

Choose Life!

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: 07 June 2020

Preacher: The Venerable Daniel Gifford

[0 : 00] Well, I want to add my welcome to David's to you this morning and also invite you to send any questions you might have as you hear this sermon. And you know, I'm going to feel very free to turn the really difficult questions over to David as well, since we'll be together.

And I also want to say congratulations to anyone who's graduating this month from high school or from post high school education of any kind.

This is graduation month. And my son Alexander graduated virtually at his school on Wednesday by being recorded on video, receiving his diploma individually and walking across the stage.

And I said to Alexander, it must have been a very strange way to do a graduation. He said, well, you know, it's not my first rodeo. And I said, what do you mean by that?

He said, well, I did graduate from preschool and from grade seven, and they made an awfully big deal of it then. And despite the lack of ceremony, the lack of gathering in a way that you normally do, it is an exciting and it is a joyful time for graduates this year.

[1 : 15] And perhaps you have a feeling of relief. I'm finally finished. But there's also a sense of anticipation in any graduation. You ask, what is next?

You know, is it more studies? Is it a job? What will it be? What will be my occupation? What are the big decisions that I will be making? That's why it's not only called a graduation.

It's called a commencement as well, where you begin a new life with new decisions and a new kind of living.

It's also graduation day in Deuteronomy 30, because they are in a place called Moab, which is right on the edge of the promised land.

They are set to go in, and they are about to graduate from the school of the wilderness. It's a school where they have been learning that a person does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

[2 : 20] It was a school of trusting in the living God who loves them and provides for them. God is their life they have been taught.

To obey him and to trust him and to love him is where true life is to be found. It's been a 40-year degree, the longest degree in history, and now Moses says today is decision day.

It is the commencement into a completely new life in the promised land. The big question is, will you choose life? Will you do it by loving God with all your heart, with all your mind, and with all your soul?

Will you love God who has first loved you? Well, God's love fills this chapter 30, as you heard it being read, and that's why it not only has a feel of a graduation, but also a feel of a wedding ceremony.

Christian weddings, and I've been to hundreds of them, are filled with joy. But there is always in a Christian wedding a solemn moment in the middle when vows are made between husband and wife, where they commit themselves to each other completely, and they give their lives to one another until the day that they die.

[3 : 48] It's this final and awesome decision that everyone in the wedding service witness. And from my experience, it is the moment when most of the tears come in any service.

Tears of joy, tears of wonder, it's what is happening. And here in chapter 30, Moses tells all the people, it is time to renew your vows.

This is the solemn moment. It is joyful, but it is solemn as well. God has brought you into a loving relationship with him that's even deeper than marriage.

You belong to him, and he belongs to you as your God. Sixteen times in this chapter, Moses says, God is your Lord, your God.

And there is a solemnity about this commitment, because chapters 28 and 29 speak of the awful result of rejecting God and of ignoring the life that he gives, ignoring this relationship that he has given to you.

[4 : 58] They are called curses, because when you cut yourself off from God, it means that you cut off yourself from everything that is worth living. And that's why instead, Moses calls them to the clearest of decisions.

Choose God on this graduation day. Choose life. Choose blessing. It's really the first evangelistic sermon in the world. And it has a much bigger live audience than any other service, even one that Billy Graham would do.

There's hundreds of thousands of people. You may have attended a Billy Graham crusade in the past. I know some of you have. And I heard Billy Graham at a missions conference years ago. And even there, he moved people to a decision. He asked people to come forward to commit or to recommit their lives to Jesus Christ. And many people went forward.

It was very moving to see that. But in this evangelistic service, Moses wants every single person in those hundreds of thousands that are gathered in Moab to step forward and to make their commitment to God.

[6 : 12] Moses didn't know Jesus then, although he knows him now. But his whole sermon points to the good news of Jesus. Jesus perfectly fulfills everything in this sermon.

And that good news unfolds in four ways that I want to briefly speak about now. First of all, he says, you will fail and God will restore.

Second, he says, God must operate. And that's verses 6 through 10. And then he says, God comes near in verses 11 through 14. And then at the end, verses 15 through 20, he says, you must choose.

You must choose. And this good news chapter begins with a real downer. It begins in an unexpected way. Moses tells them, you will all fail.

At the beginning of the chapter, he says, you will experience not only God's blessing, but his curse as well. Which means that they will reject God.

[7 : 20] They will ignore God who has blessed them. And the worst of the curses in chapter 29 is that God will drive them away from this promised land that he has given to them.

If they are unfaithful and reject them and reject God. That's exactly what happens at the end of verse 1. He will scatter them in verse 3.

This is a deep failure on the part of God's people. And hundreds of years later, they are going to be dispersed far away from Israel. They know what is right. God has given them his clear word, which is the bread of life.

And they will, Moses says, say no to God. They will disobey his loving will. Now, I wonder if you can relate to that this morning.

And are at times in your life in the past, Mark Twain is reported to have remarked, it's not the things that I do not understand about the Bible that trouble me.

[8 : 20] But the things which I do understand that trouble me. You see, we often very clearly know what God wants of us. And we simply do not do it.

This is the desperate spiritual condition of all of humanity. All Christians experience this even. Paul was very, very honest about this in his own heart.

He says, Christians all can relate to that sense of frustration.

And if you're watching today, and I hope there are some watching who don't know God or consider themselves a Christian, I think you can relate to this as well.

You know what is right, and you hold people to that standard. But how often are you doing what you know to be right at all times? It's hard.

[9 : 28] And I think that this time of COVID is a time of stress. It can be a time of anxiety and strain that really exposes our own deep weaknesses in this area.

We are prone to irritability, to being impatient with others. We don't trust God. We may serve ourselves instead of others to sort of protect ourselves.

This is a time also where we are experiencing in the world, worldwide, demonstrations for right and just outcomes for racial tension.

We want right race relations. And now there is a chance for us really to consider how easily racism creeps into our hearts.

There is really a change of heart that we know that we all need. And Moses says to us in verse 2 that God is speaking to you.

[10:33] That you need to return to God by listening to that living voice that is His word in the Bible. Because in doing this, you open yourself up to the compassion of God, as you see in verse 3.

He restores you. He gathers you, even though you may be outcast into the outermost parts of heaven. His mercy surrounds your failure.

Because He is far more ready to gather you than you are to return to God, than you are to repent. But how can this happen?

How can this happen when the people of God and you and I are so prone to fail God? Well, that brings us to the second fold in that good news.

It's verses 6 through 10. God must operate. So in those verses, God is very concerned with your heart. And that's because your heart is the seat of all the things that you love most.

[11:37] It is central to the way that you operate. Your heart, what your heart is set on affects your emotions and your will and your mind. As Tim Keller writes, what your heart most wants, your mind finds reasonable and your emotions find desirable and the will finds doable.

Isn't that a great quote? That shows what our condition is like. Our heart affects everything. And in that new promised land, the people of Israel will find their hearts far away from God.

They would be hard towards Him and towards others. They would be drawn to idols and to material wealth instead. A deep temptation for them. And the only remedy would be a drastic heart surgery in verse 6.

Look at that with me now. The Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the hearts of your offspring so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, that you may live.

And wonderfully, we get an in-depth view of that operation in Ezekiel 36, 26, where God promises, I'm going to give you a new heart and a new spirit I'm going to put within you.

[12:59] I'm going to remove the heart of stone and give you instead a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

You see, this is not a heart bypass surgery. It's a radical heart transplant. It's an operation that changes the heart so much that it makes obeying God and His commandment not a duty, but a delight.

Our greatest delight. In verses 8 and 9, it's talked about as a deep privilege of obeying the voice of the Lord your God. It is saying that God personally talks to you and you can respond to Him with hearts that are very open to hearing God and loving Him.

Now, on this Trinity Sunday, it is only possible because God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Because how it works is that our spiritual open heart surgery takes place only by the powerful work of Jesus, who is God's Son, who alone gives us peace with God the Father by the forgiveness of our sins through His death on a cross.

And He gives God the Holy Spirit who sets our hearts on God Himself above all things. He fills us with that Holy Spirit so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, and with all your soul.

[14:38] And the good news is that Jesus, who gave His life to you, is actually the doctor of your souls. He comes for those who have sick souls.

And what He does is He lovingly performs this surgery for us so that you may live. We can't do that surgery by ourselves. We must submit to the work of that loving surgeon.

And wonderfully, the result, as you say at the end of verse 6, is life for you. And it's not just any life. Moses describes it in 9 and 10 as a prosperous, abundant life.

You know, you saw in the children's video, coins dropping from heaven there. It's a great picture because it tells us that God is taking delight in giving you abundance.

And He's not saying here that every person in Israel, or even most of the individual Israelites, will be wealthy. He is saying that the whole nation that does this of Israel will flourish.

[15:46] And that material goodness is simply a sign of something infinitely greater. And that is the incredible riches of a right relationship with God.

Every spiritual blessing is given to those who trust in Jesus, Ephesians tells us. By Jesus' poverty and a cross, we become rich towards God.

What a picture. And at this point of the sermon, in Moab that day, everybody who is listening would say, I want that new heart. You know, I want God to take delight in me and prosper in me.

How do I get this? Well, every religion in the world says, you must climb to God. You must do great things in order to find Him and to find His life.

Well, there is a third fold in these good news. In verses 11 through 15, Moses says the exact opposite. He says, the living God has come down for you.

[16:45] He speaks to you. You don't have to go up to heaven. You don't have to cross an ocean. God is close. And in verse 11, Moses says that the command to turn to God with all your heart and soul by obeying His voice isn't too hard.

It isn't far off. God takes away all physical distance, all spiritual distance that you may be experiencing. And that distance between you and God is bridged.

His word in verse 14 is very near to you, he says. It is in your heart. It's in your mouth so that you can do it. And you know, God's word in Romans 10, 8 and 9 tells us that this is all about Jesus.

He says, the word is near you in your mouth and in your heart. That is the word of faith that we proclaim. Because if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.

He is close to save us, to give us this new life. You may be far away in your heart from God, but He has come right to the door of your heart with a message that says, choose life, choose Christ, but you must turn to Him.

[18:09] Because otherwise, nothing will change. You will not know that life that He is giving. And that brings us to the end of this chapter. It brings us to a moment of decision in this sermon, verses 15 through 20.

It is a solemn moment. He says, you must choose. Verse 15 makes it really clear. He says, I give you, I show you life and good on one hand, and I show you death and evil on the other.

The life and death choice is centered on this question. What will you do about God who has loved you, who has come close to you, who speaks personally to you?

Will you love Him and obey Him? Or will you die? That's how stark the choice is. Moses is telling us that this is the ultimate decision in all of life.

You know, you graduates have many decisions ahead of you. And they will really determine the direction of your life. You're going to decide what vocation to follow, where to study, what to specialize in.

[19:23] Then where to work. You'll decide who to marry as well. In all of these decisions, you'll be thinking about what's best for you. But nothing comes close to this question and decision.

What will you do about God? He has first loved you in Jesus Christ. What will you do with the one who knows you best and has what is truly best for you?

Will you love Him and walk in His ways and listen to His voice? Or will you choose death and separation from Him? It is so crucial a question that Moses says, I call heaven and earth to witness what your choice will be.

Brothers and sisters, in this last verse, verse 20, Moses is calling me and is calling you to choose life.

Whether you're considering Christ for the first time or you have been a Christian for 90 years, that is the question that is all important. And it is a renewal of that answer in our lives that Moses is after here.

[20:41] Will you choose by choosing to love the Lord your God? God the Father has loved you first in Jesus. He is sovereign over all things, even the hardest circumstances in your life, to bring blessing to you in the end.

His ways are far beyond us, but we know one thing. He always wants to bless us. Love Him in return. Will you choose life by obeying His voice?

God the Holy Spirit opens your hearts to Him. He speaks His word deep inside of you. Will you choose Him? Finally, choose by holding fast to Him.

You can't do this by clinging to other gods, to other idols, to other things in your life that you put above God. Jesus is the only hope in life and death.

He is the way, the truth, and the life. In giving Him your life on this graduation day, you will receive life.

[21 : 47] Thanks be to God for this immeasurable gift. May you, by the gift of the Holy Spirit, receive it today. And let's pray before we sing.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have come close to each of us by sending Jesus to us.

Please forgive our sins and give each of us new hearts that love you and hear you.

Help us by your Holy Spirit to turn to you and give our lives to you so that we might know your life.

Please strengthen us in this new life so that we might bless the world in your name.

And it is in Jesus' name that we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.