

THE LORD IS YOUR LIFE

DEUTERONOMY 30:15-20; PSALM 119:1-8

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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One of the running jokes over the past few weeks has been, shall we say, the “engineering deficiencies” of the display on the wall. Each week I see a few people who perhaps haven’t been here every Sunday kind of furrowing their brows as they look to my left, trying to figure out how (or if!) will work. I can almost see the gears grinding in your heads!

Last week, we had a bunch of kids from a youth retreat that I spoke at who joined us for worship. A few of them came up afterward and gave me quite an exhaustive analysis. *It’s not going to work... If you turn “love” to the right, then “God” and “wisdom” are going to get all mixed up and it’s going to lead to disaster!*

I hadn’t quite thought of it that way ☺.

It’s been surprising and gratifying (I think) to see how much attention people are paying to this display!

(I have to say, a saying about forests and trees has come to mind as I have listened to some of these comments, but I digress...)

We have been talking about listening to the Psalms and the wisdom for living well that they contain. We have been talking about what a well-lived life looks like, what some of the components of a well-lived life are, etc.

As I was walking through the sanctuary on Thursday, I actually spent some time looking at the display.

The more I looked at it, the more I thought that it was actually very appropriate. Throughout this series on the Psalms we have been encountering

But we have also acknowledged that a well-lived life does not automatically or always lead to a life of uninterrupted delight. Sometimes the righteous suffer. Sometimes the wicked prosper. There is not always (or even often) a straight line between living well and a life going smoothly.

And so, it turns out that our display reflects this perfectly! Even well lived lives do not always work perfectly. Sometimes the gears grind together, causing a bit of chaos. Sometimes doing all the right things leads to confusion and disappointment.

But this does not change the fact that these are the building blocks to a well-lived life!

(So, you see, this was all part of our plan in putting the display together in this way ☺.)

Our texts this morning deal with some of the same themes we have been talking about in recent weeks.

We are back in the realm of “conditional theology”—or, more informally, “if-then” theology.

Deuteronomy 30 lays it out very clearly:

- *If you do what is right, then it will go well for you.*
- *If you obey, then you will be blessed.*
- *If you disobey, then you will be cursed.*
- *If you bow down to idols, then you will perish/not live long in the land.*
- *If you observe my commandments, then you shall live long and become numerous.*

What Moses says *explicitly* to the people of Israel as they stand on the banks of the Jordan River about to enter the Promised Land, our Psalm says *implicitly* in the form of song/prayer.

Happy are those whose way is blameless... And presumably, unhappy are those whose way is full of blame.

The Psalmist says that if he obeys God’s commandments, “then I will not be put to shame.” Again, presumably, failure to keep the commandments *will* lead to shame.

We have already noted that life doesn't always work this way, whether in our own lives, or even in Scripture itself (think of Job, the book of Lamentations, or the Psalms of Lament).

So I'm not going to say any more about that today. Today I am going to offer a (qualified) defense of conditional theology.

But first, a few words about our world in comparison to the ancient world that produced these two texts.

We are people who are conditioned—by advertising, by media, by a consumeristic culture—to think that one of the highest values of human life is have the freedom to make unconstrained choice.

To be human is to choose. Everywhere we turn there is a bewildering array of options for us to choose from—everything from which toothpaste and shampoo to cell phone and satellite providers to where we will holiday to what we will drive to which church we will attend.

Our Internet culture only heightens this understanding of ourselves as sovereign choosers. Anything we could ever want, available at the click of a mouse, *on demand*.

Want to watch the women's luge final at 3 am? [Click here](#).

Want to check on hotel prices in Mexico from your phone on the bus? No problem.

Want to listen to the famous preacher while you are driving to a conference? Easy.

Want to chat with (and see!) your loved ones around the world at your convenience? Yup, we can do that, too.

Some of this is very good. It is a true gift to be able to see and hear the voices of those we love that are thousands of kilometers away from us. It is incredible to be able to access vast libraries of information at the click of a mouse. I am not complaining about technology. I am grateful to take advantage of its many blessings.

But there are losses that come with gains. I fear that we are increasingly growing accustomed to a world that almost literally revolves around us and around our preferences.

The consumer is always right.

Increasingly, we see ourselves as self-determined individuals who make our own choices about what and how we will believe according to what we *prefer* or about whether or not it *works* for us.

These are the cultural waters we swim in. And the church is hardly immune from this. We are nearly five hundred years downstream from that date in 1517 when Martin Luther famously nailed his ninety-five theses to the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral kick starting the Protestant Reformation.

While few of us would want to return to the state of affairs prior to the Reformation, one of the unfortunate, probably unintended consequences of this has been the cultivation of a church culture where there is all kinds of splintering and fragmentation based on personal taste and choice.

Don't like the worship style in this or that church? Go somewhere else? Don't like this or that preacher? Go somewhere else? Don't like this or that interpretation of Scripture? Go somewhere else.

The common denominator behind the entire above scenario is the assumption of the sovereign individual self.

We don't like the idea, frankly, that anyone—even God!—should tell us what to do or how to live.

Deuteronomy 30 and Psalm 119 present the law as a delight, a source of life. But we don't tend to think of law as delightful in our day. We think of law as a burden. We are familiar with hearing it contrasted with "grace." We think of it as outdated, a strange aspect of the earlier part of the story from which we are now, thankfully, liberated.

There are many reasons for the decline in biblical literacy in our day, but surely one of the reasons is fairly simple. We aren't convinced that it is authoritative.

A useful guide for living, perhaps. A resource to access at our convenience to aid in the cultivation of our own spirituality. An interesting record of the religious experiences of people throughout history. A repository of spiritual metaphors and insights. Sure. Any and all of the above.

But something through which God *stands over us*? We're not so sure.

Now, of course this doesn't mean that the hard work of biblical interpretation and application isn't necessary. It doesn't mean that our understandings of *how* God exercises authority through Scripture doesn't change here and there over time.

The history of biblical interpretation makes clear that there is growth and development in how we understand and apply the Bible (or regression). E.g., slavery, the role of women...

The people of Israel have a long tradition of wrestling with Scripture, arguing over what it means and how it should be applied in this or that situation. This is all good and as it should be.

But whatever this looks like, what it means is that **God determines what a truly human life looks like. Not us.**

We start not with ourselves, but with God with what God has given, and we work from there.

Moses knew this. The writer of Psalm 119 knew this.

Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in all of Scripture. It is a poem with each stanza beginning with a different letter of the Hebrew alphabet—a poem that is, in essence, an extended meditation on the beauty of the law.

The law was not understood to be a burden, but a delight. It was meant to lead to *life*. Obedience to the law was understood as the source of blessing and joy.

It was to be followed with all of who we are. The Jewish conception of the heart was “the locus of thought and intention”—the deepest part of who we are (not the centre of our emotions, as we tend to think in the west).

We see the same thing at work in our OT passage from Deuteronomy.

Moses urges the Israelites to obey the law and love the Lord their God not because an arbitrary and severe God commands it, but because it will lead to *life*—to prosperity, longevity, blessing.

There is the threat of punishment if the law is disobeyed, to be sure. But this is more like experiencing the natural consequences of wrong choices than some severe prison guard looking for us to mess up so that he can punish.

The law was not given as an arbitrary test but as the parameters for a life well-lived for that time and place.

We see this all around us. There are consequences to living selfishly, to withholding mercy, to rejecting compassion and mercy.

Perhaps not immediately or obviously. But a lifetime of choosing self over God and others leads to people being turned in on themselves, incapable of gratitude or truly giving or receiving love.

And, ultimately, of course, this leads to being separated from God. It leads to death.

Conversely, a lifetime of choosing to pursue love of God and neighbour at the expense of self leads to a very different kind of person. It leads to becoming a person who is able to live with open hands, a person who does not need to cling to blessings as they pass by because they are confident in the future God is preparing for those who love him.

It leads to life.

Yes, we live in a broken world. No, your life won't be one of uninterrupted bliss if you strive daily to walk blamelessly, and to choose life.

But the world is a better place when people choose to live well each day.

Marriages are better, relationships with kids are better, workplaces are better, and our own mental health is better when we daily decide to *choose life*, to “walk in his ways” (Ps. 119:3).

What does it mean to choose life? In one commentary on this week's texts, I came across a remarkable phrase by Brett Younger that I think summarizes it well:

Death is a slow process of giving ourselves to what does not matter.¹

¹ Brett Younger, Commentary on Deuteronomy 30:15-20 in *Feasting on the Word: Year A, vol. 1*, ed. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster, John Knox Press, 2010), 341, 343.

Younger offers a great list of how to give ourselves daily to what *does* matter, beginning with the most central, the heart of the law, summarized by Jesus and by Moses in Deuteronomy 6:4-5:

- Love God with all of your heart, mind, and soul

But what about practical everyday things? Here's a sampling of what Younger suggests:

- learn things you have told yourself you would never learn
- play with children
- laugh often, long, and loud
- cry when it is time to cry
- be patient with your own imperfections and the imperfections of others
- walk around the block
- turn off the television (even during Olympics!)
- invite a stranger to lunch
- read a book of poetry
- quit doing what is not worth your time
- do something so someone else won't have to
- stop arguing
- apologize to someone, even if it was mostly his fault
- forgive someone, even if she does not deserve it
- have patience
- stop having patience when it is time to tell the truth
- pray
- love your church
- believe that God loves you
- remember the stories of Jesus
- see Christ in the people around you
- share God's love with someone who has forgotten it
- delight in God's good gifts²

Choose life. Every day. Choose the Lord who *is* your life (Deuteronomy 30:20).

In the section immediately before today's OT reading from Deuteronomy, we read these words:

² Younger, 343.

¹¹ Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. ¹² It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, “Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?” ¹³ Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, “Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?” ¹⁴ No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.

So choose life. Every day. When the blessings it leads to are obvious and when they are not. When it “works” and when it doesn’t seem to. When it seems to make sense and when it seems to be like pushing a rock up a hill.

Choose life.

Amen.