

Life and Death

M. W. Bassford, 5-8-11

A few years ago, I read a book by a man named Stephen Covey entitled *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. I thought a lot of the book was weird and didn't make a whole lot of sense, but there was one idea that I borrowed for my own thought process. It was the distinction that Covey made between things that are important and things that are urgent. This distinction isn't intuitively apparent. We commonly think that because something is urgent, it must be important, and vice versa. However, that's not necessarily the case. For example, let's say that there's a project at work that's due tomorrow, and everybody on the team is working till midnight getting the project done. However, a year from now, nobody is going to remember that the project even existed. It is urgent, but not important.

On the other hand, we recognize that spending time with our children and being good parents is important. In fact, it's one of the most significant things we will do in this life. However, if we choose to work late one night instead of going home to be with our families, there are no immediate repercussions to that decision. One missed evening probably won't doom our children to be drug addicts. Spending time with them, then, is important, but not urgent.

This difference between important and urgent can skew our decision-making process so that we spend most of our lives on things that don't really matter to us. We can rush from project to project to project at work while our marriage founders and our children grow up strangers. Plenty of people make that choice, but few like the results.

This can be an even bigger problem in the religious realm. It's all too easy for us to forget our service to God in favor of pursuits that will ultimately be meaningless. This is not a new problem. One of the main messages of Deuteronomy, in fact, is that we must consider the impact of our choices. It can literally be a matter of life and death.

Deuteronomy 29

In the closing portion of the Deuteronomy sermon, Moses spends some time discussing **THE ROOT OF BITTERNESS**. We read about this in Deuteronomy 29:18-20. The man described in this text makes a terrible error. He assumes that because he is surrounded by the righteous, he himself can choose to be idolatrous and wicked. However, God promises a terrible vengeance on such people. First of all, they themselves would be singled out for special punishment with the precision instrument of divine justice. Second, though, because the people as a whole tolerated such a man in their midst, even though they were otherwise righteous, they too would be punished as a nation and swept away.

This sobering statement has an application to every one of us. It's not as common up here as it is in the South, but it's easy for us to develop a denominational attitude toward the Lord's church. We can say things like, "I'm Church of Christ" and be filled with confidence that because we belong to the right church, God is pleased with us even though our deeds are wicked. Now, brethren, I don't mean in any way to diminish the importance of belonging to the church that Christ established. However, on the day of judgment, we are going to be judged as individuals, not as a church. It may well be that every single person we worship with is welcomed into heaven, but we ourselves, because of the decisions that we made, are condemned to the outer darkness. It's equally likely, though, that the evil effects of our evil conduct will defile those who are closest to us, so that our example costs our families and friends their souls too. What a dismal failure of a life that would be! Once we start thinking that it couldn't happen to us, though, is when it will happen to us.

A little bit further down, Moses brings up **THE SECRET THINGS**. They appear in Deuteronomy 29:29. This passage is critically important because of the way it guides our study of the word. It tells us that God does not intend the Scripture as some kind of complete book of answers for every kind of spiritual speculation that we might come up with. There are many Biblical questions that are unanswerable. The Scripture does not tell us what Paul's thorn in the flesh was, it does not reveal where the devil came from, and it does not fully explain the workings of the Godhead. Those are just a few areas that the inspired word does not cover, and I'm sure we could come up with a list a mile long if we wanted to. God did not reveal those things because He wanted to keep them secret, and they belong to Him. If we are wise in our study, we will leave those unrevealed things alone, and confine ourselves to what God has spoken.

If we do that, we will discover what God's purpose is for His word, which is to teach us to obey and please Him. In the area of what we must do, God's word is complete. It reveals to us all things pertaining to life and godliness. It equips us for every good work. If we study and practice those things, that's the way we gain the reward of eternal life. Turning our studies in any other direction can only distract us from the things that truly matter.

Deuteronomy 30.

Moses emphasizes the importance of this choice in his comments on **THE NEARNESS OF THE WORD**. This idea is beautifully expressed in Deuteronomy 30:11-14. It is on this passage and others like it that true Christianity is founded. One of the distinctive features of denominationalism is that denominational leaders do their best to separate

their church members from the word. Indeed, they must do this, because if they encourage their people to study, sooner or later, those ordinary members are going to start asking why the Bible says to do one thing and the denomination actually does something else. That leads to people getting disgruntled and jumping ship to another church.

The denominational powers that be don't like that. Their solution to the problem, then, is to discourage Bible study. They tell their rank-and-file members, "Oh, you need a divinity degree to understand the Bible." Or maybe, "You need a special anointing of the Holy Spirit to figure out what it's saying." The implication is that the Bible is just too hard for ordinary believers, so they shouldn't even bother reading it on their own, and they should just trust their leaders to tell them what will please God. When I think about how many millions have swallowed that lie, it breaks my heart.

The truth, of course, is precisely the opposite. The word is not too hard! The word is not too far away! Instead, it is something that is not just near to us, but very near to us. We can put the word in our mouths, and we can inscribe it on our hearts. We can understand what it says, and we can obey it. What a joy it is to know that we need not depend on anyone but Jesus for our salvation! Of course, that's a sword with two edges. If we can understand ourselves and obey ourselves, then God will hold each one of us personally accountable for the life we choose to lead. We won't be able to get off the hook by claiming ignorance. It's up to us, then, to read, to obey, and to live.

If we make the right choice, we can expect to receive **LIFE** from God. Moses makes this plain in Deuteronomy 30:15-16. It's amazing how precisely this transfers from the law of Moses to the law of Christ. The first verse of this text highlights the starkness of the decision we face about how we will lead our lives. On the one hand, we can choose life and good. On the other hand, we can choose death and evil. It's that simple, and it's that profound. The way that we choose life and good is equally simple. First, we love God. Second, we walk in His ways. Third, we keep His commandments.

However, just because this is simple doesn't mean that it's easy. I would imagine that anybody in this country who believes in God at all would express the desire to love Him, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments. However, the people who actually live that way are few indeed, and if we're not careful, we can join the multitude that talks the talk but doesn't walk the walk. This isn't a decision that we make once. It's a decision that we make every hour of every day, whether, in each situation that life presents us with, we are going to be evil, or we are going to be righteous.

The stakes for making the right decision in each circumstance are huge. As was true for the Israelites, that's the way we come into possession of God's promised land, but unlike them, our promised land isn't found anywhere on planet Earth. All of those seemingly unimportant decisions, taken together, will determine whether or not God receives us into the eternal joy of heaven. We will only enter into that joy if we keep its promise before us always.

Sadly, it's all too easy for us to make the wrong choice, which will lead us to **DEATH**. Moses highlights this possibility in Deuteronomy 30:17-18. As Moses describes it, this isn't a deliberate choice to do evil. It's just a choice not to listen, to have our hearts turn away from God, to be drawn away by any of the idols we examined a few weeks ago. This is not the kind of decision that makes us struggle and fight to remain true to our commitment to evil. Instead, following evil is the path of least resistance. It's easy to sleep in or keep watching TV instead of assembling with the saints. It's easy to be led astray by worldly friends into all sorts of vices. Perhaps most of all, it's easy to deceive ourselves, to pretend that God is OK with our behavior even though the word plainly says otherwise. As we make these disastrous choices, we drift away from God and into the devil's harbor, where we will be certain to receive his reward.

That reward is nothing we want to see. Just like the disobedient Israelites, we will perish. We will be cast out of the promised land. However, the death that we will suffer is an eternal one, and the land that will reject us is filled with the light of the presence of God. We will spend forever in hell, not just with the devil and his angels, but with all of the other poor deluded fools who thought that if they kept drifting, somehow they would drift right on into heaven.

This brings us, then, to the **CHOICE** that is before us. Moses shares his thoughts about this in Deuteronomy 30:19-20. This is not a decision that we can dodge, nor even a decision that we can postpone. Even if we decide not to choose, that itself is a choice. If we will not declare ourselves for God, He will count us with those who are against him.

The key, as Moses tells us, is to love the Lord, obey His voice, and hold fast to Him. We don't do these things on a whim. We do them because we understand that He is our life, and only those who understand that can be saved.

If we want to go to heaven, God needs to be our life in two main senses. First, He needs to be what our life is about. If some impartial observer shadowed us for a month, listened to what we talked about, and watched how we spent our time and our money, what would he say about us? Would he say that God is the most important thing, bar none, in our lives? Or would he say that God gets His sliver of the pie, but we're more concerned with making money, with getting ahead in the world, or with pursuing our favorite recreations? Brethren, if God is nothing more than a hobby to us, if we keep Him tucked away in His niche while we live the way we want to, we are already drifting, and we are in grave danger of losing our souls. God needs to be our reason for existence, and it needs to be evident in everything we do.

God must also be our life because we have the hope of receiving life from Him. As important as it is for us to strive to obey Him, we must recognize that our obedience will always fall short. We cannot hope to justify ourselves, so we must rely on Him to justify us. If we do receive eternal life, it can only be as a gift from Him.