

The Way x08. Sunday 24 February_2019.

THE TWO WAYS.

READ: Deuteronomy 30: 15 – 20 and Matthew 7: 13, 14.

We aim to see through our study and reflection on Scripture this year a clear thread of teaching and revelation about God showing **a way forward and a way through that we can follow – whether we are journeying in an easy place or the wilderness.**

There are prophecies in the **OT** about ***GOD making a way in the wilderness (Isaiah 43: 19-21)*** and in the early Church “*the Way*” became a title describing followers of Jesus - before the term Christian was used. So, we read of men and women who “*belonged to the Way*” (*Acts 9:2; 22:4*) because presumably of Jesus’ own claim in response to questions that he is the Way to the Father God.

In Scripture, there is abundant advice for the path in life which will provide the most meaning and fulfillment. Our path refers to *the way* we live and what we decide to do with our limited time on earth – and the many choices we make every single day.

We enter the 150th anniversary of the church of VPBC with the knowledge that even though we step into a new season of change and the darkness of the unknown we have the Light of God with us to guide us in the way that we should go: *Psalms 119: 105 Your word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light to my path.*

TODAY: 2 passages of Scripture.

The first passage in Deuteronomy 30: 15 – 20

Backstory: In this book Moses speaks to Israel when they are in the wilderness east of the River Jordan. On the first day of the 11th month of the 40th year of their wanderings after they left Egypt Moses tells the people everything God commands him to say. They have experienced Mt Sinai but have NOT entered Canaan the “promised land”.

THE 2 WAYS...instead of entering Canaan they have remained in their wanderings.

God speaks of CHOICE and the CHOICE is between Blessing and a Curse.

V11 the command given by God is not too difficult or beyond your reach.

V14 No, it is here with you. You know it and can quote it, so NOW OBEY IT.

CHOICE...

V15 TODAY I AM giving you a choice between good and evil, between life and death.

The reasoning of GOD is if we say we love him then we will obey God and the resultant promise is then of prospering and being a nation of many people (concern for fertility). At the time they were scattered and disparate. God knew that the Hebrews had a divided heart. Even at Mt Sinai when Moses was up the mountain they had doubted and

made a “golden calf” to worship (Ex 32:4). The temptation is still real - disobedience and the worship of other gods – in this case particularly if they moved into Canaan Baal one of the chief gods of the Canaanites. God speaks of disobedience, and a failure to live a long life in the land across the Jordan. In other words, the inheritance will never be received in this life.

Baal, god **worshipped** in many ancient Middle Eastern communities, especially among the Canaanites, who apparently considered him a fertility deity and one of the most important gods in the pantheon. He was also called the Lord of Rain and Dew, the two forms of moisture that were indispensable for fertile soil in Canaan. Baal worship and the fire of Moloch *Jeremiah 32: 35* in the ancient world involved child sacrifice – which appears to be an issue still in the modern world. (Bull or cow symbol of Baal).

V19 I AM NOW GIVING YOU THE CHOICE between life and death, between God's blessing and God's curse, and I call upon heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. CHOOSE LIFE.

V20 LOVE the LORD your God, obey him and be faithful to him, and then you and your descendants will live long in the land that he promised to give your ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

(This could be read as a threat from God OR simply as a description of what the consequences of the choice will be. Choices always have outcomes & consequences).

(Moses is ending his time as their leader). He presents clearly God's CHOICE as they face the future and the prospect that it is the next generation who will enter the promised land Canaan. It will not be the generation that exodused Egypt 40 years before. *29:15*. Moses is speaking of sustainability, inheritance and entering into blessing. *Hebrews 3: 19 tells us that the Jews understood that they did not enter in because of unbelief – they didn't trust God.*

Deuteronomy 30: 2 this is a call to turn back to the LORD with whole hearted obedience BECAUSE OF LOVE v6 for the LORD.

GOD GIVES CHOICE. GOD DOES NOT IMPOSE – God calls for love from us. *Vv19, 20 CHOOSE LIFE. (Jesus, "I AM the LIFE")* God's first command, (*Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5:7*) priority command is to love him with every part of our being and to have no idols of any sort. His promise is that if we obey him then the promises flow. God's love is unconditional, but God will not be a false teacher – or a bad parent rewarding disobedience.

CHOOSE BETWEEN: Life and blessing OR death and a curse. (The curse of Eden needs to be reversed and all the blessings of God are “Yes and Amen in Jesus”).

You choose LORD and I will obey. What is our attitude?

What graces do I need to keep on choosing life? (To want life means I have to die to self – *John 12*). To “choose life” is to choose God's Way.

The second passage from *Matthew 7: 13, 14*. Here JESUS is also speaking starkly of 2 ways – and it is the drawing together of his core teaching in his sermons on the mountain.

Go in through the narrow gate, because the gate to hell (better translated destruction – APOLEIA- loss of wellbeing, ruin or eternal perdition) is wide and the road that leads to it is easy, and there are many who travel it. But the gate to life (ZOE) is narrow and the way that leads to it is hard, and there are few people who find it. JESUS

Here Jesus is talking about journeying through life's choices and destinations.

He pictures human beings making choices to take either to go through a wide gate and he describes this as the choice of the majority to walk an easy road which leads to what the Jews understood as "hell". (TEV opted for this word but see above).

He also describes a choice that some take to go through a narrow gate and walk a hard road which leads to what he calls Life.

Most of us will know what some of the Jews understood about hell and eternal life – and we will know what confusion there was and how like many religions they caricatured hell as a place/ condition of eternal burning and suffering (perdition/ punishment).

I cannot here deal with all the different understandings of what I think Hell is except to say that I think the NT teaches that after death we will all be raised and come face to face with God and then on the basis of our response to JESUS we will experience **eternal Life or eternal Death**. (*Romans 6: 23 and Revelation 20:14*). **See footnote.**

JESUS as did the writer in Deuteronomy is urging his Followers to choose the Way that leads to Life - not because the gate is narrow and the road hard but **because it leads to Life**. Life in the absolute sense – life as in God – life as he Jesus is: *I AM the LIFE. John 14:6*. Abundant life now, knowing God in Jesus and resurrection life forever. Jesus is urging them to constantly and consistently choose that which God has created us for – so that we might experience full humanness.

There are easier and more self centred choices we can make but we not thrive in this life or even exist in the next says Jesus.

JESUS presents the choice as absolute and stark – we would prefer more choices. No doubt this is a communication device, but it is used repeatedly to make plain that choice is needed. *Psalms 1* presents it as choosing either the way of righteous living or wicked living.

JESUS calls his Followers to follow his Way. He is living it and he will continue to live the road that leads to Life for humanity – even though his choices lead to his personal crucifixion. He lives it – he calls his followers to choose life. The wide easy road has "no curbs no boundaries of either thought or conduct" (John Stott) and I say those who take

the wide easy road will also often accuse those of us who take the hard road of being guilty of narrow mindedness and bigotry.

Peoples choices but also the attitude with which we make choices and especially treat others who make different choices is of great importance. To simply believe that we are right is not enough – that is a type of bigotry. Freedom of speech. Freedom to practice religion and belief are to be greatly valued for all. The practice of love and not to perpetuate hate crimes is essential to all and that includes those who seek to follow the Way of Jesus. Attitudes of humility as well as choices involving belief and commitment are essential.

BUT make no mistake – choices are made by us every day of our lives. The history of individuals, families, societies and the world is made through the choices we make.

We will think more about the choice we make – the Way we live in the days ahead.

May JESUS who is not just the Way, but also the Life – enable us to discover that he is also the Truth.

FOOTNOTE.

Some notes on what is “Hell” – conditional immortality.

Author Erik Jones. <https://lifehopeandtruth.com/life/life-after-death/what-is-hell/>

Blessing prayer:

May we walk in the Way of Jesus according to the truth he has revealed. May we choose the life that he offers on the way of obedience.

We pray for strength for the journey and right relationship with all we meet this week on the road.

We ask for grace to make the choices with humility. We ask that we may always engage with the world and not walk by on the other side.

We are within the love of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN.