

Natalie W. Bell
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Choices
Deuteronomy 30:15-20

*See, I have set before you today **life and prosperity, death and adversity**. ¹⁶ If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God^[b] that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. ¹⁷ But if your heart turns away and you do not hear but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, ¹⁸ I declare to you today that you shall certainly perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. ¹⁹ I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. **Choose life** so that you and your descendants may live, ²⁰ **loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him**, for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.”*

These words are not just good words—
these are the **final words** of Moses to the people of Israel,
just as they are about to enter the promised land.

Have you ever heard **someone’s final words**?

It’s very humbling and powerful—

usually they are words right from the person’s **heart**—

Often about **love, forgiveness, hopes** for loved ones.

I remember my Grandma’s last lucid moments—she wanted all the relatives to come one by one to her bed so she could share her love.

It was powerful.

That’s essentially what Moses is doing here,

Giving final words of wisdom,

At the end of his life, just before the Israelites are going to enter the promised land with Joshua—after wandering in the wilderness for 40 years!

Moses sets before them a **choice**—

and it all boils down to something very simple:

*choose life or death,
blessings or curses.*

Choose the covenant with God and live,
Or reject the covenant and perish.

Now this almost sounds too *simplistic*, doesn't it?
And too obvious. I mean, who wouldn't choose life?
Sounds a lot like a 'formula' too—do good, and good will come to you,
do bad, and bad things will happen to you.

But that is NOT what we believe, or what the whole of scripture says!

Jesus himself says in Matthew 5:45 that it rains on the just and the unjust alike,
he challenges people in Luke 13, who think victims of the Tower of Siloam
collapse were somehow worse sinners than other people. Jesus says absolutely not!

And the Wisdom in *Proverbs* affirms that bad and good happens to all of us.
Ecclesiastes 9:2 says that the future awaits the righteous and the wicked alike.
And the *Book of Job* is most powerful, as Job argues with his friends, who think
he must have sinned to lose his family and livelihood.
Not true.

The truth is, there is no formula for life,
no formula for being blessed, or suffering.
It's a fallen, broken world, full of fallen, broken people—
so life, creation, humanity, is all imperfect.
It's a mess.

We see the brokenness of creation,
in natural disasters like the recent earthquakes.
No one is to blame for that earthquake.

We do see effects of our own poor choices, in things like climate change.
We do see people struggling all over the globe, and in our own community, and
sometimes personal choices are involved,
but other times people are victims of things beyond their control—like illness,
disability, or loss.

So to read *Deuteronomy 30 as a formula, is not true to Scripture.*
How else could we read it?

Well, what if this is primarily about the choices we make,
 And how *all of our choices have consequences*.
 We know that to be true, don't we?

We sure do love our choices---
 Organic or store brand?
 Supersize or regular?
 Fries or chips?
 Coke or Pepsi?
 The list goes on and on and on....
 In any given day we make hundreds of choices—
 sometimes frivolous, other times they are life and death.

Choices matter, some more than others.
 But all our choices *have consequences*, right?
 Do you know what I'm talking about?

Can you think of choices that you've made, and the consequences?
 We've all made both wise and foolish choices.
 All of us.
 But what if we can *learn* from our bad choices?
 I think that's a part of the gospel!

And what if Moses is saying *we need to make good choices*,
 especially about the things we *follow, believe in, and worship*.

Moses is very concerned about *false worship*—
 in the preceding chapter he warns the people against worshiping *idols*,
 because that has very bad consequences.
 And it happens to be a temptation they give in to—a lot!
 Remember a golden calf that Aaron made for the people to worship,
 because Moses was taking too long on Mt. Sinai
 getting those 10 commandments from God?

Now we may not have a golden calf in our home
 (or maybe someone does, but that's a different conversation...)
 But we are *all faced with the temptation* to follow, believe in,
 and worship other things besides God.

Just think about all the *ads we see*---
 things we supposedly can't live without.
 If we get caught up in material things, that is false worship.
 It's idolatry.

Think of the way the world *portrays relationships*.
 Think about all the TV shows about finding a mate, or dating, or getting married at
 first sight...it's scary!
 What if we believed that was the right way to love?
 That's a false belief.

And think about how easy it is *to want, to covet, someone else's life*—
 their home, their car, their money, even their family.
 Especially when we see it looking so good on social media.
 It's really easy to fall into that trap,
 and then we find ourselves more focused on wanting what they have,
 than on being grateful for what God has given us!
 That's false worship.

So Moses' says: *Choose life*.
 When you think about that statement, it is very *powerful*.
The question is, HOW we do choose life?
 Moses goes on, to tell us that
 Choosing life means *three things*:
loving God, *obeying* God, and *holding fast* to God.

What do those three things mean to you?
 How *do you love, obey, and hold fast* to God?

There are so many ways to grow in our *LOVE of God*.
 What about *a devotional and scripture* every day?
 There are so many great books and Bibles for this.
 Did you know that the Bible app and many devotionals are available—right on
 your phone?
 Isn't that awesome?
 We can always hear an encouraging word from God!

Another way to love God *is to love others*,
 especially those in need of extra care.
 Volunteering, or reaching out to neighbor—is loving God.

And of course we love God *when we enjoy God's creation!*
When was the last time you went outdoors to do that?

How *do YOU love* God?

I think it's great for us to share our ideas and experiences—
Because it encourages all of us!

Moses also urges us to **OBEY God**.

How can we do that?

Well, think of some of the most famous verses of the Bible,

Like **Micah 6:8**: *Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.*

Like the **Great Commandment** in Matthew 22, *to love God and our neighbor as ourselves.*

Like the **ten commandments** in Exodus 20,

Like the **Shema** of Deuteronomy 6—*to obey and love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.*

What does *obeying God* mean to you?

How do you choose to obey?

Moses urges us to **HOLD FAST** to God.

What if that means holding onto the **Holy Spirit's power** within us?

Or taking the hand of Jesus to lead and guide us?

I call upon this kind of power all the time.

It's especially meaningful to hold fast to God in tough situations.

When I received calls as a **Fire Chaplain** I would take lots of deep breaths,
and ask the Holy Spirit *to fill me, and use me.*

Because the only reason I was ever called was for a fatality or serious accident.
It was not going to be easy—but I believed God would equip me for whatever I
saw and heard—which was often heart-wrenching, things you never forget.

How do **YOU hold fast** to God?

It's particularly important when we don't know what we're walking into,
and we need God to be in us. Got any situations like that? We all do, right?

Moses likely couldn't comprehend all our choices in 2023.

But he would encourage us to **choose life!**

How do we do that in *our family, work, church and community*?
 What does it mean *to choose life, to choose God*?

What about *enjoying* time off, or *playing* with kids?
 What about *learning* a new skill,
 or *starting* a new spiritual practice?
 What about the *basics of faith*—worship, prayer, reading the Bible, fellowship?
 When we do all these things, *we choose life*, right?

This call to make a good choice, is *not just for us as individuals*.
 It is our call as a *church family*.
 We are called to choose life, to choose God—*together*.
 How can we do that?

What if we consider what makes a healthy, thriving church?
 In the Fall I preached on the 7 marks of a vital church—

- lifelong discipleship.
- intentional evangelism. ...
- outward focus. ...
- empowering servant leadership. ...
- spirit-inspired worship. ...
- caring relationships. ...
- church health. (--from PCUSA Vital Congregations)

Pastor Carey Nieuwhof has a Leadership Podcast,
 And a few years ago he highlighted
5 choices for churches that want to thrive;
 And I think these choices are important in any area of life.

The first choice is *we CAN* vs. *we can't*.
 And to be honest, *both things are true* if you believe them, right?
 You *can* if you believe that---or you *can't* if you are sure you'll fail.

A *we CAN* attitude means relying on God to do the impossible.
Thriving churches go forward in faith, when there's no way,
 because God makes the way!
 Do we choose to say *we can*—
 or do we have a *negative* attitude about what is possible?

The second choice is ***THEM or us***—if we want to thrive, we have to work for ‘***them***’—the people outside the church. Many of us have heard that great quote, *the church is the only organization that exists for those who are NOT members.* That’s our call, friends.

Thriving churches ***focus on the people we want to serve***, the people we want to reach. ***Dying*** churches focus on their ***own members***, And everything that we want, not the needs of our community, or making new disciples.

Are we focused on **us or on THEM?**
This is challenging because we do a lot of things because our members want it. But what about making disciples? But what do we do for visitors? New people? The community at large?

The third choice is ***PRINCIPLES vs. preferences.*** ***Dying*** churches focus on what people in the church like or don’t like, they spend a lot of time and energy to make people in the church ***happy***. We hear people say they don’t like certain parts of worship, or activities, and so we change according to our ***preferences***.

But what if we chose to make disciples, by ***following the principles*** we feel are most important, Like Jesus’ Greatest Commandment: *to love God, and our neighbor as ourselves.*

What if **everything** was held up to that standard? Wouldn’t that give us some perspective on our preferences? Disliking a particular hymn is not as important as how ***we love each other***, right?

The fourth choice is ***PROACTIVE vs. reactive.*** We want to be ***proactive***—and set out goals and missions— for what we do and what we believe, Instead of just reacting to problems that arise. Now, this doesn’t mean we ignore needs and issues, But we choose ***where to focus***. If we focus on being disciples, that’s different than just reacting to problems.

The final choice is ***NOW vs. eventually***.
 If we want to be effective, we act—Now.
 We listen to God now. We follow the Holy Spirit now.
 Talk without action has little value.
 And too many churches specialize in talk, saying ‘we’ll do that---eventually’.

Of course, it’s ***hard to embrace change***—in church, or in our own lives.
 We usually prefer to keep things the same.
 We want what is ***comfortable and familiar***, don’t we?

But if we want to choose life—
 we have to choose to follow God ***NOW, not eventually***.
 It’s far too easy to say we’ll do that
 when we have more people, more money, more time.
 It takes courage to say, I don’t know how,
 but with God’s help we are going to do this new thing God is calling us to do!
 Carey Nieuwhof, October 27, 2015, churchleaders.com/pastors/pastor-articles/265066-5-significant-attitude-differences-that-separate-growing-and-declining-churches.html

Those five choices,
Can vs. can’t,
Them vs. us,
Principles over preferences,
Proactive not reactive,
Now, not eventually---
 Those choices are the heart of what it means ***to choose life***.
 You know, ***Moses*** was an amazing leader, who chose life!
 He was human, imperfect,
 he was a criminal who ran away and tried to live a quiet life....
 until God found him through the burning bush.
 He thought he couldn’t return to Egypt, but God made him the leader!

Moses’ final words are ***still powerful words*** for us today.
 About choices. Choices that matter.
Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live.
 Isn’t that something we all need to hear?

I’d say that’s our ***Good News of the Gospel***.
 May God give us the ***power*** and ***courage***
 to ***choose life, each and every day***. And all God’s people said, Amen.