

Choose Life

In the name of him who is our life and salvation, dear friends in Christ: Some decisions in life are hard. Think about the ones a high school graduate faces: Should I go to college? If so, which one? What career should I pursue? Whom should I marry? Where should I live? Should I buy a house or rent for the time being? What car should I buy? What investments should I make? These are big decisions. They require careful deliberation. If you're older, you made those decisions a long time ago – for better or for worse – but that doesn't mean you aren't faced with difficult decisions. Some have grave consequences: the doctor tells you that you've got a life threatening illness for which there are three treatment options, each with its own risks and chances for success. Which do you want? Other decisions are just as difficult, even if the consequences aren't as serious: Your host tells you, "For desert we have cheesecake. Do you want the chocolate, the raspberry, or the white chocolate raspberry?" Mmm. That's a tough one – unless you can have a sampler plate and try a sliver of each.

Other decisions in life are not difficult. We call them "no brainers". Your seven year-old son asks for permission to jump off the roof with a parachute he's fashioned out of a bed sheet. That's easy. No. (But next time he'll know not to ask for permission first.) Two polite young men come to your door and ask if you'd like a copy of the Book of Mormon. Don't even have to think about it. Nope. In a poorly written E-mail from Mrs. Alice Tobunga of Nairobi Kenya, the widow of the late Dr. William Tobunga, asks for your assistance in freeing the frozen eight million dollars in assets that (for some strange reason) she can't get to without your help – for which she'll gladly cut you in for half. Uh-huh. Delete message. And the annoying televangelist who tearfully pleads that his ministry is doomed to fail unless you, yes you, send in \$100 immediately. No chance. Bye-bye Pastor Slick. I guess your show is cancelled, and ain't that a shame. These are not hard decisions to make. At least they shouldn't be. But obviously in some of these cases, there are people who do manage to make the wrong choice.

This brings us to today's Old Testament lesson from Deuteronomy, where we are presented with another decision to make – one that *should be* a "no brainer". Moses stands before the Children of Israel as they prepare to enter the Promised Land, and he says, "Here's your choice, folks: you can have life and good and blessings or, if you prefer, you can have death and evil and curses. Those are your choices. And they apply to you and to your children. So, what will it be? It's up to you. And just in case you need a hint here, I strongly recommend that you choose *life*."

Well, duh! Who would be so stupid as to choose death? The surprising answer is that a lot of folks do. There were many people standing there listening to Moses that day who ultimately did make the wrong choice. They chose death and evil and curses instead of life. Sadly, it still happens today, and in several different ways.

Choosing death for oneself – that is, suicide – is practically an epidemic among us. It's the third leading cause of death for people in our country ages 15-24 (that's after fatal accidents and homicide). So, for every one of those heartbreaking stories you hear of some poor child losing a battle with cancer there are literally dozens of other young people who voluntarily chose death and killed themselves. The reasons for this scourge are many and complicated. In a small percentage of cases mental illness plays a role. But in the vast majority of cases it all bubbles down to a lack of perspective. The individual loses sight of the big picture and can only

see this far [hand in front of eyes]. Whatever the problem is – be it family stress, trouble socializing, difficulty at school, a painful break up, substance abuse, whatever – the immediate problem is *all* the person sees. The only way out, *it seems*, is to choose death rather than life. *It is always the wrong choice*. And if the person could just back up a bit and see the bigger picture, they'd know it. They'd see that it's a no brainer to choose life over death every time. The trouble is that they act before taking the time to think it through. And there are no do-overs. Choose death for yourself just once and you don't get another chance to try again.

As bad as this is, far more numerous are the people who exercise their so-called "right to choose" to select death for their children. I speak of abortion, by which, at the sustained rate of over 3500 a day – in this country alone – unthinking parents sacrifice their own offspring to the true American idols: the unholy trinity of "Me first", "I can't be bothered", and "Too bad for you". It's strange: most creatures that God made will die defending their young. It's especially true of what we call the higher animals. But when it comes to humans, the highest of all of God's creatures, to whom alone was given the glory of bearing his image and the ability to make moral choices, *that's* where you find not only the wholesale despising of the gift of life that God grants to parents, but also the futile effort to justify this evil in the name of personal freedom – and not just once, but for many parents two, five, even ten times or more. Choosing death for their children becomes for them – and for those who support them – a macabre way of life.

It's madness. But I've been talking about choosing death in merely a physical sense, which, if Christ tarries, we will all experience one day whether we choose it or not. What I really want to talk about this morning is that decision we have to make between life and death in an eternal sense. There is no decision that matters more. What do you want to be your lot *forever*: life and good and blessings or death and evil and curses? It should be a no brainer.

Especially considering who it is that must make this decision. Contrary to what many believe, this isn't an offer made to everyone. To be specific, a lot of people mistakenly think that this is the choice that *unbelievers* are presented with: "Will you believe in the God of the Bible, or not. Will you choose Jesus and accept him as your Lord and Savior and thereby get all the benefits that go along with that: forgiveness and eternal life? Or will you choose to reject the Gospel and suffer the frightful consequences: death, hell, and eternal damnation?" But this is wrong. It's not to unbelievers that these options are given.

Consider: When Moses lays out the choice between life and death, he isn't talking to unbelievers. He's talking to the Children of Israel. He's talking to people who have just spent forty years in the desert living every day by God's grace. These are the people God rescued from Egypt with mighty miracles, culminating with their crossing through the Red Sea which opened for them and drowned their enemies. Everyone older than forty remembers this. They remember too seeing God come down on Mount Sinai and giving the Law to Moses. And every day since then they've seen the Lord leading them as a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. They've been living on bread from heaven miraculously served up to them. They've been drinking water that springs forth from rocks on command of Moses. And now they've been led by the Lord up to the edge of the Promised Land with his invitation to go in and take possession of it – just as he promised them. The point is that they all believe in the Lord. They've seen what he's done for them. They know the benefits of being his people.

So the choice Moses lays before them is this: Will you *continue to* adhere to the Lord? Will you continue to listen to his voice, trust in him, and walk in his ways? If so, then you are choosing life and good and blessings. Or will you turn from the Lord, reject his Word, and begin

to seek and to serve other gods? If so, then you are choosing death and evil and curses – for yourselves and for your children.

The same applies today. This offer of life or death is not made to unbelievers. The Bible is clear: no one comes to faith in Jesus by their own power, effort, or will. They don't get to make that choice. Faith in Christ and his saving work on the cross is a gift of God instilled in people by the power of his Word and of work of his Holy Spirit. To be sure, the Bible describes those who do not believe as spiritually dead. And dead people do not make decisions. They can't. They cannot choose what's good and right. They can't choose to become alive. Instead they must be *given* life and raised by the Spirit of God. Only then, once they are alive by faith in Christ can they then choose whether to go on living or to die. They can choose to continue to live by listening to God's voice, trusting in him, and walking in his ways – or choose death by turning away from him, failing to hear his Word, and electing to follow after other gods.

This is key to understanding this passage of Scripture. Moses isn't talking to just anyone when he lays out the choice between life and death. He's talking to believers. That means he's talking to *you*. *You* must choose between life and death. Why? Because by God's grace you have been given faith in Jesus Christ. You trust in his atoning work on the cross. You crossed from death and the bondage of sin to life when the Lord brought you through the water of Holy Baptism that drowned your sin, washed it away, and raised you again with Jesus Christ the living Savior to walk with him. And ever since that day you have been walking through the wilderness of this world following the Lord, relying on his grace, and feeding on the Bread of Life from Heaven – that is, Christ the Son of God crucified for you – who feeds your life of faith with manna from above and continues to wash away your sins by the Living Water of his Spirit. He's leading you onward and upward to the eternal Promised Land. You are alive in Christ. The question is: will you choose to *keep on* living in him or will you choose to turn away from him, stop listening to his voice, and die?

It should be a no brainer. I mean, if someone already has faith in Christ and all the blessings that go with it, who would be so stupid as to give it up? Who could possibly make such a terrible choice? Who? Let me tell you who: You could. I could. Don't dare doubt it for a moment. How? It's easy, really, because there is in each of us who believe and who are alive by faith in Christ also a sinful old nature that, when it comes to matters of the Spirit, is stupid, blind, unenlightened, mistaken, and eager to gain the upper hand.

This old nature in you is spiritually suicidal. Oh, it won't come right out and say so because it really thinks it's doing what's best for you; but it's wrong. So it tells you that you've come far enough now in your walk of faith and you can just coast the rest of the way. It tells you that you no longer have to feed your faith with God's Word because you know it all already or at least all that really matters. It tells you that you don't need the body and blood of Christ because you've been there and done that so many times. It tells you that you don't need to gather with the faithful for mutual support and consolation because you're strong enough to go it alone; and besides, you can't stand hanging around with all those hypocrites. It tells you all of these things that, if you listen, lead to spiritual starvation and death.

It tells you other things. It tells you that since you have been forgiven in Christ, you can push the envelope. You can bend and break the rules in the pursuit of forbidden pleasures as long as you go back later and say you're sorry. What it fails to take into account however, is that repentance is something worked in you by God and his Word; not something you come to on your own. So when you deliberately choose to sin expecting to be forgiven, you're taking an enormous risk. You're muzzling the voice of God that tells you not to do it in the first place while

expecting it to speak loudly enough for you to hear later when it tells you to repent. This is like playing spiritual Russian Roulette. And every time you go back and do it again, it's like putting another round in the chamber when you play because the voice of the Lord grows quieter and the voice of your own sinful nature gets louder. The chance of losing increases each time you play. Keep playing and eventually the gun goes off – but you won't hear it. That's because the voice of the Lord in you will be silent and you will have returned to the state of spiritual death.

There's something else that the sin nature in you tells you that causes trouble, and that's that you have to keep your priorities straight. It tells you, sure, your relationship with Christ is important; but there are a lot of other things that matter just as much or more. There's your family, for example: your parents, your spouse, and your children. What could be more important than them? You've got to keep them first in your life and make sure they're happy. Jesus speaks about this in today's Gospel lesson – but what he says is exactly the opposite. He says that if you place any human relationship before the one you have with him, then you cannot be his disciple. Whatever you place in higher priority to your relationship to Christ, be it a person, a career, wealth, fame, sports, food and drink, the pursuit of pleasure, what have you—*that* becomes your god. And if that's your god, then you aren't following Jesus or listening to him. He refuses to be just one god among many. If he's not first for you, you have chosen death over life.

And not just for yourself. As sad as it is when someone commits spiritual suicide, even more tragic is what it does to those who follow their lead. Just think of all the people who by God's grace were raised in the Christian faith and who then, through spiritual apathy and laziness, deprive their children of the same blessings – who, through their example, teach their children that having a living relationship with Jesus by regularly hearing his Word and receiving his body and blood just doesn't matter. We are justifiably horrified when parents choose temporal death for their children. How much more should we be aghast when parents who should know better choose *eternal* death for their offspring?

It's easy to think that because Moses spoke these words some 3500 years ago, that they aren't relevant in our time. That's wrong: nothing could be more relevant than for us, God's people, to choose life both for ourselves and for our children; not just today, but every day. This isn't a one shot deal. Every day – perhaps even several times during each day – we who are alive by faith in Christ are presented with the choice. We can recognize our weakness and tendency to stray and so all the more continue to listen to the Lord, receive his forgiveness, follow and trust in him, *and live*; or we listen to our sinful nature and turn from the Lord, neglect to hear him, and so let our faith in Jesus starve, become feeble, *and die*.

Dear friends in Christ: God has chosen you in Jesus Christ and given you faith in him. Therefore choose life that you and your children may live, loving the Lord your God, hearing his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and the length of your days both in time and eternity. Now and always, choose life. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!