

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: Deuteronomy 30:15-20

¹⁵ See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. ¹⁶ For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, 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.

¹⁷ 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, ¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live ²⁰ 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.

About fifteen years ago I went on a two-week trip to New Zealand and Australia with three other pastors. We went there to study a Christian movement called Emerging or Missional Churches. While we were there, we rented a car. Two members of our group needed to be approved by the U.S., New Zealand and Australian departments of motor vehicles to drive in the foreign countries.

I was glad I wasn't one of them. Our drivers had to learn to drive on the left side of the street, which as you know, is the opposite of what we drive on in the U.S. They also had to learn to drive with the steering wheel on the right side, our passenger side, of the car. We had a few interesting moments as we drove around the two countries we were visiting.

Occasionally before making turns, we needed to purposely think about and point to the side of the street we were supposed to be on when we made the turn. If we chose the wrong side of the road to drive on, we could very well have found ourselves face to face with another vehicle and in an accident. The choice for what we had to do was clear, but remembering and following the driving laws of these two countries was challenging at times.

In today's scripture, the Israelites, after wandering in the wilderness for forty years, were about to cross over the Jordan River to the land promised to them by God. It was a long and arduous journey full of ups and downs, including ups and downs in their relationship with God. Many of those who began the journey with Moses had died, and it was a new generation that would now enter the Promised Land.

This particular text from Deuteronomy is actually the ending of a very long speech Moses made to the Israelites who were about to cross the Jordan River to enter the Promised Land. He knew he would soon die, and he wanted to communicate his desire for them to have a good life that included faithfulness to God in this new land they were entering.

Moses knew that once they entered the Promised Land they were going to face a whole new set of challenges and temptations that could pull them away from God. The temptations would arise from the affluence and wealth of the new land. Remember that they had just come to the end of a forty-year journey in the wilderness—a time when a variety of foods and normally easily accessible things were not available. The promised land in comparison was going to be like paradise.

Moses warned the Israelites to be on their guard. He told them that they had two choices facing them once they entered this new land—life and blessings or death and curses. Let's take a closer look at what Moses meant by these choices.

We're going to take a moment to understand the Hebrew meanings of the words blessings and curses. The Hebrew word for blessing is "berakah," and it refers to the power of life to expand and flourish in all ways. Biblical commentator, Robert Jenson writes: "There is some notion of that idea in all cultures, but in Israel, blessing is not 'a sort of free-floating life force,' but something 'linked exclusively to the Lord.'"

The opposite of blessings is curses, and the Hebrew word for curse is "qelalah" and it means to have a complete deprivation of blessings. Jenson writes, "It is enfeeblement. It is existence without the expansion and flourishing that is implied in blessing."

So, with that background, let's first consider the option for life that Moses puts before us, life and blessings which is, of course, the positive choice. Life here is all about continuing a covenantal relationship with God. It is loving God and others as well as obeying God's commandments. The outcomes of life then are joy, peace and happiness of the soul, and a good life.

Moses links "obedience" and "love" to blessing. He says, "If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess."

Obedience is not a very popular idea today. We'd rather keep our options open and opt for the opposite of obedience, which some think is freedom. But the thing is, obedience and freedom are directly connected. As U.S. citizens, for example, we have freedom, but only within the bounds of the Constitution and the laws of the land. Freedom with no restraints at all, of course, leads to trouble and turmoil, and we would likely lose our freedom to fear, greed, and even violence.

On the other hand, if we remain obedient to God's law, we are free to live without moral guilt and free to make all kinds of personal choices that increase our happiness. We are warned here that if we choose to make our own rules just to satisfy our own desires and sense of fairness, we've broken covenant with God, and we get lost in a dismal dead-end life.

One word of caution needs to be mentioned here. Obedience to God's commandments does not mean that one merely needs to follow a set of rules to have a good life. If following the rules becomes the most important thing to us, then the rules themselves become our god. The rules then fill one with a sense of power and an attitude of judgement towards others. Obedience to God does not begin with the rules—it begins with our spiritual bond with God, and our relationship with others.

The choice to be in a committed relationship with God is ours. Moses said that choosing life and blessing means that the Israelites would be choosing to love God, walk in God's ways, and observe God's commandments. And this love is a two-way street.

Eugene Petersen, translator of the Message version of the Bible, says this about love: "Deuteronomy presents God in a loyal, committed relationship of love with his people. God is not a random thought. God is not a word to fill in the gaps of what we don't know. God is actively and energetically dealing with people in love. Love is the key and characteristic word in the book. This love is both God's character and his command. Because we are under this kind of God, there is no living worth the name that is not a participation in that love."

Moses uses the word "love" throughout Deuteronomy, and it is always an action, never simply a feeling. We read that God's love in action delivered the Hebrews from Egypt. Likewise, God's love for us carries us through all the chaos in our lives. In turn, Israel's love for God and our love for God is also to be active, and demonstrated through obedience to God's commandments.

But remember, there's another option for how we could live. Moses told the people of Israel that if they do not choose life and blessing, the other option is death and curses. The first thing we must understand here is that Moses was not speaking about death as a physical outcome, but rather as a separation from God. It happens when we allow other things to take over as the gods in our lives. Our allegiance then is to a world perspective centered on selfishness and pride rather than a covenantal relationship with God and others.

The consequence of this kind of death is perishing that is brought on by oneself. Perishing means to be caught in patterns of social relations that generate fear, anger, hate, and brokenness in human relationships.

These were the two choices facing the people of Israel as they entered the Promised Land. They could choose a covenantal relationship with God and his people, or they could choose the alternative life of worshiping godless gods and living selfishly. Put another way, they could choose life or death—blessings or curses. It would be a choice that they would build on the rest of their lives.

In the movie *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice came to an icy fork in the road. Panic stung her as she stood frozen by indecision. She lifted her eyes toward heaven, looking for guidance. Her eyes did not find God, only the Cheshire cat leering at her from his perch in the tree above. "Which way should I go?" blurted Alice. "That depends," said the cat, fixing a strange smile on the confused girl. "On what?" Alice managed to reply. "On your destination. Where are you going?" queried the cat. "I don't know," stammered Alice. "Then," said the cat, with a grin spreading wider, "it doesn't matter." Many of us feel like Alice in Wonderland—we stand at some crossroads in our life and don't know which road to take. The difference between us and Alice, however, is that we DO know where we are going.

And so, at some point, we too sit, motors idling, at a fork in life's road; and, in truth, there are really only two choices: God's way or the other way. The question before each of us every day is which way do you choose? Amen.