

Now Choose Life

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[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 10th of February 2002.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled Now Choose Life and is based on Deuteronomy 30.

Verses 1 to 10. The first week of December 1972.

For some it was a great time. For some it was not. For in the first week of December 1972, after what some would have called 23 years in the wilderness of Liberal government in Australia, the Labour Party took office and Gough Whitlam became the Prime Minister.

The slogan for the campaign in 1972 was quite memorable. It's time. It's time for a change. It's time to decide to vote Labour and to change Australia.

[1 : 16] It's time. And most Australians seem to agree. It was time. And for the first time since I think it was 1949, the Labour government was in office in Australia.

In many ways, the slogan, it's time, could be a way of describing this chapter of Deuteronomy, chapter 30. It's the climax of the book.

And in several respects, its slogan is, it's time. Now it is time, the height of this book, at the end of this book, after 40 years of Israel in the wilderness, it's time to enter the Promised Land.

The words of the book of Deuteronomy are preached by Moses, the leader of the people of Israel. He's an old man at the end of his life. It is Moses who was the leader of Israel through the plagues against Pharaoh, bringing them out from Egypt, through the parting of the Red Sea, and for 40 years in the wilderness.

And now they are on the verge of the Promised Land, high up on the plains of Jordan, overlooking the Jordan River, across into the Promised Land of Canaan, or what we now call Israel, and the West Bank.

[2 : 32] For 40 years, Israel had been in the wilderness. It ought not to have been the case. The journey from Egypt into the Promised Land was not that long, even on foot for many people.

But because of Israel's stubbornness, hard-heartedness, rebellion, and unbelief, they were, in a sense, consigned to 40 years in the wilderness.

The generation who were adults at the time of coming out of Egypt have now died out. Israel had been on the verge of the land before, 38 years before, on the southern border of the land.

There they'd chickened out, firstly by sending in spies to have a look at the land, who brought back a good report of it, but also reported that there were inhabitants in the land.

And the people feared those inhabitants rather than feared God. And so they decided not to enter the land. And in part as punishment, God left them in the wilderness for 40 years, bringing them eventually around to the eastern border, across the Jordan River, still under the leadership of Moses, who is about to die at this point.

[3 : 48] They've got to this point, not through a series of stunning successes, but through 40 years and more of failure.

It's extraordinary that they're at this point at all. And in fact, in the book of Deuteronomy, which is, as I've said, a sermon preached by Moses, he pulls no punches about the past failures of the people of Israel.

They failed even at Mount Sinai, a great point of Israel's history, where in just a few weeks out of Egypt, they arrived at the mountain of God himself and heard God's very voice declaring the key laws that God was giving the people as part of the relationship that he had with them.

But there, while Moses was on top of the mountain receiving the tablets of law and other laws that he would later write down on papyrus and scrolls, they committed a gross act of idolatry.

But Deuteronomy also remembers the time when a little bit later they were on the verge of the land and sent the spies in. Deuteronomy chapter 1 rebukes the people for their fear of the inhabitants rather than their fear of God, in effect.

[5 : 02] But Deuteronomy doesn't stop there either. It records the fact in chapter 9 that from the day they left Egypt to this very present day, they have not failed to be rebellious against God.

At times they grumbled because there wasn't enough food or the right food or enough water or the right water. At times they grumbled because they thought they were going to be killed. In fact, before they even crossed the Red Sea, as they were fleeing the pursuing army of Pharaoh, they grumbled and wanted to go back.

This is not a people with a great history or a great past. It is a people who have failed and failed often.

And so it's quite extraordinary at the climax of the book of Deuteronomy to have, in a sense, an optimistic future.

Israel is being exhorted to decide, to choose, to choose life, to cross the Jordan River and to enter the Promised Land. Not to fail as they had done so many years before when they chickened out of entry into the land.

[6 : 09] Now it's time. Time to decide. Time to cross the river. Time to conquer. Time to trust God.

And time to obey. But just as Deuteronomy is quite realistic about the past failures of Israel, incredibly it is also realistic about the future failures of Israel.

In the preceding chapter 29, Moses makes clear to the people his expectation that when they cross over into the land, they will not obey God's laws.

That will bring upon them the curses of God and lead them to be evicted from the land into what we might call an exile from the land. The future is not good just as the past was not good.

We might well wonder what on earth is going on here in the preaching of this sermon. Why does Moses bother and why does he look forward to the future? You think of the motivational speakers that you hear today, the football coaches or tennis coaches, political leaders and other whiz-bang motivators.

[7 : 24] You've got it in you to succeed. Think hard, believe hard enough and you'll win. you've got the resources within you to be who you want to be, to do what you want to do.

That's not Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy knows that people fail God and no matter how hard we try, we fail and yet this is still a book of wonderful motivation and inspiration, still a very moving book and sermon at that and ultimately still a very optimistic book for the future.

How can that be? This chapter begins by anticipating not only the entry into the land but Israel's failure after the entry into the land and their eviction from the land so that there may have been a period of initial blessing when they conquered the land but then that was followed by a time of the curses of God coming upon the people for their disobedience.

When all these things have happened to you, the blessings and the curses that I've set before you, if you call them to mind or maybe put them in your heart is a better way of translating that, mind and heart being the same thing.

If you put them on your heart among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, that is into exile, not in the land, and if you return to the Lord your God, you and your children obey him with all your heart and with all your soul just as I'm commanding you today, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes.

[9 : 08] Now that looks as though it's simply saying to the people when all these bad things have happened because of your disobedience and you're scattered to the four corners of the earth in exile, away from the land, remember, put on your heart what's happened.

Remember God's requirements. And turn to God. Repent of your failure. And then he'll turn to you and bring you back into the land and restore your blessings and even restore the blessings more abundantly than the previous ones you will have known at that point.

And we could say quite simply that's what Moses is preaching here. It's up to you. When you sin, repent, God will restore you and you'll be blessed and that's great. That's the gospel, perhaps.

Now certainly the idea here is an idea of repentance. The word in our translation is return. But that's the standard Old Testament term for repentance, to turn around and to come back to God.

Repentance is certainly underdone in Christian preaching today, it seems to me. It's underdone because we have weak views of morality. morality. Therefore, when we act immorally or unethically

or dishonestly, then we're not likely to repent because we're likely to qualify whether we've actually done anything wrong at all.

[10 : 30] I mean, after all, everyone else does it, so why can't we? And so when we have weak views of morality and compromise God's standards, we're unlikely to repent. That's typical of our society today.

Or we may underplay repentance because we don't want to say that anyone is wrong. So if somebody does something that contravenes the standard of God, we may be very reticent to say to them, repent of your sin because we don't like telling anyone that they're wrong.

Certainly not in our world today. Or we underplay repentance because we deny responsibility.

Faced with our own failure or our own sins and mistakes, well, it's not really me but I was provoked to do it because I've had a bad day, my boss at work was pretty lousy or I've had the kids screaming at me all day or the school teachers did it.

It's the government's fault really. It's the educational system. It all goes back to 1972 in fact. That government that was elected then. And sometimes we underplay repentance because we think it merely is saying sorry.

But repentance is actually a good word. It is a good thing because when God commands us to repent, he's saying I'll give you another chance. But it's not just saying sorry.

[11 : 49] It's not passing the blame. It's not denying our responsibility. It is taking full responsibility for our own failures and sins before God, failing to live up to his standards but turning away from them.

Not merely saying sorry, though there is a sorrow element of it, but rather seeking to turn back to God and his ways and live our lives according to him. And so when God demands our repentance, that is a great word to hear.

And if some Christian brother or sister calls you to repent, that is a great thing to be told because it is saying you've got another chance. It is not the end.

God's not coming down on you like the great big foot in Monty Python without a second chance. you've got another chance. Repent and start again. Now repentance is the human side of change perhaps, but this passage is not quite as simple as that.

It is not quite simply saying we have to somehow change our minds and directions and our hearts so that we'll come back to God in order for him to come back to us and our exile as Israelites to be restored.

[13 : 05] The repentance that Israel will one day have here in Deuteronomy 30 is prompted by the words of God. So when all these things, all these words, verse 1, have happened to you or come upon you or come to you, then that will lead you to repentance.

That is the initiative to repent is not from within us, but it's from God himself. It is his words that will actually cause to well up inside the Israelites a repentance and a return to God.

So too for Christians today. Any act of our repentance is prompted by God and God's words being applied to us by God.

Take them to heart, God says, those words in verse 31 or into your mind as this translation has. words, but there is the big problem because throughout the book of Deuteronomy, the problem for the Israelites, the people of God, is their heart.

The problem of the heart is the heart of the problem. The heart is not right. And so throughout this book, God has demanded that the heart be right.

[14 : 24] Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and strength. Serve him with all your heart and soul and strength. Be no longer stubborn hearted or hard hearted.

It's all very well to be told that time and again through the book of Deuteronomy, but the people to whom this is told, the Israelites, have exhibited in their past history consistent hard heartedness, stubbornness, a heart that is not responsive to God.

So that early in chapter 29, Moses says to them in verse 4, to this day the Lord has not given you a mind, literally heart to understand. Your heart's not right and God hasn't done it for you yet to this day.

What needs to happen? The heart needs to change. Now already back in chapter 10, God had demanded through Moses that the Israelites circumcise their hearts and over the course of this young adults weekend that we've just been having, I told them last night to go away and circumcise their hearts.

No one came back to tell me that they'd done it. How do you do it? Kristen's a doctor, I don't know whether his scalpel will help to circumcise our hearts.

[15 : 46] So what's it all about? At the heart of chapter 30 is verse 6, perhaps the greatest verse in this book. Moreover, 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.

Everything in this chapter that is optimistic about the future derives from this verse and this action promise of God. If Israel is to have any ultimate future with God, it depends on the fact that God will one day circumcise their hearts.

So that, as verse 6 says, you will love the Lord your God and you will live. Loving God, living with God in the land, they're only possible if God will circumcise the heart.

later on, the exhortation at the end of this chapter is to choose life. But life comes from a circumcised heart. To choose life is to choose to have your heart circumcised by God.

A result of a circumcised heart is verse 8, then you shall again obey the Lord. So to obey the Lord is only possible when the heart is circumcised. And then in the next paragraph beyond which Elissa read for us today, we're told there that we don't have to go up to heaven to find the commandment that's been commanded to us.

[17 : 24] We don't have to cross the other side of the sea. No, verse 14 says the word is very near to you. It's in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe. Now most people reading Deuteronomy misunderstand that verse.

They think that it's saying you can do it. You've got it within you. The word of God is close enough. Just go and do it. But all of that is premised on God circumcising the heart.

Verses 11 to 14 flow out of God's work on the heart of the Israelites. Only when he circumcises their heart which he's yet to do here will the word in fact be near them in their heart and on their mouth for them to observe.

And the same also for the repentance because the repentance is tied to obedience. And so the repentance even of verse 1 is certainly not human initiative. It's prompted by God's words and it's effected by God circumcising the heart.

So then what is it to circumcise the heart? If we can't do it even if we had a clever doctor with a scalpel, what on earth is it about? In the first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis, the hero or the patriarch I guess of the people of God, the one from whom it began in a sense, the recipient of God's promises, was Abraham.

[18 : 49] And he was told to circumcise himself and all male members of his household in perpetuity to pass on generation to generation. The men would be circumcised.

That is, their foreskins would be cut. An odd thing really, the sign of the covenant. Well you think now if you were dreaming up a sign for the covenant of God with his people, what would you do? I think you'd make it something that everyone could see, you know, a fish sticker on the forehead or something like that. I mean then people would know that you belong to God and it would include the women as well as the men.

So why circumcision when no one would see it? Jews were much more sort of careful than people are today.

Why circumcision? circumcision. Because in the chapter preceding in Genesis, Abraham had had wrong sexual relations with his wife's maid in order to in effect take on for himself the promises of God of an heir to produce one himself through his wife's maid.

[19 : 58] Circumcision in part was rebuked to Abraham for being in effect hard-hearted, for being stubborn, not trusting the promises of God and not obeying God. It was to be a sign of trusting the covenant promises of God.

But in itself, it's just an external act. It does nothing to change Abraham. In itself, it looks forward to the circumcision of the heart, which is God's work, and does change people from being hard-hearted and rebellious against God's commands and not trusting his promises, into being receptive to God's promises and obedient to his commands.

Well, the issue at the end of Deuteronomy is that this heart is yet to be circumcised. Here are Israel being commanded to cross the Jordan River to conquer the land, live obediently in the land, but their heart's not right yet.

Why not wait for a while? Why not Moses saying to God, God, why don't we just sit here on the plains of Moab for a little while longer yet? I can stay alive a bit longer because he's not allowed to enter the land, and when you're ready, circumcise our hearts, then we'll cross the Jordan. When does it happen? It hasn't happened here in Deuteronomy. It doesn't happen when they cross the Jordan River under the leadership of the next person, Joshua. It doesn't happen when they get a king on the throne, King David, for example, great king, no circumcised heart there, in the people of God.

[21 : 23] In fact, if you keep on looking through the Old Testament, you won't find it. And certainly what's being said here in Deuteronomy is that you'll enter the land, you'll have some blessings for a while, but then you'll be disobedient, then the curses will come, you'll be evicted from the land, and then you'll be brought back.

So let's look to the end of the Old Testament. Where do we find the circumcised heart there? The people do leave the land in 587 BC, 900 years nearly after these words of Moses.

Another generation or two past, they come back to the land. But in the bits of the Old Testament that are written after they come back to the land in about 520 BC, there's nothing there about a circumcised heart.

And so they live on in the land, largely it seems dispirited and not very prosperous. Certainly not receiving abundant blessings from God, reluctant even to build the temple again when they get back.

And so in those last bits of the Old Testament, in Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, there's no circumcision of the heart. And then God's silent for a while.

[22 : 27] The Old Testament ends. A few hundred years pass. And then John the Baptist comes on the scene. The forerunner of Jesus. And it's in Jesus Christ that we find the circumcision of the heart finally done by God.

About 1450 years after Moses preached these words of Deuteronomy, St. Paul wrote to the Church of Colossae in what is modern-day Turkey.

By this stage, Jesus is dead and risen and ascended to heaven. And we're some years, a couple of decades, after those events. And St. Paul says to the Colossians in chapter 2, In Jesus Christ, 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 when he forgave us all our trespasses.

[23 : 48] You see, our hearts are circumcised when we are identified in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. when we are brought in the world. When we are brought into him through faith in him, God circumcises our hearts.

When he makes us alive, when we put off our old bodies of flesh and take on the new life in Christ. Notice how in those verses of Colossians 2, the emphasis is on life.

Jesus is risen to new life and we also are made alive together with him. The same promise that's there in Deuteronomy 30. God will circumcise your heart so that you may live.

And here at last it happens when we are identified in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ through faith, when we are in him, to use St. Paul's favourite expression.

We often think of Jesus' death as being the heart of the gospel and the heart of our faith because there we're forgiven. But the power of Jesus' death does not stop at the power of forgiveness.

[24 : 58] Because the power of Jesus' death is the power also to change our hearts so that we may be circumcised in heart, enabled to obey God.

Now that then raises a dilemma for us because here we are, most of us I suspect, are Christian people, therefore most of us have hearts that are circumcised. Why is it that we are not fully obedient?

Why is it that we still fail and sin? It seems to be that we're not quite doing what the circumcised heart would do for us, according to Moses.

And I guess to put it simply, the answer is that what Moses looked forward to as a sort of single event, if you like, the circumcised heart leading to full obedience of faith.

We now see from the perspective in which we live that we live in between the first coming of Jesus, his death and resurrection, and his second coming. In between there our hearts are circumcised but the full effects of that will only be found when he returns and we're made fully perfect in the sight of God for eternity.

[26 : 12] What the Old Testament sees as one event, the New Testament sees as perhaps we might say a process in between two events, the two comings of Jesus Christ.

Let me say a little word then about the Old Testament relating to the New according to these words. Notice how Moses here acknowledges that the law of God, which he's been preaching for many chapters, it's not a bad thing, it's a good thing.

The problem is the heart of Israel, not the law. He recognises that the law and the obedience to God alongside the promises that God makes of living in the land with blessing and so on is all pointing to a great future reality.

But the problem is the heart of the people is wrong. They are impotent to change and do what the law requires and trust the promises of God. I've used this illustration before but let me do so again. Imagine that you're wanting to climb Mount Everest. You wander around for a while until you see a sign that points to the summit. Fantastic, you think. That's what I've been looking for all this time.

[27 : 25] I want to know how to get which way to go for the summit. So you start to climb Mount Everest. Now if you're like me, you find it a bit hard to even climb the hill up to Shopping Town.

You sort of have to stop halfway and take a breath. There's no way I'm ever going to be able to climb to the summit of Mount Everest. I'm not fit enough, strong enough or these days young enough to do it.

The Old Testament is like that sign post pointing to the summit. It's great. It's what we need. It's pointing in the right direction. Promises of God down this path. Obedience to God.

Here's the law pointing in the same direction. So that at the summit you can see, if you can imagine, the people of God living obediently under God in the land that God has given them, bringing in blessing to the world and so on.

Pointing the right way. That's the Old Testament. Trouble is it doesn't have any power to help you get there. You're on your own in a sense. The power to get there is what we find in the New Testament through the death and resurrection of Jesus when our hearts are circumcised by being identified in him and his spirit taking up dwelling in our hearts.

[28 : 40] If you're walking up to the summit and you realise you're not going to get there on your own steam, that's a bit like the Old Testament. But the cable car that stops to pick you up and carry you there, that's the death and resurrection of Jesus, the power to change your heart, to take you where the Old Testament's pointing.

This chapter ends with the exhortations to choose life. Verses 15 to 20. See, I've set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.

If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I'm 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're entering to possess.

But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.

[30 : 01] Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, 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.

Choose life. But what is life? The result of a circumcised heart. Not something we achieve by our own greatness or effort. So to choose life is to choose to submit to God circumcising your heart. It's to do what Deuteronomy has been exhorting Israel to do, to humble itself as the test in the wilderness was meant to prove for them. Though they refuse to obey that test.

Choose what is good. The prosperity is literally the good in verse 15. And what is good? Again, it's the result of a circumcised heart back in verse 9, for example, and 5 of this same chapter.

Choose obedience. But again, that's the fruit of a circumcised heart going back to verse 6, leading into verse 8. So all the things that Israel is to choose in this final climax of this sermon of Moses, all derive from the heart that is circumcised.

[31 : 20] So in the end, Moses is exhorting the people, choose God. Choose to have your heart circumcised by God. Choose to submit to His work in your life.

Choose not to do it for yourself. You don't have the resources within you. Submit yourself to God. Choose Him. Choose His grace to change you.

So that you may love Him. That you may obey Him. That you may live. Moses, in the end, is calling on Israel to submit to God's grace, to rely on God's grace, to choose His grace and not themselves. For us, though, we see more fully what we are to choose. To choose life is, in the end, to choose Jesus. Because it is in Jesus that God keeps all His promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Choose Jesus. To choose life is to choose Jesus because He is the ideal one whom the law describes. Choose Jesus.

[32 : 40] To choose life is to choose Jesus because the law exposes our sin and our weakness and our inability to obey and therefore our need for a Savior. To choose life is to choose Jesus.

To choose life is to choose Jesus because without Him we stand accursed by the law and face death, not life. To choose life is to choose Jesus because it is in Him that our hearts are circumcised, that we are changed so that we may love God and obey Him.

For the Lord is your life and He will give you many years in the land He swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. For the Lord is Jesus.

The land promised is for us heaven. And Jesus is the way. It's time. If you've never done so, it is now time to choose Jesus.

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