

# I Set Before You Life and Death

## Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Expository Lessons from the Book of Deuteronomy

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### I. Introduction and Background

- a. The **Book of Deuteronomy** consists of three speeches that Moses gave to the Israelites near the end of their 40 years of wandering in the Wilderness. The three speeches are as follows:
  - i. **Speech No. 1: Deuteronomy 1-4** (first four chapters)
  - ii. **Speech No. 2: Deuteronomy 5-26** (twenty-two chapters; about 25 lessons in this series)
    1. This section covers the specific laws and regulations.
  - iii. **Speech No. 3: Deuteronomy 27-34** (last eight chapters of the book)
    1. Final wrap-up, including warnings and blessings, depending on whether the Israelites obey or disobey what has just been handed down.
    2. The death of Moses and the handoff of leadership to Joshua.
- b. From **Deuteronomy 28-29**, we learned from Moses:
  - i. What will happen if they obey the Lord and follow the Law given through Moses (abundant blessings of every type).
  - ii. What will happen if they turn away from the Lord and refuse to follow His Laws (unimaginable curses, defeat, slavery, famine, etc.)
  - iii. What will happen if all the Israelites *except one* person/family/tribe follow the Lord and keep His Law?
    1. An aspect of God's character revealed: His *justice*.
- c. In **Deuteronomy 30:1-14** (the two prior lessons), we encountered:
  - i. Another important aspect of God's character revealed: His *mercy*.
  - ii. After the people stray from the Lord's commands and face discipline, when they turn back to Him and repent, He will be happy to forgive and restore them.

- iii. A famous statement in **Deuteronomy 30:12-14** that Paul repeats in **Romans 10** regarding salvation and why most of the Jews of his day were lost.
  - 1. Paul explained that the word is not far away or obscure. Instead, he said, “The word is near you... in your mouth and in your heart...”
- d. Today, in **Deuteronomy 30:15-20**, we will cover one of the greatest discourses of all time on God’s design for each of us to have free will. Each person is given the freedom to make his or her own moral choices for good or evil. Afterward, each person will reap the resulting consequences.
  - i. It explains something important about the nature of God. Understanding this can impact how we raise our children, how we share our faith with unbelievers, and how we disciple one another to become more like Christ.
  - ii. This also reveals a lot about the nature of the human heart (after the Fall of mankind).
  - iii. It provides important insight toward answering the age-old question regarding whether we are either basically good, totally depraved, or something else.

## II. The Great Choice

- a. Read **Deuteronomy 30:15-20**.
  - i. This is one of my favorite passages of all of the Old Testament.
  - ii. After laying out all the laws of the Old Covenant and explaining what will happen if and when they follow (or abandon) them, God puts the ball of responsibility squarely in their court.
    - 1. Moses calls God’s people to make a decision. He offers them two choices.
  - iii. God, through Moses, gives them free choice between two options, with two vastly different outcomes.
    - 1. He clearly explains the outcomes of each, but leaves the decision to each person.
    - 2. Moses called “heaven and earth” as witness to his challenge to the Jews.

- a. The Lord, the angels, as well as men, are called to witness what Moses has just said. He lays this out before the universe, for all to hear.
  3. We are free moral agents, able to choose between good and evil. And we can change our minds and take the other path later on.
- b. A number of early Christian writers commented on how important this concept was to understand: *that God has given all men free choice.*
  - i. Cyprian, writing c. 250 AD, quoted from this passage to back up his point.
    1. “The liberty of believing or of not believing is placed in free choice. In **Deuteronomy**, it says: ‘Look! I have set before your face life and death, good and evil. Choose for yourself life, that you may live.’ (**Deuteronomy 30:15 & 19**)”
      - a. (Source: Cyprian, *Treatise No. 12: Three Books of Testimonies Against the Jews, Book 3*, testimony 52; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 5, p. .547)
  - ii. From Irenaeus, writing c. 180 AD:
    1. “This expression [*referring to **Matthew 23:37***] ... sets forth the ancient law of human liberty. For God made man free from the beginning, possessing his own power, even as he does his own soul, to obey the commandments of God voluntarily, and not by compulsion of God. For there is no coercion with God.... And in man, as well as in angels (for angels are rational beings), He has placed the power of choice, so that those who had yielded obedience might justly possess what is good—given indeed by God, but preserved by themselves.”
      - a. (Source: Irenaeus, *Against Heresies, Book 4*, chapter 36; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 518)
  - iii. From Clement of Alexandria, writing c. 195 AD.
    1. “Choice depended on the man as being free. But the gift depended on God as the Lord. And He gives to those who are willing, are exceedingly earnest, and who ask. So their salvation becomes their own. For God does not compel.”
      - a. (Source: Clement of Alexandria, *Who Is the Rich Man that Shall Be Saved?*, chapter 10; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 2, p. 593)

- iv. The quotes above were taken from *Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, ed. David Bercot, article on 'Free Will and Predestination.' For additional examples, please refer to that article.
- c. **Question:** What does this show us about the nature of God, and how He views and treats us? [Let us *meditate on the meaning of this passage from Deuteronomy 30*, in the spirit of **Psalm 1**, where it calls us to "meditate on the word of God day and night".]

  - i. He is not controlling. He created us with free choice (whether to obey or disobey him) and wants us to be free and to love Him freely.
  - ii. His overarching desire always has been for His people to *love Him, to walk in His ways, and keep His commands*.
    - 1. Everything else follows from that.
    - 2. Let us always keep the priority on *loving God with our whole heart and soul* (not like the Christians in the Ephesian church in **Revelation 2**, who were religious but lost their first love).
      - a. Yet let us not fool ourselves into believing that loving God is limited to an emotional experience or feeling, devoid of an obedient response.
        - i. "Jesus answered and said to him, 'If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him. He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not Mine but the Father's who sent Me.'" **(John 14:23-24, NKJV)**
  - iii. God is *not* 'the Great Enabler.' He will let us reap the consequences of making foolish decisions.
    - 1. If the Jews choose to abandon the Lord and follow other 'gods,' like those in the nations they will inherit, they will perish.
  - iv. God does not make things complicated. He makes it quite simple: a choice between life or death, good or evil. A child can understand this.
    - 1. The choice is simple, clear, and distinct.
    - 2. Jesus taught the same: the choice between the narrow and the broad road. Light or darkness. Good or evil. Life or death.
      - a. "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are

many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it." (**Matthew 7:13-14**, NKJV)

- d. **Question:** What does this passage reveal to us about the nature of being humans, and the challenges before us in this life?
- i. Obviously, people have always had the ability to choose good. *That continued after the Fall of man in Genesis 3!*
  - ii. The philosophers who teach that everything is predetermined, therefore that we have no free choice, are wrong.
  - iii. Calvin and his followers were wrong.
    1. Protestant Reformers like Calvin taught that after the Fall of Adam and Eve, all men became totally depraved. They and all their descendants (us included) became completely unable to choose to do anything good thereafter. They take passages like **Romans 3** out of context and interpret them in ways that contradict the other Scriptures.
    2. They teach that while Adam and Eve had free choice, it was lost to their descendants. Therefore, all born since the Fall have no ability to choose between good and evil. They therefore have no free moral choice.
    3. That false conclusion (that all men became totally depraved after the Fall, we have all lost the ability to choose to do good) is a *rotten theological foundation*.
      - a. Upon it, the followers of the Reformers added a string of other (false) teachings that naturally flow from that foundational misunderstanding.
      - b. They teach that since we are unable to choose good, salvation consists of God arbitrarily deciding to save certain individuals while relegating others to *eternal destruction*. We have no choice in the matter. They conclude that God only desires for certain individuals (rather than all people) to be saved.
      - c. However, as Paul explained, God "...desires *all men* to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (**1 Timothy 2:4**, NKJV)
  - iv. We humans, even after the Fall, are neither inherently good nor inherently corrupt and depraved. We still have free choice. Over the

ages, some (few, noble examples) have chosen to do good, while others have gone in the other direction.

1. We (and the angels) are made in the image of God, which means we are rational beings who have been given free moral choice. We can choose to do good or evil.
  2. We also can, since we have free choice, change direction (from evil to good, or vice versa).
- e. **Question:** What are some of the natural implications of appreciating that God has given each of us free choice?
- i. I believe understanding his principle can have a profound impact on how we preach and teach, as well as on how we share the gospel with unbelievers.
    1. We need to start with an understanding that all people have free choice and, therefore, have the ability to change. In general, we should not give up on the possibility of people changing (repenting) until they are dead.
    2. We should not try to manipulate or strong-arm other adults into doing what we think they should do. Our job before God is not to 'manage' the behavior of others. Instead, we should respectfully allow them to freely follow (or reject) God and warn them of the consequences.
    3. Those who preach and teach should not hold back from clearly laying out their options and the resulting consequences. All the great preachers have done it that way. Don't be a coward or conflict avoider. Tell people the truth, and lay out the consequences. Then call them to make a decision! In the end, it often comes down to two options. Bring them to the "fork in the road" where they need to choose one path or the other.
      - a. We saw Moses do that here in **Deuteronomy 30**. Joshua, who followed him, did likewise. (See **Joshua 24:14-17**)
      - b. Jonah and all the great prophets preached that way (calling their hearers to repent or face destruction from God).
      - c. Elijah, at Mount Carmel, challenged the onlookers: "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is god, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." (**1 Kings/3 Kingdoms 18:21**)

- d. Jesus and the apostles did that.
    - i. “And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God.” (**John 3:19–21**, NKJV)
  - e. I believe that all great preachers today will take more or less the same approach. They will lay out the options and call people to make a decision. They don’t “beat around the bush.”
    - i. Brothers, if you want to have an impact on the world (and pay the price as a result), take note, and take courage!
    - ii. Let us be willing to “drop the hammer.” Don’t be afraid to call people to repent and to make decisions, after you clearly lay out the options and consequences.
4. Often it does come down to *just two options*.
- a. Don’t be afraid to lay things out in black-and-white terms (where it is in fact a black-and-white situation according to God).
  - b. You may be accused of oversimplified ‘binary thinking,’ or [*horrors!*] being ‘narrow-minded’ or ‘judgmental.’ However, sometimes in reality that is how it is!
    - i. The broad road vs. the narrow road.
    - ii. There is only one way to the Father, through Jesus (all other paths lead to death).
    - iii. Consider what Jesus said in commissioning Paul for the gospel ministry:
      - 1. “I will deliver you from the Jewish people, as well as from the Gentiles, to whom I now send you, to open their eyes, in order to turn them *from darkness to light*, and

*from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.” (Acts 26:17-18, NKJV)*

- iv. Consider Jesus in **Revelation 2 and 3** to the seven churches.
  1. Actually, there is one case, in addressing the church of Laodicea, where Jesus indicated there were *three* options (hot, cold, or lukewarm), in **Revelation 3:15-16**.
- ii. Lessons for parents, based on these principles.
  1. God gives strong warnings and clear choices. However, He leaves the choice in our hands. He does not try to control our behavior by strong-arming or controlling us.
  2. So don't try to control or manipulate or pressure people to do what you want.
    - a. Parents need to teach their children what is right and wrong, and the way of following the Lord. They also need to discipline their children.
    - b. At the same time, as our children become older, we have to realize that our children must make their own decisions. They have free will, and will need to exercise it.
      - i. Sometimes they will make bad choices.
      - ii. They can change, either way (for the good or for the bad).
      - iii. Parents need wisdom to discern how much freedom to give, and when it is best to do so.
- iii. Similar principles apply when teaching and discipling younger Christians.
- iv. Church leaders also need to keep these principles in mind as they lead their churches. By all means have a disciplined church and strong, clear teaching. Address sin in the Biblical way when it is discovered. No compromises.

1. However, they also need to appreciate that members of the church are free moral agents who sometimes will make bad decisions.
2. It is not wise to focus on *controlling the outward behavior* of others in the church.
3. Ideally, I believe that everyone should feel an appropriate sense of freedom (and the personal responsibility that goes with that) in our churches. Something is wrong if Christians feel like they are being coerced or peer-pressured, or if they feel they are in some type of spiritual 'straight-jacket' in the church.
  - a. Our main focus should always be on motivating others in the church to love the Lord and obey His commands.
  - b. We all desire holiness in the church. However, that desire cannot be a license to extinguish the free choice that God created us to have. The path to holiness is one that each person must be called to choose!
  - c. The Lord is looking for free people who have *freely chosen* to love Him, obey Him, and do what is right.