

Choose Life

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. My name is Vanessa Erickson and I am in the Alameda Parish. This is a reading from the book of Deuteronomy, verses 11 to 19. Now, what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach.

It is not up in the heaven so that you have to ask, who will ascend into heaven to get it and to proclaim it to us so that we may obey it. Nor is it beyond the sea so that you have to ask, who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so that we may obey it.

No, the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart so that you may obey it. See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction.

[1 : 27] For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees, and laws. Then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.

But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed.

You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.

Now choose life so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God. Listen to his voice and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life, and he will give you many years in the land.

He swore to give your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It just reminds me of Isaac, and how many times we heard him share God's word, primarily with his parents.

[2 : 53] The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the word of our God stands forever. Amen. So let me also say good morning, Christchurch.

Good morning. And thank you, Pastor Jonathan, for inviting me to preach this today. I must say that this is very unusual for me, since English is not my language at all.

So bear with me if I make a lot of mistakes. But I'm very happy to be here. Since we have family, my wife and I, Gabriel is our son, and we have our grandchildren here.

And when we are in Sweden, we always think, it's wonderful to have grandchildren, but why so far away? So we try to make it once in a while. And now since we have had this corona business going on, it hasn't been possible to see each other that much.

So we're very happy about the technical possibilities to at least communicate. It's, of course, a privilege to be here to preach and to do this in the concluding sermon in the long series of very important texts that I know that you have gone through this fall.

[4 : 25] I have not been able to listen to the entire series, but I have listened to a couple of sermons. And I'm impressed from what I've heard.

You have done a wonderful journey through the book of Deuteronomy, and I hope it has deepened your appetite for studying the Old Testament.

And I hope it has enlarged your knowledge about the relevance of this part of the Bible. And hopefully you have also understood that this rather anonymous book, at least judging from what my students in Sweden used to say.

I hope that you have realized that this was a favorite of Jesus in Scripture, together with Psalms and Isaiah. But before going further into the text in more detail, let us once more pray together. Dear Heavenly Father, we pray today that you would open our eyes, our ears, and our minds so that we can see, hear, and perceive your voice in your own word.

[5 : 44] Help us listen to and follow your commands. Help us honor, love, serve, and obey you in everything. And let us, with your help, always choose life.

Your life. The gift of eternal life. And we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

The portion of Scripture that we just listened to comes at the end of a long speech by Moses. The entire book of Deuteronomy is, of course, in a sense, the last will of the man who led the Israelites through the 40 years in the wilderness after coming out of Egypt.

And now his mission has come to an end. He has done what he should do. And he summarizes his message to the people. And that is what we find in the book of Deuteronomy.

His words are not new to his listeners. They've heard all of it before. And we may notice that Moses is not afraid of repeating himself.

[7 : 07] The final words of the paragraph preceding today's reading was the exhortation, Turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

Turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. And now today's text deepens the meaning of this in three steps.

It's all about how to mature and grow as part of God's people. To mature and grow as part of God's people. The first step is to remember that God's word is accessible.

The introductory words are quite revealing. It is by no means difficult to understand and do the will of God. It is by no means difficult to understand and do the will of God.

God's commands are accessible. His will is no secret to anyone. And Moses underlines what he says by using two proverbial sayings.

[8 : 23] It is no need to search high going to heaven or far away going beyond the sea in order to find out what God expects from his own people.

Moses, Moses, the word of God is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart so that you may obey it. The substance of the commandments is that the will of God is both reachable and doable for anyone who has turned to the Lord with all his or her heart.

To again quote Moses. because anyone who turns to the Lord is also eager to learn by heart by heart the word of God.

This is part of religion of faith in practice. Reading, memorizing, meditating on the word of God. It is letting God's word fill mind and heart but never letting it stop there.

To know the will of God through his word is a good thing but it is not enough. It is not enough. The meaning of it all is that his word should lead to action.

[9 : 48] The rule is very simple. To know and to do. To know and to do. And if I pause there for a moment and add some comments to this first part of today's reading reading and I will try to relate it more directly to us.

My first observation from my experience is that many of us seem to complicate things when it comes to understanding the word of God. In the scholarly world where I have spent much of my adult life it seems we have many times complicated the reading and interpretation of scripture to such a degree that we have lost the directness of the word.

We have lost to understand the possibility or the will to understand the simple meaning of the words of the Bible. Well I know that there are difficult passages in the Bible but most of what we read is not difficult to understand.

It might be difficult to agree upon or act upon since we live in a much more secularized society than that of the Bible.

We are influenced by so many ideas and thoughts which are very foreign to the word or to the biblical thinking.

[11 : 31] But the word of God is not necessarily hard to understand. That is my first observation. My second observation has to do with the understanding of the words in Deuteronomy in the New Testament.

When the apostle Paul comments on this passage in Romans 10, he knows that by letting Christ, who is the word, into your heart, this gives you salvation.

And letting Christ, the word, into your heart, is simply becoming a Christian and believing in Christ. That gives you salvation.

salvation. Christianity is not only a matter of knowledge, it is a matter of faith. Knowing Christ is good, but it's not enough.

Knowing Christ in your heart, which is another word for faith, is necessary. That is what gives salvation. salvation.

[12:42] To quote Paul again in Romans 10, for it is with your heart that you believe and are justified. so then the first step to mature and grow as part of God's people is to never forget, never forget that God's word is accessible and that it is accessible and then to practice it by reading, memorizing, and meditating on it in order to act according to the word.

Lord. So that is the first step I wanted to point out. The second step, and if you follow in your Bibles, that is from verse 15 to 18, the second step is to make a decision to obey the Lord.

When Moses instructed the Israelites how to think and act after arriving in the promised land, he put before them a choice between life and death.

His words are sharp, seemingly without compromise. It is a matter of life and death, prosperity and destruction.

Verse 15. Moses is well aware of the dangers in life, not least in a situation and community where there are other religions present.

[14:19] And that the Israelites knew from Egypt, and they will know it when they come into Canaan. And we, of course, know how right Moses was.

The history of Israel is a history of constant idolatry, a history of forgetting constantly who is the true Lord and God.

But it is also a history of God's constant calling of the chosen people to repent and to return to their Lord.

So the speech of Moses is revealing and prophetic. And just like the other prophets in the Old Testament, Moses exhorts the people to keep to the Lord in all circumstances.

In a sense, he summarizes what is meant by fearing the Lord and what the benefits of this fear are.

[15:30] It is to love the Lord, walk in his ways, and keep his commandments. Verse 16. All this leads to a blessed life.

Idolatry, on the contrary, leads to destruction. And we can see that Moses even foresees that in the future the promised land will be taken away from the people.

Not because of God's will, but because of the disobedience of God's people. life is not now, thinking of ourselves, we know that life is not totally black and white.

And we know from other parts of the Bible, and probably from our own experience, that life is not always easy to live. Blessing cannot be ordered, but it can be prayed for.

blessing is no automatic phenomenon that simply comes as a result of obedience. But we do know that disobedience very seldom has any good results.

[16:50] That we know, and history confirms our knowledge. knowledge. What we have here in the words of Moses is in a sense a guide for how to relate to God as part of his people.

And it can be summed up in four simple words. To honor or fear God. The Hebrew word is double in meaning.

Fearing God is more giving honor to him than being afraid of him. Even if there are times when there is good reason also to fear in the sense of being afraid.

But honor is mainly giving, honoring is the basic meaning of the word. That is the first word. The second word is to love God.

And love in the Bible is less a matter of very special thrilling emotions and more a matter of loyalty and faithfulness. We know that.

[18:05] The third word is to serve God. And serving God is paradoxically often to serve people in need.

And it has rightfully been said that we as his people are the hands and the feet of the Lord. And the fourth word to obey, to obey God.

God. And this is of course stressed in today's Bible reading. And I will return to it in a moment. We have the words like, to walk in his that is the Lord's way and to keep his commandments, decrees, and laws.

Verse 16. So as Christians, we are called to walk in God's ways and obey the will of God.

What that is, we know from him who himself is the way and who was obedient to his father until death. I think that St.

[19 : 12] Paul sums up our calling in the letter to the Philippians in the simple sentence, your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.

Your attitude, your and mine, should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. And then he continues by describing the life of Jesus from his being with the Father in the heavens.

And then coming down, giving his life on the cross, and followed again by God's exaltation of him back to his heavenly throne at the side of the Father.

where he now is praying for us. And it is, of course, no coincidence that Paul, in the letter to the Romans, writes about the Christian faith in terms of obedience.

Obedience. When he, in the beginning of the letter, talks about his own mission as an apostle, he says that it is to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith.

[20 : 31] So the second step to mature and grow as part of God's people is to learn obedience, obedience to the Lord, and to make a decision to follow him by honoring, loving, and serving him.

God's God's life. That leads me to the third step, mainly seen in the two last verses of today's reading.

conclusion. Concluding his long speech or sermon to the Israelites, Moses once more challenges his listeners to make a choice.

And again, and he repeats himself, it is a matter of life and death. In a sense, what he says is again nothing new. It is a repetition of what he has already said, but it underlines the message he's conveying to the people.

The importance is further underlined by the fact that he this time takes heaven and earth as witnesses against the people. And heaven and earth, of course, meaning everything that comes from the creator of it all.

[21 : 49] So what he is doing is that he's taking God himself as a witness. And the alternatives are distinctly stated. Life and death, blessing, and curse.

And we could add belief or unbelief. The choice, says Moses, is up to the people. And what they choose will have consequences not only for themselves, but also for their children.

The people are given a choice. from the side of God, the decision is already made. He has chosen them to be his people.

Now they are challenged to do their choice, a choice which will show itself in the way the people think and act.

therefore they are urged to love the Lord, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. In the last verse, this only, this only will lead to life, for the Lord is your life, as Moses says.

[23 : 10] So the message also, this last part of the text is clear. Choose the Lord to be your God.

Choose life. And I think that this message is as important today as it was when it was first presented.

We, all, the people of God today, we also need to make the same choice over and over again.

We know that life at large is filled with small and big choices we have to make. Some of them are more important than others. Some are easy to make, others are more difficult.

But there is one choice, there is one choice which determines more of our life than anything else. and going back in my own life, I learned about this decisive choice early in my life.

[24 : 21] I grew up on a farm in the northern part of Sweden, in a small rural community. My parents were Christians and my siblings and I were brought up in that faith.

faith. When I was in my teens, I was part of a youth group in our church. We were not a very large group, but we met once a week for singing, Bible study, and different programs.

And I must admit that most of what we did I have forgotten. Isn't that life too? But there's one thing that I remember.

It was a song that we often sung. And I won't sing it for you because that's not my gift. But in translation it says, choose now, choose Jesus, and choose for life.

Choose now, choose Jesus, and choose for life. preparing this sermon back in Sweden, those words have been ringing in my head.

[25 : 40] Choose now, choose Jesus, and choose for life. And looking back on my life, I realize that the choice I myself made as a teenager to follow Jesus has had an enormous effect on my life.

and it has affected my entire life to something good. So when we read and listen to the words in today's Bible reading, and the theme of this sermon, we can actually forget most of what has been said.

God will stay in your mind, or to speak biblically in your heart. Choose life, choose Jesus.

And doing so, you will experience that Christian belief, or choosing to believe, is actually dependent on the fact that God himself first chose us.

And I quote from the Gospel of John, Jesus' own words, you did not choose me, but I chose you, and appointed you to go and bear fruit.

[27 : 12] John chapter 15, verse 16. So our choice is in reality an answer to God's or Jesus' choosing of us.

The Lord is always a step ahead of us. And the life we are urged to choose is the eternal life, since it is a life given by him who is himself eternal.

So that was the third step in this text, and it summarizes what I wanted to say today.

So let me conclude with two short quotes from the text in Deuteronomy 30. The Lord, and here we can see that the meaning of the Lord is both God and Jesus.

Jesus, the Lord is your life, the Lord is your life, and then the words, now choose life.

[28 : 30] Choose now, choose Jesus, and choose for life. God is your life. That, I think, is today's message, and a greeting from God himself to all his people, including us, who are gathered here at Christ's church today.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
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