoken about in these songs.

We've seen that one day he is going to bring global justice, that he came to deal with the problem of sin, and that he is the king before whom everyone will one day bow. And it probably comes as little surprise then that the nature of the choice presented in the third song is centered on the servant himself.

It's centered on Jesus. And the choice is simple. We can choose to follow him or we can choose to reject him. Now, to make any informed choice, we need data.

And that's what this song does. It sings of the servant himself, letting us listen about him, listen to him, and see him. And only then is a choice put forward.

So that's what we're going to do. We're going to follow the song. We're going to listen to the servant and then consider the choice that he puts before each and every one of us. So the servant speaks in his own words.

[ 3 : 39 ] And he begins by making the case that his words are worth listening to. Now, I like to treat myself on a Wednesday afternoon by watching prime minister's questions, each to their own, I think.

But every week, it's just full of so much waffle. And so I become less and less inclined to pay much attention to anything that's being said. So how do I know that the words of Jesus aren't just waffle? Well, we're given two good reasons as the song begins. One, his words are not the fleeting opinions of a mere man. His words come from God.

And two, his words are the perfect words for weary people. The song begins, Because the servant listens to instruction, he comes with a message that is not his alone.

There is an authority behind his words because they come not from the mind of a man, but from the heart of God. In the New Testament, two of Jesus' disciples record this dynamic.

[ 4 : 59 ] Matthew tells us about a time when Jesus had been teaching the crowds. And he reports that the crowds were amazed at his teaching because he taught as one who had authority.

And then John writes down Jesus' very words to his disciples on the night that he was betrayed. Jesus said, The words I say to you, I do not speak on my own authority.

Rather, it is the Father living in me who is doing his work. Now, if someone claims to have words from God, you might initially be disinclined to listen to them.

But if the crowds around him notice that this man's words really do have a kind of authority that they've just never encountered before, well, maybe he is worth listening to.

And the nature of the words themselves further prove their power. The song calls them words for the weary. A more literal rendering would be, I think this is quite helpful, a word in season for the fainting one.

[ 6 : 02 ] These are words of comfort, of power, words of restoration. Now, words are powerful. The right words can topple a government, can bring hope to the hopeless, or bring hurt.

When Jesus speaks, his words take on even more power. They are divine. And that power is directed towards the weary, the depressed, and the hurting.

This is illustrated, I think, rather powerfully by something else Jesus once said. Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart. And you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

Are you feeling weary and burdened? Has life just been grinding you down? Jesus has the words that will bring you rest and restoration, with a word for every season of your life.

[ 7 : 15 ] And this is what I think is the most distinctive thing about the Christian faith. Where most other religions focus on what you must do to be acceptable before God, Jesus says, come to me.

Where every life coach has a step-by-step plan for you to become your best version of yourself, Jesus says, come to me.

And where practically every worldview that's out there puts the responsibility for your life, and your identity, and your future, in your hands, and your hands alone.

Jesus says, come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Following Jesus is distinctive because Jesus is the focus.

And his message is about who he is, and what he has done, and what he will do. Now, in anyone else, this would look like arrogance. But with Jesus, his very life proved his humility.

[ 8 : 20 ] And the change that he brings to lives shows that he's not wrong. So we've learned then that Jesus is worth listening to. But then the song goes on to tell us more about his character.

And it sings of his obedience. Verse 5. The sovereign Lord has opened my ears. I have not been rebellious. I have not turned away.

Obedience is probably not a quality that enjoys a particularly high premium in our society. A desire for obedience sounds controlling, inflexible, Victorian.

Probably relates, actually, to that idea that all choices are equally valid and equally good. And no one has that right to condemn your choices. A request for obedience, by its very nature, doesn't offer choice.

But that's exactly why obedience is such an underrated quality. We don't celebrate obedience because obedience is hard. It means denying yourself and your own wishes and subjecting yourself to someone in authority over you.

[ 9 : 27 ] Obedience is not actually weakness. Obedience is strength. The strength to follow and the strength to leave your own desires behind. We see just how extraordinary Christ's obedience was.

I think it was clearly in the Garden of Gethsemane. His death was approaching. As he went to the Garden, Matthew records that he said to his disciples, My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.

Stay here and keep watch with me. And going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, My father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me.

Yet, not as I will, but as you will. And Matthew continues. He went away a second time and prayed, My father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away, unless I drink it, may your will be done. That cup that he's speaking of is his suffering on the cross. Obedience may not be fashionable, but when you look at what obedience looks like in the life of Jesus, are you not amazed?

[10:42] Amazed that despite the grief and the agony he's facing, the mental pressure, the spiritual attack, the physical torment, Luke tells us that he was sweating blood.

He says, May your will be done. And it's worth adding that if Jesus hadn't been obedient, hadn't gone to that cross, there would be no hope for the world and no hope for the weary.

So what we see then is that Jesus, the servant, is not just obedient, but actually in his obedience to God the Father, he's willing to suffer. Verse 6, I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard.

I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting. This one verse captures quite in a condensed form the cruelty that Jesus willingly subjected himself to.

In the Gospels, we see him flogged by Roman soldiers. He's beaten by them. They spit at him in contempt. We see him mocked by his own people, by his killers, even by those dying alongside him.

[11:59] And the key detail is that he let this happen willingly. He offered his back to those who would beat him and his cheeks to those who would pull out his beard.

The language here conveys a humble willingness to let his haters do as they will. Matthew records that Pilate, the Roman governor, asked Jesus, don't you hear the testimony that they're bringing against you?

But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge, to the great amazement of the governor. This is Jesus, obedient to the point of death.

But he didn't die for any crime of his. The servant is absolutely innocent. And more than that, because the servant is innocent, Isaiah promises that the servant would be vindicated.

And this in part is behind Christ's almost shocking obedience to his father. Verse seven reads, Because the sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be disgraced.

[13:07] Therefore, I have set my face like flint, and I know I will not be put to shame. Though Jesus faced the cruelest abuse, a staggering miscarriage of justice, and the most appalling kind of death, he did it willingly, because he knew the sovereign Lord would help him and would vindicate him.

It's worth pointing out here that God has called the sovereign Lord four times in this song. Isaiah does this to emphasize the fact that God is in sovereign control of events.

Jesus, praying in the garden, hanging on the cross, wracked in agony, knows that God the Father is working all things out for the ultimate good.

Now, it's a facet of God that we can struggle to wrap our heads around. And the aspect of it that this song draws our attention to is that the innocent Jesus suffered because he knew he would be vindicated by the sovereign Lord, his Father in heaven.

But though the focus here is very squarely on Jesus, it's worth saying that in this world where we will all suffer to some degree, and where we will all experience that weight of weariness that life thrusts upon us, that pressure of life that bears down heavily, God is sovereign and God is in control.

[14:42] In fact, it's because God is working to bring about a world where suffering no longer exists that Jesus actually came to suffer and to die. The innocent for the guilty, the just for the unjust, the perfect for the imperfect.

And it is his innocence and perfection which means he has been vindicated. The song continues, he who vindicates me is near. Who then will bring charges against me?

Let us face each other. Who is my accuser? Let him confront me. It is the sovereign Lord who helps me. Who will condemn me?

They will all wear out like a garment. The moths will eat them up. What we have here is courtroom language. And now in the recent trials that have gripped the headlines, the Wagatha Christie trial or Amber Heard versus Johnny Depp, none of the claimants really came out looking particularly good and once all was said and done, even those who technically had won.

That's not the case here with Jesus. The song imagines the servant calling on his accusers to confront him and condemn him. He openly challenges them to defend their false accusations

because he is both perfectly innocent and has the sovereign Lord defending him.

[16:08] And what does the song say to those who oppose Jesus? They will all wear out like a garment. The moths will eat them up. And isn't that just the case?

Where are the Pharisees and the Sadducees? Where is Pontius Pilate? Where is the might of Rome? Modernity might like to paint Christianity as an out-of-touch relic of a bygone age or accuse it of backward morals and hate or just to dismiss it as a myth.

But consider this. The movement that began after Jesus, the church, has not stopped in the 2,000 plus years since Jesus walked on earth.

But every movement and culture that has rejected him has worn out like an old pair of jeans and been finished off by the moths of time. It reminds me, if you'll allow me a bit of Shakespeare, of the famous part in Hamlet where Hamlet's holding up the skull of Yorick, a man he knew, and he considers death and the passage of time.

He reflects on how great men like Alexander and Julius Caesar have vanished into dust. Imperius Caesar, dead and turned to clay, might stop a hole to keep the wind away.

[17:27] Remarkable individuals, movements, and entire civilizations turn in time to dust and clay. Nothing more than the mud which might keep the wind at bay.

But Jesus Christ remains. And his church continues in every age. This is not some fluke of history or a glitch in the matrix.

This is because Christ has been vindicated as innocent and he has been declared by God to be the hope of the world. This is Jesus, the obedient and innocent servant who suffers willingly on behalf of others.

The one who has the perfect words for the weary. The one who has words of life for a world that is steeped in death. which is why we keep coming back day after day and week after week to look at him and to listen to him.

And it's only when we really look at Jesus then that we can make that informed choice about him.

And this brings us to the crux of the song because, as we've said, this song promises a choice.

[18:44] A choice to follow Jesus or to reject him. There's two angles to the choice, I think. The first concerns those of us who wouldn't maybe call ourselves Christians.

And to be frank, this is the big choice. The one that is of eternal significance. Will we follow Jesus? But there's also this second angle.

Because if you are following Jesus and you have already chosen him, the reality is that you face choices every single day. Choices about whether to follow Jesus or follow the world and the myriad temptations to sin which we all experience every day all the time.

Now these daily choices, if we choose unwisely, do not stop us being in Christ. That is essential to remember and I don't want to deny the reality of our assurance for a single second.

Salvation in Christ is not something that you can lose. Nevertheless, if you're following Jesus, you'll know that it is hard and that you're faced with choices of whether to follow his way or the world's way every single day.

[19:57] And so we must keep learning how to choose well. So in the final two verses of Isaiah 50, the song presents the choices.

Jesus or our own way. This is what Isaiah says about choosing Christ. Verse 10, Who among you fears the Lord and obeys the word of his servant?

Let the one who walks in the dark, who has no light, trust in the name of the Lord and rely on their God. Walking through life can feel like walking through a forest in the dead of night with no torch to guide your way.

Each step is full of trepidation and anxiety. Every sound a potential danger. The Psalms capture this feeling really well, especially Psalm 23, which is why we sang it earlier.

That Psalm says, Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. And this is exactly the point.

[21:03] As we walk through this dark wood of a world we need a guide. And Isaiah's imagery is powerful here because you'll notice that Jesus doesn't actually light the way in this metaphor.

Rather, he takes your hand and leads you along safe paths in the dark. You might not be able to see far ahead. You may only be able to feel his hand.

At some points in life, you may only be able to hear his voice faintly just up ahead. But in following him, he will lead you home.

In plain terms, though following Jesus is fraught with difficulty, he promises that he will lead us to God and eternal life in him.

As he told his disciples, I am the way and the truth and the life. The alternative option looks at face value to be the better choice.

[ 22 : 09 ] And Isaiah, as much as admits that through the imagery that he employs, but appearances can be deceptive. This is the other choice. But now, all you who light fires and provide yourselves with flaming torches, go, walk in the light of your fires and of the torches you have set ablaze.

This is what you shall receive from my hand. You will lie down in torment. Now, let's not beat around the bush here. These are strong words, harsh words even, for the simple reason that there is a right choice and a wrong choice.

And God wants us to choose the right choice, Jesus. As we walk through that dark wood, we might think it just makes sense to light a fire and see.

From a human perspective, sure. From God's perspective, no, actually. What does Isaiah mean when he speaks of lighting a fire?

Well, he means to follow the prevailing view of the culture we live in, to follow our own desires and our own views about how things should be, to follow a philosophy where every choice is valid and every choice is good and no one can tell you that you are wrong or making a mistake.

[ 23 : 31 ] Certainly not God. Who is he to interfere with your life? But that's just it. He is God. And he did interfere in human history and he did it in the kindest way imaginable.

He sent Jesus to suffer and die on your behalf. We'll consider in more depth what Jesus' suffering achieved in a couple of weeks' time, but for now, it suffices to say that Jesus came to suffer so that you could have a relationship with God and receive his gift of eternal life.

And more than that, receive his gift of Christ. The hand who holds your hand as you walk each day through the dark forest of your life.

In him is the road out of the darkness and into everlasting light. Isaiah himself puts it like this later in his prophecy. Your sun will never set again and your moon will wane no more.

The Lord will be your everlasting light and your days of sorrow will end. What a day that will be. A day that will stretch on forever and ever and ever.

[ 24 : 55 ] But it comes at a cost. Choosing Jesus. However, that cost is nothing to the cost of choosing our own way.

So as we close, let's listen to the words of Jesus himself. He was talking to his disciples here and he said, whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

For whoever wants to save their life will lose it. But whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. what good is it for someone to gain the whole world yet forfeit their soul?

Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.

And that's what it comes down to. Jesus has come to offer us this choice. And he urges us, he pleads with us to choose him and gain everything.

[ 26 : 12 ] The alternative is to reject him and lose more than you ever could conceive it was possible to lose. So if you have never chosen Jesus, all I can say is he is worth giving your life to.

And I recognize that's a huge claim. But if he is the man described in the Bible, he is worth every second of our lives that we have.

And no other way of life can possibly compete. And on that claim I would stake everything. if you do know Jesus and are shouldering your cross to follow him, keep looking at him, keep looking at his cross, keep listening to him and choosing him and loving him.

It might well feel very dark on the way, but with Jesus we know that it won't be dark at the destination.