

SO CHOOSE LIFE!

Series: Awesome Father, Precious Son

by Ron Ritchie

The cover story of the August 28, 1995 issue of *Time* magazine is entitled "The Evolution of Despair," by Robert Wright. The subtitle reads, "A new field of science examines the mismatch between our genetic makeup and the modern world, looking for the source of our pervasive sense of discontent." Wright speaks of a great increase in anxiety, stress, and depression: "Rates of depression have been doubling in some industrial countries roughly every 10 years. Suicide is the third most common cause of death among young adults in North America, after car wrecks and homicides. Fifteen percent of Americans have had a clinical anxiety disorder." (1) He states, "The problem with modern life...is...that too little of our 'social' contact is social in the natural, intimate sense of the word." (2)

Wright observes that isolation in the suburbs has been particularly hard on women with young children because of the lack of the influence of the extended family of aunts, uncles, and grandparents. Our isolation is increased when we can drive home in our private car, and as we finally reach our block, we can hit the button on our electric garage door opener and slip directly into our house without risking contact with a neighbor. "...The ultimate in isolating technologies is television..." (3) which the average American spends twenty-eight hours a week watching. And then the "fruitless pursuit of the More---the sixty-hour workweeks...can keep us from better knowing our neighbors, better loving our kin---in general, from cultivating the warm, affiliative side of human nature..." (4)

The social scientists are studying the problems of stress, anxiety, and depression, a study of a humanity that has chosen death. Humanity is not conscious of the fact that, as I have often said, just because you're breathing doesn't mean you're living. Abundant life comes only to those who have turned to the one and only living and awesome God whose name is Elohim-Yahweh and to his precious Son Jesus Christ, who in every generation lovingly offers life to those who are dead in their sin, shame, and guilt. Our loving Lord wants to establish a personal relationship with each one of us, an eternal relationship based on love and commitment---the relationship we have sought all our lives in all the wrong places. To bow our knee before the risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and invite him to become our personal Lord is to choose the life God intended us to live, enjoy, and appreciate to his honor and to our personal joy.

In our study in Deuteronomy 30:11-20, Moses offers a whole new generation in his day an opportunity to choose life. He is summarizing the last (12:1-30:20) of three messages in the book. In chapters 12-30 the aged shepherd has laid out for the Israelites the laws for living in relationship with Elohim-Yahweh, with each other, and with their enemies. As a prophet of God he is able to see how God will bring blessings or curses on Israel throughout their history on earth. It is an amazing text that I encourage you to look at carefully.

In chapter 27 the priests from the family of Levi have been called upon to recite to all the people the curses, which are the consequences of disobeying God. The people swore to God that they would seek to obey him or experience the consequences. Then in 28:1-2 Moses told them, "If you fully obey the LORD your God and carefully follow all his commandments I give you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the Lord your God...." Those blessings covered their personal lives and the lives of their children, their crops, their cities, their enemies, and their business with other countries.

Then Moses gave them another warning in 28:14: "Do not turn aside from any of the commands I give you today, to the right or to the left, following other gods and serving them." He followed that warning with a review of the curses should they be tempted to follow other gods (see 28:15-68).

Finally in chapter 30 he deals with the question, what if they sinned against God but came to their senses and repented of their evil ways? "The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live" (30:6). "The LORD will again delight in you and make you prosperous, just as he delighted in your fathers, if you obey the LORD your God and keep his commands and decrees that are written in this Book of the Law and turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul" (30:9b-10).

So now in 30:11-20, in light of the curses and blessings, Moses tells the people to choose life because...

God's word is in your hearts

Deuteronomy 30:11-14:

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.

Moses is saying, "Now, what I am commanding you today is not too mysterious or hard for you to understand." God's life-giving revealed word is very near to them. God has placed before his people the Ten Commandments as well as the various decrees and statutes within the covenant. Now, these Ten Commandments at first reading seem simple enough---so simple and easy that when Moses shared them with the first generation after the Exodus, they responded, "We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey" (Exodus 24:7). But as we all know, the Law written on stone challenges the flesh to want to respond with self-effort or self-confidence, which in the end always fails.

But then why does God tell this second generation of Jews that his commandments are not too difficult or too far away? Because this is a chosen people who have established a loving relationship with the one and only living God, Elohim-Yahweh. Because this is a people whose hearts of flesh God has circumcised: "The LORD God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live" (Deuteronomy 30:6). Here is a loving God speaking to his own beloved children who in turn are in love with him. They have hearts that are willing to obey his every commandment by the power of his Spirit within them.

Paul picked up these verses when writing to the Roman Christians. The Jews in Paul's context substituted a self-righteousness produced by their works for the righteousness that come from God by his grace, through faith in the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul wrote, "Moses describes in this way the righteousness that is by the law: 'The man who does these things will live by them'" (Romans 10:5). Yet man by his self-determined will and effort cannot keep the Law of God.

Paul then went on to tell the Romans, "But the righteousness that is by faith says: 'Do not say in your heart, "Who will ascend into heaven?" ' (that is, to bring Christ down [speaking of his incarnation]) 'or "Who will descend into the deep?" ' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead [speaking of his resurrection]). But what does it say? 'The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,' that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That 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. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved" (Romans 10:6-10). The first law is God's just demands of those who have sinned against him. The second law is of faith in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ for our sins. Christ fulfilled the demands of the Law, and therefore all who place their faith in Christ are placed on the path of salvation without any self-effort.

"No, the word of faith is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it." The point Moses is seeking to drive home to the Jews of his day is that the Law has been given to them within the context of love and grace. The land they are about to enter was promised to Abraham as a gift to his descendants. Nothing they are receiving is a result of some self-effort or self-righteousness, but only of the

grace, love, and power of God. In the same way, true righteousness is by faith in Christ. Once we establish a spiritual relationship with him, he moves the Law off of the stones and writes it on our hearts, and then gives us the Holy Spirit, who in turn gives us the desire and power to want to keep his commandments, to live out our lives in a way that pleases him (see Jeremiah 31:33f and 2 Corinthians 3).

I have a friend who years ago chose death as a lifestyle. He became involved in drugs, and by the time he was arrested and placed in a major prison to do ten years of hard time, his arms had needle tracks from the wrists to the shoulders. While he was in prison he was introduced to Life himself---Jesus Christ. He bowed his heart and knee to his new Lord and Savior and then began to minister in that prison. Finally his sentence was up, and he came out and has served the Lord as a clean man for the last several years. Three months ago he was diagnosed as HIV-positive as a result of using some contaminated needles in the old days before Christ. He told a group of Christians recently that on the surface, HIV is bad news, but the good news is that because he had chosen life in Jesus Christ, he firmly believed that, in the words of Paul to the Romans (8:28), "...we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." In this man's life I see both the curses, or the consequences of his old lifestyle of disobedience, and the blessings, God's enabling him to minister to others, share the life of Christ with them, and experience life himself in the midst of his brokenness.

Choose life because the word is in your hearts and because...

God wants to bless you

Deuteronomy 30:15-16:

See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, 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.

Moses is referring to the abundant spiritual and material life they will experience because of God's relationship with them and because of their willingness to respond wholeheartedly to his love. Note that nothing is withheld from God's children. When we establish a spiritual relationship with God and walk according to his known will, we receive nothing but spiritual and material blessings. (Keep in mind that at times even the most righteous person can be tested by God with affliction for a season, as seen in the lives of the saints over the ages, the foremost of whom is our Lord Jesus Christ himself.) On the other hand, if God's children prefer to serve other gods, they will surely experience horrible death and destruction. They will be taken into slavery once again.

"...Love the LORD your God...." Moses is saying, "Give your whole heart to the one and only living God, who has loved and revealed himself to not only your fathers, but also you. He is also the one and only living God who was able to deliver you from Egypt, the land of slavery, and set you aside to become a holy people for his name's sake and for the salvation of the nations around you. So in response to that divine and loyal love, (1) love the Lord your God out of a full heart of appreciation, (2) walk in his revealed ways, and (3) keep his commandments, laws, and decrees by the power of the Spirit. And know that as a result of that loyal love, you will taste life as God intended it to be enjoyed in the land you are entering to possess."

The precious Son Jesus said, "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete" (John 15:7-11)

I was talking to an old friend from another city this week. As we shared our lives, I was reminded that even as a Christian he had chosen to live with sin, which in time resulted in death, bringing some serious, harmful consequences to him and to those he loved. But during our conversation I shared a psalm of David with him. In that psalm he began to see how much God loved him and wanted to bring healing not only to his life but to

the lives of his loved ones. By the time we finished the psalm, I could see his whole body relax with a great sigh of spiritual relief. He then chose life by asking the Lord Jesus to empower him with his Spirit as he made plans to be reconciled with those he had harmed.

Choose life because the word of God is in your hearts, because God wants to bless you, and because...

The only other choice is death

Deuteronomy 30:17-18:

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, 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.

The prophet Jeremiah spoke out many years later to a disobedient Judah:

"This is what the LORD says:

Cursed is the one who trusts in man,
who depends on flesh for his strength
and whose heart turns away from the LORD.

He will be like a bush in the wastelands;
he will not see prosperity when it comes

...The heart is deceitful above all things
and beyond cure.
Who can understand it?

I the LORD search the heart
and examine the mind,
to reward a man according to his conduct,
according to what his deeds deserve.
(Jeremiah 17:5-6; 9-10.)

"...And if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, 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." To bow down to other gods in this context is the same thing as a wife leaving her husband for another lover. Idolatry is equivalent to spiritual adultery. And in the context of the Law, adultery was a capital offense punishable by stoning to death the guilty parties. (But see also John 8:1-11; Deuteronomy 4:25-31.)

The precious Son Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life" (John 5:24).

In my own study of this passage I paused here and reflected on the folks I have spoken to in recent months who were spiritually dead. There was a doctor who was angry with religion...a couple who were raised in the Christian tradition, but had decided to follow other gods...a man who loved God but couldn't believe Jesus was the Son of God...a recovering drug addict who admitted there must be a higher power, but whose mind, heart, and at times whole body shuddered at the name of Jesus...a doctor who was very interested in my spiritual walk but not his own...

Choose life because the word of God is in your hearts, because God wants to bless you, and because the only other choice is death. Choose to follow God because...

Without a relationship with God, there is no life

Deuteronomy 30:19-20:

This day I call heaven and 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 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.

Moses' life on this earth, as well as his message from God to the Israelites, are drawing to a close. He wants to make sure that this second generation of Jews after the Exodus hears every word of God that offers them the choice between life and death, so he calls in two witnesses: heaven and earth.

"Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him." Imagine if you can the aged shepherd of God standing on a mountainside in Moab looking to heaven, then westward into Canaan, and down to the two million people of God. They are all looking up to him. He has told this people everything God wanted him to tell them. He has laid out the choice they have of living a life that will bring blessing to them as a nation, as families within that nation, and as individuals. And these blessings will affect not only them at that present time but their children in the generations to come. So as the shepherd calling out to his sheep and as a shadow of the Good Shepherd to come (see John 10:1-18), he says, "Choose life, so that you will have a heart that loves God, ears that are willing to listen to his voice, and hands that are willing to cling 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." There is God's definition of life, and there is the world's definition of life. God's definition of life begins with his expression of love toward us and our response of appreciation and thankfulness to him for that love. The greatest commandment still stands even today: "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deuteronomy 6:5).

The precious Son Jesus said to his disciples, "The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him" (John 3:35-36). He also said, "For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:40). Jesus said to his friend Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:25-26). Jesus loved the book of Deuteronomy, and he quoted from it often to his disciples because he wanted his disciples in every age to come to know his awesome heavenly Father. In coming to know the Father we must also come to know his precious Son, and in Deuteronomy we can see so much of him. On the evening before his death, Jesus prayed, "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent...Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you" (John 17:3, 25).

Jesus willingly went to the cross of Calvary for our sins, was buried, and three days later was raised from the grave by his Father. He then spent forty days on earth demonstrating to his disciples that he was alive and teaching them that they should go out into the world in the power of the Holy Spirit and tell everyone that there is life, hope, joy, and peace now and beyond the grave if they place their faith in Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior. The apostle Peter added a wonderful word of encouragement about his risen Lord when he stated before the Jewish supreme court during his own trial, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Men and women need to be saved from the wrath of God, from their sinful nature, from eternal separation from God, as well as from depression, anxiety, despair, stress, and isolation, now and forever. The only one who can save us from emotional, physical, and spiritual death and give us the gift of eternal life now and forever is the risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

If you are currently living out your life in depression, despair, anxiety, stress, and physical and spiritual isolation, let me quote Paul's words once again to remind you of this ray of hope in a very dark world: "But what does it say? 'The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,' that is, the word of faith we are

proclaiming: That 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. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, 'Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.'

So choose life--His name is Jesus!

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