

CRAIG GROESCHEL

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**THINK
AHEAD**

**7 DECISIONS YOU CAN MAKE TODAY FOR THE
GOD-HONORING LIFE YOU WANT TOMORROW**

Also by Craig Groeschel

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THINK AHEAD

SEVEN DECISIONS YOU CAN MAKE TODAY FOR
THE GOD-HONORING LIFE YOU WANT TOMORROW

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Think Ahead

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Introduction

The Power of Pre-Deciding

35,000.

Seven.

35,000 is the number shaping your life.

Seven is the number that will allow you to take back your life.

Before I explain these numbers, I want to begin with a story to give you an example of how I have struggled with decision-making.

Spider-Man, a Typewriter, and a Pay Phone

It was the early '90s and I was in my early twenties. I was newly married and a full-time pastor at First United Methodist Church in Oklahoma City. I was also a full-time seminary student.

Go back and read that last paragraph again. Look for the first sign that I have issues. Newly married and a full-time pastor? Okay. Newly married and a full-time seminary student? Sure. But newly married and a full-time pastor and a full-time seminary student? I was young, had a calling from God, and was ready to take on the world, so of course I thought I was bulletproof.

In that era, girls wore leg warmers, shoulder pads, and big hoop earrings. Guys wore acid-washed jeans, Jams shorts, and the ever-coveted Members Only jackets. Back when Bon Jovi was livin' on a prayer. And when people did not yet own personal computers. Well, maybe a few did, but I certainly didn't. So I wrote my papers for seminary on a typewriter. For those under forty, go ahead and take a moment to google "typewriter."

One night I stayed really late at the church typing a fifteen-page paper for a class. The next morning, when I got up early for the ninety-minute drive to seminary, I realized I'd left my paper in my office. *Ugh.* Since I had typed the paper there, the copy sitting on my desk was the only one in the world. I had to go back and get it.

So at 6:00 a.m. I drove to the church. What I didn't realize was that our key cards were programmed not to open the doors until 8:00 a.m. I tried, but the door wouldn't unlock, and I had to get that paper.

That's when I made the first in a series of bad decisions.

My office was on the third floor of our majestic church building. Because it was up so high, I always left my window unlocked, knowing no one would be dumb enough to risk the dangerous climb to break in. No one except me. Since the window was my only option, I thought, *I could just climb up the wall to my window.*

Over the years, I have since discovered a lot about myself—abilities I possess and others I lack. But at that moment I did not yet know whether I might be Spider-Man. It was time to find out.

I was actually able to climb the wall! (The exclamation point is because that's the only positive thing I get to say about myself in this entire story.) After carefully scaling the wall and arriving at my window, I precariously perched in my penny loafers on the small ledge. With my left hand, I held on to a brick in the building with my fingertips. I cautiously reached down with my right and tried to lift the window. It wouldn't budge. Someone had locked it!

At that moment I realized I was in big trouble. I couldn't turn around or go back down. I was stuck there. Talk about livin' on a prayer! It was now 6:20 a.m. This was before everyone had cell phones, so I had no way of calling anyone. What did I do? I just stayed there. Well, more like hung on there, with the toes of my loafers on the ledge and my fingers in the brick crevices. I started singing to myself, *Oh, we've got to hold on, ready or not. You live for the fight when it's all that you've got. Whoa oh, we're halfway there. Whoa oh, livin' on a prayer.*

About thirty minutes later I saw a guy walking down the street. I started shouting. "Hey! Help! Up here! No, up here! It's me, the guy in the pleated khaki pants and Members Only jacket! The guy three stories above you. Hey!" Finally, this apparently directionally or visually

impaired stranger saw me and yelled up that he would get help. How? He had to find a pay phone. For those under thirty, take a moment to google “pay phone.”

Evidently he found one, because soon the fire department showed up to get Pastor Craig down off the wall from the third story of the historic church building.

Now, why do I tell you all that?

To let you know that I can be a poor decision-maker.

I hate to break it to you, but chances are you can be a poor decision-maker too. No offense, but it turns out we can all be pretty bad at making decisions.

And that’s a big deal, because this is true for any of us:

The quality of our decisions determines the quality of our lives.

We’ll get to the importance of our decisions in a moment, but now that I’ve said you and I can be poor decision-makers, I think I owe it to you to explain why we all make poor decisions.

The Three Enemies of Excellent Decisions

You want to make great decisions. So do I.

You may even want to believe that the majority of the time you do make great decisions. So do I.

But we don’t. We can all admit that, right? Just look at the evidence:

- We eat more than we should.
- We buy things we can’t afford.
- We waste time.
- We procrastinate.
- We say things we regret.
- We do things we don’t want to do.
- We hurt the people we love most.
- We don’t do things we want to do.
- We don’t eat healthy food, exercise, read our Bibles, or save for the future.

- We don't pray enough, say "I love you" enough, or slow down enough.

We can be really bad at decision-making.

Even the apostle Paul admitted his frustrating battle with decisions. He was bluntly honest in Romans 7:19: "I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway" (NLT). Proof that everyone struggles with this issue.

Speaking of bad decisions, did you hear about the guy who had a cockroach living in his ear for three days but thought it was just water, so he kept blow-drying his ear?¹ Hopefully we at least have an edge on that dude.

So if we want to make great decisions, what's stopping us?

The technical answer is *lots*.

So many things.

But I will highlight three.

Enemy of Excellent Decisions 1: We're Overwhelmed

I started this introduction with the number 35,000. Here's where it comes into play. Experts estimate that we make 35,000 decisions a day.² A day! Wow. That can only mean that you and I are making decisions all day, every day, like these:

- whether to hit snooze
- whether to take time to pray
- what to wear
- what to eat
- whether to exercise
- whether to post on social media, what to post, and what posts to like
- to dodge or not to dodge a coworker
- when to check email and how to respond to every email
- what to do tonight and what to do this weekend

While 35,000 decisions sounds unbelievable at first, once we start

to think about all of the subconscious and split-second calls like these that we make, that huge number makes sense. One thing is for certain: the decisions never stop coming.

That's why it can be so overwhelming. We make so many choices that our decision-making muscle becomes tired. Cognitive scientists call it "decision fatigue." They've discovered this:

As the volume of decisions increases,
the quality of decisions decreases.

One group of experts offered this explanation: "Individuals experiencing decision fatigue demonstrate an impaired ability to make trade-offs, prefer a passive role in the decision-making process, and often make choices that seem impulsive or irrational."³

That explains why you can make difficult and wise decisions all day at work and then at night binge-eat and waste several hours staring at a screen. It's because you got tired of making good decisions. Or perhaps you've been making a series of wise financial choices because you want to save money, but then, out of nowhere, you make an irrational purchase you later regret. You wonder, *How could I be so stupid? Why did I do that?*

The answer is decision fatigue.

The first enemy of excellent decision-making is that we're bombarded with too many decisions.

In your decision-making, are you overwhelmed? Fatigued?

Enemy of Excellent Decisions 2: We're Afraid

We don't worry about whether to eat oatmeal or yogurt for breakfast, but when it comes to bigger decisions, we are often afraid of making the wrong choice. *Should I buy this car? Should I take this job offer? Should I move?*

Ever hear of analysis paralysis? We look at all of the options and then freeze up out of fear that we'll make the wrong decision.

This problem is exacerbated for Christians because we have the added challenge of trying to discern God's will. So the always difficult

question of what's the right thing to do is further complicated by the fear that we might miss out on God's plan. Like, *What if I miss out on the perfect situation he has for me? What if I settle? Or worse, what if I mess up and it takes years to get my life back on track?*

All of this can lead us to make a bad choice. But sometimes, because we're not sure, we just don't make a decision at all. That feels safer, but we have to remember:

Indecision is a decision and often the enemy of progress.

So when making decisions, how often are you afraid? How often is your decision not to decide?

Enemy of Excellent Decisions 3: We're Emotional

In their book *Decisive*, Chip Heath and Dan Heath show through their extensive research that we are biologically hardwired to act foolishly and behave irrationally.⁴ They explain that our emotions may be the preeminent enemy of excellent decisions. We let emotion overrule logic.

You've experienced this. You don't want to yell at your children. But then your kid does something dumb. Logic says, *Be patient*. But emotion says, *Yell as loudly as you can*. And emotion overrules logic.

Or there's a sin you are determined to avoid. But then temptation comes knocking. Logic says, *Doing that is not healthy and dishonors God*. But emotion says, *Let's party!* Emotion overrules logic.

To make great decisions we need to think ahead, to ask, *What are the consequences of this choice? What path does this decision put me on?* But emotions typically give us a myopic focus on the here and now.

What's interesting is that we often spend way too much time analyzing unimportant decisions (*Which Netflix show should I binge-watch next?*) but make important decisions (*Should I watch porn?*) on an emotional whim. An embarrassing personal example: I once spent hours researching a purchase on Amazon. The big decision? Whether to buy the seven-dollar version with the 5-star rating or the six-dollar version with the 4.5-star rating. I started reading through all 4,328 reviews

to determine the wise choice. But when it comes to critical decisions, I often let my emotions take over and I just react in the moment. (Like deciding to scale a three-story building.)

Obviously, forces are working against our making wise choices.

So on any given day, how many decisions do you make based on your emotions?

Let's stop and review. Because the quality of our decisions determines the quality of our lives, we must understand the three enemies of excellent choices:

1. Overwhelm
2. Fear
3. Emotion

The Sum of Your Life

It's safe to say that life is the sum of the decisions we make. Why? Because a successful life is based not on a few big decisions made at a few big moments but on thousands of normal decisions made at thousands of normal moments.

As James Clear says, "Every decision you make is a vote toward who you will become." That's why we need to think ahead. That's why we *have* to think ahead. Each seemingly inconsequential decision has such value because our decisions are rarely isolated. Have you noticed how good decisions tend to compound in the right direction and bad decisions tend to compound in the wrong direction?

I bet you've made a bad decision thinking it was only a one-time thing, then later realized it put you on a slippery path. It felt like that choice gave you permission to keep making the same choice or similarly bad ones. Somehow your bad decision multiplied.

You've also made good decisions that seemed isolated, but weren't at all. Your choice seemed normal, but it was actually enormous. You made the right choice and somehow it had a compound effect. It's like this:

We make our decisions, and then our decisions make us.

The decisions you make today determine the stories you tell tomorrow.

C. S. Lewis, a brilliant Christian thinker and author, wrote about this in his book *Mere Christianity*: “Good and evil both increase at compound interest. That is why the little decisions you and I make every day are of such infinite importance. The smallest good act today is the capture of a strategic point from which, a few months later, you may be able to go on to victories you never dreamed of. An apparently trivial indulgence in lust or anger today is the loss of a ridge or railway line or bridgehead from which the enemy may launch an attack otherwise impossible.”⁵

Your decisions determine your direction,
and your direction determines your destiny.

So if your life is moving in the direction of your decisions, do you like the direction your decisions are taking you?

Do you feel good about who you are and where you are in life? Do you believe God is pleased with your direction?

If not, it's time to take back your life.

How?

Through the power of pre-decision.

The Power of Pre-Decision

You will decide *now* what you will do *later*.

You will *decide* now what you will *do* later.

That might sound simplistic, but it is a profound spiritual tool that will help you live in a forward-looking, people-loving, God-glorifying way that leads you to become who you want to become and live the life you want to live.

Decide now what you will do later.

When you're in the moment, the three enemies we just talked about wreak havoc on your ability to make quality decisions, so why wait until you are in the moment to decide?

Ask God to help you decide now what you will do later.

With his help, what you do now can be different from what you did before on your own. We get stuck thinking, *I've always been this way, always done these things. It is what it is, I am what I am.* But God says, "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing!" (Isa. 43:18–19). We partner with God in the new thing he wants to do in our lives by making new decisions. We make these decisions with God and submit them to him. And what does God do? "Commit to the LORD whatever you do, and he will establish your plans" (Prov. 16:3).

Decide now what you will do later.

Look at the heroes of our faith throughout the Bible.

In Genesis 22, God told Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. Um, no one is going to decide to do that in the moment. But in the past Abraham had pre-decided, *My God is always trustworthy, so whatever he asks me to do, I will obey and honor him.* (Thankfully, God let good ol' Abe off the hook.)

In Ruth chapter one, we find Ruth and her sister Orpah with their mother-in-law, Naomi. Times are tough and getting worse. Naomi is headed back to her hometown, where her prospects are no better. Naomi tells the girls to stay and make new, better lives for themselves. It is the choice that gives them the best chances, so Orpah agrees to leave. But Ruth had pre-decided to make Naomi her ride-or-die: *Where you go, I will go. Where you stay, I will stay. Your God will be my God.*

Ruth had pre-decided her commitment to Naomi.

Then there's Daniel. He and his friends were essentially taken hostage and forced to live in a foreign land. Constant attempts were made to brainwash them into thinking like their captors and eating the food they ate. Yet Daniel believed eating the king's food would dishonor God. We read in Daniel 1:8, "But Daniel resolved . . ." We could say, "Daniel pre-decided." It says, "But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way."

Daniel didn't wait to get to the dining room, where he might have been tempted to go against his values by the perfectly seared tomahawk ribeye and the molten-chocolate lava cake. No, he pre-decided, *My values will be determined by God, not others. I will honor my God with my choices.*

Daniel pre-decided his commitment to God.

When we decide now what we will do later, with God's help, we will determine our course of action before the moment of decision. It will look like this:

When faced with [situation], I have pre-decided to [action].

For instance: "When I begin to worry, I will read 1 Peter 5:7, pray, and give the burden to God."

Or "When I'm tempted to make an impulse purchase of more than fifty dollars, I will wait at least three days before I decide whether to buy it."

Or "When I have written an angry email, I will sleep on it before deciding to hit send."

If you were to start applying everything we have discussed so far in making pre-decisions, how might that positively affect your life? Here are three immediate benefits:

1. Pre-Deciding Reduces the Number of Decisions to Make

Pre-deciding combats feeling overwhelmed by all of our choices, which can lead to decision fatigue. Steve Jobs famously wore the same outfit every day. Did he just really love his black turtleneck, Levi's 501s, and New Balance sneakers? No. But he knew that not having to choose his clothes every day freed up energy for more important decisions.

Billionaire hedge-fund manager Ray Dalio wrote a book about pre-deciding. In his book *Principles: Life and Work*, Dalio writes, "Without principles, we would be forced to react to all the things life throws at us individually, as if we were experiencing each of them for the first time." He goes on to say: "Using principles is a way of both simplifying and improving your decision making. . . . [This] will allow you to massively reduce the number of decisions you have to make (I estimate by a factor of something like 100,000) and will lead you to make much better ones."⁶

2. Pre-Deciding Reduces the Fear of Deciding Wrong

We often make poor choices because we are driven or stopped by fear. We fear with good reason: because we know our record and how much we have fighting against us in the moment of decision.

But pre-deciding reduces our fear. Why? Because we base our decisions on our values. We discover, in advance, what is important to God and decide what is important to us, and we commit to make decisions that honor those values. In the pages to come, I hope to help you find clarity on what is important to you. We're going to discover that when our values are clear, our decisions are easier.

3. Pre-Deciding Prevents Emotion from Taking Over

We want to live wise, God-honoring lives, but in the moment, our emotions often take over and hijack our integrity. That's why we need to decide before the moment. That way, our emotions don't get a vote.

It has been proven that this concept is the key to doing what you want to do. Peter Gollwitzer, a psychology professor at NYU, reviewed ninety-four studies that analyzed the effectiveness of pre-deciding by people who actually implement their best intentions. He concluded that having goals is no guarantee of success, because it doesn't account for the barriers that will arise along the way. So what did ensure success? Pre-deciding what to do when faced with such barriers.⁷

In another study, 368 people in orthopedic rehabilitation were split into two groups. One group set goals. The other set goals and also pre-decided what they would do to achieve them. Only those in the second group achieved their goals.⁸

When we pre-decide, we let logic overrule emotion.

Seven

You're probably wondering, "What should I pre-decide? It feels like the options are endless. I mean, do I need to wear the same outfit every day like Steve Jobs? If so, does it have to be as drab?"

At the beginning of this introduction, I gave you two numbers: 35,000 and seven. I said, "35,000 is the number shaping your life. Seven is the number that will allow you to take back your life."

Now that I've explained the 35,000 in detail, it's time for the seven.

I want to offer seven life-defining pre-decisions we all need to make. You may choose to add others, but I think you will see why these are so foundational as we journey together in the pages to come.

To get started, I want to be a little more honest with you than is comfortable for me. While I am a follower of Jesus, and I am a pastor, I have noticed some negative qualities in me.

- *I am unprepared.* I am often unprepared spiritually. Satan is the enemy of my soul. He attacks me at every opportunity. In those moments, I sometimes have my guard down. I love God with all my heart and truly want to follow Jesus, but actually doing that happens moment by moment, and I find that, in too many moments, my devotion falls short.
- *I am selfish.* I don't want to be, but I am. Because I am selfish, it's easier for me to want to get than to give. I am committed to the mission God has given us because I am convinced everyone needs Jesus. But I'm afraid that rather than being compelled to share the good news of God's love, too often I can be selfish with it.
- *I am inconsistent.* I find myself starting off in the right direction, but it's too easy for me to change course and end up doing the wrong thing. When things get tough, I want to give up and quit. Just walking away often feels like the best option.

Now that my confession is over, can I ask, Do you resonate with any of my issues? I described me, but did I also describe you?

If so, I'm sure, like me, that is not who you want to be or how you want to live.

Are you ready to think ahead and take your life back?

We can, through seven life-defining pre-decisions:

1. I will be ready.
2. I will be devoted.
3. I will be faithful.
4. I will be an influencer.
5. I will be generous.
6. I will be consistent.
7. I will be a finisher.

Are you ready to choose who you will become?
To live the life you want to live?
To be satisfied, to be successful, and to honor God?
Let's do this!
Let's pre-decide.

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INTRODUCTION EXERCISES

1. Rate your day-to-day decision-making ability on a scale from 1 to 10 (low to high). Explain your answer.
2. How would your rating change as you move through the major areas of your life, such as family, work, friends, and spiritual life? Explain.
3. Are you fearful about making a decision? What area of your life tends to bring fear when you have to decide?
4. Is there an ongoing situation that causes decision fatigue? If so, what are some factors that contribute? (For example, volume, expectations, burden of importance.)
5. Are you feeling overwhelmed about making a decision? What area of your life tends to cause overwhelm when you have to decide?
6. Do you struggle with indecision or procrastination? Does it tend to be overall or just in certain situations? Be specific.
7. Are you feeling emotion about making a decision? What area of your life tends to cause emotion when you have to decide?
8. How often do you avoid important decisions by distracting yourself with unimportant ones? Does that tend to happen regularly in any area of your life?
9. Looking at your previous answers, can you detect any patterns where pre-deciding could benefit you? If so, write down your thoughts.
10. If you are a Christian, how does your relationship with God affect your decision-making? What are some benefits? Where do you struggle?

Appendix

Takeaways and Scriptures

INTRODUCTION TAKEAWAYS

The quality of our decisions determines the quality of our lives.

As the volume of decisions increases, the quality of decisions decreases.

Decision fatigue comes when we face so many decisions that our decision-making muscle becomes tired.

Indecision is a decision and often the enemy of progress.

These are the three enemies of excellent decisions:

1. Overwhelm
2. Fear
3. Emotion

Life is the sum of the decisions we make.

We make our decisions, and then our decisions make us.

The decisions you make today determine the stories you tell tomorrow.

Your decisions determine your direction, and your direction determines your destiny.

You will decide now what you will do later.

Ask God to help you decide now what you will do later.

Pre-deciding reduces the number of decisions we make.

Pre-deciding reduces the fear of making the wrong decision.

Pre-deciding prevents our emotions from taking over.

When our values are clear, our decisions are easier.

These are the seven life-defining pre-decisions:

1. I will be ready.
2. I will be devoted.
3. I will be faithful.
4. I will be an influencer.
5. I will be generous.
6. I will be consistent.
7. I will be a finisher.

INTRODUCTION SCRIPTURES

I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway.

—Romans 7:19 NLT

Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.
See, I am doing a new thing!

—Isaiah 43:18–19

Commit to the LORD whatever you do,
and he will establish your plans.

—Proverbs 16:3

But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way.

—Daniel 1:8