**What will you choose today?**

Text: Deuteronomy 29-30

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**Scriptures:** Deuteronomy 29:14-29; 30

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 164, 502, 137b, 432, 531+532

Series: Deuteronomy (#16)

Theme: The Lord renews His covenant with Israel, reminding them of His past works of deliverance, warning them of the danger posed by anyone in their midst who turns away from Him and describing a possible future where their disobedience has led to the covenant curses but also the His compassionate restoration of their fortunes when they return to Him, and He promises to change their hearts so that they wholeheartedly love Him.

Proposition: The Lord calls you to choose life today!

**Introduction**

Have you ever looked back at the history of your own life and observed patterns of your attitudes and behaviours? Have you then learned vital lessons? Have you then changed the way you determine to live in the future? Such careful reflection with a view to reformation is a vital skill. Many wise people have recognised this. “*Those who fail to learn from history are condemned to repeat it*” (Winston Churchill, George Santayana). “*If you always do what you’ve always done, you’ll always get what you’ve always got*” (Henry Ford).

Following His revelation of the covenant curses which would result from disobedience and blessings which would be a consequence of faithfulness, the Lord again reminds His people of their deliverance by His mighty power (29:1-8). They, and/or their parents, had seen the mighty signs and great wonders which the Lord did to release them from Pharoah’s oppressive grasp. They and their parents had been led in the wilderness. The kings of Heshbon and Bashan had been defeated. Yet, until now they had not understood what had happened in the past. This is how the Lord expresses it: “*But to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear*” (29:4). To put it simply, they had not understood God’s grace. They had not been able to review their history and see how much they had been given by the Lord.

Surely for us too, unless we can look back and see how God’s grace has blessed us in our lives, we will be discontent and unhappy people who struggle to willingly obey the Lord’s good commands. This is true for us as individuals and as a congregation.

The covenant which the Lord was renewing with His people Israel in preparation for their entry into the promised land was far broader than just those individuals hearing the last sermon of Moses. It was a multi-generational covenant of the Lord with His people spanning across time as He reveals: “*It is not with you alone that I am making this sworn covenant, but with whoever is standing here with us today before the LORD our God, and with whoever is not here with us today*” (14-15).

For us here today, all who are the spiritual descendants of Abraham, heirs according to the promise (Gal 3:29), we are part of the multi-generational new covenant in Christ (e.g. Luke 22:20; 2 Cor 3:6; Heb 8:13). The warnings, promises and the call to make a choice which were conveyed to the Israelites almost 3,500 years ago come to us today. We’re going to see what the Lord has revealed in our text today under three headings:

1. A possibly harmful future
2. The promise of restoration
3. Death or life? Your choice
4. **A possibly harmful future (29:22-29)**

Did you know that the Accident Compensation Corporation here in New Zealand receives about 5,000 injury claims every day? Much harm comes to many people because they simply do not think before they act. ACC are currently running an advertising campaign “Have a hmmm” which aims to encourage people to pause before taking a dangerous course of action which will lead to a bad outcome.

In light of the many warnings about the consequences of disobedience in this book of Deuteronomy, and especially the covenant curses in chapters 27 and 28, the Lord effectively says to Israel in our text ‘Have a hmmm’. “Take time to think about what the future would look like if you ignored my warnings and the curses for breaking my covenant fell on you”.

Israel, imagine a future where: Your offspring and those who visit the Promised Land see how much affliction and sickness is there; In the land they are confronted with a devastated landscape where nothing can grow because the Lord’s fearsome judgement has fallen, as it did on Sodom and Gomorrah and nearby Admah and Zeboiim (probably located near the southern end of the Dead Sea).

Then they ask, together with everyone else “*Why has the Lord done thus to this land? What caused the heat of this great anger?*” (v24). Then the reply will come '*It is because they abandoned the covenant of the LORD, the God of their fathers, which he made with them when he brought them out of the land of Egypt, and went and served other gods and worshiped them, gods whom they had not known and whom he had not allotted to them’.* This is why they have suffered so much harm. *Therefore the anger of the LORD was kindled against this land, bringing upon it all the curses written in this book, and the LORD uprooted them from their land in anger and fury and great wrath, and cast them into another land, as they are this day*.'

How many unwise and/or sinful decisions have you and I made in our lives forgetting, or not thinking about, the consequences that will come if we don’t stop, ‘have a hmmm’ and change our intended course of life before it was too late? Wisdom says, “*In everything the prudent acts with knowledge, but a fool flaunts his folly*” (Prov 13:16).

Because of His great love for His people, the Lord desires that they act prudently – showing care and thought for the future. He provides them with knowledge so that they have all the information they need to make good choices which can then result in blessed outcomes in their lives. Their future will be dependent upon their own decision whether or not to follow the Lord in faithful obedience to His good Word.

For Israel, back then, on the border of the land which they had yet to possess, the future lay ahead of them, full of possibility, full of potential, full of promise. We could say that ‘the world was their oyster’. They had the opportunity and ability to do almost anything in the land which the Lord was going to deliver into their hands. It was like Adam and Eve being placed in the pristine Garden of Eden where they had great freedom. Israel was a highly privileged people, what would they do with the liberty which the Lord had bestowed on them?

Whilst they were looking forward to a future - as yet unrealized, we look back and we know what happened because their history is recorded for us in Scripture. We know that the covenant curses did fall upon them. There was sickness and devastation in the land because they were unfaithful to the Lord and rejected His love for them.

Yet, whilst the Lord is in control of all things and everything happens exactly according to His will (Eph 1:11), yet this harmful future was still avoidable for Israel if only they had chosen to heed His warnings. If only they were careful to remove from their midst anyone who served other gods and functioned like a ‘*root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit*’ (29:18). If only they kept the covenant by willingly obeying God’s law.

There is an unfathomable mystery about the twin realities of God’s perfect rule over everything and mankind’s responsibility to make real decisions. For our limited minds there is a paradox between a certain future which God has predetermined and the future which is influenced by the real decisions which we make. This profound truth is summarised in Deut 29:29. "*The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law*”.

We don’t know the detailed future for ourselves as individuals, families and as a local congregation, but we do know God’s revealed will for us as revealed in His Word. We do not know exactly how our daily choice to follow Christ will affect our future. However, we do know the Lord’s will for us as revealed in Scripture, and that is enough for us – or it should be!

What happens though, if in the future, you or I make the wrong choices and end up suffering some of the painful consequences for what we have done? What happens if we ‘come to our senses’ like the wayward prodigal son who, having lost almost everything, decided to turn back? Thinking about this brings us to our second point:

1. **The promise of restoration (30:1-10)**

I have been physically lost a few times in my life. Have you? For me, in the past (before Google Maps), driving in an unfamiliar city or region and taking a wrong turn. Being male, asking for directions was the last thing I would do! Once you’ve realised that you are lost and then been told by a guide with knowledge of the route that you need to retrace your route in order to get to your destination, then begins the often long (and sometimes difficult) journey back. It doesn’t feel good to admit that you’ve made a big mistake and wasted much time and energy going in the wrong direction. It’s humbling, humiliating and quite frankly hard. However, there is no other option if you are going to get to the right place.

In Deuteronomy chapter 30 the Lord reveals another possible future circumstance. At that point in time, whether or not it would eventuate was unknown. It was still part of God’s ‘secret will’. If and when, in the future, Israel had been driven from their land by the Lord and they then remembered the covenant blessings and curses, and they returned to the Lord then He promised to restore their fortunes.

What does a return to God look like? A complete rededication to Him – a renewed commitment to ‘obey his voice with all your heart and with all your soul’. What does God promise to do? (v3) ‘have compassion on you’ and ‘gather you from where you have been scattered’ and ‘restore your fortunes’ and ‘take delight in prospering you’. The covenant curses which had deservedly afflicted Israel would now be put on their enemies who had persecuted them and who were also deserving of God’s righteous judgement (30:7).

Looking back on the history of Israel: we know that Israel did take the wrong path. We know that they became lost and were exiled far away from the Promised Land. We know how the Lord delivered on His promise of restoration for them. He enabled them to return from their painful exile. He again gathered his scattered people. He blessed them and they were able to live in the land of promise with a degree of prosperity.

This said, the fortunes of Israel after their return in the time of Nehemiah and Ezra were less than they had been before (Ezra 3:12). There was a greater restoration yet to come. The Lord promised a far greater and lasting change that he would make, not to His people’s land, nor to their physical enemies, but deep within themselves. “*And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live*” (Deut 30:6).

The Lord is not speaking here of a physical surgical operation. It is an anatomical fact that the four chambered pump which circulates blood through your body does not have a foreskin like that of the uncircumcised male reproductive organ. *Circumcise your heart* is a metaphor which describes the non-physical reality of the inner attitude of a person. This figure of speech is clearly connected to sign of the covenant which the Lord first made with Abraham.

Physical circumcision was **never** a guarantee of a person’s spiritual condition, any more than baptism is now, but functioned as a sign pointing to the need for an inner attitude of love and willing devotion to God – a ‘circumcised’ heart. We know that the internal transformation which the Lord reveals here has occurred in the lives of many of God’s people and is still taking place today as Christ gathers His church.

This is the supernatural work of regeneration which Jesus explained to Nicodemus. "*Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God*” (John 3:3). When a person is born again through the supernatural work of the Lord in the heart and soul then that person truly has life. The essence of life is not to be found in lungs that breath, a heart that beats, or a brain which is active. This signs only indicate that a human body is physically alive. The essence of life is to be found in a relationship with God who is the only Giver and Sustainer of life.

The most devastating covenant curse is spiritual death – a separation from all that is good, all that is blessed, all that is life. In His promise of restoration, the Lord God promises life to all whose hearts He will circumcise. This is entirely a work of the Lord Himself, and yet He calls each person to make a personal decision for themselves, which brings us to our third point this morning:

1. **Death or life? Your choice (30:11-20)**

The Bible is both a simple and complex at the same time. It is a bit like the living organisms which God has made. A child can draw a stick figure from an early age, and we recognise the image as representing a human being. A round head, two arms and two legs. Yet, when we start to investigate the detailed structures and processes which make up our bodies and also the complexities of the human mind and soul, then we realise how much we do not know.

One of the traps which some people fall into is to focus their attention on the less clear parts of the Bible and thereby to miss the plain teaching which is there. As author Mark Twain famously said “*It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand*”. God says about what He commands by His Word (v11-14): ‘it is not too hard for you’, ‘neither is it far off’ – not in the sky or the sea, ‘it is very near to you’, ‘It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it’.

It is possible to ‘tie yourself in knots’ trying to comprehend the mystery of God’s sovereign work by which He bestows life upon the people He chooses. It’s possible to get hung up trying to resolve both God’s control and human freedom. ‘*The Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring*’ (Deut 30:6) and the mystery that we must respond to God by our own choice: “*Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn*”. (e.g. Deut 10:16). Always remember that "*The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law*” (Deut 29:29).

The basic message of the Bible is easy to understand, the hard part is yielding yourself up to the kind, protective rule of Christ, the Lord. God’s Word was accessible to Old Testament Israel back then and it is likewise available to each one of us today. Ultimately, the Bible presents each person who encounters this special revelation of God, with a real choice. It is the choice between ‘life and good’ and ‘death and evil’ (v15). It really seems like a ‘no brainer’. Who in their right mind would ever choose death over life, or evil over good? Surely everyone who hears the call to choose blessings over curses would always opt for what is far better for them and for others?

But this is not so, and we know why. All who are separated from God – that is spiritually dead – are ‘*futile in their thinking*’ (Rom 1:21), their ‘*foolish hearts are darkened*’ (1:21), they ‘*suppress the truth by their unrighteousness*’ (Rom 1:18). The sinful nature of every person descended from Adam results in a mind which is not right and which perversely chooses death and evil, rather than life and good.

God holds each person accountable for the choice they make. This is how he explained the responsibility of all who hear His voice to accept that they are liable for the consequences of the choice they make: “*I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live*” (Deut 30:19).

What will you chose today?

Now we might think that choosing to follow the Lord enables us to save our own children by ensuring that they have spiritual life in Christ. This idea is called ‘presumptive regeneration’. That is the belief that baptised offspring of Christian parent or parents are ‘considered regenerated and sanctified in Christ, until the contrary should become evident from their doctrine and conduct as they grow up’ (Reformed Church in the Netherlands, Acts of 1905 Synod, article 158).

Whilst we cannot guarantee true life for our children, we can show and teach them that the Lord is ‘their life and length of days’ (v20). We can show them what spiritual life looks like and call them to ‘choose life’. It is not only our children, if we have been so blessed, but everyone with whom we come into contact.

Calling people to ‘choose life’ is a great privilege for us all, as ambassadors for our Lord. Proclaiming Christ very much includes calling people to ‘choose life’ for their own good, for the good of others and for the glory of God.

AMEN.