

# "The Life You Choose"

Text: Deuteronomy 30:15-20

**"Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus...make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all... so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints." 1 Thessalonians 3:11-13**

Dear Fellow Christians, of all religions in the world, Christianity is at the same time the hardest and the simplest. It is simple in that the basic, fundamental principle of Christianity is that another – Jesus Christ – provided for mankind all that mankind needed to be saved. God has declared our sin debt to have been paid for us by his Son. Those who believe God's promise will go to heaven. Those who do not will be damned.

The basic principles then of Christianity are very simple. But simple does not always mean easy. If I tell you that I'll give you \$100 if you touch your elbow to your ear, that's simple - but it most certainly is not easy. (Kids, feel free to try this at home.) So Christianity is simple, but is it easy? Yes and no. On the one hand it is easy in that the effort that man himself has to put forth to save himself is nil. Our God supplied everything that we need to be saved. Jesus earned it for us. In that sense Christianity is also easy.

So why then could or would anyone claim that Christianity is also the hardest religion in the world? The answer is probably not what you think.

We search for answers in our text for this morning, found in Deuteronomy Chapter 30:

***ESV Deuteronomy 30:15-20 "See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. <sup>16</sup> If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. <sup>17</sup> But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, <sup>18</sup> I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. <sup>19</sup> 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, <sup>20</sup> loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them."***

So far the verbally inspired words of our God. Here God himself has spoken to us. Our job is to listen – really listen – and learn, for here God offers us a wealth of infallible truth and wisdom – truths that protect and save. We prepare to give these truths our undivided attention and to receive great things from our God as we pray: **"Sanctify us by Your truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth."** Amen.

The basic truths of Christianity are certainly anything but difficult or complex. Little children can explain them - sometimes better than adults. How then can it also be the most difficult of all religions?

First, because you and I are incapable of truly understanding and believing what the Bible tells us about how we are saved *unless and until God the Holy Spirit works the miracle of faith in our hearts*. That means that while the bare facts are simple enough, no human being can come to accept these things as true apart from the miraculous intervention of God himself, for **"no man can say 'Jesus is Lord' but by the Holy Spirit."** What this teaches us, among other things, is that the mere hearing of certain facts could never, in itself, convert and save. Again, God had to do that for us, in us. It is therefore impossible for man to save himself – even if all he had to do was to make himself believe certain things that he was told.

John spoke of this phenomenon in his First Epistle. Referring to those who had only the *appearance* of Christianity he wrote: **"They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us. <sup>20</sup> But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge."** 1 John 2:19-20

What a terrifying truth to realize that so many can be so close to the truth, and yet so far from salvation; or that all are from birth headed for eternal death and destruction, but only a few are rescued by that which cannot even be seen. It's difficult to find human analogies that illustrate these truths, but here are two that, when taken together, might strengthen our grip on this unique reality.

One of the more horrifying results of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was that a substantial number of seamen were alive after the

attack but trapped in overturned ships. Rescue workers labored frantically to round up cutting torches and to open escape holes in the hulls, but most had to watch in impotent frustration as ship after ship slowly sank and the men trapped within drown. They could hear their fellow sailors banging on the hull and screaming for help – separated by just a few inches of steel – but were powerless to help them. The trapped sailors themselves were utterly powerless to save themselves. They simply did not possess the wherewithal to penetrate that which prevented their escape.

So it is with man. Unless and until the Holy Spirit burns through that impenetrable wall of unbelief that separates believer from unbeliever, no man can be saved. The Holy Spirit does so with the fire of his Word – law and gospel.

Again from history, when Europeans first came to America they unwittingly brought with them that against which Native Americans had no power – disease. The result was that sickness – especially smallpox – ravage entire civilizations that had existed and thrived for hundreds if not thousands of years. Yet a few survived. Why? Epidemiologists tell us that in any given population there are always the rare few who possess the gift of a natural immunity to the disease that kills everyone else in their community. Those that survive have no basis for bragging; no reason to imagine that they are somehow stronger or more worthy. They lived because of a gift that they had in no way earned or deserved.

So too when Scripture teaches us that the Holy Spirit *"calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith"* those that are so rescued must simply stand in awe at the merciful goodness of that Holy Spirit who lives within them.

Christianity then is the most difficult of all religions because it can only be *received* as a gift from God; never earned and certainly never deserved.

Yet there is more that makes it so difficult. In an area of West-Central Wisconsin in the early 80's, residents began to notice a marked surge in the rabbit population. This was anything but good when almost everyone relied heavily on summer gardens for a substantial share of their food supply. Most just assumed some natural breeding cycle was to blame and countered with chicken wire and pellet guns. And then someone made the comment that maybe it had something to do with the fact that there seemed to be no foxes in the area, meaning the rabbits suddenly had no predators. How, exactly, there came to be so few foxes in the area

remained a mystery to all but one fairly successful trapper – who kept that information to himself.

So too while the natural enemies of Christianity are everywhere (the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh) the devil will offer little to no resistance against that which only damns – that which only advances his diabolical cause. Some, for example, have been wondering aloud again of late just why a base, damning religion like Islam can prove so resilient and enjoy such growing, worldwide appeal. The fact is that just as any species of animal in the wild will thrive in the absence of enemies or predators, so also in the area of religion. The devil will always rage against Christianity (which is the only salvation plan that delivers souls from Satan's bondage) but he will just as surely be the puppet master behind every other false and damning religion. Those then that believe that any old religion will do will always choose the path of least resistance – and that is anything *but* Christianity.

Our text for this morning brings us to the third reason Christianity can be so difficult: the difference between saving truth and damning falsehood is razor thin, and the enemies of the Christian faith have become very good at disguising which is which.

To prove the point, take another look at the opening verses of our text: ***"See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. <sup>16</sup> If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you ..."***

This is part of Moses' farewell speech to Israel. What exactly is he saying to them? Here's where the confusion starts, and this is exactly why Christianity can be so simple and yet our enemies can make it so complicated. An alarming number of "Bible experts" read this section as if Moses were laying out God's salvation plan for Israel. Moses continues: ***"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."***

You see the problem. If Moses is talking about saving faith, then he is clearly teaching not only decision theology (that man can and must, in effect, bring himself to faith) but also pure work-righteousness. How then could what the Apostle Paul said centuries later in Ephesians 2:8-9 also be true: ***"For by grace you have been saved through faith.***

***And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, <sup>9</sup> not a result of works, so that no one may boast”?***

There is, of course, no contradiction here, but this is exactly why God wants us to study our Bibles so carefully and so faithfully. Man and devil are consummate masters when it comes to perverting and twisting that which is so clear and simple. The result is that many just give up, assuming that the Bible contradicts itself and that therefore there really is no one "right religion" for all have truth and all have error.

The simple resolution here is that Moses isn't talking about salvation; he's talking about the survival of God's "favored nation status" for the Jews as they stood at the threshold of the Promised Land. The text here makes clear that Moses is talking not about the one-sided covenant that God established with mankind when he promised to simply forgive their sins - freely for Jesus' sake; he's talking about the two-sided covenant that he established with Israel as a nation. That covenant had two parts: the first that Israel would honor the one true God alone and keep his commandments (Israel's obligation) and the other that God would respond by blessing them in the land they were about to enter. The second part was contingent on the first. This becomes obvious when we read carefully Moses' words: ***“...Then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. <sup>17</sup> But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, <sup>18</sup> I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess... Therefore choose life... that you may dwell in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.”***

We know from history that the Jews could not even keep their part of this simple covenant – let alone live lives free from all sin and thereby earn heaven. That's exactly why God established the New Covenant of forgiveness through faith in the goodness of Jesus Christ. Yet even when man sees this simple truth, his natural reaction is to dismiss the lesson to be learned here. They suppose that if these words are not telling us how to save ourselves, then they have no practical relevance at all. While we cannot choose to be saved, the choices that we can and do make in life most certainly carry consequences. Christians cannot long abandon God's commandments and expect that saving faith will survive. Sin is the acid that destroys the metal of saving faith and it poses the single greatest threat to our eternal future. Prolonged disobedience – including the despising of the means of grace – is a terrible choice that mankind *can*

make. We cannot therefore bring ourselves to faith, but we can bring ourselves to ruin.

Let your old Adam then hear well the words of our text, for it is the only language it understands. Recognize again this morning the profound danger of allowing any sin to establish lodging in your heart. You alone, by the power of the Holy Spirit living in you, can identify the attacks of sin and Satan in your own personal walk – the sin that you harbor there. God the Holy Spirit has brought us to saving faith in Jesus Christ. May that same Holy Spirit prevent us from now choosing death by living contrary to his Word and will. Amen.

## **Scripture Readings**

ESV **Micah 6:1-8** Hear what the LORD says: Arise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. <sup>2</sup> Hear, you mountains, the indictment of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth, for the LORD has an indictment against his people, and he will contend with Israel. <sup>3</sup> "O my people, what have I done to you? How have I wearied you? Answer me! <sup>4</sup> For I brought you up from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery, and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. <sup>5</sup> O my people, remember what Balak king of Moab devised, and what Balaam the son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the LORD." <sup>6</sup> "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? <sup>7</sup> Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" <sup>8</sup> He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

ESV **Matthew 5:1-12** Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. <sup>2</sup> And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: <sup>3</sup> "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup> "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. <sup>5</sup> "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. <sup>6</sup> "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. <sup>7</sup> "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. <sup>8</sup> "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. <sup>9</sup> "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. <sup>10</sup> "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>11</sup> ¶ "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

# ST. PAUL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

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**The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany – February 2, 2020**

## The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

## The Opening Hymn – 10 *(Red Hymnal)*

"This Is the Day the Lord Hath Made"

## The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. *(Brown Hymnal)*

## The Scripture Lessons: *(Printed on the back page of this bulletin)*

**The Old Testament Lesson:** (Micah 6:1-8) The Holy Spirit here addresses us through the Prophet Micah. His message is both clear and simple: To obey is better than to offer sacrifices. Though we can in no way earn our own forgiveness or salvation, yet it is the Lord's will that we obey his commands. This is how we naturally thank him for all that he has done for us – and continues to do for us every day of our lives.

## Psalm of the Day – Psalm 84 *(Supplement page 38) (Brown Hymnal)*

**The New Testament Lesson:** (Matthew 5:1-12) Our Gospel Lesson is part of Jesus' great Sermon on the Mount. Together with our sermon text, this reading emphasizes the fact that man simply cannot earn his way into heaven by "doing good." God established the New Covenant (whereby he alone freely forgives all sins for Jesus' sake) because we could not earn our way into heaven through good works. The Sermon on the Mount teaches us how miserably we fail to achieve perfection.

## The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed – page 15. *(Brown Hymnal)*

## The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 723 *(Brown Hymnal)*

"What Wondrous Love Is This"

## The Sermon – Text: Deuteronomy 30:15-20 *(Printed on the back page of this bulletin)*

**"The Life You Choose"**

## The Offertory – *(Supplement page 16 insert)*

## The Post-Sermon Hymn – 778 *(Brown Hymnal)*

"Grace Has a Thrilling Sound"

## The Prayers

## The Benediction

## The Closing Hymn – 800 *(Brown Hymnal)*

"Go, My Children, with My Blessing"

## Silent Prayer

**Welcome!** - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States, as well as Canada, India, and Africa. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again!

## Attendance – Sunday (28) Average (40)

### This Week at St. Paul:

<b>Today</b>	<b>-9:00 a.m.</b>	– Sunday School (No Bible Class)
	<b>-10:00 a.m.</b>	– Worship Service
	<b>-11:00 a.m.</b>	– Fellowship hour
<b>Wednesday</b>	<b>-6:00 p.m.</b>	– Confirmation Class
	<b>-7:00 p.m.</b>	– Midweek Bible Study
<b>Next Sunday</b>	<b>-9:00 a.m.</b>	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	<b>-10:00 a.m.</b>	– Worship Service w/Holy Communion
	<b>-11:15 a.m.</b>	– Fellowship and coffee hour

**CLC News** – Pastor David Schaller is considering the call to Berea of Sioux Falls. Caleb Noeldner has returned the call to Faith Lutheran School of Markesan, WI.

**Encouraging Witness** – Five students from ILC (including Grace Meyer) attended the recent Pro-Life rally in Washington DC. Several of those students were interviewed by Breitbart News and gave a wonderful testimony of their Christian faith and conviction. The video of the interview can be seen here: [https://youtu.be/a\\_cR-JjqHas](https://youtu.be/a_cR-JjqHas).

**Lay Service** – Our thanks for the dedicated laymen who are bringing us the Word of God this morning in the Pastor's absence. Pastor Roehl is scheduled to return on Tuesday.

**CLC Women's Retreat** – This year's CLC Women's Retreat is scheduled for March 20-22 at a new location in Amery, WI. The cost is \$150, which includes meals and lodging. For more information, please go to <https://christianwomensretreat.weebly.com/spring-midwest-retreat.html>

**Black Hills Camping Trip** – This year's annual Black Hills Family Bible Camp is scheduled for July 10-14. To sign up or for more information, please call Pastor Aaron Ude at (605) 393-1311 or email him at [aaronude@gmail.com](mailto:aaronude@gmail.com).