

## The Word is Near You

### Deuteronomy 30

David Sunday    November 22, 2020



Have you ever listened to a preacher preach his last sermon? I'm pretty sure that's not going to be your experience today. I'm hopeful I still have many years to come. But I once read a book entitled If I Only Had One Sermon to Preach. It's a collection from 19 preachers who describe the message they would give if they knew it was their last opportunity to ever speak God's Word.

If Moses had a chapter in that book, we don't have to wonder what he'd say. We've been listening to Moses' final sermon series throughout these last eleven weeks. Today as we open our Bibles to Deuteronomy 30, we're going to come to the grand crescendo. Moses makes a clarion call to God's people in this chapter. If Moses had only one sermon left to preach, and he had to sum it up in two words, this is what he would say: "Choose life."

We see this in Deuteronomy 30:19-20. These are the final words of his final sermon. There's going to be a little more to come in the book of Deuteronomy and David Wollen is going to preach next week on some very sweet words from chapter 33. But this is Moses' conclusion to his sermon. Deuteronomy 30:19-20:

*<sup>19</sup> I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, <sup>20</sup> love the LORD your God, obey him, and remain faithful to him. For he is your life, and he will prolong your days as you live in the land the LORD swore to give to your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.*

Now, at first glance this sounds pretty easy, doesn't it? You've got two options: life or death. What will you choose? Do you need another set of options? Okay. I'll give you one: blessing and curse. We heard last week that blessing is ultimately all about God's favor and cursing is about God's displeasure. To be blessed is to have God working for you and for your good; to be cursed is to have God working against you, working for your condemnation.

So there you have it. Do you want to live or do you want to die? Do you want to have God working for you, for your good, or do you want God working against you, for your condemnation? What will you choose?

British humor is dry and sometimes not so funny to Americans, but there's a spoof about an Anglican vicar who is at a tea party; apparently Anglican vicars spend a lot of time at tea parties. In this spoof, he's confronting everyone who approaches him with this odd greeting: "Cake or death? Cake or death?" Everyone who comes to this vicar hears him say, "Cake or death?" They say, "Well, in that case, I guess I'll have cake, please." It seems kind of ridiculous.

In this chapter, Moses is not presenting some superficial, ridiculous choice like that. It's a choice that requires our most earnest consideration. It's a choice that brings us to the threshold of eternity, to blessing or curse, to heaven or hell. I appeal today to you in the strongest possible terms to choose life. There are three considerations, three elements to this choice from Deuteronomy 30 that we'll draw out of this passage. My aim in all these points is to persuade you to seriously consider, "What have I chosen? Have I made a decision? Have I chosen life or death?"

### **1. It's the only choice that makes sense; but, left to yourself, you will not make it (verses 1-5).**

Let's read Deuteronomy 30:1-5:

*<sup>1</sup> When all these things happen to you—the blessings and curses I have set before you—and you come to your senses while you are in all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you, <sup>2</sup> and you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and all your soul by doing everything I am commanding you today, <sup>3</sup> then he will restore your fortunes, have compassion on you, and gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you. <sup>4</sup> Even if your exiles are at the farthest horizon, he will gather you and bring you back from there. <sup>5</sup> The LORD your God will bring you into the land your ancestors possessed, and you will take possession of it. He will cause you to prosper and multiply you more than he did your ancestors.*

Picture this scene. Moses has spent 29 chapters pouring his heart out to these people. He's been encouraging them to remember how they got stuck in this wilderness for 40 years and how to turn in a new direction now:

- Listen to the Word of the Lord.
- Love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul and strength.
- Love their neighbor as themselves.
- Live a life of obedience to the covenant God is making with them, so they can flourish and enjoy God's *shalom* in the land God is bringing them into.

Moses tells them over and over again how good, how generous and how eager God is to bless them, but also how dreadful will be the curses that will fall upon them if they do not listen to the voice of the Lord their God.

Now, if you're like me, sometimes you need a good motivational speech. I like to listen to a Brett McKay's podcast called "The Art of Manliness" that covers all kinds of subjects like art, history, literature, the outdoor life, athletics—all kinds of stuff. It's always very motivational. The aim is to get men to live the strenuous life, like Teddy Roosevelt. I've noticed at the end of all these podcast that none of the presenters ever wrap up their motivational talk by saying, "I actually want you to know I've wasted my breath on you people for these last 50 minutes because you're all a bunch of losers. Why have I wasted my time telling you about health and fitness, when I know that on Thursday you're just going to gorge yourself with mashed potatoes, gravy, stuffing, pumpkin pie and whipped cream. And that's not going to be the end of it, because here are going to be so many leftovers that you're going to keep on gorging yourself for days.

"Then you're going to say, 'Christmas is coming, so why not just worry about the diet after New Year's?' Then by that time, it's going to be so cold outside you're not going to want to go out and exercise. So what am I talking about? You can't do it." I've never heard a motivational speech end like this.

But Moses is basically saying that to God's people. Look at how he starts in verse one. "When all these things happen to you—the blessings and curses I have set before you —there's no question that the curses of the covenant are going to come upon you." Notice he says when they happen, not if. Moses is saying this because he knows the people of Israel have not really taken to heart the words he's been preaching to them. They have ears, but they haven't heard. They have eyes, but they haven't seen. Moses makes it ever so clear why this is in the previous chapter. Look at what he says in Deuteronomy 29 2-4:

*<sup>2</sup> Moses summoned all Israel and said to them, "You have seen with your own eyes everything the LORD did in Egypt to Pharaoh, to all his officials, and to his entire land. <sup>3</sup> You saw with your own eyes the great trials and those great signs and wonders. <sup>4</sup> Yet to*

*this day the LORD has not given you a mind to understand, eyes to see, or ears to hear.”*

So left to themselves, their minds are closed, their eyes are blind and their ears are plugged. Because they're stiff-necked and stubborn in heart, they're going to be careless and disobedient to God's Word. All these dreadful curses Moses described in chapter 28—the curses of disaster, dearth, disease, drought and deportation—are going to fall upon the Israelites, but not because God takes delight in cursing them. No, His heart is spring-loaded for blessing. As Joe said last week, He has to be provoked to curse.

But their provocation is exactly what the Israelites are going to do for hundreds of years. God is going to be extremely patient with their endless provocation, but the time will come when Israel's rebellion will release the safety lock on God's anger, then the awful curses of the covenant are going to come crashing down on them.

In 722 B.C., hundreds of years after Moses spoke these words, the ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom of Israel are going to be invaded by the Assyrians and carried off into exile. All God's people will go to Assyria. Then a little over a hundred years after that, in 583 B.C., the Babylonians are going to come and ransack the Southern Kingdom, carrying them away as captives. “These things will happen to you,” Moses is saying, “because you are going to fail to choose life. You're going to blow it big time.” Moses wants the people to know that.

But he also wants them to know that God is not going to give up on them. God will take them back. I love the phrase in Deuteronomy 30:1 that speaks about when “you come to your senses.” Other translations speak of “calling to mind” the blessings and curses. They're going to think again. I like the language of coming to your senses, because it reminds me of Jesus' favorite parable—the Parable of the Prodigal Son. This son, when he was in a distant country squandering his father's blessings in wild living, finally “came to his senses.” Listen to the story from Luke 15:

*<sup>17</sup> When he came to his senses, he said, “How many of my father's hired workers have more than enough food, and here I am dying of hunger. <sup>18</sup> I'll get up, go to my father, and say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight. <sup>19</sup> I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired workers.’” <sup>20</sup> So he got up and went to his father. But while the son was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion. He ran, threw his arms around his neck, and kissed him.*

Moses is saying to the children of Israel, “That’s how your Father will respond to you when you come to your senses in a far country, when you and your children return to the Lord with all your heart and all your soul in repentance and obedience.” Look at Deuteronomy 30:3: *“Then he will restore your fortunes, having compassion on you, and gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you.”* Verse four says there’s no place so far away that the Lord is not going to be able to reach them and gather them back to Himself.

Verse five is even more astounding. Not only will He bring them back to the Promised Land—which He did indeed do in 539 B.C.—but there’s more. He will *“cause you to prosper and multiply you more than he did your ancestors.”* This is the language of God’s covenant with Abraham, echoing back hundreds of years later. This is the blessing God gave Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden: to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. God never forgets a promise He has made and He is a God Who will restore His people. He’s tenaciously committed to fulfilling His Word.

How can we not marvel at such a God? He’s a God Who is just and Who will surely punish sin—no doubt about it. But He’s also a God Who is merciful, has an astonishing capacity to forgive and Who will lavish kindness on His people when we least deserve it. He’s the God of *“marvelous, infinite, matchless grace...grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt”* (from *Grace Greater than our Sin* by Julia H. Johnston). This is Who He is.

I know that someone came into church this morning—or maybe is watching on line—and you’re thinking, “I have blown it so badly.” You feel like you’ve sinned one time too many. You’ve wandered so far off the reservation there must be no way back. If that’s you this morning, I want you to know that God’s Word in verse three is not merely a piece of historical testimony; it’s a promise to you today in 2020. If you will return to the Lord today with all your heart and all your soul, He will restore your fortunes, He will have compassion on you, He will gather you back into His arms from however far you’ve run from Him. In fact He will come running to meet you with hugs and kisses. That’s your Father. He longs to have you back in His arms. He’s ready to receive you, no matter how far you’ve fallen, no matter how badly you’ve failed. He’s calling you to choose life. He’s calling you to Himself.

Not only will God forgive and restore us, He has a way of multiplying His blessings when we repent, so that the greater our sin and the deeper the repentance, the richer His presence and His promises become when we return to Him with all our hearts. Here’s the thing. Even though it’s the most sensible choice—to return to the Lord your God, to choose Him, to follow Him—it’s the only choice that makes sense. You cannot do it left to your own strength.

It's what we read about in Deuteronomy 29. We need a new heart. So the reason Moses can be so confident about the grace of God the way he is in these first few verses is because he is absolutely sure of the promise God makes in Deuteronomy 30:6.

## **2. God is able to fix what makes us fail to choose life (verses 6-10).**

Verse six speaks of something you might have heard about in Sunday School. It's in the Bible a lot, but maybe you were afraid to ask what it means. Then when you finally understand what it means, you kind of wonder, "Why is God using this metaphor?" Look at verse six: *"The Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the hearts of your descendants, and you will love him with all your heart and all your soul so that you will live."*

I heard Tim Keller talking about how awkward this is. Why circumcision? Why not a tattoo or some other sign on some other part of the body. But Keller said God chose something so intimate, so personal, so bloody, so gross, so disturbing, because that's what the penalty of sin requires. Sin is so dire, so intimate, so gross, it could only be represented by something like circumcision.

Circumcision becomes a metaphor for what God wants done on our hearts. What is our heart in the Bible? The heart is the center of your desires. It's where all your affections spring from. It's where you decide what your true treasure is, what your highest joy is, what your hopes will be, what will control you. It all springs from your heart. God is saying, "That's where I want to do divine surgery. That's where you need to have the crusty, stubborn, rebellious, unyielding shell removed so that you will respond to Me with tenderness, love and obedience. You need a heart transplant."

Keller describes the circumcised heart this way: "When what you most ought to do and what you most want to do are the same thing." It's when what you most ought to do and what you most want to do are no longer at odds with one another, because they've joined together. That's when you have a circumcised heart.

We see that happening in verse eight. After the Lord removes the curses from His people and instead puts those curses on their enemies, look at what verse eight says: *"Then you will again obey him and follow all his commands I am commanding you today."* That comes from a circumcised heart. John Newton put it like this:

Our pleasure and our duty,  
    though opposite before,  
Since we have seen His beauty,  
    are joined to part no more.

What a beautiful way of putting it.

Back in the Garden of Eden we have a picture of the way things ought to be. Adam and Eve found no contradiction between their pleasure and their duty. Then sin came and it ripped those two things apart. Pleasure and duty became opposites, resulting in a war going on in the hearts of humanity. Because of that intrusion of sin, the Garden of Eden is now guarded by cherubim and a flaming sword that whirls around in all directions. There's only one way back into that garden where God's presence and blessings, along with human flourishing, were found. That one way back is for someone to go under the sword which is what Jesus did on the cross.

In Colossians 2, Paul describes what happened to Jesus on the cross as “the circumcision of Christ.” Jesus came under the sword. Paul says we who believe in Jesus were “*circumcised in Him with a circumcision not done with hands*” (Colossians 2:11). In other words, Jesus was cut off from life so that we can now have new hearts that choose life in Christ.

What I want you to relish most about this section in Deuteronomy 30 is in verse nine, where we see God's goal in doing this divine surgery on our hearts. After speaking about how the Lord will make His people prosper abundantly in every way, look at what God says: “*Indeed, the Lord will again delight in your prosperity, as he delighted in that of your ancestors.*” In other words, the reason God performs divine surgery on our hearts is to make our hearts tender and receptive to Him, so that we can now live in a relationship where God delights in us and we delight in Him, where He rejoices over us with singing.

John Piper exults in this truth with these words:

[God] is infinitely energetic with absolutely unbounded and unending enthusiasm for the fulfillment of His delights... God is like a great Niagara Falls—you look at 186,000 tons of water crashing over the precipice every minute and think: Surely this can't keep going at this force year after year after year. Yet it does. That's the way God is about doing us good. He never grows weary of it. It never gets boring to Him. The Niagara of His grace has no end.

He delights in prospering and blessing His people. Don't you want to choose a God like this, a God Who does divine surgery on our hearts, so that we can become the object of His everlasting delight and intense affection? I do.

### **3. There is no excuse to justify delaying your choice (verses 11-20).**

This brings us to the last point this morning: there is no excuse to delay in making this choice. Look at how Moses puts it in verse 11: “*This command that I give you today is certainly not too difficult or beyond your reach.*” In other words, this whole thing about choosing life is

not too complicated. It's not that it's inaccessible. It's not that you can't understand or grasp it. No, it's profoundly simple and it's available to all who will humble themselves and receive it.

Look at verse 12: *"It is not in heaven so that you have to ask, 'Who will go up to heaven, get it for us, and proclaim it to us so that we may follow it?'"* In other words, you don't need to hire some kind of guru who can ascend into the heavenly places and obtain access to the esoteric secrets of life and then come down and show you. No, because heaven has come down. In the case of the Israelites, heaven came down on Mt. Sinai and they heard God's voice speaking to them out of the fire. In our case, heaven has come down so much more wondrously in the person of God the Son. He's become so near, so accessible, that we could hear Him with our own ears, we could see Him with our own eyes, we could observe Him and touch Him with our hands. The word of life was revealed in Jesus. The eternal life that was with the Father has come down to us and made Himself known to us.

Then Moses says in verse 13 that we don't have to cross the sea to get this word and have it proclaimed to us so that we may follow it. In the ancient world, the sea was the great abyss. It was the most fearful chasm. It was the place of the most horrifying danger. Moses is saying, "You don't need to go across that abyss in order to get access to God that I'm calling you to choose here, because Someone has done that for you." Someone has gone into the abyss.

Moses is telling us that God is not unknowable. He's not made His will impossible to understand. He's not put Himself beyond the reach of us. He's not playing games, saying, "I'm not going to let Myself be found by you." No, He's made His Word plain and clear, and it's available to all who will listen. Look at verse 14: *"But the message is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, so that you may follow it."*

Do you want to know how you choose life? It has to do with this message—this Word. It's very near you. It's in your mouth and your heart, so that you may follow it. God is near. That's what makes Israel so distinctive among the nations. Do you remember what God said in Deuteronomy 4:7? *"For what great nation is there that has a god near to it as the Lord our God is to us whenever we call to him?"* He is near.

The point Moses is making is you can't blame God if you make the dreadful choice for death. You can't say God didn't give you enough revelation. You can't say God was just teasing you, God was keeping Himself at a distance. No, because whenever God's Word is spoken, God is opening His mouth to you, getting so close to you that you can hear and feel His breath. That's how near God is. He's with you in the Word He speaks. And everyone who has heard the Word of God is accountable for how we respond. You avoid responding to this message at your own peril.

Listen to how God calls us to response in verses 15 and 16:

*<sup>15</sup> See, today I have set before you life and prosperity, death and adversity. <sup>16</sup> For I am commanding you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, statutes, and ordinances, so that you may live and multiply, and the LORD your God may bless you in the land you are entering to possess.*

Moses is speaking to the nation as a whole here, but he's using the second person singular. He's pressing the message home to each and every Israelite. He's looking in their eyes, saying, "It's not enough that you were born into a believing family. It's not enough that you belong to a community of believers. It's not enough that you were a member of a church. No, you need to grapple with this choice as an individual. I am appealing to you today: choose life. Respond personally to the message God is speaking to you."

This is a choice that matters infinitely more than any other choice you will make. It is a choice you must make. So what does it look like to choose life? Verse 16 says it looks like loving the Lord, walking in His ways, keeping His commands and enjoying the fullness of His blessing so that you will "live and multiply." That's the language of Eden all over again, as well as the promises God made to Abraham finding their fulfillment.

Honestly, if you don't know whether or not you've chosen life, it may very well be a sign that you haven't yet, because when you've chosen life, radical changes start to happen. You start to experience God's blessings in ways that are palpable. I'm not talking about material prosperity in this life. I'm talking about knowing Him personally, His presence and His joy. He starts changing you in ways other people notice, so your life becomes contagious for Christ. You'll bear much fruit as you multiply. That's how you know you've chosen life. You see Him at work in your life.

There's only one very sobering alternative to this choice and it's in verses 17-18: "*But if your heart turns away and you do not listen...*"—to God's breath, God's Word, which is so near to you right now—"*...and you are led astray to bow in worship to other gods and serve them*"—if you put your hope in earthly things and you forsake Him— "*I tell you today that you will certainly perish and will not prolong your days in the land you are entering to possess across the Jordan.*"

That's the stark alternative. This appeal, this invitation to choose life, only comes with two replies: yes or no. There's no "maybe" option. You must choose. That's hard for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We want limitless options. We like to hit "maybe." We like to keep all our options out in front of us. But that actually robs us of the joy of fully committing to anyone or anything.

A guy named Barry Cooper wrote about this in an excellent article. He described a visit he made to Starbucks; I think you can probably identify with this:

I stood behind a customer who ordered a decaf Grande sugar-free vanilla non-fat latte with extra foam and the milk heated to 140 degrees. As I stood in line, I started to think, “Maybe I want 140-degree coffee too. Maybe,” I thought to myself, “my choice of milk temperature up to this point has been catastrophically naïve.” Suddenly, his choices made me unhappier about my own. I began to covet. I wasn’t sure what I wanted anymore. I became anxious and indecisive. I wasn’t sure I was ready to commit, either to my kind of coffee or his. Was this really freedom of choice—or slavery to choice?

What if we take the same multiplicity of trivial options we have at Starbucks and apply them to bigger questions? Where should we work? Where should we study? Where should we live? Whom should we marry? Whom should we worship? Here’s his point:

It seems that the more options we have, the more afraid we are of choosing. We become enslaved to being noncommittal. We don’t want to make a mistake or cut down our options. In fact, we may become so fearful of making a choice, we simply refuse to choose. As we do that, we are worshiping an idol. A false god. One of the Baals of our culture, in fact. His name is “open options.”

Rather, I’m bringing you good news of great joy today. It’s for all the people and it’s for you, the people of New Covenant Bible Church. The good news of great joy I’m bringing to you is that the true and living God is closing in on you. He’s training His sight on you right now. He’s centering His affections on you and calling you to choose Him.

Don’t treat Jesus as one option on a smorgasbord. To do that is to choose death. We know these words are not pointing us to choose a life of perfect obedience. That’s not what God is calling us to here. He’s not saying, “If you want to live, you have to perfectly obey the law of the Lord.” He’s already made it very clear that He knows we’re going to fail. But He’s a God Who is ready to restore the repentant.

He makes it so very clear in verses 19-20 what He is calling us to—or better, Whom He is calling us to. *“I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.”* This is not just about you—this is about future generations. This is about a world that needs to see Jesus. *“Choose life...love the LORD your God, obey him, and remain faithful to him.”*

Here is the key that unlocks the treasure. This is the first time Moses has said this in the book of Deuteronomy and we won't hear this again until we get to the New Testament. Underline this phrase in verse 20: *"For he is your life..."* In other words, you might have found life, had you perfectly obeyed the Law of the Lord. But let's be very clear: none of us has done that and none of us can do that. God is so determined to rescue a people for Himself, on whom He can set His everlasting joy and delight, that He Himself has come down and become life for you. He's not just the God Who gives you life; He is the God Who is your life. If anyone is in any doubt Whom He's talking about here, the Apostle Paul makes it so clear in Romans 10:4-9. Look at these wonderful gospel words.

*"For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes, since Moses writes about the righteousness that is from the law: The one who does these things will live by them."* Do you want to go that path? You'd better perfectly obey. But there's another righteousness that God has made accessible to sinners. It's the *"the righteousness that comes from faith speaks like this."* See if you recognize these words:

*Do not say in your heart, "Who will go up to heaven?" that is, to bring Christ down or, "Who will go down into the abyss?" that is, to bring Christ up from the dead. On the contrary, what does it say? The message is near you, in your mouth and in your heart. This is the message of faith that we proclaim: If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*

Jesus is Lord, Who came down from heaven to earth to give us life, Who descended into the abyss of God's judgment on our sins and rose from the dead to be our life. He will come again to judge the living and the dead and you won't be able to avoid Him then. He will make Himself utterly unignorable to all humanity. I'm calling you today to choose Jesus as your life. Ignore Him no longer. Had you chosen Him in the past, make that your choice again and again each and every day.

As we take the cup and the bread into our hands, I want to invite all who are trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ, who have turned from sin to put their hope in Him, to hold these elements in your hands and remember that He is the end of the law for righteousness to those who believe. Praise Him that He is your life.

As Paul has said in Colossians 3:1-4, *"If you have been raised with Christ, set your affections on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father."* Let your heart hope in Him. Treasure Him. Trust Him. *"Set your minds on things above, not on things of the earth, for you have died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. And when*

*Christ, who is your life, appears” —when He comes again— “you also will appear with him in glory.”*

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