

**+ Deuteronomy 30:15-20 + Serving the Lord—A Matter of Life or Death +
+ 6th Sunday after the Epiphany + 16 February 2014 +**

I'm going to give you a few of what I hope will be easy choices. You can quietly think about what you would answer. Which would you choose?

- A well-stocked fridge and a pantry full of food to feed you and your family or an empty fridge and cupboards with no money to buy food?
- A functioning furnace to warm your home during the cold winter or no heat at all in your home for an entire winter full of freezing days?
- A doctor's care for your health or fending for yourself with exposure to contagious diseases, your own care for wounds and broken bones, and no preventative care?
- A winter's drive in a vehicle with all the latest safety features including seatbelts and air bags or a drive down the Thruway in a rusted-out, open-air Model T during the middle of a Nor'easter?

I would guess that all or nearly all of those choices were easy to make. Generally, it was pretty obvious which choice to make. You'd likely prefer the well-stocked food supply, the functioning furnace, the doctor's care, and a safe vehicle over the more dangerous and potentially deadly alternatives. You would prefer life over the possibility of death. That's usually what we prefer. The only real exception is when a person chooses to give up their life to save the life of a loved one or a friend or simply another person. In those cases, you might sacrifice your life to avoid their death.

Well, I have another choice for you. If given the option, would you choose to serve the Lord and him alone or serve him...and others—other people, other things, others? As a Christian, I hope you would say that you'd serve the Lord and him alone, but do you really? Do I? Do any of us?

Compared to the previous "easy choices" I gave you earlier, something seems different about this choice. All those other choices were matters of choosing life or death, but choosing between serving the Lord alone and serving him and other people and other things and other others doesn't seem like such a "life or death" choice. We think it's not like the Lord strikes you dead right then and there if you choose to follow a particular whim of your sinful nature. He didn't even do that with Adam and Eve when they served their own sinful natures! You do know that sin is wrong and there's a certain amount of guilt that follows, but it all seems so harmless...or is it? Serving the Lord is actually a matter of life or death, isn't it?

The ancient prophet Moses would've answered that question with a resounding "Yes!!" In fact, that's exactly what he told the Israelites at the end of his life. The forty years of God's judgment that had forced the Israelites to wander in the wilderness for four decades had finally come to an end. A new generation of Israelites—a faithful, God-fearing generation—was finally encamped on the bank of the Jordan River. The Promised Land was just on the other side, yet Moses, God's servant and their leader, was not going to take them the rest of the way. During the forty years of wandering, he himself had momentarily taken the glory away from God in a fit of anger against the constantly complaining Israelites. As a consequence for his very public sin, the Lord told Moses that he would never enter the Promised Land. That time had come. Moses would soon depart this life and the Israelites would enter the land promised to their forefathers.

That's how we get the book of Deuteronomy. It's really Moses' final sermon or sermons to the Israelites before his death. In this book he reviews the great things God had done for his people and reminds them of the holy Law God had placed over them to set them apart from the other nations. Near the end of his final sermon, Moses lays out the covenant or agreement God was establishing with the Israelites. **"See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction."** Basically, "Which do you choose—life and blessing in the Lord or death and curses apart from the Lord?" Is serving him a matter of life or death?

It certainly was for the Israelites. You see, in giving them civil, ceremonial, and moral laws, the Lord established with them a conditional covenant. "If you do this, then I will do that." Moses made it pretty clear what the condition was. **"For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess."** Basically, if they followed the Lord's commands, his decrees, and his judgments, then he would bless them richly. He would also allow them to live for many, many years in that land.

...But remember this was a “conditional” covenant. That means if Israel broke God’s covenant, there would be penalties and consequences and punishment. Moses was just as clear with the consequences. **“But 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 you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.”**

Moses certainly didn’t want that to happen to his people. He didn’t want them to be destroyed. He didn’t want them to be exiled from the land long-promised. Above all, he didn’t want them to wander away from the Lord their God, who had rescued them from centuries of slavery in Egypt and who had brought them to this Promised Land.

For good reason, then, Moses wanted his people to realize how serious God was about serving him or sinning against him. For the Israelites, it was a matter of life or death. You can hear that in Moses’ final plea to his people. **“Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to 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 120 years, Moses had seen and enjoyed God’s grace and mercy and love and blessing. He knew what a precious gift the Promised Land was for his people, yet above all, he knew that the Lord of free and faithful grace would be their life—in this life and the life to come. So he wanted them to live.

Let’s go back to that choice we considered earlier. Do you serve the Lord alone or do you serve him and “others”? If I went around the room, I’m sure I’d hear every one of you say, “I will serve the Lord alone”, but do we? Even as Christians, do you and I truly serve the Lord and him alone? If you walk back through the past week or the past month or the past year, have you always served the Lord alone or did you serve another?

Did you serve the lust of your heart letting your eyes go where they should not? Did you serve the greed of your heart feeding its endless appetite? Did you serve success or your job being willing to do whatever it took to get where you wanted to be? Did you perhaps serve your family or your activities or your stuff giving them highest priority for your time or your treasures? Even if you didn’t serve anything I just mentioned, surely you have served yourself in the past week or the past month or the past year. In serving yourself like some kind of self-made deity, you put yourself above the true God. You followed your whims. You did what you want to do. You allowed your sinful nature to take you down paths that lead away from your God.

...But where does that choice lead you? At first glance, it doesn’t seem like a matter of life or death. In your own eyes, you realize that choosing to serve yourself or another over serving the Lord alone isn’t always good. Sometimes there are consequences, but sometimes you get away with it...or so you think. Yet in God’s eyes, choosing to stray away from him is never good. It never ends well. It always leads to a curse rather than blessing, to evil rather than good, to death and hell rather than life and heaven. Moses’ words come back to haunt us 3,500 years later. **“If your heart turns away and you are not obedient...I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed.”** God is serious about serving him. In his eyes, serving the Lord is a matter of life or death whether you are an ancient Israelite or a 21st century American. What’s really tragic is that we just don’t seem to get it, even as Christians, or at least comfortably ignore it. Yes, we prefer life, but by nature, we’d blindly fly headlong towards death.

...But then comes along One who actually preferred to give up his life to save us from death! Think about that. Jesus came in spite of you and me. He came even though we gave him no good reason to do so. He came to serve God alone because you and I preferred to serve ourselves or others. By nature, we rightfully deserved death and God’s eternal curse, but Jesus came to give us life by taking God’s curse on himself. Jesus came to establish a new covenant—a one-sided covenant between us and God.

He did everything, so we could have everything. Jesus came to give us grace—the undeserved, self-sacrificing loving kindness of God himself. He came to give us forgiveness for all those times when we’ve chosen to serve another. He came to give us abundant blessings like peace and purpose and mercy and confidence and joy in this life, and to give us life eternal.

Jesus gave us the real, lasting reason why you and I can and do serve the Lord alone. It’s not something you conjure up in yourself or something you do if you just pray hard enough for it. It’s not some burning feeling in your heart or some cloudy dream in your mind. No, it’s the reality recorded here in the pages of Scripture, where it says you are forgiven. You are transformed. You are alive. You are saved through Jesus.

That impacts how you live in every aspect of your life. When you or anyone else looks at your life, should there be any doubt who you serve? Should there be any doubt that the Lord of life, the Lord of grace, the Lord who's given you everything and more, is a bigger deal than food or health or heat or anything in this life? Should there be any doubt that serving the Lord alone is the only right choice for a child of God? If serving the Lord alone means eternal life with him in heaven, then what possible need is there to serve anyone or anything else that passes away?

So I place before you a matter of life or death, of eternal blessing or eternal curse. By nature, you would choose death, but by faith in Christ, choose life in him who is your life. Choose life ***“that you may love the LORD your God”***. Choose life that you may ***“hold fast to him”***. Choose life and serve the Lord alone whose free and faithful grace is yours in Christ. Amen.