

Wonderful Counsellor

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning everyone. It's great to be back for, as I also said, a little introduction to what we're going to be doing over the next few weeks in church as we build up to the 25th.

But to get us thinking this morning, I wonder if everybody could hold up nine fingers. Nine fingers. Here's the challenge to get us thinking this morning. I want you to turn to your neighbour, or anybody sitting around you if you're on your own, you can do it yourself.

I want you to try and describe yourself in nine words. Describe yourself in nine words. Now, let me just clarify the rules so there's no cheating. Because remember, Santa, he sees if you've been bad or good.

So let me just clarify the rules. If you're Scottish, that is one word. If you're Northern Irish, that is two words. If you're from the Democratic Republic of Congo, then all the best. So have a go, 30 seconds to your neighbour. Can you describe yourself in nine words?

Okay. Are we all set? So I must say, from the front, from the front, I heard an awful lot of laughing. So I don't know what you were saying in those nine words, but it was great to hear, just as having some fun, getting us thinking about how we describe ourselves.

[1 : 14] Because here's what we're going to do, is we're going to build up to the 25th over the next few weeks. We're going to think as a church about nine words. Nine words, okay. Nine words. Nine words that we often, frequently, we read and we think about at this time of year.

Nine words that God spoke through the prophet Isaiah to a people in despair and darkness. Nine words that described the saviour that he would send them. Nine words that God spoke to a troubled and doubting people about the king who would come.

And these are nine words that if we could grasp them in this time of year, if we could grasp them just that little bit more, if we can mine the depths of them just that little bit more, it would have the power to radically transform our lives.

Because these are nine words that God uses to describe the bairn who would be born. These are nine words that God uses to describe who his son, Jesus Christ, is.

Here they are. Let's get them on the screen. Wonderful counselor. Mighty God. Everlasting Father.

[2 : 22] And Prince of Peace. Nine words to describe the Lord Jesus Christ. As we're going to see over the next few weeks, nine beautiful words. That help us understand who he is.

So if you've got a Bible there, then Isaiah chapters 8 and 9, this is where we're going to be this morning. Margo's going to come in a minute and just read the verses to us. Chapter 8, verse 11 through to verse 7 of chapter 9.

That's going to give us the context that we'll consider this morning in which we find these nine words. Margo's going to come and read them to us. The band are going to perform a song to help us think about Jesus.

And then we're going to get thinking about the first couple of these nine words. So I'll hand over to Margo now. Well, thank you so much, band.

That's a great modern Christmas carol. It is. That's a great one that hopefully we're going to see linked so well with what we're going to be seeing in Isaiah this morning. But to begin, I had a funny moment a few weeks ago that reminded me of just how brutal it is in Scotland at winter.

[3 : 30] So I went to wake my two-year-old daughter from sleep in the morning. And the first thing that she said to me with all sincerity and with such optimism was, Daddy, is it summer yet?

And I didn't have the heart to tell her that our one month of summer, June, is an awful long way away. I mean, it's hard, is it not, to live here in wintertime. You wake up in the morning, it's dark. You go to work and it's dark. You're at work and it's dark. There's a little bit of sun. And then you come home and it's dark until it goes round and round again. It's difficult.

Is it not living in darkness? But if you find that difficult, if you find it difficult living here, then thank your lucky stars that you don't live in Reykjavik in Iceland. Because at this time of year, the sun rises close to half eleven.

Imagine that, half eleven. And it sets just after half three, which means there are just over four hours of sunlight a day in winter. That is difficult. Is it?

[4 : 32] Darkness is difficult. But this morning, as we dive into Isaiah chapters eight and nine, we meet a people who will soon find themselves living, not just in, well, not in physical darkness, but in spiritual darkness.

Here are Isaiah's words prophesying to this little kingdom of Judah. The two tribes that are in the south where Jerusalem is located, who had become distinct from the ten tribes' big brother in the north, Israel.

And these are trying times for the little nation of Judah. Isaiah eight and nine. Trying times. But the thing about Judah is that in their trying times, and this is what we need to see here, in their trying times, they're searching for saviors in all the wrong places.

All the wrong places. And this is the first thing that we see. Judah are a people, verses 11 to 22 of chapter eight, they're a people in need of light.

So externally, they're searching for saviors in all the wrong places. At the time, the king on the throne in Judah, his name is King Ahaz. Now, he is a young, he's an intelligent king, but he lacks experience and he lacks wisdom.

[5 : 45] And he is being politically bullied by the northern kingdom of Israel and by Syria to join forces against the superpower of the day, who is Assyria up, way up in the north.

And Ahaz is making the foolish mistake of thinking that the security of his nation is to be found in the brokering of a deal. So this is what he thinks.

That if I can somehow secure an alliance, if I can do that, then the nation of Judah will be okay. Now, if you want to turn back to chapter seven and verse nine, you'll see God's words to this king Ahaz, who's on the throne.

This is what God says, chapter seven and verse nine. Really simply. Stand firm in your faith. Stand firm in your faith.

Ahaz be a king who builds his life on my words and who leads based on my promises, especially the ones that I have made to David, about the king who was set on his throne.

[6 : 48] Now, the only reason that you think the political powers of the day, the only reason you think that they are superpowers is because you've taken your eyes off me, who is the superpower of superpowers. And in case you hadn't noticed, I am your covenant God.

I am for you. I'm not against you. I am for you. You are my people and I am your God. You see, externally, Judah are all over the place.

They are searching for saviors in all the wrong places. And internally, Judah are searching for saviors in all the wrong places. You see it there, verse 19 of chapter eight. In search of answers, where are the people going?

They are going to mediums. They are trying to get in contact with the dead because they think that somehow that will be the channel that will help me understand and explain the questions of my life. Judah are a people searching for saviors in all the wrong places. Here's what they're doing. They're looking out. They're looking in. They're looking down. Do you know where they're not looking?

[7 : 49] They're not looking up. That is the problem for Judah. He has his problem. And the people's problem is that in their minds, God is too small for this.

He's too small. As J.B. Phillips once said, your God is too small. Your God is too small. That's Judah. So let me ask you this morning, is your God too small?

Is he too small? Can you fit him in your top pocket? Can you put him on the dashboard of your car? Is he simply an icon on the desktop of your life?

I mean, how big is your God? If you're struggling with that this morning, if you're thinking, I need to get a bigger picture of God, do you know what I recommend? I recommend you watch Blue Planet. Right? You get yourself down, you get a cup of coffee, you get on BBC iPlayer, and you have a date with Uncle Dave. At and Brissetta again, and Blue Planet is absolutely incredible. I love the show. Love the show.

[8 : 51] And as I watch it, as I see the glory of the world, I'm reminded of two things. Firstly, isn't God big? You see it. Isn't his creation magnificent?

Isn't his design unparalleled? Isn't God big? Second thing I think, I'm an eye small. As I see Attenborough, as I see him describe the oceans that we've not even begun to understand the depths of, as I see him discovering creatures, that we're still discovering creatures, even as I looked at the supermoon the other night, did you see it?

The supermoon? I thought, how big is that moon? And yet, how many thousands of miles am I between that and that moon? How big must that moon be? And I started thinking, if that moon's big, then just think how big the God who created it is.

And you sit there and you think, wow, isn't God big? And am an eye small? How often is it the other way around in our minds? And I read in scripture, the seamless ease at which God spoke and things just came into being, they just happened.

You'll see it there as an afterthought. He created the stars. It was no problem for him. And as I read that the nations are a drop in the bucket to him, then surely we're moved to sing in our hearts, O Lord my God, when I am awesome wonder, consider all the works thy hand have made.

[10:12] Then sings my soul, my Saviour God, to thee, how great thou art. As you hear this morning, and your God is too small. He's too small.

Do you see, Judah's problem is that their God, their view of God, their grasp of God, in their minds, he is too small. And God gives his opinion on the nation's Saviour search at verse 13 of chapter 8. Here's what he says. The Lord Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy. He is the one you are to fear.

And he is the one you are to dread. Do you see, God's summons to the king and to the people is trust me. Trust me that I'm big. Trust me that I'm bigger than you think I am.

Trust me. And God's challenge to the king and to the people is will you? Will you? Well, some of them will. But on the whole, Judah won't. Israel in the north, their day will soon come.

[11:12] Judah's day will follow not so long after at the hands of another superpower called Babylon. But you'll see it in verses 21 and 22 describing Judah in exile. Distress, gloom, anguish, all of this to show all of this to show that God, holy God, he takes sin and rebellion against him seriously.

He takes it seriously. It's a theme that runs all the way through the Bible story, all the way through Scripture, beginning in the garden with Adam and Eve. And since then, the sin and rebellion against God comes all too naturally to all of us.

And it's the reason behind not just our own individual darkness, our own individual brokenness, it's the reason behind the world's brokenness. See, Christmas, as we look at the baby in the manger, it screams to us that we need saving.

We need saving. And so, as we look at this little nation of Judah, let me ask you, if you're here this morning and you're looking for saviors in all the wrong places, are you looking for them in all the wrong places?

Are you just like Judah? Are you looking out? Are you looking in? Are you looking down? Are you looking up? Now, will God do anything to lift his people from their sin and darkness? Will this be the end of the story for Judah?

[12:32] No, it won't be the end of the story. Not because they deserve it, but rather because he will move to save simply because of who God is. Right at the heart of who he is, he is gracious and he is full of unending and steadfast love.

We read verses 1 to 5 of chapter 9 of a God who sends light. You see, on this people living in great darkness, God's great light is going to supernaturally and it's going to surprisingly break in.

And when this light breaks in, when God's light breaks in here, look at what it will mean for the faithful people of Judah who have put their lives in the hands of God and his promises.

It will mean joy. It will mean joy. like when there is an abundant harvest. You see him try to describe it, Isaiah? Like when spoil is divided after a great victory over an enemy.

You see, God's light, when it comes, it will cause the people to rejoice like they've never rejoiced before. The yoke that burdened them smashed.

[13:32] The rod that we use to oppress them broken. And how will God do this? How will God do this? Well, he will do it like he did at Midian.

It's a reference back to the book of Judges. We were there over the summer to a time when God's people were in slavery to their enemies. What did God do out of his grace and compassion for his people? He raised up judges.

Raised up many saviors, if you like, to save his people. One of which was Gideon. It's the story. Gideon is set on marching against the Midianites with his army.

He's got 32,000 men. God says, no, that's too many. You make it 10,000 men. So Gideon gets 10,000 men. He's ready to go and God says, no, that's still too many. You make it 300 men.

And what happens? Gideon and his army, they march against the Midianites. They win. Why do they win? What's the message? The message is that the victory was the Lord's, not Gideon's. The message is that the victory, the glory, goes to God and it doesn't go to Gideon.

[14:34] So here is the same promise. In the same way, God is going to break in and he's going to bring you a quite unexplainable and a quite unexpected victory.

This is what God's going to do for his people. And how is God going to do it? Verses 6 and 7. We read of a king who is light. Now I love this here. Will God pick the brightest?

No. Will God pick, choose the strongest? No. Will God select the bravest? No. Because here's what I would have done if I'm God and that's a phrase that I use far too often in my sinful heart.

Here's what I would have done. I would have fashioned Superman out of clay. So I would have done, there's your saviour. But here's how God works. But he doesn't pick the brightest. He doesn't pick the strongest. He doesn't pick the bravest.

He gives the smallest. He gives the smallest. It's incredible. His means of salvation will come in the form of a helpless baby. His agent of transformation will come in the shape of a son and he will be a king who will be the ruler of all rulers.

[15:36] He will be a king whose reign will be the reign of all reigns and this baby will be the invincible figure that spans the ages and his kingdom that he establishes will never be toppled and the throne that he occupies will never be vacated.

This is God's king. An incredible thing is that Isaiah is speaking roughly, give or take, eight centuries before Jesus was even born. And he's declaring it.

Doesn't he even see it there like it's already happened? How does that work? Well, here's the wonderful truth. Is that that's what happens when God speaks. When God declares something to be true, when God says he will do something, there is no speculative word for the future, it is a cast iron guarantee for these people that they can live in light of what God has said is going to happen and they can live in light of the fact that it's a done deal.

800 years before Jesus is even on the scene, these people are told they can stake their lives on it. And what will this king of light be like? Well, it states this to the first few words that we see in verse 6.

God's king of light will be called wonderful counsellor. Be called wonderful counsellor. Now, like me, I wonder if you've been to many Christmas services down the years and you've heard these words read countless times before.

[16:58] But have you ever stopped to ask yourself why God uses that word, those two words? Why does God call his son the wonderful counsellor? But here's two things that I want us to see this morning, two truths that I think are so brilliant for us to see.

Here's the first truth, that he is a king in whom you can trust. He's a king in whom you can trust.

See, this Judah generation, what are they doing? They're searching for saviors in all the wrong places.

All the wrong places. Why are they doing that? Well, a big reason is because they've got so many voices competing for their attention. So many voices. Who should they listen to? Well, here is God saying that I'm sending you the wonderful counsellor.

I'm sending you him and his words will be flawless, his counsel will be unfailing, his wisdom will be perfect and his judgments will always be righteous. And you can confidently place your hands, place your life in the hands of my wonderful counsellor.

I remember when I was a young lawyer and I walked into the office every morning to my desk. One of the things that put me at ease every morning was the fact that there was a library just down the corridor.

[18:07] Now, here's why that put me at ease for three reasons. One, because I knew people would ask me questions. Two, because I knew I didn't have the answers to those questions. And three, I knew that the books did have the answers to those questions.

Somewhere, somehow, the answer was in the books. Now, I had that beautiful plan worked out until one day somebody rang me from another side and he challenged me on a point.

So I did my three things. I thought, I don't have the answers but the books are the answers. I went to get to the books and it turned out the guy on the other side had written the book. But here's the thing as we read about Jesus in the Gospels, as we encounter him in the Gospels, he's never reaching for the books.

He's never reaching for the books. Why is he never reaching for the books? Because there's no problem that he needs to study up on. There is no question that he needs to outsource.

There is no issue in which he needs to consult an expert. There is no person that he does not know. Why? Because Jesus is wisdom personified. He is wisdom personified.

[19 : 14] He is wisdom, God's wisdom, in flesh. Later on in Isaiah, we'll see Isaiah speak of him as the spirit of wisdom and understanding and counsel is upon him.

Here is Jesus. That's exactly what we'd expect from one through whom the cosmos was created and in whom all things hold together and for whom all things exist.

Jesus Christ is wisdom personified and here's what that means. that means if we're told in scripture, if we know that this wonderful counselor holds the world in his hands, surely that means that you and I can trust our todays to his hands and we can trust our tomorrows to his hands.

You see, the baby in the manger, the arrival of whom we celebrate at Christmas doesn't just come to give us the answers. He is the answer. He doesn't just come to show us grace.

He is grace. He doesn't just come to say that he is the way and the truth and the life. He is the way and the truth and the life. Do you see? God's wisdom in flesh.

[20 : 25] Jesus Christ. He is the answer. Here's the second thing that he is a king to whom you can turn. He's a king in whom you can trust. He's a king to whom you can turn. When we're going through difficult times in our lives, what is it we pray?

What is it we long for more than anything else? We long for somebody who understands. We long for someone who understands and can do something about it. We long for somebody who can help. And this takes us to the staggering truth right at the heart of the Christian faith.

And it's a truth that sets it apart from all other religions and it's a truth that comes into sharp focus at Christmas time. And it's this. That God took on flesh.

That Jesus took on our humanity. That Jesus, while not ceasing to be fully God, became fully man. The incarnation, that's what that's called. Friends, if you think the Pacific Ocean is deep, get your trunks on and go swimming in that truth.

The incarnation that God became human. The words of that song that the band performed for us, who would have dreamed or ever foreseen that we could hold God in our hands?

[21 : 34] It's incredible. You see, Jesus didn't just look on from a distance at our darkness. He didn't just dip a toe in our brokenness. He got involved.

I was in Glasgow on Friday and took a walk down Buchanan Street. I wonder if you saw this in the news the other day. There's a statue that's just gone up by a Canadian Christian called Timothy Schmaltz and it's called The Homeless Jesus.

Basically what it is, it's just a little bench and there's a figure on the bench in a hood, cloaked, shivering away and you can just see his feet and in the feet are the two holes.

Here is Jesus. Now it's deliberately provocative. It's meant to get us to think about how we treat those who are less fortunate than us at Christmas time but it strikes at the heart of a wonderful truth that Jesus knew the brokenness of our world and that's why we can sing Yes he walked my road and he felt my pain Joys and sorrows that I know so well.

Later in Isaiah you see it spelled out more clearly that Jesus he was a man of sorrows and he was acquainted with grief. Now what does that tell us? As we look at the baby in the manger what does that tell us?

[22 : 54] It tells us that Jesus knows and above all else it tells us that God loves God cares. Like he knows Jesus knows he knows what it's like to be abandoned that Jesus knows what it's like to be betrayed by those closest to you that he knows what it means to lose a loved one that he knows what it means to suffer that he knows what it means to be mocked that he knows what it means to die and notice that he's not just a counsellor he is the wonderful counsellor he in fact if you want to put it like this he is the counsellor of counsellors that's what is trying to be conveyed there because he is not one who simply sympathises with us in our darkness you see Jesus didn't just come to pat us on the back and say there there keep on going actually he is a counsellor a wonderful counsellor who has come to save us from our darkness his life his life of service his life of obedience that would be given voluntarily and freely would see him end up where on a cross on a cross because

he loved us too much to let us wander in our darkness that he loved us too much to see us stay in our sin and he gave his life his perfect life so we were singing earlier he became a curse for us so that our curse he would reverse to redeem us from our darkness friends you see the wonderful truth about the baby in the manger here it is truly he is a wonderful counsellor it's difficult living in darkness is it not it's difficult living in darkness

Rejavik in winter no thank you for me no thank you for me but here's the thing about Rejavik it's a different story in June different story in June looked it up this week the sun rises before three in the morning three in the morning and it sets just after midnight so in the summer there are 21 hours of sunlight in Iceland it's incredible 21 hours I think it's the coolest thing I love about living here in the summers it's great but if you think that is cool then let me take you to the city that John describes in Revelation 21 just the words on the screen don't worry about looking it up you can look it up later Revelation 21 this is what John sees I did not see a temple in the city because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple the city does not need the sun or the moon to shine in it why? for the glory of God gives it light and the Lamb is its lamp the nations will walk by its light and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it on no day will its gates ever be shut for there will be no night there here is God dwelling with his people where?

in the city of unending light why? because the darkness has been banished forever sin is a distant memory all oppression has ceased every tear has been wiped from every single eye and all of it has been replaced by all out worship of the God who is eternally worthy of all praise this is his city of light this is God's city we should read Isaiah 9 rightly we should look back today and see its wonderful fulfillment in the king of light who came at Christmas time Jesus Christ but we also need to read Isaiah 9 and look forward to its complete fulfillment on that day when the rain of Jesus Christ the victory of this returning king the reign of this wonderful counselor will be seen by all and of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end praise God friends that God sent us the wonderful counselor the words that we're going to finish with in a moment beautiful savior wonderful counselor clothed in majesty lord of history you're the way the truth the life star of the morning glorious in holiness you are the risen one heaven's champion and you reign you reign over all let me pray for us as we close and maybe as we've been hearing God speak through his word this morning you are here and you think

I've never really thought about this stuff you're sitting here aware of your own darkness and God would invite you to reach out to the king of light Jesus Christ this morning dear father thank you for the privilege that we get at this time of year to remember and to thank you for sending your son Jesus to earth to be our savior and our king and to be our wonderful counselor father and so dear lord whatever we are at this morning with you we ask that you would help us to leave here this morning and to walk in light of a bigger picture of who you are and a more beautiful picture of who your son Jesus Christ really is father thank you that you are the god of all grace and we pray these things through Jesus name amen

[28 : 44] T so thank you