

Life's Big Choices

Texts: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8; Matthew 5:21-37

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Life is full of choices. We all make hundreds of them every day.

From the moment our alarm clock goes off at the time we chose to set it at the night before to the moment we decide to turn out our light and go to sleep, we are making choices big and small.

Some choices seem to be of little importance – should I have eggs for breakfast this morning – though I suppose that even that could matter if you were watching your cholesterol – and some choices have life altering consequences – should I leave home and family and country and job and go off and marry a woman I met on the internet?

It sounds crazy, I know, but some people do that!

Some choices are relatively free: should I buy Coke or Pepsi, use Colgate or Crest, wash with Tide or All Temperature Cheer.

But lots of choices that we make are forced choices: I can certainly decide what shirt and tie to wear to come to church this morning, but I can't really decide not to wear pants.

That's a socially enforced choice, at least if I want to keep my job and avoid hospitalization for a mental breakdown.

A few choices in life have real significance. Should I go to college and if so what should my major be? Should I get married, and if so, to whom? Should we have children, and if so, how many?

Some seem almost insignificant at the time, but take on huge consequences later. I remember hearing a young man telling about the first time he had tasted alcohol at 14. He said, "As soon as I tasted it, I knew I loved it and I had to have more."

He was a member of the church I grew up in, the pastor's son, in fact, and for the rest of his life he struggled with alcoholism, in and out of AA, in rehab, sober, off the wagon and back on again. Just when he seemed like he was going to make it, he would fall again.

His name was Alan, just like me, and when he was around 30 years old and ten days before Christmas about two decades ago, he hanged himself in a park.

That first choice, so innocuous for so many of us, was a fatal one for him because it broke his will.

What I mean by that is that after that first drink, he no longer had the same freedom to choose not to drink that he had had before.

The very power of choosing in him had been compromised, and his whole subsequent life was spent trying to win back that power of choice until he felt so tired from a struggle that would not end that he decided to make the one choice that would end it forever.

I still think about Alan every year, just before Christmas, and all of the pain in his life and his family's life from that first choice so many years ago, and I pray that his soul is at last at rest in Christ. His story is unfortunately far from unique.

Now, the Bible is a book about choices.

Why, almost as soon as humans are introduced in Genesis, the issue of choices arrives. There is that one tree in the center of the garden that the man and the woman are not to eat from, and one choice that they must not make. I don't think this is a story about real people, but I think it's a story about each of us and the choices we make, and their consequences.

In the story, the prohibition seems like such a simple thing, not eating from a tree, just don't eat from that one tree, and it seems impossible that it could have any kind of important consequence, but, like so many choices in life, of course, it does.

"When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she *took* some and *ate* it. She also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate it."

Now the point of the story isn't about a couple making a bad choice long ago, but it's about you and me and all of us and how that first choice not to listen to God completely even in something that seems ridiculously small and insignificant has momentous consequences.

The point of the Scripture is to remind us that those small choices can have real consequences. They can break our will, our power of choosing, so that for the rest of our lives we are going to have to struggle with sin. The very heart of us has been compromised, so that we struggle to do what we want to do.

The apostle Paul wrote about his experience in his letter to the church in Rome: "I do what I don't want to do, and I don't do what I do want to do, and there's no health in me, and who can help me out of this mess?"

Some scholars think that this shows that Paul was schizophrenic with a split personality, but anyone who has actually struggled with the sin in their lives knows exactly what Paul is talking about.

You decide not to sin, and before you know it, you are sinning again.

I'm not going to say a bad word, and I say a bad word. I'm not going to call that driver a jerk, and I call the next one a jerk.

I'm not going to work on the Sabbath, but the office just called. I'm not going to dishonor my parents, but can you believe how stupid my mother is on the computer? I'm not going to pass on gossip, but did you hear about ... and on it goes.

Our wills are just broken and we can't stick to what we decide.

In today's passage from Deuteronomy, for example, it would seem like the choice laid out before Israel is pretty clear cut: choose life or choose death.

It can hardly be simpler than that: love God and obey God and you will live; turn away from God and fail to obey God's commands, and you will die.

Nothing could be easier to understand, and no incentives could be clearer: choose God and you will live, turn away and you will die.

It should be easy, but the whole subsequent history of Israel shows that it's not easy, that it's actually incredibly hard, and that Israel as a whole found it impossible to do.

And the reason that it wasn't easy for them, in spite of the Law and the prophets and their history with God, is that their wills were broken, that is, the very power of choosing in them wasn't working right.

If it had been working right, the choice is so obvious and so clear, they would have made it! But they didn't, so something must have gone wrong.

And that's the problem with sin, isn't it? It's more like an addiction than a choice. We try to avoid it, but we almost can't help ourselves.

Jesus then ups the ante even more when he says, "It's not enough not to actually commit murder, you can't even be angry with your brother or sister, to call them a jerk," which is more or less what the Aramaic word "Raca" means.

"It's not enough not to actually commit adultery, you can't even lust after a man or a woman. It's not enough not to try to kill your enemy, you have to love them."

We can't help but be angry with people sometimes, even our family, and we can't help but look at really sexy people and think to ourselves, "Wow, that person's really sexy!" and we can't help but dislike our enemies – if we didn't dislike them, how would we know who they were? How would we know who we had to love if we didn't have someone to hate?

We would very much like to redefine sin to be just big things – well, I haven't killed anyone, have I, so I must be okay – and Jesus takes that option away from us. "No," he says, "you're not okay!"

But where does that leave us?

We have a broken will so that we can't even choose to do right on a continuing basis, but we have to choose it in order to live, and not just choose it in the big decisions, but in the little ones, too, and yet that's the very thing we can't do and, hoo boy, I guess we're in deep doo doo here!

We're actually right there with Paul: "I do what I don't want to do, and I don't do what I do want to do, and there's no health in me, and who can help me out of this mess?"

Thankfully the Scriptures have a solution for that, too, the one that Paul found so long ago: Jesus. Jesus says to his disciples, "You did not choose me, but I chose you."

If our power of choice is broken, God's power is not. If we can't choose God, God can choose us. And in Christ Jesus, God does choose us. It's just what God did with Israel: God chose them, which is why they are called the Chosen people, and not, say, the Super Holy Righteous people.

God chooses us, not because we are holy, but in spite of the fact that we aren't holy. God chooses us for life, even though we have chosen to disobey for death. God chooses us for redemption because of who God is, and not who we are.

And in Christ, God undoes what has been done, and offers us another chance to choose, frees up our power of choosing by the Holy Spirit so that we can begin to have God's ways written in our hearts, and our compromised wills are strengthened by God's own power through the Holy Spirit.

In the story of Adam and Eve, standing in for all of us, they chose to disobey and to take and eat the food that led to death.

Jesus offers us the chance to obey once more, but this time God is telling us to take and eat the food that leads to life, that is, the bread and wine that are his body and blood, just as we did last week.

The Bible is a book of choices and life is filled with choices. The Bible teaches that it is fallen human nature to make bad choices, to disobey, to end up with our wills fatally compromised so that we can't even any longer choose to do what's right, that we continually get entangled in sin in spite of our best efforts.

But the Bible also teaches that God has chosen us to be made in God's image, chosen us in spite of what we may have become, and chosen us to be redeemed. Even if our wills are broken, God's is not, and God chooses to save us in spite of ourselves.

Thanks be to God, for he has rescued us when we most needed to be rescued. Thanks be to God, for God has won the struggle for us just when we most despaired.

Thanks be to God, for God's faithfulness is from everlasting to everlasting, and God has chosen us, God's broken willed children to share life with God forever. The choice before God was to choose life for us, or to choose death for us. Thankfully, in Jesus Christ, God chose life.

Amen