

A National Referendum

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Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 00] Well, I hope you all know that there's an election on Saturday, and I hope you all turn out and vote.

And if you want to know who to vote for, see me after this. There's... I was looking at this, wondering about this kind of thing.

If you put down a word like obey, or submit, or humble, what other word would you add to that list that would be in keeping with those three?

Would you, Ian? Can you help me with that? Sorry? No, no, no, no, but that's an adverb to whatever adverbs do, but I want a word like that.

What? Yield, I guess, is a good word. Yeah. Any... Bow down?

[1 : 27] Bow down. You can't read that anyway, but I wrote it. Those words are...

They're not very popular words in our society, I wouldn't think. That they're not the way ahead. There's something wrong with all those words. You know, that I was obedient to this particular institution, and I was misled.

I was abused. I submitted, and I was taken advantage of. I humbled myself and was victimized for it.

I yielded, and so on. So that, in a sense, they're all very negative words in our culture and in our society. And most of the people who, in a sense, in a secular way, find themselves are people who say, once I obeyed, but then I realized what was being done to me.

[2 : 41] Or once I submitted, but I will submit no longer. Once I was humbled, but... That doesn't pay off.

The guy who goes home with the cash in his pocket is not this fellow here. Once I yielded, but I won't yield anymore. And once I bowed down, but I won't bow down anymore.

And that's... I think that really has to do with... The problem of tyrannies is the problem that those words...

create. And if you are encouraged to do what these words imply, you're almost bound to end up in trouble of some kind.

And so I'm wondering how you can see... I mean, what is the problem with all these words? What do you do with them? Because you've got to do it for somebody, don't you?

[3 : 44] You've got to ultimately be... I mean, can you picture what the opposite to this is? I mean, whatever is opposite to it would be more acceptable in our society than any of those words.

So that's why I want you to look at this passage here and to see what's happening. What you've got... What you've got...

Just let me give it to you once again. The people of Israel, they have been brought together as a nation. They have been relieved from the oppression of obeying the Pharaoh of Egypt.

They no longer submit to his rule. They have crossed the Red Sea. They have faced God on Mount Horeb. They've been given the law. They have been led and cared for in the wilderness for 40 years.

They have now come to the Jordan River. They're on their way, about to go over the Jordan River to claim the land which God has promised to their fathers, to Abraham and that group.

[4 : 51] They're all ready to go. And this is what... And Deuteronomy is really the sermon that Moses preaches to them before they go.

And he preaches it to them in order that they will renew their covenant with God and learn to obey him, to submit to him, to be humble before him, to yield to him, to bow down to him.

And all those things are required of them in this sermon. And he says, this is the hour of decision, to quote Billy Graham.

And Moses, in preaching towards the hour of decision, says these words. See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction.

For I command you to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways, to keep his commands, decrees and laws.

[5 : 57] Then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. But, and he said, if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed.

You will not live long in the land which you are crossing the Jordan to enter. So that he makes it very clear that something's going to happen.

You've heard what I've said, Moses tells them. And now I'm telling you, you are to obey. And people hearing that will find out.

It's not, it doesn't look to me, if you look at this text carefully, it doesn't look like like, uh, Moses is suggesting to them that they have a choice to obey or a choice not to obey.

He just says, when you hear this, you will obey. Uh, I command you this day to love the Lord your God. And, uh, he says to them that, uh, uh, that they are to, to love God, to walk in his ways, to keep his commandments, decrees, and laws.

[7 : 30] These are the marks of an obedient nation. And you will live, you will increase, you will be blessed, and you will possess the land.

And that's what obedience is going to look like. That's the way you respond. Now, what I'm trying to get at here is that I think there is, within each of us, a sense in which, either from the heart we obey or from the heart we wander away.

How are you going to respond? How are you going to respond? And, uh, and that's what, what Moses tells them. He says, if you do, uh, if your hearts do turn away, if you do wander, if you do not obey the commands, uh, if you bow down and worship other gods, you won't live long in this land. That's, that's the way it is. The whole undergirding of your life will be gone. So that somewhere in there, there is the necessary response of obedience.

And where on earth does that come from? Because we are all rebels. I mean, how many of you would prefer to say, I am a humble and obedient person, or I am basically a rebel?

[8 : 55] Well, I mean, uh, we all think of ourselves as rebels. We all think that, uh, that way about ourselves, and we don't want to submit.

And so what happens is that, uh, you get, you get this decision based on some passages that, uh, that, uh, come in Deuteronomy chapter 28, which I'd like just to read to you, because this is where he gives them what the blessings that belong to obedience and the curses that belong to disobedience.

The blessings that belong to obedience are in, uh, in Deuteronomy 28 and they're, uh, in verses one to nine. Listen to this. If you fully obey the Lord, your God, carefully follow all his commands that I give you this day.

The Lord will, your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the Lord, your God.

You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country. The fruit of your womb will be blessed. The crops of your land and the young of your livestock, the calves of your herds, the lambs of your flocks, your basket and your kneading trough will be blessed.

[10 : 26] You will be blessed when you come in and blessed when you go out. The Lord will grant that the enemy who rises against you will be defeated before you.

They will come at you from one direction, but flee from you in seven. The Lord will send a blessing on your barns and on everything you put your hand to.

The Lord, your God will bless you in the land he is giving to you. Now, basically, you see, that implies a relationship of obedience.

Almost all those things, we would say, would come from clever business practice, clever agricultural practice, scientific knowledge, development of things, that we would accomplish that by, in a sense, rebelling against this, but he says that the order of this is some kind of direct blessing that comes from God.

It affects your family. It affects your business. It affects the work you do with your hands. It affects every dimension of your lives. In every dimension, you see the outworking of the blessing of God.

[11 : 39] Now, then he goes on and tells them what happens if they don't. If you do not obey the Lord, your God, and this is just the negative side of what I've just read to you.

If you don't obey all his commands I'm giving you, all these curses will come upon you and overtake you. You will be cursed in the city and cursed in the country. Your basket, your kneading trough will be cursed.

The fruit of your womb will be cursed. The crops of your land and the calves of your herd and the lambs of your flock, you will be cursed when you go out and when you come in.

Well, that's the picture that he gives. You see how there is blessing and there is cursing. Now, notice this about it, though, that both of them imply a sustained relationship to God because of your disobedience.

Because of your disobedience, you are cursed by God. Because of your obedience, you are blessed by God. The end result is that if you are blessed by him, you will return to him in worship.

[12 : 55] And if you are cursed by him, you will return to him in repentance. So that the blessing and cursing are all designed to bring you into closer relationship to God.

And that's why he says that there is a choice set before you. Now, what he does, and I think this is, he talks about the blessing and the cursing.

And then he talks in the same chapter, and this is preceding the passage which we're looking at today. He talks about the circumcision of your heart. And you know that circumcision was the mark of being under the covenant.

And you know that came into a great point of controversy in the New Testament. But here Moses says to them, The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the heart of your descendants so that you may love him with all your heart, with all your soul, and live.

So what it seems that God is doing, what the Lord wants to have, is that he wants to give them, he's made this covenant with them.

[14 : 09] The sign of the covenant is the outward sign of circumcision in the body. But he says, I want to circumcise your hearts so that your membership in the covenant will not come from something outward in your life.

It will come from your heart. So that you will be in relationship to God because of your heart.

Circumcision, in that sense, is when the New Testament came along, the argument was that we are the people of God because we are under the sign of the covenant.

And the sign of the covenant is that the males in our community are circumcised. And that brings us as a community in relationship to God. But what Moses is saying here, and what Paul picks up again in Galatians in the New Testament, is that it's somehow a condition of the heart that God is after.

So that when you hear his command, your response will be to obey, not to disobey. Your response will be to submit, to humble yourself, to yield, because you know whose authority you are coming under.

[15 : 35] And you respond from the heart. So that the possibilities of prosperity are enormous in our world if we can live in obedience to God.

So that, you know, when somebody told us this morning in our morning Bible study about the fact that the possibility of NAFTA creates a huge trading block and the falling of the Berlin Wall brings a huge consumer community into our economic sphere and the Pacific Rim countries, that there is, in fact, the possibility of unlimited prosperity.

I don't know whether you agree with the politics of that or not, but that's not my point at the moment. The thing that I want you to look at is that God's purpose for us is that we should enjoy prosperity. That that's what God wants. He wants abundant prosperity. Now, if you look at all the political agreements and alliances and various things that make up our country, you know where the fault lies.

It lies in human greed and human selfishness and the unwillingness to submit. And so it's in submitting to God that we are to find the prosperity that belongs to us.

[17 : 20] And that that prosperity, which is spoken of in Deuteronomy as being the prosperity which comes with the, the Old Testament, there's a New Testament concept of that prosperity too.

And that is the gospel blessings, the blessing of eternal life, the blessing of the indwelling Holy Spirit, the blessing of the hope of heaven, which are, which are blessings way beyond the merely material prosperity, which is promised in, in, in Deuteronomy.

So that those are the blessings. And what we are to do is submit to God. And we are enabled to submit to God because the sign of the covenant is not outward conformity to God, but it is a heart's desire to obey him.

That from our hearts we delight to do that. You see, the difficulty, the difficulty with this choice that, that Moses puts before us, whether you choose life or whether you choose death, I mean, the, the, the way he puts it that, I set before you life and prosperity, death and destruction.

Now, which, which do you respond to? Which do you choose? It's very difficult, isn't it? Because Jesus comes along, and what does he do? He chooses death and destruction in order to bring life and prosperity.

[19 : 00] What do we do? Well, we look at the possibilities for personal gain, and we choose life and prosperity and end up in death and destruction.

Okay. So that what, you see, the, the, the, the way we've twisted the thing around. The life and prosperity is not independent of God, but can only be in submission to God.

And that's, that's the way he, he puts it. So, then he goes on and says, there is the circumcision of your hearts. And then he says, if you obey the Lord your God and keep his commands and decrees that are written in this book of the law and turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

So that this book, which is, as you know, the fifth book of Moses, this book, which was discovered in the temple in the time of Josiah, this book, which becomes, in a sense, the foundation document out of which the whole canon of the Old Testament was built with Psalms and Proverbs and Prophets and history.

It all was built around this statement of Moses. That if you will, if you will keep, live by this book of, of the law and turn to the Lord your God.

[20 : 25] That this book is the thing by which this is God's word written. We hear this book and turn in obedience to the God who is the author of this book and we submit in obedience to him.

And he says, if that happens, then what else happens? He says, you turn to the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul.

And that brings us right back to the fundamental reality of the individual's relationship to God, which is to love him with all your heart and mind and soul and strength.

Who are you to love? The God who has given you the book. And what has he done for you? Well, he has circumcised your hearts to make that the sign of your covenant relationship to him.

So that when he says, do it, our first response is not on your life, but that's what I want to do. That's where my life is.

[21 : 30] That's what obedience is. And that's, I think, the discovery that many people have made and that many people live by. That they have seen life and prosperity.

They have seen death and destruction. And so they live maybe in poverty, looking for life and prosperity as preferable to living in prosperity, immediate prosperity, and heading towards death and destruction.

So it's enormously incisive. Well, then what happens is that Moses goes on from here and says, now, what I'm commanding you today in terms of setting before you life and prosperity, death and destruction, what I'm commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach.

It is not up in heaven so that you have to ask who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so that we may obey it. Now, that is one of two pictures he gives here which are primarily what most of us consider religion is all about.

Religion has to do with God and God is in heaven and if we could only get there we would know what to do. We would know what it was to be related to him.

[23 : 03] And so that then along comes the preacher who says, I've been there and I can tell you. And he can't. Of course. Or I can offer you a mystical experience whereby you will be transported into heaven and you will find out for yourself.

Or I can tell you that as the result of this long series of ascetic practices you might finally arrive at the beatific vision and you will then know God.

I mean, that's how humanly we think of religion. That it's something remote and distant that you go after. The second picture he gives which is similar to that is nor is it beyond the sea so that you have to ask who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so that we may obey it.

You know, I would be very willing to live in relationship and in obedience to God if only I knew what God wanted. But then we get into some kind of Ulysses-like journey to the ends of the earth to try and discover what it is that God wants if I only knew what he wanted.

What he wants to do is he wants to bless you and he wants you to live in obedience to the word which he has given to you.

[24 : 30] And he says the word is right here. It's not remote. It's not distant. And the thing that I think is important about that is that he's in fact telling us that the life he wants as our response to him as a nation or as individuals the life he wants from us we know exactly what it is.

It's not a mystery to us. We know what it is. Now we don't have hearts that want to obey it necessarily but we at least know what it is.

And that's why Paul picks up from this passage these very words and gives them back to us again when he writes to the Romans.

He said the word is very near you on your lips and in your heart. If you will believe in your heart if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord that is he is the one to be obeyed.

If you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead then that saving relationship between you and God is established.

[25 : 52] It's there. That's the basis on which you are to live your life. That's the basis on which you are to walk out the door onto Merrard Street. That's the basis in which you pick up your telephone.

That's the basis on which you sit down and write your letters. It's that assurance that you have fundamentally this relationship with God.

That's what you want to do with your life. You want to live in response and the response of obedience to Jesus as Lord in your life. That's all you want to do.

It's a the New Testament is infuriating to most of us I think because we are so blessedly religious. and we want our religious behavior to be written in a book of a hundred chapters with a hundred subsections each of them with a hundred other subsections telling us exactly to do wherever we are in whatever in every possible conceivable circumstances of our life.

[27 : 02] That's how we would like to think of it. But he says no here it is. You have set before you very simply life and prosperity not just prosperity on this earth but mostly the blessings of the gospel which are ours.

You have that you have death and destruction. Which way is your heart responding to God? It's not it's not a secret it's not particularly difficult it's not profound it's just there.

and you are wise mature and responsible enough to know that at the basis of your own life is the desire to be obedient to Jesus Christ as Lord confessing him to be Lord and believing that he is the one who is Lord.

You see we are prepared to submit to all sorts of orders and things you know to some lovely lady came up to me over the weekend and told me that she was a member of the order of the mothers of the you know one of those long things you know where some group that she belongs to that tells her what to do with her life you know which is what we all desperately want but we don't need to submit to anything or anyone save Jesus Christ as Lord and to live in relationship to him that's what we need and when we when we follow that relationship by putting ourselves in some kind of artificial obedience you know I mean it's I can't say it because I'm sure I'll offend your sensibilities but you know one young fellow said you know he was anxious for me to join the Masons and he was making a mistake because you're not to be asked to join the Masons you have to know but he he asked me he says do you know that if we did everything that's in the book for the Masons to do this would be a perfect world

I know that that's not that's not the answer though that's the problem and and and what has to happen is that you have to get to the place where you recognize that the response of your life to the one who God has set in authority is to acknowledge and obey him and that these words become not the off scouring and the undermining of our whole human potential but these words become the words by which we live obedience to Jesus Christ submission to him humbleness before him and yielding to him and bowing down the knee to him which is the one before at whose name every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord that's the picture and here it is in Deuteronomy chapter 30 verse 15 which I remind you says that life's very simple

[30 : 19] Moses tells them before you today life and prosperity death and destruction and you have to ask what the decision of your heart is as you see as you see that and you have to ask it so that you will know your own heart and be able to do something about it let me pray our God I I sense

that again I fill the world with words when there is only one word and that's the word that you have spoken to us in Jesus Christ so help us to sort out and discard the words those that have been helpful will you use in our lives to bring us to encounter the word those that have not give us the grace to forget we ask this in Christ's name

Amen