

*“See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil... therefore choose life...”*

Moses preached these words to Israel on the edge of the Promised Land. After forty years of wandering in the wilderness, the people of God stood ready to enter the land of Canaan. They had seen the Lord’s mighty acts: plagues on Egypt, the Red Sea parted, manna from heaven, water from the rock. They had heard His Law at Sinai. They had received His promises. And yet, they had also seen death: their parents’ graves in the desert because of unbelief and rebellion.

Now, on the plains of Moab, Moses sets before them the choice: life or death, blessing or curse, the way of the Lord or the way of idolatry. “Choose life,” he says.

It sounds so simple. Who wouldn’t choose life over death? Who wouldn’t choose blessing instead of curse? Who wouldn’t choose good over evil? But when we look more closely, we see that this choice is far from simple. It is, in fact, impossible for sinners like us.

When Moses says, “Choose life,” it sounds like an appeal to human free will. As though life and death lay evenly balanced before us, and we simply needed to make the right decision. But Scripture tells us otherwise.

Israel’s history already showed what sinners do when faced with this choice. Again and again, they chose death. They worshiped the golden calf at Sinai. They grumbled against the Lord’s provision of manna. They refused to enter the Promised Land the first time because they feared their enemies more than they trusted God. Every step of the way, Israel chose unbelief, rebellion, and death.

And even after hearing Moses’ words in this sermon, even after they knew the stakes, Israel still couldn’t do it. After crossing the Jordan and entering the Promised Land, they continued to run after idols. The book of Judges records an endless cycle of corruption and idolatry. Kings rose up who led them astray. Prophets who preached God’s Word were ignored or persecuted. Finally, the people were driven into exile because they would not cling to the Lord.

So the command to “choose life” was clear, the warnings were plain, the blessings were promised... and still they would not do it. Still they could not do it.

That is what it means to be a sinner. It’s not just that we occasionally make bad choices. It’s that our hearts are bent toward death even when we know better. We know the truth, we know the stakes, and we still turn away.

So we can’t look down on Israel as though we would have chosen better. The Apostle Paul says, *“The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot.”* Left to ourselves, we cannot choose life. We cannot cling to God. Our hearts are bent toward idols. Our hands cling to our sin.

When Moses says, “Choose life,” he’s really holding up a mirror of the Law, to show us our failure. He tells us to choose life, but all that reveals is how often we choose death.

But Moses doesn’t stop with this command. He goes on. *“Love the Lord your God, obey his voice, and hold fast to him, for he is your life and length of days.”* Notice the shift. He tells us to choose life, to be obedient, to hold fast to him. Those are the Law and the Law is good.

But ultimately, whether or not we receive life doesn’t depend on the choice we make. Life is not in your effort or in your decision. Life is in the Lord Himself. *“He is your life and length of days.”*

The God who redeemed Israel out of Egypt, the God who carried them in the wilderness, the God who made a covenant with them... that God is their life. Not their own strength, not their own resolve, not their own obedience. Only Him. He is their life.

He is our life. Because our life doesn't come from our ability to choose rightly. Our life doesn't come from our faithfulness. Our life is in God alone.

Life is not a possibility that hangs in the balance, waiting on your decision. Life is a Person: Jesus Christ. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He is your life.

That's why God sent His Son. Jesus is the true Israel, the One who perfectly chose life by loving the Father with all His heart, soul, and mind and loving His neighbor as Himself. Loving us, in all our sinfulness. Where Israel failed, He succeeded. Where Adam disobeyed, He obeyed. He walked the way of life in our place.

And then, in the great reversal, the One who is Life entered into death. At the cross, He took upon Himself the curse that Moses warned about: *"If your heart turns away... you shall surely perish,"* he warned. Jesus bore that death in our place. Our hearts turn away, but Jesus perishes on the cross.

And in His resurrection, He trampled death underfoot and became for us a fountain of life. Water from the rock, once again. So the call to "choose life" is fulfilled in Christ. He has chosen life where you could not. He has chosen you. And He has given His life for you. He is your life.

And now, instead of clinging to the Law, we cling to Christ. Moses gives us that very image: *"hold fast to him, for he is your life."* That's what faith does. Faith clings to the cross. Faith clings to the risen Lord. Faith clings to Christ.

And even here, we really can't take credit for it. We cling to Him only because He has first taken hold of us. Think of a child holding her father's hand while crossing a busy street. She may hold tight. Or she may let go. She may even foolishly pull away. But the father's hand holds her securely. So it is with Christ. We cling to Him, in our frail, sinful way. But even more, He clings to us.

But Jesus makes it clear in the Gospel reading that clinging to Him is no light thing. He says: *"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple... Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple."*

In other words, clinging to Christ means letting go of every other priority. It means renouncing anything that would compete with Him for our trust, even the closest relationships. Even our own life. Jesus tells us to count the cost. To cling to Him is to lose everything else.

And here again we see how impossible it is for us sinners. On our own, we can't let go of those idols. We can't bear the cross. We can't renounce it all. But what is impossible with man is possible with God. The same Christ who calls us to cling to Him has already borne the cross for us. The same Lord who warns us of the cost has already paid it in full.

So when He says, "Cling to me, for I am your life," He's not demanding what you must supply. He is promising what He Himself gives. He places His cross upon your shoulders, not as a curse, but as a mark that you belong to Him. And He holds you fast so that you may endure.

In Baptism, He binds Himself to you with His own Triune name. In His Word, He holds you fast with His promises. In the Supper, He gives you His very body and blood as the pledge that nothing can separate you from His love. We stumble. We falter. We are loosen our grip. But He will not let go. He is your life.

And because He is your life, you have a sure and certain future. Moses spoke of life and length of days in the land that the Lord was giving to Israel. But in Christ, the promise is even greater. It's not merely Canaan. It's the new creation, the eternal kingdom, the resurrection of the body, the life everlasting.

Moses set before Israel life and death. And the truth is that, left to ourselves, we would always choose death. But the Gospel proclaims a greater truth: God Himself has chosen you in Christ. He is your life. He has gone into death for you. He has risen to give you eternal life. He holds you fast, even now, in Word and Sacrament. So cling to Him, not as though your grip secures you, but because He is your life, and He will never let you go. Amen.