

CHOOSE LIFE

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Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Today is the day of the big game—the Super Bowl. And this afternoon, two teams who have slogged their way through a season of 17 games plus the playoffs will face one another to determine who will claim the title of champion.

So, which team are you rooting for? Kansas City or Philadelphia? Many of you were probably pulling for the Tennessee Titans until it became clear that they were out of the running. So, do we have any die-hard Eagles fans here? I know that at least one of you is cheering loudly for the Chiefs. But how is it that we choose? How do we choose which team that we are going to support? Choices are interesting.

In my family, we have a story about choices. I have a cousin, Charlotte, and her youngest son is James. James and my daughter are exactly the same age being born just four days apart. Ever since elementary school, James has had a best friend that I will call Robbie. They were inseparable.

One Friday night when the boys were about 15 years old, they were staying at Robbie's house. There was a third boy with them. Robbie's parents had gone to bed and the boys were downstairs hanging out when they had an idea. Never good. They decided that they would take Robbie's mother's car and drive around town, despite the fact that none of them had a license. James, however, chose not to go. He stayed at the house and went to sleep on the sofa. The other two took the keys to the car and left. Sometime later, there was a knock at the front door, and Robbie's parents answered. It was a policeman. The boys were OK, but he was bringing them home. He had caught them out driving. They hadn't run a red light, they had not been speeding, there was no wreck. The policeman had pulled them over because they were driving too slow.

The next morning my cousin picked up her son and learned what had happened. When she got home, she questioned James and asked why he had not gone out driving with his friends. James' answer is part of our family lore. He said to his mother, "You and dad always tell me to never do anything stupid. And that looked pretty stupid."

James made a choice and it was a good one. He's a good kid. He was raised well. He will make good choices throughout his life.

But we all know of people who have a pattern of making bad choices—choices that have long term negative consequences for them. I'm not talking about external forces beyond our control. I'm not talking about, say, buying a house that gets hit by lightning. I'm talking about a pattern of decisions that a person makes that causes

them harm—decisions that any other person would look at and say, “that looks stupid,” and not do it.

In a paper¹ published this month in the **Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry**, two researchers from the University of Amsterdam examined what they term “maladaptive situation selection”—a fancy term for making bad decisions.

While most people easily learn from their past mistakes, some people don't, and they repeat their poor behavior. Examples of such maladaptive situations would include staying with an abusive partner or not leaving a risky profession.

Say, for example, I had a dream of becoming a concert pianist. And I pursued that dream despite the fact that I lacked any musical talent. And pursuing that dream caused me great financial, social, and emotional harm. It was obvious to everyone around me that would never succeed. But I continued making bad choices for myself. I didn't learn.

Life is full of red flags that warn us of maladaptive situations. However, some people seem unable to heed these red flags and continue to make poor choices. Missing red flags over and over signifies that a person has what the researchers term a “faulty compass.” You know how some people have a bad sense of direction and are often getting lost? People with a faulty compass are like this. It is difficult for them to tell the difference between a good choice and a bad choice.

The researchers looked into the roots of this faulty compass and asked what might cause a person to make poor decisions repeatedly, and they came up with four hypothesis.

The first hypothesis of why some people fall into patters of bad decisions is what I call “try, try again.” A person with a faulty compass attempts to repair a previous bad decision by doing the same thing again but hoping to fix it on the second or third go-round. It's like a person returning to an abusive relationship in the belief that this time they can make it better.

A second hypothesis for why a person returns to a negative situation is that there is a comfort in sameness. As the saying goes, “The devil you know is better than the angel you don't know.” It's like taking a job in sales even though you've been fired from three sales jobs already. There's something reassuring about knowing the outcome of a situation, even if that outcome will be harmful to you. For some people unpredictability is simply too stressful.

The third hypothesis for a faulty compass is when a person acts in a negative way to reaffirm their sense of self. For example, a person who uses drugs may seek

¹ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0005791622000714?via%3Dihub>

out a partner who also uses drugs because that reaffirms how they view themselves. A partner who does not use drugs might challenge the drug user's worldview. This faulty compass causes a person to make harmful decisions in order to maintain their sense of self-esteem.

Finally, the fourth hypothesis of a faulty compass is distraction. A person with a faulty compass may make a decision that is so harmful to them that it distracts them from an underlying emotional problem they cannot cope with. For example, a person who feels badly about a failed marriage may do something at work that gets them fired. The pain of getting fired will mask their deeper pain about the marriage.

The passage from scripture that I have chosen for today is from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy. These six verses come towards the end of a longer section that is a speech delivered by Moses to the Hebrew people. Moses has brought the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt. He led them into the wilderness and shepherded them for 40 years as they slowly migrated towards the land promise to them by God.

In this reading, Moses and the people stand on the banks of the Jordan River ready to make their final push into this new land—the land that will be their home. But Moses recognizes the magnitude of this transition from wilderness to security, and he preaches to the people that they are at a juncture in their lives. They have a choice before them. They have a decision to make. Do they choose life, or do they choose death?

By life, Moses means obedience to the Lord and the ways of the Lord. God has given the people the Law. They know what God expects of them. They know that they are to love God and walk in God's ways. They are to observe and honor God's commandments. If they love God, then they will be blessed. They will experience the fullness of abundant life.

On the other hand, the people also have the option of taking a different road—the road of death. Death is understood as turning one's heart away from God and failing to keep God's commandments. Death is idolatry. Death is placing our own interest over and above God's interest. Death is not following God's commandments and God's will. Death may not be physical, but it will surely be spiritual.

This new land the Hebrews are about to enter is occupied by people who worship other gods. The Hebrews must remember to resist the desire to chase after every shiny new deity they encounter. They must choose life.

Given the choice between life and death, at this crucial inflection point, Moses pleads with the people to make the right choice, to choose life. As they enter this

new land and embark upon a new chapter in their lives, Moses urges them to choose God.

I invite you to listen once again to Moses' words to his people.

I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.

But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. 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; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

However, despite Moses' plea, we know how this story progresses. Too often, God's people make the wrong choice. We are those people. We don't always follow God. We don't always commit ourselves wholly to God's path. We choose death over life. It is our faulty compass. It is our propensity to sin.

But over and over again, in the story of our faith, we recognize God's hand. God doesn't let our bad choice be our last option. God pulls us back from the fruits of our sin and offers us another way—the opportunity to change. And, as we know, God's greatest commitment in redirecting us back to the right path was to come to us in person. He comes to us as Jesus of Nazareth to show the choice of our salvation. As the apostle Paul puts it, *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord* (Romans 6:23).

The hope of our salvation is that despite our bad choices God does not leave us or abandon us. God is with us.

It may seem that those with faulty compasses are irredeemable, that they are broken for life, that they are cursed to making self-destructive decisions. But the researchers say that it is otherwise. People can change. Emotional associations and prior patterns of behavior can be unlearned. As they write, "You don't have to be burdened for your entire life by choices that you now regret."

That is also the message that we find in the story of our faith. We may sin, we may make the wrong choices, but with God, there is always hope.

But the choices we make are not limited to the big decisions in our lives. To live with God means making these choices part of everything we think and do. No decision—no matter how small, no action—no matter how insignificant—can be done in the absence of God’s will. Choosing to be here today is good. Choosing to follow Jesus’ teachings out there is great. Like the Hebrews in the new land, we have our own deities to contend with. If we serve wealth instead of God, the poor suffer. If we serve consumption instead of God, the environment suffers. If we serve pride or fear instead of God, both we and our neighbors suffer. Service of God alone must be the beacon that guides our journey through daily life. If God is with us, then we must be with God. *We must love the Lord our God with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our might* (Deut. 6:5).

Let us love God. Let us choose life.