

A Choice to Make

Choices have consequences, whether it be eating a second donut or buying a new car. Then there are the really



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big choices such as honesty, marriage and money management. As a pastor I have had serious conversations about these and many other life decisions with church members.

But the biggest choice of all is God! Every dimension of living involves God. Israel is at the key turning point of their life in this text, when everything balances on whether God will be at the center of their hearts and behavior. God cannot be locked up in a temple or chained to any altar on a mountaintop. Neither can he be bought with gold coins, a sacrificial ram or prescribed rituals. We are talking about the God in whom all reality exists – the God who does not live by time constraints, the God who created you and me so he could know and love us. He is the God who takes chances on people whom he knows may not choose to love him back or treasure his abundant gifts. This is the God who stayed with Israel from their unremarkable beginnings, through their slavery in Egypt and through the hard lessons of forty years in the wilderness.

Now it's decision time. Time to grow up and get serious. Moses is very specific and down to earth as he says it is time for them to choose, and not by looking elsewhere or sending out a delegation (vv. 12-13). Have they not had enough life lessons from Egypt and the wilderness? Moses says: "the word is near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe" (v. 14).

In the days of citywide crusades I served twice on a steering committee and as chair for the counselor training program. I witnessed wonderful blessings. One of the most memorable instances occurred the night an enthusiastic and wonderful African-American woman ended up counseling a prominent businessman. The situation did not fit the guidelines of our training manual which suggested we match people of compatible backgrounds. I watched as their conversation deepened, they prayed, and that staid man hugged

the counselor as though she were his mother. When I asked him about his decision he said, "I have accepted God's love in Christ and this dear lady helped me make the decision!" Those of us in charge realized once again that God's love and grace are simply experienced when a person makes the choice to believe. In the New Testament the Apostle Paul who knew Israel's story well writes: "Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow. If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh; but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit" (Galatians 6:7-8). Although the about-to-be-nation of Israel was hearing Moses, the decision to trust God could only last if it were personal, i.e., "in your heart for you to observe" (v. 14).

This life-changing choice is all about God, not national identity, not religious rituals and organization, and not political/military power. Israel would only be blessed if they shunned pagan gods and shallow cultural prizes of the world. God's people must be a different kind of people, a distinction Israel all too frequently forgot. The crucial distinction in both the Old and New Testaments is God's people must love and obey God. As Jesus said, the greatest commandment is to love God above all else, and the second is to love your neighbor as you love yourself (Matthew 22:37, 39). The words are deceptively simple, but putting them into daily practice is challenging. We are quick to criticize the Jews for religious legalism and treating God as though he was their personal possession. But we fall into the same errors with our preferred theological ideas, church traditions and our failure to live out God's love and grace in the real world.

The word of God must be written in our hearts if we are to experience the abundant life. God knew Israel and he knows us. We are not perfect. We struggle with the challenges and temptations of life. God has given us three powerful resources for godly living: the written word, the Savior, and the Holy Spirit. But, again, we must choose to hear and pattern our living on God's revelation.

Since we know the full story of Israel we know they repeatedly made the

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Scripture: Deuteronomy 30:11-20

same flawed decisions and suffered the consequences. Moses' words to Israel should inform us as well: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him" (v. 20). Such a living faith in God will offer "life and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors" (v. 20). Be careful not to add your own expanded expectations to God's promised blessings. God does not promise immunity from difficulty, war, disease or natural disaster. Nor does he promise wealth and satisfaction in every moment. The promise is to be safe in his grace no matter the circumstances, to experience a life of blessings, to know God's love will never fail, and to know there is more to life than what you see and touch today.

Faith in God is intentional, meaning we cannot work our way to perfection. By trusting God in the challenges of this world, God will guide us by his grace to that place we call heaven. Along the way we will grow in faith and bless others with the promise of God's grace. The Old Testament prophets often railed against the sins of Israel, but they also declared forgiveness and hope if the people returned to God. To be "chosen" means to have opportunity to grow in faith beyond your weaknesses or failures.

We understand so much more than the children of Israel because we know the ultimate evidence of God's grace in Christ. The generations of Israel from Abraham to Jesus reveal God's heart, through some very turbulent times. We have a clarity and assurance in Jesus of not only God's forgiveness but his daily companionship through the presence of the Holy Spirit. And Jesus was plain-spoken as he modeled how difficult life can be when we follow God. In the "sermon on the mount" Jesus tells us life will include heartache and humility, but there will also be blessings (Matt. 5:3-5). We may sometimes see ourselves as too much like Israel, so let's not forget God's love for them through many troubling times and let's faithfully seek the Holy Spirit's leading as we make our choices.

Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques. Formations is a curriculum series from Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. through NextSunday Resources.