

April 7, 2010

Joshua 24:14-15 / Acts 3:17-23 / Acts 20:17-24 / Luke 13:31-35

## The Power and Consequences of our Choices

It doesn't take long in this world for even the smallest child to realize that life is full of choices and every choice leads to one type of consequence or another!

Some choices lead to consequences that are so INSIGNIFICANT we barely notice their effect on us / while other choices are so consequential and so SIGNIFICANT, they can actually alter the direction of our lives — some with eternity hanging in the balance.

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In fact, we make so many choices each day, that we often fail to notice we're making them! For instance: We choose to get up as soon as the alarm goes off or we choose to sleep a couple minutes extra / we choose to shower (or not!) / make the bed or not.

We choose what clothes we'll wear / what we'll eat for breakfast (or whether we'll skip it altogether) / when to fit in devotions and prayer / what we'll bring to work for lunch / whether we'll make coffee at home or buy it on the way (at WaWa, YumYums, McDonalds (to save money), Dunkin's or Starbucks)! So many choices!

We choose what route we'll take to work / what speed we'll drive at / whether we'll stop or gun it at that yellow light / be patient or snarl at that irritatingly and inconsiderate driver / and even whether we'll be friendly and pleasant when we arrive at our destination or quiet, keep to ourselves and avoid others.

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We choose what tone of voice we'll answer the phone with / whether we'll resist temptation or give in to it / check our email account on company time or wait till we get home / how slowly or rapidly we'll work / and if or how we'll broach the topic of the Gospel with that friend.

We choose how to organize our day / what we must get done in it and what we can let slide till another time / how and when we'll transition from one task to another / and how we'll respond when someone else's incompetence or irresponsibility disrupts our plans or adds more work to our already busy schedule.

We choose how much we'll eat for supper / whether we'll relax in front of the TV or help our spouse with the chores / read a book with the kids / ignore or referee the dispute between the kids / talk and pray with them before they go off to sleep / go to sleep ourselves / or stay up emailing, surfing the web or chatting on Facebook.

It's true. Decision making is an unavoidable part of our lives! And although some decisions carry with them little or no noticeable consequences, other decisions carry with them extremely significant, life-altering and even eternal consequences — as we find in our text for today where the Jews rejection of Jesus leads to their "desolation" as a people (v. 35).

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And, you know, it's not always easy to know which choices will bring what consequences. Because some choices or decisions, which SEEM very insignificant at the time, actually turn out to have enormous consequences.

Like the teenage girl who chose to reach for the cell phone she dropped on the car floor as she was going around a corner / or the couple I knew, who ran to see who was at the front gate of their house (leaving their toddler in the back yard for only a two or three minutes at most) near the swimming pool / or the dad who decided to leave a loaded gun in the closet / or the teenage boy and girlfriend who gave into temptation in a moment of passion and ended up having a child while they were still children themselves / or the CEO who taught a class I took in Seminary, who lost \$80,000 when a trusted friend (and brother in the Lord) started a business and ended up being less than honest or trustworthy with his investors.

And I could go on and on and on (and so could you). In fact, because we see such things so often, we fully understand why the Bible so frequently encourages us to gain wisdom / and pursue godly knowledge / and use discernment / and seek guidance from God / and counsel from others / and consider all the possible consequences our actions could have before we make them — so we can make wise decisions and good choices.

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And here, though I don't 100% agree with the statement I'm about to read, I want to read it anyway, because it would be foolish not to admit there is a great degree of truth in the saying: "We are, in many ways, the product of the accumulated choices we have made or will make over our lifetime."

And that's NOT to say we make our choices apart from the sovereign influences of God / or that we're somehow the captain of our soul / that the entire weight of everything rests upon us / or that God cannot (by His grace) redeem the consequences of even our worst choices. Most of us are well aware that He not only can, but has on many occasions!

Yet having said that, it is also necessary to say that whereas some Christians overemphasize the weight of responsibility our decisions carry (thereby paralyzing people with fear of making the

wrong one) / other Christians (and I speak of my Reformed or Calvinistic brothers and sisters) tend to underemphasize both their importance and significance making people feel they don't really matter (when the Bible assures us they do)!

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So let's look and see what this passage has to tell us about the importance of making wise decisions and right choices.

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And as we do, the **FIRST** thing we find (and we find it in Jesus example) is that making right and necessary choices regarding our life or our future, comes from knowing our purpose and our calling in life. In the text Jesus is confronted by some Pharisees, who tell Him: *"Leave **this place and go someplace else, because Herod wants to kill you.**"* And from the context it's hard to know whether the Pharisees are sincerely concerned for Jesus welfare, or just taking advantage of a threat to get Him to leave the area. Yet it doesn't really matter, for the threat appears to have been real, and thus it forces upon Jesus the need to make a decision about what He will do in light of it.

Will He choose His own personal safety and comfort and thus deviate from His mission, or continue what He's doing because He knows His purpose in life is to obey God and fulfill His divine calling?

And, thus I ask you: *What would you do? / If you were told you might suffer or be killed if you continued doing the things you're doing, or if you continued on the path in life you were following, what would you do? / How would you respond? / Would you retreat and seek personal comfort and safety, or like Jesus, choose to stay the course and continue doing exactly what you had been doing?*

Jesus response to the threat is: *"Go tell that fox, 'I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and the third day I will reach my goal.' In any case, I MUST keep going today and tomorrow and the next day — for no prophet can die outside Jerusalem."*

Jesus didn't hesitate to give the answer He gave, because He KNEW that His calling from God and His purpose in coming was to die as the sacrificial Lamb. / And not just die, but die on a cross in Jerusalem, where He would give His life as an atonement for all the sins of all who would ever believe.

He knew that was His calling, and because He did, He could not be deterred by anything — not threats or persecution or suffering or even death. I believe the same is true for us as well, if we are to make right choices and life-decisions. Because it's only when we're sure of what God has

called us to do that we can make the decisions that enable us to stay the course, and finish the race, when opposition, and frustration, and hardship, and persecution, or temptation, or threats seek to get us to deviate from it.

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For instance: This past week when I was cleaning out some books from my office, I picked up the biography of Chet Bitterman, the missionary from Pennsylvania, who was martyred by M-19 rebels in Columbia in 1981. I remember it well, because I was serving as a missionary in the Dominican Republic at the time. The title of the book is: "**Called to Die.**"

It's a title based on an entry in his diary (found after his death) and written eight months before he ever got to Columbia. And in that entry it says: *"Costa Rica, Sept. 13, 1978. The situation in Nicaragua is getting worse. If Nicaragua falls, I guess the rest of Central America will, too. Maybe this is just some type of self-inflicted martyr complex, but I find this reoccurring thought that perhaps God will call me to be martyred for Him and His service in Columbia. I am willing."*

Two and a half years later, in the early morning darkness on January 19, 1981, seven armed terrorists burst into the Wycliffe Bible Translators guest house in Bogota, Columbia. Herding all the residents together, they demanded the director. But the director wasn't there, so they pointed to Chet and said, *"We'll take you."*

He walked over to his baby Esther, who was crying, kissed his three year old Anna, turned to his wife Brenda and asked her to be calm for the girl's sake, and was then whisked away at gunpoint, found weeks later, on a bus, with a gunshot wound to the chest.

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Why did he decide to go to Columbia as a missionary when he knew it was dangerous? / Why did he choose to risk danger and even death? / Why could he not be deterred from going? You know. Because he felt in his spirit that that's what God had called him to do! Deep inside He sensed his calling in life was to be a missionary in Columbia — and thus he chose to go, regardless of what might happen to him as a result! He had to. That divine calling on his life informed his choices and determined the decisions he would make.

And the same should be true for us. For instance, knowing that as Christians *"We do not belong to ourselves,"* as Paul says in I Cor. 6:20, *"but were bought with a price (the price of Christ's death) and should therefore honor God with our body,"* helps us to say "no" to things our unbelieving friends might say "yes" to. / Knowing that our calling is to live for the glory of God drastically influences the choices we make.

Likewise, knowing God has called us to a certain task in life, be it missions / or the pastorate / or teaching / or building / or Bible translation / or being a committed wife and mother or husband and father / or social reformer / or civil rights advocate / or helper of the poor or handicapped / or whatever it is — when we sense it's our calling and our purpose in life, we let nothing deter us from it!

Martin Luther couldn't be deterred from spearheading the reformation in Europe, because he felt his calling in life was to stand up for the truth of the Gospel. / His name's sake, Martin Luther King Jr. couldn't be deterred from pushing for desegregation and equal rights for blacks and minorities, even though he received imprisonment and countless death threats for doing so, because he felt very strongly that that's what God had called him to do.

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You see, people will endure much suffering and forego personal comfort and safety, and promptly make decisions and choices that others would balk at or refuse to even consider, simply because they are sure of their purpose and calling in life.

What about you? What guides your choices? / What's your purpose and calling in life? What drives you to make the decisions you make? / What causes you to say "no" to certain things and "yes" to others, with a determination and resolve that matches that of Jesus in this passage who knew that it was His destiny to go to the cross.

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Then **SECONDLY**, we come to the verses which accentuate the importance, and the significance, and the dire consequences that our choices and decisions can have. Thus we hear Jesus say in verse 34: ***"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!"***

That is: I was willing to care for you, and protect you, and gather you under my wing, but you were not willing to have my care. You resisted and refused and chose to reject my care, protection and love.

And it wasn't just them. I've known plenty of people throughout the years who have done the same. I myself was one of them! Because I remember so well, in the months before I came to Christ, realizing the war of contradictions that was going on in me. That by fighting God and resisting Jesus call on my life, I was actually fighting and resisting the love and care of God that I so desperately yearned for — yet wanted conditionally. That is, wanted only so long as I could remain in control and have it on my terms!

It was like I was saying, "Please God, protect me and show me your love, but let me be the one who dictates how you can show it to me, and what you can then ask of me, or expect of me, or require of me in return." You see, I wanted His love more than anything, but I wanted to remain the one in control of everything. And it can't be that way with God!

That's why people resist the love of God and the divine care they desire—as some of you may have done, or may be doing right now. We fight the freely offered love and tender care of God that we desire so much, yet resist because it frightens us to think what that love might do to us or require from us in return. We sense the intensity of God's holy love, and though we want it, it scares us.

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Yet there are consequences for choosing to reject God's willingness to love and care for us, just as there were for the people of Jerusalem. That's the **THIRD** thing I need to point out. The rejection of God's love leads to judgment.

What were the consequences they suffered? *"Your house shall be left to you desolate."* Jerusalem would be ravaged, pillaged and destroyed and the nation left desolate. By choosing to refuse the protection of His overshadowing and protecting wings when God offered it to them (something He did through the mouths of the prophets they went on to kill) / by being unwilling or choosing not to come *"under the shelter of God's wings"* it left them, like little chicks, exposed to the predators God's outspread wing was meant to protect them from — like the Babylonians and Assyrians in the Old Testament, and in this case the Romans.

So what is Jesus doing? He's not only declaring God's willingness to save, He's also telling them there are consequences (terrible consequences in this case) for rejecting His invitation to come to Him and accept the care He offers them in Jesus. An offer they would reject by crucifying the One God sent to offer His love and care and protection.

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You see, God IS merciful beyond anything we can imagine. / He is *"slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."* / He is good and patient and kind and just. But He is also firm and when necessary, stern (Rom. 11:22).

And thus He will indeed, if we persist in our sin and rebellion and refuse to come to Him or acknowledge Him or trust in Him or surrender our lives to Him, let us suffer the consequences of those choices.

For Jerusalem the consequences were severe. The city, whose population was estimated to be about 30,000 people at the time, was decimated. Josephus, the Roman historian tells us that the armies of Rome, starved the city into submission before they destroyed it.

Famished women thronged the roofs of the houses with their babies in their arms and the alleys were filled with the corpses of the elderly. People young and old, says Josephus, *“roamed like phantoms through the market places and collapsed wherever their doom overtook them.”*

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And I know it's difficult to hear. Yet let me say this, because this is the point of the text: They received what they chose. God offered them His protective care and called them to come for protection under the shadow of His wing, but they stubbornly chose to refuse it, and as a result, were exposed to the assaults of their predators and suffered the severe consequences for the persistent choice they had made.

A consequence that will not cease, says Jesus, *“Until they say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”*

And He didn't mean just a few days later when He would enter Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Darrell Bock is right when he points out:

*“The language of this statement is from Psalm 118:26. The original psalm described the priests' blessing on the worshipping entourage as it approached the temple... The desolation will last until they say of Jesus, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’ When they recognize that Jesus has been sent from God, blessing will return... And though the warning here is national in scope and points to Israel, the implied application is clear enough: For any of us to live outside of (a worshipful) relationship with Christ is to live exposed and desolate in a world of spiritual promise.”*

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You see, I'm not usually one to press people for a decision. But it can't be avoided here, since the whole text resonates with an invitation offered by God, that invitation spurned by people, and those people suffering the consequences of doing so.

Which leads me to conclude by asking you: Have you heard God's invitation extended to you? And if so, what is your decision?

What is your choice regarding Christ and the offer of God's love and care and protection?

God says; "Come and abide under the shelter of my wings. I invite you and long to gather you, like a hen gathers her chicks for protection under her wing."

What will you choose to do? What will your response be to His invitation?"

He will not drag you under His wing, kicking and screaming against your will. But He will call, and actively pursue, and state and restate my both His desire and willingness. He will continue to reach out to you and invite you to come. (Though at some point (and its different for all) that invitation will cease, as it did for the Jews, 37 years after Jesus spoke these words.)

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COME, knowing as Jesus promises, that, "***He who comes unto Me, I will in no wise cast out.***" Whoever comes to Christ by faith will always find themselves to be welcomed in, or should I say, "welcomed under the protective shadow of His wings."

***"COME!"*** That's the call of the Gospel.

***"Come unto me, all you who are weak and heavy laden and I will give you rest." "The Spirit and the Bride say 'COME!' Let him who hears 'COME!' Whoever is thirsty, let him COME, and whosoever will, let him COME and drink freely from the waters of life."***

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Will you? Will you come to Christ today? God "longs," says Jesus, to "gather you under His wings," don't let His longing be met with your unwillingness, because the consequences for rejecting Christ are horrific (as this passage shows).

Yet the decision is yours. ***"Choose this day,"*** said Joshua, ***"whom you will serve. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD."***

Jesus says the same. Don't fight Him? / He invites you to "COME!" / What will your decision be?