

Choose Life

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[0 : 00] You may like to have open the passage from Deuteronomy, page 163. For those who are visiting, this is the final of a sermon series on the book of Deuteronomy that I've been preaching through since August.

And for some, no doubt, it will be a great relief to finish. Let's pray. God, we thank you that your word speaks forever.

And speaks to our hearts. And we pray that your word will be written on our hearts, that we may indeed love you and live for Jesus' sake. Amen.

It's time. The first election I can remember in this country was 1972, when Australia decided that it was time to change government and it was time to have a Labour government for the first time for 23 years or something.

It was time. It was time to change and it was time to decide in December 1972. And in many ways, when we get to Deuteronomy 30, it's time.

[1 : 15] It's time for Israel to decide and it's time for Israel to change. Indeed, this chapter, in many respects, is the climax of the book.

Even though it's not the last chapter, it's the climax. The book began by recounting to Israel the history of its past, reminding them of God's goodness and provision as Israel came through the wilderness, from slavery in Egypt to the verge of the Promised Land.

It reminded Israel of its failure in the past, the times when it forgot to worship God, when it went and worshipped idols, when it failed to go in and take the land. The book has reminded Israel of the laws and commandments and statutes and ordinances that God had commanded his people in the wilderness at Mount Sinai.

And it had exhorted them to obey them and follow them when they entered the land. It had reminded them of the ceremonies that they were to perform when they entered the land.

The book has encouraged Israel to know that God would help them and conquer the land for them. And now at the end of the book, at the climax of the book, it's time.

[2 : 26] It's time for Israel to decide and move. It's time for Israel to change. The chapter that we're looking at is full of great optimism, great hope for the future.

And yet, throughout the book, it's been clear that Israel is a people which fails and sins. A people which constantly falls away from God. It goes and worships idols.

It fails to take the land 40 years before. And as we saw last week, in the ceremony in chapter 27, with the curses and the blessings, the setting up of the law and the altar on Mount Ebal, all symbolising Israel's failure.

So what place is there for hope when the people keep failing? It's time to change.

It's time for Israel to change. It's time to move out of a cycle of failure and forgiveness, failure and forgiveness, marked by the sacrifices that were to be made, to look ahead to change and to break that cycle.

[3 : 33] Very often, I think, as Christians, we fail to go the further step. We think that the gospel is a gospel of forgiveness full stop.

And if we were to stop where we were last week, with the ceremony on Mount Ebal and the law and the altar and the sacrifices, we would have failed to take the necessary second step.

For if we stop there, we're saying that in a sense, God, yes, is merciful and holy, but the gospel is only to forgive us and to leave us unchanged and to keep on in a cycle of failure, needing a sacrifice and forgiveness, failure then, sacrifice and forgiveness, failure, sacrifice and forgiveness.

But the second step and the necessary step that we must go on to as Christians is the change step. And very often we think that the gospel of Jesus' death only brings about forgiveness full stop.

But there's more. And this chapter here in Deuteronomy tells us there is more as well. The chapter begins with a call to repent.

[4 : 38] When all these things have happened to you, the blessings and the curses that I have set before you, if you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you and return to the Lord your God, and you and your children obey him with all your heart and with all your soul, just as I am commanding you today, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you.

In the middle of those opening verses is the call to Israel to return to the Lord. And literally the word means repent.

Repent, return, the same thing. For to repent is to turn around, to change mind, to change direction, to change attitude. To repent is to say, I've been heading the wrong way, I return or turn to the Lord and follow that direction instead of the direction that I have been following.

Very often, in Christian preaching, repentance is almost ignored, certainly underplayed or downplayed.

Often that's because we have a weak view of the morality and holiness of God. We think that it doesn't really matter what I do, so therefore there's no place for repentance. Because repentance means saying, that direction is wrong, this direction is where I ought to head.

[6 : 02] Sometimes we ignore repentance because we don't want to say that we're wrong or anybody else is wrong. And in our modern age, that's a very common thing. That we don't want to say anybody's wrong, so we never want to call anybody to repent.

For ourselves, we often underplay repentance because we so easily blame something else. We blame our parents for our bad upbringing, or we blame the government, or we blame our neighbours, or we blame the church.

We never want to take responsibility for our own failure and sin, and therefore we never repent. And sometimes we underplay repentance by weakening our understanding of it. Repentance is not just saying sorry, but it's changing direction.

But sadly, sometimes we think that the prayer of confession is a sorry prayer. Well, yes, we do express our sorrow, but we also express repentance, which is more than sorrow. It's a preparedness, a willingness to change direction, more than just saying sorry for our failure.

Repentance is in fact a good word. It's actually a good thing to encourage others to repent, and to repent ourselves. It's not a negative thing, because to offer somebody the chance to repent, or to take the chance to repent ourselves, is to acknowledge that God is merciful.

[7 : 22] For if God were not merciful, there'd be no place for repentance and change. And it's also to acknowledge that God is holy. For if God were not holy, then he wouldn't care whether we do right or wrong, and therefore repentance would be meaningless.

But to offer the chance to repent and to take it ourselves, is to also acknowledge that God gives us a fresh start. That God says that we can start again, that we can wipe the slate clean, that all the past failures and sins and things that we've done wrong against God, we can put them aside.

God treats us as though we've never done them, when we repent and turn away from them. And that's a great thing to say. It's a great thing to encourage somebody to repent, because it's saying something fundamental about the merciful character of God and His holiness.

It's a good thing to repent, and it's a good thing to call others to repent. And we ought to do more of it, I think. And now is the time to repent.

Before Jesus comes again. Now before it's too late. We sometimes wonder why Jesus has not yet returned, when it seems in the New Testament His return was so imminent.

[8 : 31] But the reason He is yet to return is because of His grace and mercy in extending the time for us and others to repent. This is the time for repentance.

And if we wait, we may miss out. Well, repentance is the human side, so to speak, of change, to change our minds and direction.

But it's not as simple as that. For change is not fundamentally my activity or my initiative or my power or my strength and ability.

But rather repentance is prompted and initiated by God. So the chapter begins when all these things, literally when all these words have come to you, blessings and curses that I've set before you.

And if you call them or take them to heart and return to the Lord, the prompt is the words of God, the blessings, the curses.

[9 : 36] But really I think summarizing all that's gone before in Deuteronomy, it's when God's word comes to your heart that repentance is prompted. It is God who initiates it.

It's God who provides the impetus for our repentance and for our change when His words come to our heart. But the fundamental problem is that our hearts are stubborn.

That was Israel's problem and indeed in the preceding chapter in chapter 29 it's clear that it's still their problem. They haven't changed. So in chapter 29 verse 4 Moses says to the people that God has yet to give you a heart to love Him and obey Him and serve Him.

What needs to happen is for God to work in the human heart. If God does not work in the human heart there will be no lasting and enduring change.

And this passage promises just that. For at the heart of this chapter is verse 6 The Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul in order that you may live.

[10 : 47] everything in this chapter hinges on this verse. Everything about the hope of the future expressed in this chapter is as a result of what God will do in the human heart.

So chapter so verse 6 talks about God changing the heart using the word circumcising the heart so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul. That is that the love that Israel will express to God with its heart and soul is a result of God changing its heart.

If God doesn't change the heart then Israel won't love God with all its heart and soul. And then it goes on to say and that you may live at the end of verse 6. If Israel is to live that is as a result of God changing its heart.

It's not something that Israel does in its own ability or strength or power but something that God does first. So at the end of the chapter when Moses exhorts the people to choose life he's asking them to choose something that's the result of God working in their heart.

He's directing them in the end to God not to their own ability and strength. Verse 8 is a similar sort of thing. As a result of God changing the heart then verse 8 you shall again obey the Lord.

[12 : 04] Obedience is something that flows from God changing the heart not from our own strength or ability or initiative. It's God's work in the heart that will lead to love will lead to life will lead to obedience.

All of them are a result of God working in the hearts of God's people. The initiative you see lies with God. The same in verse 1 the call to repent and return to the Lord is prompted by God's words penetrating the hearts of the people of Israel.

It is God's initiative and it is a promise here in chapter 30 that one day God will change the hearts of God's people. What does it mean though to circumcise the heart?

It's an unusual expression. It's not something that we can do literally. It's an obvious hint back to the physical circumcision that was commanded of Israel in the book of Genesis where all the males of the people of Israel descended from Abraham were to be circumcised and there their circumcision physically was to be a sign of trust in a faithful God.

They were called to trust God and know that he was faithful to his promise. In a particular situation God had promised Abraham descendants. In Genesis 16 Abraham had gone about in his own initiative to try and accomplish the fulfilment of that promise.

[13 : 32] He'd had sexual relations with his wife's mate Hagar and produced a son called Ishmael. But in effect he'd done wrong. God is saying in the sign of circumcision in Genesis 17 that wait for God to fulfil his promise in his own way.

Trust him. He is faithful. And that's what's here in the circumcision of the heart as well. That the circumcision of the heart will make the people of God properly trust him and know that he is faithful in keeping his promises.

But when is this promise fulfilled? When is it that God changes the hearts and circumcises the hearts of his people? It's not now in Moses' day nor is it immediately the people cross the land and cross the river and enter the land.

Indeed the context in chapter 30 is of a long term future where Israel enter the land they receive some of the blessings of the land but in their failure they also receive the curses of the land and they're expelled from it into exile.

That happened about 800 years after Moses. So the promise here that God will change the hearts of Israel is something that is well into the future. But even when Israel came back from their exile at the end of the 6th century BC nearly 900 years after Moses this promise was yet to be fulfilled.

[14:54] For the history of Israel when they returned to the land from exile in Babylon was not one of a changed heart. Indeed their nation was rather subdued and rather pessimistic and the nation did not return to the glories that were promised and their hearts were not changed.

But rather we have to look even further into the Bible to see the fulfilment of this promise that one day God will change the hearts and circumcise the hearts of his people.

We have to look beyond the Old Testament for this and well into the new. Let me read some verses from Colossians chapter 2. In Jesus you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ.

When you were buried with him in baptism you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God who raised him from the dead. And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh God made you alive together with him.

You see it's in Jesus that God fulfils this promise. It's in identification in Jesus' death and resurrection that our hearts are changed. We often think that Jesus' death merely accomplishes our forgiveness of sin.

[16:14] But that's only half the story. Jesus' death not only brings us forgiveness but it begins the process of change. And yet as Christians we say well we're not doing what Deuteronomy 30 says.

We're not loving God with all our heart and soul. We're not obeying him perfectly. And that's because it's a process rather than an instant change. When we become Christians the process begins of change by God working in our hearts bringing about the perfect love and obedience that is promised here in Deuteronomy chapter 30.

Imagine that you're standing at the foot of Mount Everest as no doubt you've done many times and you're wanting to get to the top of the mountain and you see a sign that points to the summit and you think what a helpful signpost that is because it's pointing to the summit where I want to go and I wasn't sure which direction I was meant to go apart from up.

The signpost pointing to the top is rather like the Old Testament in a way the signpost pointing to God's ideal to the perfection but if you're at the foot of Mount Everest and you're a bit like me you realise that you don't have the fitness the physique the training the equipment to get to the top. I wouldn't last very long climbing Mount Everest before I'd conk out. I'd still be well in the foothills and the Old Testament is a bit like that as well. It points to the ideal the perfect of God but it also exposes as we saw last week our failure to actually get there.

[17:55] In our own strength we can't get where the Old Testament points. We can't get to perfect obedience and faith in God. Something more is needed and the Old Testament itself recognises that.

Here in Deuteronomy 30 it promises something more. It looks forward to something more. But the Old Testament itself doesn't bring about the fulfilment of that promise. We have to wait till we get to the New Testament to find the fulfilment.

You're standing at the foot of Mount Everest and along comes a cable car and the invitation to climb in and take you to the top. And in a sense you can sit back and be carried to the top of the mountain.

The New Testament or really Jesus is that cable car. The power you see to get where the Old Testament is pointing comes only in the New Testament and it comes in Jesus.

And it's not as though you get in the cable car and instantly you're at the summit but you get in the cable car and you're on the journey to the top. And it's a journey conducted in the power and the initiative of Jesus, of God.

[19:03] Not in our own strength, initiative, or power. And that's where we are if we're Christian people. We're in that cable car heading for the top. The Old Testament has pointed the direction but it showed us that we can't get there in our own strength.

We fail all the time. And even if we remain forgiven for our failure, it still doesn't help us get to the top. But Jesus' death does more than forgive us. It changes us in our hearts.

And that's where we are being carried by Jesus to the summit, to the perfect, to be one day holy and blameless in his sight when he returns.

You see, all the Old Testament looks to Jesus as its goal and fulfillment. The Old Testament sets out the model of perfection, the model of perfect standards of God.

And therefore, it points to Jesus who alone and uniquely is the one who fulfills that and embodies it in himself. The Old Testament exposes our sin and our failure and therefore, it points us to Jesus, our need for him and our need for forgiveness and repentance.

[20 : 13] The Old Testament in effect places us under a curse because of our failure but it points to Jesus who is the one who dies in our place as a curse for us that we may live.

The Old Testament commands sacrifices to be made for forgiveness and therein points to Jesus the once for all sacrifice for our sins. The Old Testament commands the males of God's people to be circumcised as a sign of their covenant relationship with God and in that it points again to Jesus who circumcises our hearts, the real spiritual circumcision of the heart.

the Old Testament commands perfection and it's Jesus that changes us and empowers us to attain that. Moses ends his sermon 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. not calling them to rely on their own ability and strength not calling them on to strive to obey in their own power but rather to rely on God.

To choose life is to choose the gracious God who changes the hearts that you may live. To choose good as he exhorts in verse 15 is to choose another result of what God does in the heart.

[21 : 46] To choose to obey is to choose God who changes the hearts to enable obedience. The call at the end of Moses' sermon is not to walk out in our own strength and power and ability but to rely on God who changes our hearts to enable us to love God to choose what is right to obey and to live.

And to choose life is to choose Jesus because in Jesus God keeps all his promises. In Jesus is the ideal one to whom the Old Testament points.

In Jesus we find our sins and failures met not only with forgiveness but with a heart that's being changed through the power of his death and resurrection. For the Lord is your life and he will give you many years in the land he swore to you to give to your fathers Abraham Isaac and Jacob.

The Lord is Jesus and the land is heaven and Jesus is the way and it's time to choose Jesus now and every day to rely on the grace and the power of a mighty and gracious God as we seek to live lives worthy of him.

Amen. Amen.