

Responding to Our LORD – The Hour of Decision

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Scripture 1: (Joshua 24:14-25 ESV)

“Now therefore fear the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”

Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods, for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our fathers up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight and preserved us in all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed. And the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.”

But Joshua said to the people, “You are not able to serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good.” And the people said to Joshua, “No, but we will serve the LORD.” Then Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve him.” And they said, “We are witnesses.” He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your heart to the LORD, the God of Israel.” And the people said to Joshua, “The LORD our God we will serve, and his voice we will obey.” So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and put in place statutes and rules for them at Shechem.

Scripture 2: (Acts 2:14-41 ESV)

But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them: “Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel:

“And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.

And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke; the sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the day of the Lord comes, the great and magnificent day. And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.’

“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. For David says concerning him,

“I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand that I may not be shaken; therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; my flesh also will dwell in hope. For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption. You have made known to me the paths of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.’

“Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says,

“‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.”’

Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.” And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation.” So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.

Sermon:

When the LORD gave His covenant law to His people at Mount Sinai, they agreed to abide by all that God commanded them saying, "*All that the LORD has spoken we will do.*" (Exodus 19:8 ESV). They made a decision that they would obey God: that the LORD would be their God, and they would be His people.

But then they didn't; either individually and corporately, by their actions if not by intent, they changed their mind.

Moses went up the mountain to collect the "*tablets of the testimony*" carved by the "*finger of God*" (Exodus 31:18), but while he was gone, the people demanded of his brother, Aaron, to craft for them an idol of gold, an image of the "*invisible God*" (Colossians 1:15) for them to worship. They called the idol, "the LORD" (Exodus 32:5) with all the people saying, "*These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!*" (Exodus 32:4 ESV).

Israel had seen all the wonders that the LORD had done in Egypt. Israel had heard the words of the LORD's covenant made with His people, and agreed to obey them. But before the "ink was dry", before the written law was placed into their hands, they decided to disobey God. They were impatient. They were unruly. They were self-serving. They acted out of their "lack of faith" *{physical evidence and personal experience do not guarantee one's faith to believe, while they often confirm one's faith}* and a lack of trust in the LORD's continuing faithfulness. They wanted to be just like "everyone else". They decided that they needed a physical "god", an idol which they could carry before them: one which they could see, and feel, and point to saying, "Look at how great our "god" is! It has all the latest upgrades and accessories: built in WiFi, power windows, and a back-up camera; "It slices, it dices, it even cuts tomatoes!"; **and** it also holds down paper, really well!"

They chose to not wait for Moses or the LORD. They chose to disobey God and they paid the penalty. Many of them were killed by the Levites, while others died suffering from a plague because of their disobedience (Exodus 32:28, 35).

Yet the LORD God Himself remained faithful, guiding them to the Promised Land of Canaan, where they again chose to disobey God at the river Jordan by refusing to enter the land, because of their fear of the inhabitants. They did not truly believe that the LORD would "*go before [them]*" (Deuteronomy 1:21) and give them the land. So, God caused them to remain in the wilderness for forty years, until that whole willful, stubborn, unfaithful, and disbelieving generation had perished; but then the next generation obediently crossed over the Jordan river to claim the land which the LORD was giving them.

During the conquest of Canaan, the people of God had many great victories whenever they were obedient, but they also suffered terrible defeats and tragedy whenever they disobeyed the LORD. Like when the walls of Jericho fell to the sound of trumpets and a great shout because of their faith in God's power, but then they were routed in battle by the men of Ai because one man, Achan, had kept a nice cloak along with some gold and silver for himself from among the spoils of Jericho, when everything was devoted to destruction at the LORD's command (Joshua 7).

Finally, after forty years in the wilderness plus the many years of the *{uncompleted}* conquest of Canaan, the old man Joshua summoned all the elders of Israel; he called together everyone of importance and responsibility; for them to renew and reaffirm the LORD's covenant. Joshua reminded them of all that God had done for them, from Abraham until their present day, and told them that this was the hour of their decision. He told them that they must choose, now and forevermore, whom they would obey, follow, and serve: the many idols of the world and of their pagan ancestors, or the only Sovereign LORD. They needed to decide.

Ever since Mount Sinai, God's people have been told What is right and what is wrong by the LORD through the giving of His Word, and we have each been taught by our elders and leaders, pastors and teachers. The LORD has given us the standard by which we, and the world, are measured. It is clear. It is not ambiguous. The Israelites were told what to do, how to live live holy lives, and taught how they were to do it through obedient faithfulness *{not unquestioningly (even if we do not understand why by the time of action), but still obediently and without dissent}*. They were given specific rules to govern every moment, of every day, and their entire lives: how to wash their hands, how to cook their food, how to clean their homes, who they could associate with, what they were to think about and believe, and so many others things. The Law governed moments of important decision-making. Every moment of the day was an important decision, maybe not necessarily life-giving or salvation impacting decisions, but never-the-less they were important; they were decisions made to live lives of holiness and righteousness and obedience to God.

Throughout Biblical history, under Moses, under Joshua, under the Judges and the Kings, all of God's people and their rulers, before and after the Babylonian exile, made many decisions: some made good decisions, some made poor decisions; some made decisions worthy of personal or corporate damnation and destruction, while some others made decisions leading to a religious revival among God's people. We see this same cycle repeated again, countless times during the “Church Age” and even today in our country and communities.

Every moment is an “hour of decision” for us. I do not mean to say that every moment and choice is to be a decision for Christ and your eternal salvation (we are not “free will Arminians”) *{although every decision made boils down to a decision to obey Christ, or not}* because that decision has already been made for you by God's eternal, sovereign election. The decisions I mean are those about how you will live out your election, whether you are a person elected to salvation in Christ, or elected unto damnation in Adam. The question we must each answer for ourselves is: How do I make my decisions? What is the metric, my rule, my influence, or my reason to decide one way or another?

Do I decide by the wisdom of the world, with my own strength and power, my knowledge and understanding; or do I decide according to my faith and trust in the LORD, deciding towards whatever glorifies Him?

Do I ask for and listen to the guidance of the Holy Spirit in my daily life and in my studies?

Do I consider, “What Would Jesus Do”?

Does this choice serve God, or does it serve myself? Does this choice glorify God, or glorify myself?

How do you decide? What will you decide: to obey Christ, or not obey Him?

We have spent the past two weeks talking about the Law of God, particularly the “moral law” as given to the Jews, which is also written upon the hearts of all mankind *{including the Greeks or Gentiles}*, the regenerate and reprobate alike, governing our lives and all of our interactions as our “conscience”. We understand that neither our knowledge of and obedience to the law can save us or help us with our eternal destination. Knowledge of the law should guide our lives; the law can inform our decisions, but it will not make them for us. Just knowing the law, knowing the difference between what is right and what is wrong, will not force us to make the correct decision. Our knowledge informs us, but it cannot help us make and stick with our choice.

The law offers us no help and support, no encouragement to continue in obedience, and it certainly gives us no grace whenever we transgress it. The law is a cruel taskmaster making absolute demands of us without providing the means to satisfy its' demand, like when Pharaoh took away the straw from brick-making Hebrew slaves, and still demanded the same output from them (Exodus 5). The law only makes our obedience harder;

the more laws there are the harder it becomes to obey them all (Romans 5:20). The law offers us no hope and no help, only condemnation and punishment for our failure to do the impossible.

Praise God for the Gospel of Grace! Thank the LORD for His gift of tender mercy to sinners like us!

After fourteen hundred years of Israel being governed by the Law: with periods ranging from a total failure of the people to keep the Law in the slightest (the book of Judges, the whole history of the Northern Kingdom, and some of the Judean kings) *{an anti-nomian period of license and permissiveness}*, to the peak times of revival in faith and obedience (under the kings Josiah and Hezekiah, or under Ezra the priest and Nehemiah the governor of Judea), and to an even stricter adherence to the “letter” of the Law, strengthened in its requirements through the “human wisdom” of the “oral *torah*” (by the Pharisees and Essenes) *{legalism}*; finally the day we celebrate as Pentecost came and the Holy Spirit was poured out into the people of God.

On that day, the Apostle Peter gave what is arguably the greatest evangelistic sermon of all time; speaking so clearly, by the power of the Holy Spirit, that all who heard him could understand the message in their own, best comprehended language *{the true gift of tongues}*. Speaking on their immediate history, concerning the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, with proofs from the Hebrew Scriptures, Peter preached the message of salvation by grace, through faith in Christ. “*And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.*” Peter preached to the people gathered, to these Jews gathered from all across the Roman Empire, not about the power of the Law, but of the power of the LORD and His promises (Genesis 17; Galatians 3), the power of God's grace.

Hearing this, the people were “*cut to the heart*”. They were moved, because the Holy Spirit was working among them, in their hearts. They were receiving God's grace of faith and as they believed, salvation was being applied to them, changing them; changing their foci of importance from their “works of the law”, to the work of God. They heard and believed the Apostles and now knew the grace of Christ.

“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.”

All those listening were men whom Peter called out as orchestrating the death of Jesus: particularly those who delivered Him up to the Romans for execution, and who also falsely accused Christ of law-breaking (both *Torah* and the Roman Law); these were the priests, the scribes, and Pharisees, them whose whole lives revolved around their absolute obedience to the Law, serving as mediators and representatives for all Israel; including everyone else, the “body politic”, who first cried, “*Crucify him!*” and then, “*We have no king but Caesar.*” (John 19:15). Accusing them of being the ones who condemned Jesus to execution, at the command of Pilate. If the whole of their lives before then had been lived holily, if they thought that they had been “righteous” before both man and God up until that time, they knew in that moment that they were lawbreakers; that they had violated God's Holy covenantal law and so were guilty of the whole (Matthew 5:19; James 2:10). They were each internally convicted of all their sins and needed to know what must be done to change their guilty state. How could they be made righteous or stand justified before the LORD? They knew they needed to make a decision, so they asked Peter and the other Apostles, “*Brothers, what shall we do?*”

Peter told them, “*Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.*”

Meaning: Repent! Stop! Knock it off! Change your ways! Don't do what you have been doing! Be changed. Be different. Don't "Be like Mike", but be like Christ. The point of life is not Moses's Law, because Moses cannot help you.

Believe and be baptized into Jesus Christ and His works. Receive the forgiveness of your sins by His grace, and then go and do, as Moses said.

Repentance is a choice. Repentance is our active recognition that what we have done is wrong, and an expression of our desire to do what is right instead. What we do demonstrates who we are, and who we are identified with.

So, do we choose to identify ourselves with the lawless and wicked ones, or with the obedient One and the saints?

Baptism is the new visible sign, the identifying mark of our entrance into God's covenant of grace, the covenant of promise, which He gave to Abraham and his descendants and heirs, to all believers in Christ Jesus. It is our showing the world that we have made a different decision. It is a conscious affirmation and assent to Christ's calling of us to Himself. It is a response in faith. If you hear His voice calling to you, when you hear Him calling to you by name, you cannot help but respond, you cannot help but follow Him (Isaiah 55:11; John 10:3-5), but you must choose how you will follow Him.

Will you respond quickly and immediately, or slowly and stubbornly?

Do you live your life mortifying your sin, putting sin to death within yourself, to more closely resemble your Savior? (Romans 8:13; Colossians 3:5-10) Do you often repent of your sins honestly, asking for the LORD's forgiveness and help to do otherwise, or do you choose to still revel in your sin? Salvation is once and forever, but truly a "decision for Christ" is made much more frequently, every choice should be a decision for Jesus. Our profession of faith is not "fire insurance", it is a binding affirmation and promise of obedience. Jesus requires changed lives to go along with your changed heart.

We have not been given a will free to choose Christ if He does not choose us first, but we have been given a will that is free to choose our individual actions and our active response to God's grace.

Everyone must choose how they will respond to Him. This is the "hour of decision". Do you "*harden your heart*" (Psalm 95; Hebrews 4) or do you obediently cross over the Jordan and enter into the restful land of promise?

Making "no decision" is still a choice, and it is never a choice for the good. A poor choice, a less good choice, even if made for the right purpose, being made for the glory and honor of Christ, is still better than no choice; God's grace and mercy is still great enough to cover our failures. Don't ask yourself, "What Would Jesus Do", because you are not Jesus; thank God you do not need to be; instead ask yourself, "What Does Jesus Want ME To Do", in this moment.

Jesus told the parable about a master with three servants, he gave each different sums of money (Matthew 25:15-30). Two of these servants invested the money they were given; they made good decisions and responded faithfully to their master's trust. However, the third servant made no decision to act or invest; he chose to not act faithfully towards his master, but instead acted selfishly out of his fear. He buried the money. He did nothing with it, and then he returned it to his master having been a wasteful and fruitless servant, thus he was justly condemned. Yes, that servant decided and chose to do nothing; he was not a faithful servant because he did not serve his master's interests, or work for his master's glory; so, he received a negative reward. We must choose to serve and obey God always, in everything.

In his epistle, James talks about "*faith without works*" being dead. He is saying that our choices and our actions matter because they demonstrate and express our faith in Christ. Doing good works is our choice and obligation.

What we do matters. Our obedience to God matters, but especially the why of our obedience matters as much as the how.

The Jews of Jesus's day looked to obedience to the Law of God for their salvation; they were not looking to God for it. They believed that by their obedience to *Torah*, that because of their obedience, their works done in His name, that the LORD would now restore Israel to its former glory. They preferred their messianic figures to be like King David, or Judas Maccabee and his brothers: men of power, men of deeds, men of decisive action; the strength and power of men, obedient to the law and its mediators, the priests. They believed that men could earn their salvation, earn righteousness by their obedience to the Law, but they each lacked the strength and will to obey it perfectly.

We are not be able to earn our salvation, to choose to be rescued and redeemed from our sin, because Jesus has already saved us, but we can still choose how we will respond to His gracious work. Because His obedience has been imputed to us, we may now choose to obey Him ourselves, according to God's grace given to us. Whatever obedience His grace does not achieve within us now in this life, His forgiveness will cover. The LORD has saved us from the tyranny of the Law so that we might freely be His obedient children. God demands much of His people, being the Author and Creator of all things, but He does not demand of us more than He has provided.

- Jesus said, “*Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.*” (Lk. 12:48 ESV)
- {*The comic character*} Spider-Man's “Uncle Ben” has always told Peter Parker, “*With great power comes great responsibility.*”

We Christians are empowered by the Holy Spirit. We are given the grace to try, the grace to fail, and the grace to succeed. Christ has given us such a great power by His Spirit, so now we have the great responsibility to walk in it, for His glory.

But first we must decide to walk in His way, and then keep remaking that decision, all our lives.

We are not be able to choose our salvation, but being both “saved by the grace of God” and “knowing what is right and wrong” from the moral law, we are now able to choose how we act and respond obediently in faith. Our choice either identifies us with the “old man”, Adam and the sinful nature, or with the “new creation”, Christ and the regenerated heart.

Every choice we are faced with boils down to a binary decision: for Christ or against Christ; there is no middle ground to choose {*...that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. (1 Jn. 1:5 ESV)*}. Choosing anything other than conscious, intentional obedience to God is a choice in favor of wrath and enmity against the LORD. Our decision for Christ, the decision to follow Him in all things, always is not a once-in-a-lifetime choice; it is an every day choice. We must choose to serve Jesus in every moment, of every hour, of every day. This is the attitude and mindset to apply our faith to life. We can afford to take risks, we can afford to try and fail, we can afford to be considered “foolish” by our neighbors, we can afford to obey God, no matter what the worldly cost is, because our confidence is secure in Him. Living out this choice is how we walk in the Spirit (Romans 8:3-17; Galatians 5:16-18).

So, if Jesus Christ is your eternal security, then decide to act like it.

Now then, brothers and sisters, what shall we do?

Peter told the crowd, “*Save yourselves from this crooked generation.*”: which the NIV calls a “corrupt generation” and the King James an “untoward generation”¹; the Greek word here is *skolios*, literally “bent out of shape” and is used figuratively to mean: perverse, dishonest, unfair, and unscrupulous; in short all describing

¹ Geneva Bible Notes: (1) He is truly joined to the Church who separates himself from the wicked.

the ways of the wicked, sinful world, describing everything except the Way of Christ. But Peter was not talking about people “saving themselves” for their eternal salvation, he was instructing them about their daily choices, which concerned everything else in their lives.

Israel, the people of God, the Church, has been separated from the rest of the world by the LORD's decree. We are declared to be Holy, because the LORD our God is Holy, and the Holy Spirit is even now making us holy, in truth. We are the *ekklesia*, the “called out ones”, the sacred assembly. Peter was right, we must save ourselves from this “crooked generation” and from every “corrupt generation” to come. By God's grace, we have been given the power and ability to save ourselves, to distinguish ourselves, to be separated from the rebellious ones, those lawbreakers, because Jesus Christ was “*numbered among the transgressors*” and suffered our just penalty, so that we would not have to join them.

The old argument of, “Well, everybody else is doing it...” always seems to end with folks jumping off of a steep cliff to their doom, but we Christians are called to be different, to live differently, to choose to act differently from everyone else.

Choose to be different, because of Christ. Jesus was in the world, but not of the world, and that is how He calls His people to live, as well (John 17).

Choose to not be conformed to the culture around us. We must choose to remain standing firm in the faith, living our lives upon the solid rock (Psalm 118:22; Zechariah 10:4; Matthew 7:24-25; 1 Peter 2:6).

Choose to be generous with your wealth and talents; be generous with all that God has given us because the “Good Shepherd” ensures that our cup always over flows (Psalm 23).

Choose to help others, because the LORD is our Help and Strength (Psalm 287-8, 33:20, 115:9-11, 118:14, 146:5). Help may come in many different forms, so we can each help our neighbor according to our personal capability, without guilty comparison against other believers.

Choose to love your neighbor sacrificially, without any distinction or discrimination, for in doing so we love them like Christ would, so that they may feel and know His love through ours.

Choose to speak the truth with others about brokenness, both our own and theirs, about our shared fallen condition, because we are being sanctified, we are being transformed by the Holy Spirit inside of us. We are able to share what and who we were, and show them who we are now, because of God's grace and mercy given to us. We can share our past failures under the Law and share our newfound joy in Grace.

This is the hour of decision.

So, choose this day whom you will serve, now and forevermore: will you serve yourself and the many idols of this world, or will you serve, love and obey Jesus Christ alone?

Would you choose to save yourself from this crooked generation, or will you choose to stand with them in the company of the wicked?

Make every decision to be a “decision for Christ”.

I have decided, have you?

I will stand with Joshua. I will answer Moses's call of, “*Who is on the LORD's side?*” (Exodus 32:26)

I stand with Christ Jesus.

If you have decided this as well, then please join me in standing, as you are able, and in affirming with me our faith in the LORD with the words of the Apostle's Creed.

<Please Stand> Recite Creed

AMEN Let us pray...{*Pray for our decision and strength to carry it out, standing firm.*} **AMEN**