

## Choose Life

### Deuteronomy 30:15-20

The obituaries we read often sound much the same. They tell how old people were when they died, where they will be buried, where they worked, what groups they joined, and to whom they were related. It is not the most meaningful information. It would be more interesting if obituaries told the truth.

"Bob Hickman grew up middle class, and was so proud that he had worked his way up to upper middle class."

"Marsha Lawson was known as a big talker, but no one could remember her saying anything that mattered."

"Harold Riley ignored his family, but liked to brag that he had seen every episode of *Seinfeld* twice."

Obituaries do not say when a life has been wasted or when it has been celebrated.

"Louise Chaplin loved her children and everybody else's."

"Annie Quinlin noticed things—the beauty of the rain, a touching song, a well-placed hug."

"Tony Martin enjoyed his job, and every now and then, he spoke a word of grace to a coworker who would not otherwise have heard it."

If poets wrote obituaries we would be reminded that we can either choose or refuse life.

Moses has been dealing with questions of mortality. He knew he was about to die. The Israelites were at the Jordan River about to enter the Promised Land. Moses reminisced on the peaks and valleys. He wanted to tell his people once more

how to live a good life. Moses wanted them to hear what he is saying and take it to heart. The first part, verses 15-16, focused on choice and promise. The second part, verses 17-18, presented the consequences if the wrong choice was made. The third part, verses 19-20, was an exhortation to choose life, a choice that would result in blessings.

The people of Israel had experienced the hardships of Egyptian bondage, been set free from that bondage, entered into covenant with God, been entrusted with God's law, and survived much of the challenging journey through the wilderness. They stood on the plain as Moses prepared to die and the people prepared to enter the promised land. Delivering God's message, Moses declared to them that they had two choices—either life and prosperity or death and adversity—and the choice rested with them. If the people made the correct choice, then Israel would have a long future. If not, then Israel's days were numbered. For Israel, life and prosperity meant that all human activity would be under the protection of the Divine. They would live securely on the land; their land would be fertile and prosperous; and they as a people would be fertile, blessed with many offspring and descendants. On the contrary, death would mean their activities would be empty of God's presence. The people would exist outside of the land, without security and peace. So they stood at a crossroads.

Part of their choosing life meant they choose to be "obedient" to God and God's ways. The Israelites were called to obey God's commandments and laws. These laws were meant to preserve covenant and right relationship with God (Exod. 20:1-7) and with one another (Exod. 20:12-17). One of these was to keep holy the Sabbath day (Exod. 20:8-11). This day was meant to be a day of celebration, rest, recollection, and reflection where the people were afforded the time to delight in

God's creation, to take stock of their relationship with God and with one another, and ultimately to enjoy rest in God and with God.

The commandments of the Lord also called them to love the Lord their God with all their hearts, soul, and might. Obeying God's commandments meant that the people were to love God wholeheartedly; to walk in God's ways, which were ways of justice, righteousness, and loving-kindness like what they have already experienced; and to observe not only God's commandments but also all the decrees and ordinances that were part of the commandments.

The people were called to live Torah as a way of life. Their reward for their fidelity and integrity would be divine blessing. To be blessed by God was to be guaranteed safety, well-being, strength, prosperity, and progeny. Furthermore, the people themselves would become "a blessing" (cf. Gen. 12:2-3). God's commandments and ways were meant not as restriction but rather as prescriptions that led to the fullness of life for all.

Obedience was not merely doing as one is told. Obedience meant "to listen," which involved more than just hearing and following. Obedience was and is a process that involved both the mind and the heart. In Deuteronomy 11:13; 13:4; 30:2, Moses called on the Israelites to listen "with all [their] heart," *mind and understanding*. God's love for Israel was an affair of the heart, and God, in turn, wanted such a relationship to be reciprocal. Covenant is supposed to be grounded in mutual, wedded love. Obedience, then, called the Israelites "to listen" to God's word in their inner selves, at their core, and to live out that word, which, in turn, would result in life transformed truly into God's image, according to God's likeness, with God's ways made manifest through the people's daily life together.

Having had two choices placed before them, the people were warned that if they turned their hearts away, and did not hear, and consequently turned to

idolatry, then serious consequences would follow. The people could choose a life of blessing or a death sentence with its curses.

In the last section of our reading, Moses gave the people a specific directive with regard to the choice they faced. He exhorted them to "choose life" (v. 19). Now the Israelites were faced with not only a choice between life and death, but also a decision as to whether they would listen to the wise directive given to them. The scenario had been laid out before them; God's will has been revealed. The people were left free to exercise their free will. In his interpretation of this passage, Basil called for life and death, good and evil, to be balanced within ourselves. Caesarius of Arles noted that by God's grace, people have been left to choose the narrow way, the way of life. Finally, a life blessed or a life cursed was and is the choice confronting the Israelites and people today. History bears out, however, that many times the Israelites chose their own way and suffered the consequences of their own decisions. God, however, remains faithful to the people in a myriad of ways, despite their wrong choices. Choosing life, then, is a lifelong process, sometimes learned only in the midst of struggle. **Carol J. Dempsey**

We are a nation of choosers: paper or plastic? Small, medium, large, or super? Fries or chips? Organic or conventional? Having a choice has become a staple of the American dream. Political agendas of all flavors are sold on a platform of choice—everything from private school vouchers to health-care reform. More choice is always the preferred value. Schooled in a society that shops around for a "wider selection," we resist any effort to have our choices curtailed. We resist having our choices cut, because it threatens the illusion of our autonomy. We cannot imagine demanding obedience that must be chosen if we are to have a future.

The truth, according to Deuteronomy, is that there will be hell to pay for the choices we make when those choices run counter to God's covenantal obligations. Promises are violated in marriages. Destructive secrets erupt from the places where families hide them. Irresponsible financial decisions run their ultimate course. The destruction that lies in the wake confirms that there are severe consequences for violating covenantal norms. We know that organizations, businesses, economies and nations can make bad choices and we know enough to conclude that God's ethical demands for fairness have been violated in the name of basic greed. There can be hell to pay for the choices that we make.

The flip side of these ominous warnings is that God desires for the community to be blessed. God desires life, not death. God hopes that Israel will make the right choice, for faithfulness. The right choice means blessings for the entire community, not just for some. The right choice meant a home not just for God's people but for resident aliens as well. The right choice means economic policies that leave enough for everyone. The right choice means an equitable distribution of resources. The right choice means life—this is what God desires for us. **Andrew Foster Connors**

The choices are not usually labeled "life" and "death." Most of our decisions do not seem important, but life and death are before us every day. We choose death when we ignore God and choose anything inferior. Death is a slow process of giving ourselves to what does not matter. Modern life is impoverished with a lack of purpose. We rush to meet deadlines that are insignificant and bow before ideas that are not worthy.

So how do we choose life? Love God with all of our heart, mind, and soul. Give to the poor. Fight for justice. Care for the hurting. Treat others fairly. Share food with the hungry.

How do we choose life? Learn things you have told yourself you would never learn. Enjoy simple things. Play with children. Laugh often, long, and loud. Cry when it is time to cry. Be patient with your own imperfections as well as the imperfections of others. Celebrate sex with the one to whom you have given your life. Surround yourself with what you love—whether it is family, friends, pets, music, nature, or silence.

How do we choose life? Walk around the block. Turn off the television. Get together with your friends. Invite a stranger to lunch or dinner. Clean out a drawer. Read a book of poetry. Quit doing what is not worth your time. Do something so someone else will not have to. Give money to a cause you care about. Stop arguing. Apologize to someone, even if it was mostly his fault. Forgive someone, even if she does not deserve it. Have patience. Stop having patience when it is time to tell the truth. Figure out what you hope for and live with that hope.

How do we choose life? Worship with all your heart. Pray genuinely. Love your church. Believe that God loves you. Remember the stories of Jesus. See Christ in the people around you. Share God's love with someone who has forgotten it. Delight in God's good gifts. See that all of life is holy. Open your heart to the Spirit. Search for something deeper and better than your own comfort. Live in the joy beneath it all. Let God make your life wonderful.

Moses preached that we choose life in an amazing variety of ways. "Today I set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life." **Brett Younger**

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