

Two Ways to Live

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 23 September 2007

Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 0 0] Well, please be seated. You may like to have open the Bibles at page 163 to Deuteronomy 30, and we're continuing our sermon series on the last chapters of Deuteronomy.

And let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, speak to us from your word, we pray. Write it on our hearts that we may believe it and do it.

For Jesus' sake, amen. The first election in Australia that I remember was 1972. Gough Whitlam was elected.

Many years of Liberal government ended. And it's the only election slogan of the last 35 years or whatever that I actually remember is the first one, it's time.

All the other election slogans seem to be pretty dreary and pale into insignificance or forgetfulness, but that one still sticks in the mind, it's time. And when we get here to Deuteronomy 30, there's a sense in which that could summarize this climax of Moses' preaching in this book.

[1 : 0 7] It's time. It's time now for Israel to decide. It's time for Israel to change. It's time for Israel to follow God. It's time for Israel to cross the Jordan.

It's time for Israel to conquer the Promised Land. It's time. So choose life. The climax of this whole book, in effect, comes at the end of chapter 30 in verse 19.

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I've set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life. It's time to decide, is what Moses is saying at the end of this sermon of the book of Deuteronomy.

That sounds all very well and good. It sounds very encouraging and exciting. But if we're followed through Deuteronomy during this year, there's a sense in which we must doubt the ability and resolve of Israel to do exactly what they're commanded to do.

The book began with the people of Israel on the verge of the Promised Land, where they failed to enter the land. They failed to cross the Jordan River. They chickened out of going into the land because of the inhabitants who were in there and so on.

[2 : 1 9] Israel failed. And Moses doesn't hide that failure of Israel. In Deuteronomy chapter 9 at Mount Sinai, Moses is on top of the mountain receiving the commandments and the laws from God and down the bottom of the mountain.

What's happening? Israel is worshipping a golden calf, an idol, turning away from God into idolatry. And so again, the sense is that this is an Israel who keeps failing.

A couple of weeks ago when I preached on chapter 29, the same sort of thing is anticipated. That once Israel enters the land, their future is not particularly rosy.

Their future will be that one person of Israel, a tribe, a clan, a man, a woman, will actually turn away from God to idolatry and be like poison in the root that actually spreads through ancient Israel, leading the whole nation astray and ultimately to exile away from the land.

So here we get an odd mix in Deuteronomy, an urgency for Israel to choose life, but a sense of realism that Israel keeps sinning and keeps failing.

- [3 : 26] And indeed, what we have found in the last few chapters is a very clear expectation that Israel in the future will fail. We saw that in chapter 27 a few weeks ago.
- There was a ceremony that Israel was commanded to conduct. They had to build an altar, the law on stones, all on the Mount of Curse, because the expectation is that Israel will be under the curse of God in the future.
- In Deuteronomy 28, the list of blessings and curses, far outweighing the blessings, were the 54 verses of curses. And a strong expectation, not simply if you obey, if you disobey, but when you disobey, then ultimately exile away from the land will be your lot.
- We saw it in chapter 29 with the expectation that someone, clan, group, person, whatever, will lead the whole nation astray to idolatry, to God's punishment, and to exile.
- So what real hope then is there for the future of Israel? Are these empty words of rhetoric to a people who are so persistent in their sin that there is, in fact, little hope for them?
- [4 : 42] Well, chapter 30 begins, 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 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'm commanding you today, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes.
- Now all of that is, in one sense, a hypothetical. If, then God. If, after the blessings and curses happen.
- So Moses is not anticipating something immediately they enter the land, but beyond that. He's anticipating a future where Israel will be in the land, but lose the land through their sinfulness, as chapter 29 portrayed.
- But from exile, the hypothetical, in a sense, is, if all these things, all these words, come upon you, into your heart, our translation's got the word mind, but in Hebrew, it's the word heart, it covers the mind as well.
- If they come into your heart, literally it says here, if you call them to mind, but if these words, the curses and blessings, the word of God, if it comes into your heart, then, if, you return to the Lord.
- [6 : 03] That's the idea of repentance. Literally, the word for repent is simply return, turn around, go back, is the idea. The context is a context of future failure, but it anticipates that somehow God's word will provoke in the hearts of Israel repentance, a turning back to God, and if that happens, then, verse 3 says, God will restore your fortunes.
- There's a play on words here, because the Hebrew for restore your fortunes is literally in this sense of return your fortunes. If you return to God, God will return your fortunes back to you.
- There's a sort of, not quite a quid pro quo, but a sort of balance of what Israel will do and what God will do. Now, the idea of repentance, I think, is played down a lot in Christian thinking and also in Christian preaching these days.
- I think it's played down a bit because we tend to have weaker views of morality, and so are a little bit reticent and unsure about really whether repentance is right.
- In our society, there is little that is, in one sense, wrong. If it's right for you, it may not be right for you, but something else might be right for you. There's a compromise, a relativism of morality in our world.
- [7 : 17] And so repentance seems to get shoved to the side. We don't like to suggest that something we've done or somebody else has done is wrong. We don't like saying that anybody particularly is wrong unless their sin is particularly bad and so on.

And furthermore, we sort of push repentance out because so quickly we deny responsibility. We blame others. We blame the government, our parents, our upbringing, our teachers, our education system, our kids, our spouse, our income, our weather, or whatever it is.

We blame something and therefore we don't take responsibility ourselves for our own falling short of God's holy standards. And sometimes we reduce the idea of repentance as simply saying sorry or feeling a pang of regret.

Repentance, in fact, is a good word. It's not a word that we should shun or avoid. If I was to drive down Middleborough Road and then turn onto the freeway to go into the city, I think on the, if I was to turn right before I crossed over the freeway, I would be driving down the exit ramp.

And I think there there is a big red sign that says, wrong way, go back. Now it's typically Australian blunt, there's no sort of please or would you mind, but nonetheless, it's actually a helpful sign.

[8 : 40] Periodically, you hear of people driving down the freeway on the wrong side of the road. They're in danger and others are in danger. That sign is warning you of danger if you continue down the path that you've begun.

It's actually saying, repent, turn around, is in effect what that red sign is saying. It's a good thing because it's warning us of danger ahead. When God calls us to repent, it's a good thing because he's warning us that the path we've chosen to go down is a dangerous path for us and maybe for others.

It's dangerous for us because ultimately it leads to idolatry, to sinfulness, to the wrath and judgment and punishment of God. It's warning us not to keep down that path.

But our going down a path of sin actually is dangerous for others as well. Just like if we drove down the freeway on the wrong side, we're putting others in peril. And so chapter 29, we saw a couple of weeks ago when one person or one clan or couple, they turn away from God down a sinful path leading to idolatry, they're like a poisonous root that can spread to the whole of the nation of God's people.

So there's danger for others as well. So the idea of a call to repent is actually a very good word, one that we ought to embrace. But more than that, the word repent tells us that God gives us another start.

[10 : 07] When God says to us, repent of your sins, he's saying, turn around, I'll wipe the slate clean, we'll start again. Not just our little misdemeanors, but all of our sins, all of our failings before God, big or small.

God is saying, let's start again. The word repent is a word of mercy, a word of forgiveness. It's a word of grace. And here it is embedded in the theology of the Old Testament where we often don't expect to find that sort of idea.

So often our caricature of the Old Testament is it's full of wrath and judgment and it's to the New Testament that we turn to find grace. But actually it's consistent in both Old and New Testaments.

Some of the later prophets, they began their message saying, repent. It's exactly the first word that Jesus uses in Mark chapter 1. Repent and believe the gospel. And here it is in Deuteronomy 30, 1400 years before Jesus.

The same gospel calling us to mercy and forgiveness from a gracious and merciful God. now is the time to repent is what Moses is saying.

[11 : 17] It's time to repent, to turn. Not just to say sorry but to actually turn around away from the lifestyle that you live to God's lifestyle.

To turn away from a particular sin or attraction or temptation or addiction or habit or direction and to turn to God. that's what repentance is about.

Turning back to God away from a life of idolatry, false worship, sin, etc. Now, it's not quite as simple as that.

We're dealing here with an Israel who consistently has failed to repent of their sins. An Israel who keeps on sinning. And so Moses but Moses is not anticipating somehow that Israel can muster up its positive thinking and say now we're going to repent.

That's not the thrust of the end of this sermon. It's a little bit more subtle than that but actually a bit more assuring than that. Chapter 30 begins with the blessings and the curses coming upon Israel and if you call them to mind among all the nations.

[12 : 28] That is, if these words come into your heart is literally what it's being said in verse 1. That is, the prompt for repentance is not something in a sense from within Israel but actually comes from God's word.

It is God who moves people to repent. Now, that's an astonishing act of grace. It's not simply that God sits and says come on, turn around and come back to me but the act of turning and repenting is our act, our achievement but actually the prompt, the energy for repenting from turning to God actually comes from God himself.

That shows the commitment that God has to his people. He's not simply beckoning them from afar but his powerful word is entering their hearts by his grace to draw people to himself.

That's what verse 1 is on about where it's literally talking about the words of God being taken into Israel's heart. Now, this raises the issue we saw two weeks ago in chapter 29.

There, at the beginning of that chapter, we saw the astonishing expression, to this day, God has not given you a heart to understand. but now we've got an anticipation that God's word will work in the heart of Israel to bring them to repentance and bring them back to God and back to the land.

[13 : 57] So what's going on? Through Deuteronomy, the heart is a dominant theme. The heart of Israel is not right. There is an exhortation time and again to love God with all your heart, say in chapter 6, to take these words into your heart in chapter 6.

But in the subsequent chapters we've seen earlier in the year, in chapter 7, Israel's heart is prone to fear. Israel's heart in chapter 8 is prone to pride. In chapter 9, it's prone to self-righteousness.

To the extent that in chapter 10, Moses says, circumcise your hearts. What do you do? How do you do that? If I was to say to you, come on now, we're going to circumcise our hearts together, would we all rush to the kitchen for the sharpest knife?

We'll all look around for somebody who's a doctor to help us? What would we do to circumcise our hearts? Well, now we get to chapter 30, we find that what God commanded of Israel in chapter 10, he now promises to do.

So if you cast your eye down to verse 6, 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.

[15 : 20] Now that is a staggering promise of God. It is a wonderful promise of God. It is a promise of God that he will do something in our hearts that will enable us to love God as we ought and live.

In fact, all the things of chapter 30 flow from that promise. It is not quite in chronological order in a sense. The structure of the chapter makes this verse the center and everything flows out from it.

So in effect, what verse 1 is saying is when all these words of mine come into your heart, that is enabled when God circumcises the heart. When the chapter talks about Israel obeying God, that is made possible by God circumcising the heart.

that is clear in verse 6, God will circumcise the heart so that you will love the Lord. Verse 8, then you shall again obey the Lord, not by their own strength, but from God circumcising their hearts.

The same in verses 11 to 14, when it says, surely this commandment I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, that is because God has circumcised the heart. This is consequent on the action of verse 6.

[16 : 34] So verse 12 onwards, it is not in heaven, that you should say, well who will go up to heaven for us and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it. Neither is it beyond the sea that you should say, who will go across to the other side of the sea for us and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it.

No, the word is near you, it's in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe. That's not something that's the case for Israel as they hear these words from Moses, but rather something that will happen in the future when God has changed their heart.

When he changes their heart, his word will be in their hearts so that they may do it. Well, what does this idea mean for God to circumcise the hearts of Israel?

The idea of circumcision goes back to Genesis, the first book of the Old Testament. And in chapter 17, God commands Abram and all the men of Abram's household, his heirs and his servants, to be circumcised as a sign of the covenant.

Why? It's an odd sign really when you think about it. A sign of the covenant to show that you belong to God. Why not have something that's for the women as well and why not have something that people could see, be encouraged by?

[17 : 46] I mean, circumcision is clearly private. Nobody would notice. Why not say that everybody, men and women, children, servants, why not have a fish symbol on your forehead? Then we'd all know that you belong to the covenant.

Well, actually, the circumcision sign is very appropriate in Genesis 17 because in the previous chapter, what had Abram done? He had not trusted God's promise of an heir and that lack of trust meant that he took his wife's maid, Hagar, had sexual relations with her and produced a son.

Not the heir that was promised by God, which would be through his wife, Sarah, but through a maid. Abram had lacked faith and therefore, in effect, disobeyed.

So the sign of circumcision in Genesis 17, the next chapter, is in a sense a rebuke, a rebuke of faithlessness, a rebuke of disobedience.

And the sign was a sign to remind all the descendants of Israel that they were to trust God's promises with faithful obedience.

[18 : 53] obedience. But it was only ever a sign. It was only ever a physical sign because Abram's real mistake was not the sexual relations, that was a symptom of a heart that didn't trust.

The real problem is the heart. And so the sign of circumcision was a sign of something deeper needed to change the heart, to cut the heart, so that it would be responsive to God.

And now we find in the words of Moses here that the physical circumcision sign will actually be fulfilled one day in the future by God himself.

So when is all this going to happen? The anticipated timeline shows that Israel will settle in the land, but in time will rebel against God. We saw that in chapter 29 and into 30.

And all the blessings and curses will come upon and you'll be exiled away from the land. And that's of course what happened. In subsequent centuries of Israel's history, you keep reading the Old Testament to find all this out, they spent centuries in the land.

[19 : 58] The northern kingdom was exiled away in 721 BC, about 700 years later. And another 120, 30 years later again, the rest of the people of God were exiled by the Babylonians.

They'd lost the land. They were scattered in the nations roundabout. Exactly what is anticipated occurs 700, 800 years later. But these verses here in chapter 30 anticipate that from exile, God will bring the people back to the land and to him.

And of course, 70 years later, the end of the 6th century BC, 530s, the people of Israel were allowed to return by the Persian Emperor Cyrus. promise. But when you read the bits of the Old Testament that relate to that period, the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, for example, Malachi, you don't find the fulfillment of this promise.

You don't find an Israel with a circumcised heart full of love and obedience to God. In fact, you find an Israel dispirited and often faithless. Is it that God's promises failed?

Well, no. We need to understand here what the return from exile ended up being. There's actually two things about it. The prophet Isaiah, when he prophesied the return from exile, spoke of two servants of God.

[21 : 24] One of them he named Cyrus, the Persian Emperor, a servant of God, though a pagan, who would enable the people geographically to come back to the land. But the prophet Isaiah also spoke of a second servant.

Not named, but a suffering servant. A suffering servant who would bring the people not back to the land geographically, but would spiritually bring the people back to God.

That suffering servant, Isaiah makes very clear, died. Died carrying the sins and the iniquities of the people of God. So that the people of God would be restored to God.

In a relationship with him. That suffering servant died in a sense unjustly, not for his own sins, but for the sins of all of God's people. He died to make many righteous, to bring people to God.

And time and time and time again in the New Testament, it is abundantly clear without any shadow of doubt that that suffering servant is Jesus Christ.

[22 : 33] And that it's his death on the cross that brings people back to God. That's why John the Baptist's words at the beginning of the New Testament are words from Isaiah the second half.

Make straight in the desert away for God. What's John the Baptist saying? He's saying that the return from exile spiritually is about to happen. 1400 years after Moses spoke these words and 750 years after Isaiah's prophecy came, comes the suffering servant Jesus Christ spiritually to end the exile and bring people back to God.

That's the time frame that actually in the end fulfills these words in Deuteronomy 30. Because we find that the New Testament uses exactly this language of circumcising the heart, time, to the death of Jesus Christ.

So for example, when Paul writes to the Colossians, this is what he writes in chapter 2. In Jesus also 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 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.

[24 : 07] See what that's saying? When we place our faith in the death and burial and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, then our hearts are circumcised.

You see, his death does not simply take away my sins and forgive me. is more powerful and more profound than that. It also changes my heart. That's powerful death and powerful blood.

The same sort of idea is in Romans 2 at the end where Paul writing to the Romans says that the real circumcision is not of the flesh as in the Old Testament sign, but the spiritual circumcision by the spirit.

So that as we identify in the death, burial, resurrection of Jesus Christ through faith, the spirit of the Lord Jesus comes into our hearts and circumcises and changes our hearts, writes God's word in our hearts.

That's the promise of the new covenant of Jeremiah, the heart of flesh in Ezekiel, the circumcision of the heart in Deuteronomy chapter 30. The dilemma that then should raise for us is to say, well, why are we not now loving God with all our heart, soul, strength?

[25 : 16] Why are we not obeying God with all our heart, soul, strength? Why is it that we still fail? We're still sinners. The Old Testament as it looks forward to the day of the Lord, the day of Jesus Christ, sees it as rightly as one package.

But we're actually in the middle of the package, so to speak. Jesus has come and the work of complete salvation has begun. Our heart has already been changed by being identified in Jesus' death by the giving of God's spirit, but not yet perfected.

That will happen on the day of the Lord's return, the conclusion of the package of the day of the Lord, so to speak. So our heart now has begun to be changed by God, but far from yet perfect, and ought to be making us look forward with longing and eager anticipation to the day of the Lord's return, when on that day our hearts will be perfected finally in the presence of God.

To be honest, I find it hard to imagine me on that day perfected. So different will I be from the sort of morally, spiritually compromised person that I am now, the imperfect me of now.

But it's a day I long for and look forward to. The day when my heart will be perfect, and therefore my love and obedience and faith will be perfect in the presence of God as well.

[26 : 45] The prediction here, the prophecy here of Moses, maybe beyond Moses' expectation, finds its fulfillment in the suffering servant in the Lord Jesus Christ.

What does that mean then? Moses finishes by urging the people to choose life. This is the climax of the book of Deuteronomy.

The last four chapters are slightly like appendices, looking to the transition from Moses when he dies. This is the end of his preaching that began in chapter one.

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity on the one hand, death and adversity on the other. We could say blessings and curses, obedience and disobedience, faith and lack of faith.

They're the two options. They're the two ways that Israel could go. If you obey, if you choose that is life and prosperity, 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, observing his commandments, decrees and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous.

[27 : 55] And the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you're entering to possess. That's one way. The other way is 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're crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. There's the two options. There aren't any others. Life and prosperity on the one hand, death and adversity on the other.

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 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, Isaac and to Jacob.

What does it mean to choose life? Life is back in verse six. Life comes when the heart is circumcised. To choose prosperity, to choose obedience is to choose to have your heart circumcised.

[29 : 20] Verse six. That is, Moses is not saying to Israel, come on, you've got strength, think positively, you choose the right option. That's not what he's saying. In fact, he's actually saying to Israel, choose to have your heart circumcised.

What that means is to be humble before God, to choose God's grace, we might say. Not your own strength, that will only lead into disappointment and disaster and death and sin.

But choose God, choose grace, choose to humble yourself before God. In fact, that's what Deuteronomy's been on about all the way through. That Israel is to be humbled before God so that his heart is receptive to God's word.

You see, there's no salvation when we say to God, I can do it. There's no salvation when we say God helps those who help themselves. There's no salvation when we say I can obey, I can love enough.

There's only salvation when we humble ourselves before God empty handed and say, God, I can't do this. I need you, I rely on you utterly and totally for my salvation.

[30 : 31] That's actually what Moses is urging Israel to choose. Choose life is to choose the heart that's circumcised so that you may live. Moses is urging Israel to choose God, to choose grace.

Verse 15 talks about what is good. Prosperity is our word. Literally, it's the word good. It's back there in the first verses of the chapter as well. It's the fruit of the circumcised heart. To choose to obey in verses 16 and 17 is to choose the result of the changed heart of verse 6.

All the things that Moses urges Israel to choose are enabled by God's grace. In verse 6. Moses is urging Israel to choose God, to choose grace and not to rely on themselves.

And for us, we understand even more sharply and more clearly what the choice is. to choose grace is to choose Jesus Christ. To choose grace, to choose life, is to submit to the death of Jesus on the cross for us.

To choose Jesus because he alone is the perfect one who fulfills God's law and word. To choose Jesus because in Jesus God keeps all his promises to Abraham.

[31 : 50] To choose Jesus because without Jesus and his death for us, we sit under the curse of God as disobedient sinners under his word. We choose Jesus because it's only Jesus who can change our hearts by his spirit and make us perfect.

To choose Jesus because only in Jesus is found righteousness for all who believe. To choose Jesus because it's through his death, burial and resurrection that our hearts are circumcised.

No other way. To choose Jesus because he and he alone is the resurrection and the life. 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.

The Lord is your life and the Lord is Jesus. Many years in the land and the land is heaven. And Jesus and Jesus alone is the only way.

It may be that there are some here who've never actually chosen Jesus. Who've thought that somehow your religious practices might make you acceptable to God.

[33 : 07] Now is the time to choose Jesus. To empty your hands and empty your hearts. to humble them before the cross of Christ.

And say that in Jesus alone will I find my salvation and life. Maybe you've never made that decision and choice before God.

It's time to choose Jesus. You see there's no middle path. There's no sort of well I'll choose a bit of Jesus but really I'm relying upon myself.

There's no salvation there. Self-righteousness, self-reliance is not a path of salvation. The choice that Moses confronts Israel with is a choice of humility and emptiness.

A choice of reliance and utter reliance upon the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It's time to choose Jesus.

[34 : 10] and if you've never made that choice, now especially for you, it is time. Thank you.