

Choose Life



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 2:8, 9; Rom. 6:23; 1 John 5:12; Deut. 30:1–20; Rom. 10:6–10; Deut. 4:19; Rev. 14:6–12.*

Memory Text: “I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live.”
(*Deuteronomy 30:19, NKJV*).

Always, it's a sad story: a young person, in this case a 22-year-old woman, diagnosed with a deadly disease. Brain tumor. Even with all the marvels of modern medicine, nothing could be done until the inevitable. But this young woman, “Sandy,” didn't want to die.

So, she had a plan. After she died, her head would be put in a deep freeze, into a vat of liquid nitrogen, in hopes of preserving her brain cells. And there it would wait, fifty years, one hundred years, a thousand years, until sometime in the future, when technology had advanced enough so that her brain, composed of neural connections, could then be uploaded into a computer. And yes, Sandy could “live” on, maybe even forever.

Sad story, not just because a young person was going to die but because of where she put her hope of life. Like most people, Sandy wanted life, wanted to live. But she chose a path that, in the end, surely won't work.

This week, as we continue in Deuteronomy, we will look at the choice of life and the opportunity given us to choose life, to choose it on the terms that God, the Giver and Sustainer of life, has graciously offered.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 20.

The Tree of Life

None of us asked to be here, did we? We didn't choose to come into existence any more than we chose where and when we were born and who our parents were.

It was the same with Adam and Eve. They no more chose to be created by God than did a leaf, a rock, or a mountain. As human beings, we have been given not just existence (a rock has existence), and not just life (an amoeba has life), but life as rational free beings made in the image of God.

But we didn't choose to come into existence as rational free beings made in the image of God, either. What God does offer us, however, is the choice to remain in existence—that is, to choose to have life, eternal life, in Him, which is what we can have because of Jesus and His death on the cross.

Read Genesis 2:8, 9, 15–17 and Genesis 3:22, 23. What two options did God present to Adam in regard to his existence?

“In the midst of Eden grew the tree of life, whose fruit had the power of perpetuating life. Had Adam remained obedient to God, he would have continued to enjoy free access to this tree and would have lived forever. But when he sinned he was cut off from partaking of the tree of life, and he became subject to death. The divine sentence, ‘Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return,’ points to the utter extinction of life.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, pp. 532, 533.

Thus, right from the start, the Bible presents us with just one of two options: eternal life, which is what we were originally supposed to have, and eternal death, which in a sense is merely going back to the nothingness out of which we first came.

It's interesting, too, how the “tree of life,” which Scripture says gives immortality, and that first appears in the first book of the Bible, reappears in the last book. Read Revelation 2:7 and Revelation 22:2, 14. Perhaps the message is that though we were supposed to have access to the tree of life, because of sin we lost that access; then, at the end, once the sin problem had been ultimately and completely finished, thanks to Jesus and the plan of salvation, the redeemed, those who chose life, will have access to the tree of life as we were supposed to from the start.

Think about it: By our daily choices, how are we opting either for life or for death?

No Middle Ground

All through the Bible, we are presented with one of two choices. Two options are presented here for us.

Read the following texts. What two options, what two choices, are either openly stated or implied in these texts, and how are these options presented?

John 3:16 _____

Gen. 7:22, 23 _____

Rom. 6:23 _____

Rom. 8:6 _____

1 John 5:12 _____

Matt. 7:24–27 _____

In the end, there is no middle ground for us human beings. Before the great controversy is completely over, sin, Satan, evil, disobedience, and rebellion will be eradicated. After that happens, each one of us, individually, will either have the life, the eternal life, that God originally had planned for us all to have before the Creation of the world, or face eternal death, that is, "everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power" (*2 Thess. 1:9, NKJV*). The Bible doesn't appear to present any other options for us.

Which fate will be ours? That answer, ultimately, rests with us. We have the choice before us, life or death.

In the context of eternal life or eternal death, why is the biblical truth that hell is not burning and torturing people forever such a comforting truth? What would it say about the character of God were eternal, conscious torment truly the fate of the lost?

Life and Good, Death and Evil, Blessings and Curses

Toward the end of the book of Deuteronomy, after a long discourse on what will happen to the people if they disobey the Lord and violate the covenant promises, Deuteronomy 30 begins with a promise that even if they fall into disobedience and are punished with exile, God will nevertheless restore them to the land.

That is, if they repented and turned from their evil ways.

Read Deuteronomy 30:15–20. What are the options presented to ancient Israel here, and how do these options reflect what we have seen all through the Bible?

The Lord is very clear: He, Yahweh, has set before them one of two options, basically what He did with Adam and Eve in Eden. In fact, the Hebrew words for “good” (*tov*) and “evil” (*ra’*) in Deuteronomy 30:15 are the same Hebrew words used in Genesis for the tree of the knowledge of “good” (*tov*) and “evil” (*ra’*). Here, as all through the Bible, there is no middle ground, no neutral place to be. They will either serve the Lord and have life, or they will choose death. It’s the same for us, as well.

Life, goodness, blessing, in contrast to what? Death, evil, and curses. In the end, though, one justly could argue that God really offers them only the good, only life, and only blessings. But if they turn away from Him, these bad things will be the natural result, because they no longer have His special protection.

However we understand it, the people are presented with these options. It’s very clear, too, the reality of their free will, their free choices. These verses, along with so much of the Bible, Old and New Testament, make no sense apart from the sacred gift of free will, free choice.

In a real sense, the Lord said to them: *Therefore, with the free will that I have given you—choose life, choose blessing, choose goodness, not death, evil, and curses.*

It seems so obvious what the correct choice would be, doesn’t it? And yet, we know what happened. The great controversy was as real then as it is now, and we should learn from Israel’s example what can happen if we don’t give ourselves wholly to the Lord and choose life and all that this choice entails.

Read Deuteronomy 30:20. Notice here the link between love and obedience. What must Israel do in order to be faithful to the Lord? How do the same principles apply to us today?

Not Too Hard for You

Deuteronomy 30 opens with the Lord telling His people what would happen if they repented and turned away from their evil ways. What wonderful promises were offered them too!

Read Deuteronomy 30:1–10. What are the promises given them by God, despite the fact that this section is talking about what would happen to them if they disobeyed? What does this teach us about God’s grace?

That would certainly have been comforting to hear. However, the point was not that it didn’t matter if they turned away from what God had commanded. The Lord doesn’t offer anyone cheap grace. If anything, it should have shown them God’s love, and thus, as a response, they would love Him back, revealing their love by being obedient to what He told them to do.

Read Deuteronomy 30:11–14. What is the Lord saying to them there? What is the basic promise in these verses, and what New Testament texts can you think of that reflect the same promise?

Look at the appeal here, with its beautiful language and airtight logic. The Lord is not asking of them anything too hard to do. God’s command is not too “difficult” or “mysterious” for them to understand. Nor is it too far out of their reach to attain. It’s not way up in heaven, so far away that someone else has to get it for them; nor is it across the seas, so someone else must bring it to them. Instead, the Lord says: “But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may do it” (*Deut. 30:14, NKJV*). That is, you know it well enough to be able to speak it, and it’s in your heart so you know that you must do it. Hence, there is no excuse for not obeying. “All His biddings are enablings.” —Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons*, p. 333.

In fact, the apostle Paul quotes some of these verses in the context of salvation in Christ; that is, Paul refers to them as an example of righteousness by faith. (*See Rom. 10:6–10.*)

And then, after these verses in Deuteronomy, the children of Israel are told, yes, to choose life or death, blessing or cursing. And if, by grace and by faith, they choose life, they will have it.

It’s no different today, is it?

A Question of Worship

Central to the covenant relationship between the Lord and Israel was worship. What made the Israelites different from all the world around them was that they alone as a nation were worshipping the true God, as opposed to the false gods and goddesses of the pagan world, which were really no gods at all. “ ‘ ‘Now see that I, even I, am He, and there is no God besides Me” ’ ’ (Deut. 32:39, NKJV).

Read Deuteronomy 4:19, Deuteronomy 8:19, Deuteronomy 11:16, and Deuteronomy 30:17. What is the common warning in all of these verses? Why is this warning so essential to the nation of Israel?

Thousands of years ago, just as today, God’s people existed in a culture and environment that, in most cases, exuded standards and traditions and concepts that conflicted with their faith. Hence, God’s people must always be on guard, lest the ways of the world, its idols, and its “gods” become the objects of their worship.

Our God is a “jealous God” (Deut. 4:24, Deut. 5:9, Deut. 6:15), and He alone, as our Creator and Redeemer, is worthy of our worship. Here, too, there is no middle ground: we either worship the Lord, who brings life, goodness, and blessings, or we worship any other god, which brings evil, curses, and death.

Read Revelation 13:1–15 and focus on the question of how worship is being presented there. Then contrast those verses with Revelation 14:6–12. What is happening here in Revelation that reflects the warning given in Deuteronomy (and all through Scripture, actually) about false worship?

However different the context, the issue is the same: Will people worship the true God and have life, or will they succumb to the pressures, either overt or subtle or both, to turn their allegiance away from Him and face death? Ultimately the answer lies within each individual heart. God did not force ancient Israel to follow Him, and He won’t force us. As we see in Revelation 13, force is what the beast and his image will employ. God, in contrast, works by love.

How can we make sure that, even subtly, we are not slowly leaving our allegiance to Jesus for some other god?

Further Thought: Then, as now, we all are given a choice. The crucial word here is *choice*. Unlike a certain understanding of Christianity, in which, even before humans were born, God predestined some people not just to be lost but even to burn in hell forever, Scripture teaches that our own free choice of life or death, blessing or cursing, good or evil, determines which triad—life, good, blessing or death, evil, cursing—we will ultimately face. And how good to know that even if someone makes the wrong choice, the result is death, eternal death, not eternal torment in a never-ending lake of fire.

“‘The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.’ Romans 6:23. While life is the inheritance of the righteous, death is the portion of the wicked. Moses declared to Israel: ‘I have set before thee this day life and good, and death and evil.’ Deuteronomy 30:15. The death referred to in these scriptures is not that pronounced upon Adam, for all mankind suffer the penalty of his transgression. It is ‘the second death’ that is placed in contrast with everlasting life.”—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 544.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In class, talk more about the idea presented in Tuesday’s study, about whether it is God who directly brings punishment here and now for disobedience or whether it comes as a law-like consequence of the acts of disobedience. Or might it be both? Might there be cases where it is one or the other? How do we understand this topic?
- 2 What do the texts we looked at in the Ellen White statement today teach us about the power of God available to us to overcome sin?
- 3 Read Romans 10:1–10, where Paul quotes from Deuteronomy 30:11–14 as he expounds on salvation by faith in Jesus in contrast to seeking salvation and righteousness through the law. Why do you think he used these verses from Deuteronomy? Pay special attention to Romans 10:10: “For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation” (NKJV). What point is Paul making?
- 4 What are ways that your own culture, your own society, your own people group, could hold views that, if you aren’t careful, could lead you into false worship?

Prayer of Faith in Dallas

By RUBER LEAL

I needed encouragement, and God gave it in a most unexpected way.

For the past two years, I had gone once a week to a public library in Dallas, in the U.S. state of Texas, to work on my doctoral dissertation. A homeless man who often read in the library lobby always asked me for money when he saw me. I had declined to give him money and instead brought food and shared it with him. Despite my efforts to be friendly and talk, he always seemed to be angry. It might have been because I never gave him money.

One day, he found me in the library stairwell, and he was very upset.

“What is going on, Gerald?” I asked.

He told me that he needed God.

At first, I was uncertain about Gerald’s sincerity. But we talked about the plan of salvation, and I asked whether he wanted to accept Jesus into his life as Lord and Savior.

“Yes!” Gerald exclaimed.

I led him in prayer to accept Jesus.

After that day, I did not see him for six months.

Then, shortly before the U.S. holiday of Thanksgiving in late November, I walked into the library and immediately saw my homeless friend.

I waited for Gerald to ask me for money, but he did not.

Instead, he gave me the biggest smile I have ever seen on his face. He went on to tell me about how God had been working on his heart for the past half year.

He said he joined a church and went to prayer meeting every week.

He recited all the Bible verses he had learned by heart over the past six months.

He even showed me his Bible.

I was overjoyed! We prayed together, and he closed with a most beautiful prayer for me.

As we said goodbye, I pulled money from my pocket and said, “Gerald, happy Thanksgiving!”



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Key Text: *Deuteronomy 30:19*

Study Focus: *Gen. 2:8, 9; Gen. 3:22; Deut. 4:19; Deuteronomy 30; Rom. 6:23; Rev. 14:6–12.*

Part I: Overview

In the covenant structure of Deuteronomy, the part that follows the blessings and curses (*Deuteronomy 27, Deuteronomy 28*), after the stipulations (*Deuteronomy 5–26*), culminates in the section of the appeal. God has reminded the Israelites of what He did—all His acts of salvation since their exit from Egypt. He has, then, moved to the next step and required from Israel obedience to the laws and commitment to the covenant. Next, in parallel with the ancient Near Eastern treaties, Moses' speech invokes witnesses (*Deut. 30:19; Deut. 31:19; Deut. 32:1–43*). The purpose of these witnesses is to support his plea and give to his appeal a universal note.

Lesson Themes:

The main themes of this section are the following:

- *The great controversy.* Since the beginning of history, the Bible is about a cosmic struggle between God, with His law of light and life, and Satan, with his way of death and darkness.
- *The obligation to choose.* As were Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, Israel is challenged by God to make a choice between two ways. The paradox is that if the people choose the wrong way, they will lose their freedom and really not be able to choose at all.
- *The issue at stake.* Life is the issue at stake.

Part II: Commentary

The Appeal to Choose

Israel has just heard the blessings and the curses, with an emphasis on the curses. With these still fresh in the minds of the people (*Deut. 30:1*), Israel is now ready to make a choice. To prepare the people to move in the right direction in the covenant treaty, Moses uses two arguments. First, he stipulates that all of God's conditional promises

are articulated in the conjunctions “if” (*im*) or “when” (*ki*): “ ‘when all these come upon you . . . and you return to the LORD your God and obey His voice . . . ’ ” (*Deut. 30:1, 2, NKJV*); “ ‘if you obey the voice of the LORD your God to keep His commandments; and if you turn to the LORD with all your heart and with all your soul . . . ’ ” (*Deut. 30:10, NKJV; compare Deut. 30:17*). Second, Moses assures the people that keeping God’s commandment is not beyond their reach: “It is not in heaven . . . but the word is very nigh unto thee” (*Deut. 30:12–14*). Not only is it in Israel’s interest to obey God, because of His promises, but also obedience is within the people’s grasp, as well. God, however, does not force them. They have before them two ways: life and death. This is their prerogative—to make a choice. Moses is simply showing them the good reasons that the way of life is the right choice, and he urges them to make that choice. The solemnity of this appeal is—as in the ancient covenant treaties—supported by witnesses who guarantee the validity of the covenant. In this instance, the witnesses are cosmic—“heavens and earth”—as if the fate, the salvation of the world, was at stake. If Israel fails to make the right choice, the whole project of the coming of the Messiah, the Savior of the world, is compromised.

Discussion and Thought Questions: Why does God want us to choose? Why is theology alone, the knowledge of the truth, not enough for salvation? Someone said that the difference between the philosopher and the biblical prophet is that the philosopher makes you think, while the prophet makes you choose. Discuss the difference between the two callings. Does choice not imply thinking? Explain. How does the exercise of thinking help, or become a trap, in making the right choice?

The Choice of Adam

This appeal to choose is reminiscent of God’s other appeal to choose that also determined the fate of humankind (*Gen. 2:16, 17*). Adam also was confronted with the same choice between the two ways, “life and death.” There God also made a covenant with a human partner. The covenant was based on the law of God. It was God’s first commandment to humanity. Then God also provided humans with all the good arguments for keeping His law: the argument of the conditional promise of life versus death, as well as the argument of the possibility to obey, as seen in the fact that God gave Adam all the trees from which he could eat freely. Paradoxically, when Adam used his freedom to choose the evil way, good got mixed with evil. He lost the capacity to distinguish clearly between good and evil—and hence his freedom to choose between the two ways. As Ellen White puts it: “Man lost all because he chose to listen to the deceiver rather than to Him who is Truth, who alone has understanding. By the mingling of evil with good, his mind had become confused, his mental and spiritual powers

benumbed. No longer could he appreciate the good that God had so freely bestowed.”—Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 25.

Discussion and Thought Questions: Read Genesis 3:22. How do you explain the fact that according to this text, humans became like God, concerning the distinction between good and evil, because they sinned? What is this text really saying?

Please consider the following problem of translation. The exact same form of the verb *hayah*, “was,” has been used to describe the lasting condition of the serpent, which includes an anterior time: “The serpent *was* [*hayah*] more cunning” (*Gen. 3:1, NKJV*). In this verse, the verb “to be” also is used in the same perfect form, here also used to describe a lasting condition and not something that is becoming. In fact, the same idea already has been expressed by the serpent: “ ‘You will be like God, knowing good and evil’ ” (*Gen. 3:5, NKJV*). In this verse, the form of knowledge involves discernment, knowing the difference between right and wrong. This discernment was possible only when Adam was like God, completely sinless. The only way to know good and evil is not, as the serpent said, to know (experience) the evil *and* the good, but to know *only* the good. Indeed, as soon as humans knew evil, they lost their capacity to discern between good and evil, and hence the sense of the “good” (see Jacques B. Doukhan in *Genesis, SDA International Bible Commentary; see Gen. 3:22*).

Worship Him

When God put before Adam and Israel the choice between life and death, He was not just asking for a “Yes.” The decision meant more than a mere verbal affirmation. This decision first involved Adam’s and Israel’s choice “to love the LORD.” Everything in both narratives comes down to the issue of worship. The issue is not the law per se. Religion is not for the sake of religion—but for the sake of God. Religion apart from God is just another tradition of human culture. Obedience to the law is valid insofar as it is the expression of one’s love of God. The reason for that exclusive choice is the absolute fact that there is only one God: “ ‘ “There is no God besides Me” ’ ” (*Deut. 32:39, NKJV*). Again, the affirmation of monotheism that is at the heart of the book of Deuteronomy is reaffirmed. To make it even clearer, the verse applies this truth to the reality of life and death: “ ‘ “I kill and I make alive” ’ ” (*Deut. 32:39, NKJV*). Yes, God makes alive, but what about the killing? If God is defined as the God of life, why this reference to death? In fact, this statement does not mean that God kills and makes alive, literally. This phrase refers to

the two opposite extremities (life and death), to imply the totality, the comprehensiveness of God's power. It is a way of language to signify monotheism. This is why worship can concern only the God of Creation, the God who gave life and created all. Only with God are we assured of life. When Deuteronomy explains that God " 'is your life and the length of your days' " (*Deut. 30:20, NKJV*), it is to remind His people that their life depends entirely on Him. The only way for them to survive, to stay alive, is therefore to " 'cling to Him' " (*Deut. 30:20, NKJV*). And yet, even this clinging that the Hebrew prophet has in mind is not the clinging of the mystics. The worship response to the God of Creation and to His love does not amount to feelings, to a sentimental confession, or to praise; it is a very concrete move in the reality of life: " 'to walk in His ways' " (*Deut. 30:16, NKJV*).

Discussion and Thought Questions: Discuss the difference between Eastern mysticism and biblical religion. What is the difference concerning the place of God and religion in life? How does the idea of evolution affect the view of worship?

Part III: Life Application

Two brothers received the same education and enjoyed the same privileges; yet only one had a fulfilling life with a fruitful job and a rewarding family. The other failed totally and ended up in jail with no one to care for him. How do choices in life play a part in the different tracks of life? To what degree are choices determined by education, wealth, and setting in life? Discuss the fairness of choices in regard to the condition of social justice.

In the beginning of the day as you pause for your daily meditation, think of your work, your spouse (if you have one), and your colleagues. Ask yourself the following questions: How can I make the people around me happy? What decision for changes in my habits would that require to fulfill this wish? Consider your life: What bad choices have you made that have precipitated your failure? What good choices did you make that have led to your success? Where was God in your choices?

You are in charge of a worship service. What is your priority? Your love of the Lord? Your culture? The love of your friends? Considering the fact that all these components are essential in the life of worship, what pieces are you going to choose that will accommodate the tension between the duty of reverence and the need to enjoy the warmth of your community?

Notes
