

CHOOSE LIFE

"I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live." Deuteronomy 30:19.

Last words of men and women are often their most impressive and revealing ones. This was true of Moses as revealed in his majestic farewell address which is recorded in Deuteronomy. When John Wesley finished a life of godly service, his arms were folded across his breast and he said: "The best of all is, God is with us." When President McKinley was assassinated, the last words he uttered before his departure were: "Nearer my God to Thee, nearer to Thee. It is God's way. God's will be done. Lead kindly light 'mid the encircling gloom, lead Thou me on." After he had given his last message and had said goodbye to his loved ones in Mentone, France, Spurgeon lapsed into a coma. They saw his lips moving and bent over to listen carefully and they heard him whispering over and over: "Jesus died for me."

After preaching around the world and presenting the gospel to myriads of people, Dwight L. Moody in his last days was unable to lie down because of a heart condition. He was propped upon his pillow and waiting for the summons. Presently it came, and he said to his loved ones: "Earth is receding, Heaven is opening, God is calling me, and I must go." On the last day of his life President Wilson asked his faithful physician, "Is there nothing more that you can do, Doctor?" The doctor sorrowfully replied, "No, Mr. President. All has been done for you that can be done. You are in the closing moments now of the earthly journey." Then Mr. Wilson smiled very graciously and said: "Very well, I am ready for this hour."

When he approached the end of his long and useful career, Moses had wise words of counsel to give to his people with whom he had had many memorable experiences. He reminded them of all that God had done for them in delivering them from the bondage of Egypt, in guiding them through many dangers and difficulties, in training them, and in molding them into a great nation. He told them that, if they would put God's will first in their lives and obey Him, blessings untold also would follow in the wake of such obedience. He also told them that, if they chose to ignore the Lord and His Word and will, there would be unspeakably grievous consequences.

Viewed from any angle, Moses was truly a great man, and was one of the greatest leaders in the history of the world. The national crisis into which he was thrust revealed that he was a stalwart giant, a man of vision and of creative ingenuity. He made an indelible impression upon the people of his day, and transmitted innumerable blessings to generations unborn. Moses' final words to his people are worthy of our study today. They stood on the threshold of the promised land. The road to it had been long and hard. The desert had had its perils. But now that they had reached their goal, success could and would bring its temptations, and about these Moses warned them. The most deadly of these temptations was the illusion that they could get along without God. It is an illusion which, sooner or later, tempts us all. We are so apt to say, "Mine own right hand hath gotten me this wealth," or whatever else it was for which we had been striving. We are all apt to forget the times when our backs were to the wall, and we knew in our hearts that the wall was the supporting grace of God.

Moses knew that the national vigor of his people depended on a vital faith in God. Without it they would lose their very identity, the whole story of their past would lose its meaning, and they would not have any worthwhile future. Moses told them that to keep their faith was a matter of life or death. The Bible teaches repeatedly that faith is a matter of life or death. Christ made that very plain. He said that there were two gates and two ways.

One is broad and wide, and it leads to destruction. The other is narrow and strait, and it leads to life. In the Gospel of John the Christian experience is described as passing from death to life. Thinking of the change that had come to him when he was saved, Paul said, "He hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son."

It is clear to all who do not wear blinkers that our civilization is being threatened. Such life as we still have is ours through the divine patience. Many people would not admit this, but those who admit it know that the one hope of saving our civilization is in a return to faith. The ideals on which the life of America depends are fading out with the decay of religious faith. We cannot survive without honesty, truth, righteousness, and a sense of honor.

Professor Toynbee puts the question we should be asking, "How should a man act who knows that he is living in a declining civilization?" The answer will not be found in a retreat from the world, to nourish our own souls in pious isolation. It will be found in facing the whole situation honestly, in listening for God's Word in it, and in doing His will as He reveals it to us; for in His will there is mercy and redemption. Our faith and obedience are channels for God's renewing grace. The root of our trouble lies in the rejection of God's rule in private and in public life and the consequent dominion of evil.

When he came to the end of his service to his people and was making his last appeal to them, Moses called upon heaven as his witness, and with great earnestness of heart he said: "I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing, therefore choose life." They had to make a decision. This is the kind of choice that confronts each generation and every one of us. God through His servants prods us into spiritual awareness. His message is very simple and clear. We face an alternative. There is a way which we can take which leads to God and life. Or, there is a way which we can go that leads only to destruction. We must choose which way we shall follow. On this everything worthwhile for time and eternity depends.

One of the greatest powers that you possess is the power to choose. By the power of choice you can either make your life creative or you can destroy it. Every day of life each of us makes many choices. Some people find it hard to choose anything, whether it be a tie to wear, the arrangement of furniture of a room, or the selection of a television program to watch. They cannot make up their minds. Even so, there are people who would shy away from making any kind of spiritual decision. They do not want to be disturbed. Like the ostrich, they bury their heads in the sand and hope that somehow the issue will pass.

But you and I know that we cannot ignore the great questions that have to do with our relationship to God. Sooner or later we have to confront the alternatives which Moses set forth. We may fool a few people, but we cannot fool ourselves about the greed, the lust, and the hate that rise up in our hearts.

Our pose of self-confidence hides a conscience that haunts us. We know we have sinned and transgressed the commandments of God. Try as we may, we cannot turn our backs on the need to decide about God.

Moses set before his people and us certain alternatives: life and death, blessing and cursing. He made it plain that in this world there are just two ways upon which men may walk, which ways are not parallel. In one direction is life and in the opposite direction

is death. Moses challenged all to choose life. He told them that if they would do God's will that untold blessings would follow in the wake of such obedience. He begged them to put God's will first, to live close to God, to obey His commandments, to follow His leadership, and to refuse to worship any other god. One certainly admires Moses for his faithfulness in pointing out the way of obedience and the way of disobedience, as well as the inevitable consequences of walking in each of these ways.

Every person has the immense power of choice. Of course, some people try to avoid making a choice. They expect things to work out, and sometimes they do. But the surest way to real living is to make definite, God-guided choices. For example, choose to handle the difficulties of this life creatively. Everybody is going to have difficulties and hardships. So the issue is not whether you're going to have them or not, because you are. The question is, What will you do with them? Will you allow them to crush you or will you see to it that they enable you to grow? Will they be destructive in their effect upon you, or will they be creative in their effect upon you?

Choose to stop being pushed around for the rest of your life by the weaknesses that you have. It is a miserable thing to spend thirty, forty, fifty, sixty, seventy, or eighty years being pushed around by some weakness. And, if you have a weakness as a child and you don't do something about it, you will still have the same old weakness as an older person. Age is nothing but a projection of youth. You will be in old age what you were in youth, if you don't choose to do something about it. Are you going to be pushed around by your weakness the rest of your life? You will unless you decide to do something about it and get rid of it. You have to decide, "I'm through fooling with it. I don't want it any more. I don't want to live this way any more. I have decided that from now on I'm through with this thing."

Choose responsibility and thoughtfully. Ours is not a blind choice like that described in Frank Stockton's famous short story, "The Lady or the Tiger?" The story tells about an ancient kingdom where a man on trial was put into an arena and told to open one of two doors. Behind one was a tiger which would spring out and devour him. Behind the other was a lovely lady who would lead him to freedom. But there was no way of knowing which door was which.

In spiritual matters, decisions need not be left to chance. God provides the guidance which we need. Moses said: "Choose life, that both thou and thy seed may live." It seems strange that he would have to tell the Israelites to choose life rather than death. But he knew from bitter experience that they likely would make the wrong choice. Despite God's wonderful blessings upon them in the past, they had frequently turned away from Him. When we read the account of their waywardness, we marvel at the patience of God. They still had a choice. They still could choose life. We are not different from those people. Probably few of us would deliberately choose death and God's curse rather than life and God's blessing. Yet, we stubbornly insist on having our own way.

This challenge of Moses to "choose life" is an urgent and inescapable one. Persistently the Scriptures confront us with it. One may either accept or reject Christ, confess Him or deny Him, take his stand with Christ or take his stand against Him. To those who receive Christ, He does for and with them that which needs to be done in order that they may have salvation and inward peace.

It is a choice between Christ and Satan as the master of life. Surely one ought not to have any difficulty in deciding which of these shall be the master of his life. It is also a choice between one of two lives here in this world. Involved in this choice is the matter of influence, "For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself" (Romans 14:7). Never forget that there is someone following your example.

"An old man going a lone highway,
Came at evening cold and gray
To a chasm vast and deep and wide.
The old man crossed in the twilight dim
The sullen stream had no fear for him.
But he turned, when he reached the other side
And built a bridge to span the tide.

"Old man," said a fellow pilgrim near,
"You're wasting your strength with building here.
Your journey will end with the ending day
You never again will pass this way.
You've crossed this chasm deep and wide,
Why build this bridge at even tide?"

The builder lifted his old gray head,
"Good friend, in the path I have come," he said,
"There followeth after me today
A youth whose feet must pass this way.
This chasm which has been as nought to me,
To this fair-haired youth may a pitfall be.
He, too, must cross in the twilight dim,
Good friend, I am building this bridge for him."

It is the choice between two deaths. Two men are dying: one has heard and rejected the gospel of Christ, and dies in terror, realizing that it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of Him Whom he has rejected; the other has a joy filling his soul as he faces death, and bids his loved ones goodbye in the blessed assurance that some day they shall meet again. What a difference in the way that the saved and the unsaved face death! It is also a choice between one of two abiding-places out there in the world beyond, heaven or hell.

During World War I, Doctor George W. Truett and Mr. Harry Lauder were the guests of three hundred officers. Harry Lauder had just lost his son in the fighting in France. The officers were very fond of the comedian for he always entertained them. They asked him to sing their various favorites. He said, "I cannot sing for you, boys. My son, John, is dead out yonder in the field. I cannot sing today, but, if you will let me, I will preach a little to you." He added: "Men, when I found John dead, the idol of my heart; John, on whom I had built all my hopes, I had the choice of three roads. I could take the road of grief. Or I could take the road of despair and commit suicide. Or I could take the road to Jesus and give up to Him, and that is what I have done." As Mr. Lauder went on speaking to those soldiers, he said: "My hope is Christ; the way of life is for a man to choose Christ, yield to Christ, and follow Christ."

Why not choose life and accept Christ? In Him you can find and receive eternal life, peace and joy. Receive Christ as your Saviour, now, and then acknowledge before others that He is your Saviour and Lord as now we sing.