



The Grace of Repentance (Deuteronomy 30:1-20)

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How many of you have read a “choose your own adventure” book? If you haven’t, here’s the basic scenario. You are the main character in a story. The opening chapter in the book presents you with a dilemma of some sort. Say you hear a strange sound coming from the barn. Do you (a) grab a flashlight to investigate, or (b) call the police? If you choose the first option, turn to page 35. If you choose the second, turn to page 38.

Unless you cheat, you have no idea what will happen next. If you turn to page 35, you might read, “A burglar shoots you as soon as you enter. You’re dead.” If you turn to page 38, you might read, “When the police arrive, they can’t find anything amiss,” and the adventure continues. The fun of the book is the thrill that comes from making choices when the consequences are completely unknown. The best books are filled with all manner of unexpected endings where the result of choosing a particular response catches you by surprise.

Friend, your relationship with God is not like a choose our own adventure book. Our God is infinitely wise. He knows the end from the beginning. He’s also utterly and completely sovereign. He’s more than aware of the future. He ordains the future by bringing his perfect will to pass. And our God is not silent. He delights to reveal both the future he has ordained and the consequences of our actions in light of the future he has ordained. What happens on p. 35 or p. 38 in your relationship with God isn’t a mystery. He has made it known in a remarkable expression of grace!

The Bible is filled with moments where God says in no uncertain terms, “If you make this choice, this is what will happen. If you make that choice, that’s what will happen.” The sovereignty of God does not eliminate the consequences of our decisions, brothers and sisters. It raises the stakes because we know them in advance. They’re not possibilities or probabilities. They’re certainties. We can take him at his Word.

Today we reach the conclusion of Moses final sermon to Israel before he dies. It’s the climax of the entire book. After 40 years in the wilderness, Israel is about to enter the land God promised to give her. So Moses reviews the history of her relationship with the Lord, lays out both general principles and specific applications of the law, and leads the people in renewing their covenant relationship with God. In Chapters. 27-30, he explains exactly what will happen if they choose to obey or disobey. It’s not a

choose our own adventure. The consequences are known. The consequences are certain.

His final plea comes at the end of Ch. 30: **Israel, choose the gift of life by turning to the Lord.** Is spiritual life a gift from God, a gift only he can provide? Yes. But is spiritual life also a real choice Israel must make, a choice between holding fast to the Lord or going her own way? Yes. That's not a contradiction. That's a paradox. They're both true. God's gift is a real gift. And our choice is a real choice. In vv. 1-14, Moses encourages us to choose life by telling us what will happen if we turn to the Lord. The result isn't a mystery. It's a promise in two parts.

1) ALL WHO TURN TO THE LORD ARE TRANSFORMED FROM THE INSIDE OUT (vv. 1-10)

In v. 1 Moses turns Israel's attention to the future, a day when she's tasted the blessing of life in the land and the curse of death in exile. All the promises Moses just finished declaring in Ch. 28 have come to pass. The people of God are "among all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you." At that point, Moses declares, when you hit rock bottom, you will "call to mind" everything I have set before you today.

You'll remember God's Word, the Word I've preached to you. And you'll realize it's all true. You'll realize you're experiencing the divinely designed consequences of sin. You'll realize all the trouble in your life is ultimately connected to your broken relationship with God. "I abandoned the Lord. That's why I'm in exile." You'll experience the grace of conviction. You'll realize Scripture explains the story of your life. In the depth of your soul, you'll sense your need for God to restore the relationship your sin destroyed.

Brothers and sisters, don't you love the fact that Moses says that day is a "when," not an "if"! Why? Because we serve a faithful and sovereign God. He delights to grant the grace of conviction. And he uses his Word to do it! That's why one of the best things you can ever do for a non-Christian friend is invite them to read and study God's Word with you.

And what does God's effectual Word do? It doesn't prompt Israel to simply change her behavior, to stop yelling at the kids so much, go to church more often, or think positive thoughts about herself. No! **The Word of the Lord compels her to return to the Lord.** V. 2, You "return to the LORD your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul..."



God's Word compels her to return, to choose life by turning to the Lord of life. And it's a turning, a returning (really), at the level of the heart. In the control center of your inner man, you turn away from embracing your own thoughts, your own desires, your own commitments, and turn toward embracing God's thoughts, God's desires, and God's commitments. You turn away from stiff-arming God and toward trusting God. You turn away from believing in yourself and trying to create life and toward believing in Jesus, the Eternal Son of God, and trusting him to rescue you from death and give you life.

Where you used to ignore what God says is wrong, you see sin for what is really is – death to your soul. Instead of enjoying sin, you grieve sin. Instead of hiding sin, you confess sin. Instead of celebrating and loving it, you're ashamed of it and hate it. You come to your senses, spiritually speaking. You turn off the path of obeying your voice and start running down the path of obeying God's voice, because you know it's the only path that leads to life. **In a word, you repent.**

Moses isn't talking about feeling bad about the wrong things you've done or trying to be a better person. Repentance will change the way you relate to other people, but it isn't fundamentally about your relationship with other people. The core of repentance is a change in the way you're relating to God. It's about returning to the LORD.

And what does he promise will happen when Israel does? The same things God promises will happen if you repent today, my friend. V. 3, "Then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the people where the LORD your God has scattered you."

If you repent, friend, God will mercifully restore you, starting in your relationship with him and extending to every corner of your life. Grace leaves no rock unturned. It doesn't matter how far gone you are. From the "uttermost parts of heaven," Moses says in v. 4, God is able to save you. No matter what's happened. No matter how deeply buried you are under the consequences of your sin, Jesus is able to bring you out and draw you to himself. He died for your forgiveness. He rose to set you free.

Is your child far from God? Is your close friend far from God? Is your spouse far from God? "From there" the LORD your God can gather them. "From there" the LORD your God can take them. Brothers and sisters, do not lose heart in the work of evangelism! God is able. The gospel is powerful. Jesus is mighty to save.

And notice in v. 5, when we repent, God does more than bring us out from the land of darkness. He promises to bring us "into the land" of his kingdom. For Israel, God's

place was a swath of territory in the Middle East. What's God's place today? It's the community of the saints in the local church. The church is your place, Christian!

I hear you, pastor, but there's something I need to tell you. With my mind I agree it's all true. But there's something deep within my heart that doesn't want to obey. I don't want to turn to the Lord. Is there any hope for me? Friend, there is more hope than you know! Look at v. 6. This may be, hands down, the most precious promise in all of Deuteronomy. "And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live."

What is physical circumcision? It's an outward consecration of the body. What is spiritual circumcision? It's an inward consecration of the heart. It's what Scripture calls the miracle of regeneration or being born again. It's a work of the Spirit where he removes the hardness, removes the stubbornness, removes the blindness, and gives you a new will, a new desire, a new power to choose life. Then and only then does v. 8 come to pass. "And you shall again obey the voice of the LORD and keep all his commandments."

In Deut 10:16, Moses tells Israel. "Your biggest problem is that your heart isn't right before God. You need to circumcise your heart." In Deut 29:4, he reminds Israel it's a work only God can do. When you cross over into the land, most of you will not obey the Lord because he has not given you "a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear."

There would be notable exceptions. Think of women like Ruth or Abigail, men like Joshua or David. On the whole, however, spiritual Israel, the regenerate people of God, remained a small portion of the physical assembly. Yet God's promise through the mouth of his prophets remained. Ezekiel 11:19-20, "I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them."

Then one day, a miracle happened. The Eternal Son of God took on human flesh. It was the very first Christmas, the day Jesus arrived. And the moment he was conceived in Mary's womb, sin and death were put on notice. The stubborn will of man will not have the final word! God has come to do what only God can do. And what did he do after he lived and died to redeem us from sin and death? He ascended back to heaven and poured out the gift of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, bringing Deut 30:6 to pass.

Rom 2:28-29, “For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit...” Friend, you too need God to change your heart, no less than Israel. You do not have power to make yourself love the LORD with wholehearted devotion. But the Spirit does. He is able to give you a will to turn to Jesus and a desire to obey Jesus!

So how does that miracle happen? It happens when we choose to repent. The “when” of v. 6 is crystal clear in v. 1 and v. 10. V. 1, “When...you...return to the LORD...with all your heart and with all your soul.” V. 10, “When you turn to the LORD...with all your heart and with all your soul.” Is spiritual regeneration a supernatural work of grace? Yes. But we are not passive in the process. God works the miracle as we choose to repent.

Notice I did not say, “We choose to repent. And then God works the miracle.” Or, “We do our part, and then God does his part.” They cannot be separated. They’re two sides of the same coin. How do we know that? Because the phrase Moses uses to describe the result of our choice to repent in vv. 1 and 10, turning to the LORD “with all your heart and with all your soul” is the same phrase he uses to describe the result of spiritual circumcision in v. 6, loving the LORD “with all your heart and with all your soul.”

So is the spiritual life a gift God gives or a choice we make? Yes! It’s a gift and it’s a choice. There is no gift without a choice. And there is no choice without the gift. Which is why passages like Deut 30 describe repentance as choosing the gift of life. Or as Paul commands in Phil 2:12-13, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” God is gracious – his work enables and empowers our repentance! And we are not passive – the Lord transforms us from the inside out as we choose to repent.

So many people try to change their behavior apart from the grace of repentance, apart from a change in the way they’re relating to the Lord. I’m trying to be a better husband. I’m trying to be a better son or daughter. I’m trying to be a better person. Friend, it won’t work. You can’t transform yourself from the inside out. Only those who turn to the Lord are transformed from the inside out. My own life is a case study.

For much of the last 16 years of pastoral ministry, I’ve worked more hours each week than is healthy or wise in the long run. Sustainable sacrifice has not been the name of the game. During the first few years, I thought of it primarily as a work-life balance

issue. Prioritize better. Schedule better. Manage my time better. But nothing really changed.

There are a multitude of circumstantial factors in play with the hours I've kept. It's a complicated situation, and I don't say that to solicit empathy. God calls every one of us to lay down our lives to follow Jesus. Serving him is an unspeakable privilege! But here's what God has shown me over the last few years. A big part of the issue is that I need to walk in repentance. I need to turn away from trusting that my work or my time or my attention builds our church and turn toward trusting that God's work, God's power, and God's faithfulness builds our church. Pray for me!

Why do I mention that illustration? Because the grace of repentance, the process of turning to the Lord and being transformed from the inside out, is more than something needed at the beginning of the Christian life. It's something we must do throughout the entire Christian life. When your toddler throws a tantrum in the parking lot an hour from now, will you turn to the Lord? When your company opts to withhold the bonus you anticipated, will you turn to the Lord? When you feel numb on the inside through chronic pain or are desperate for rest after a stressful week, will you turn to the Lord? When you know you've done something wrong, will you turn to the Lord?

I love the way Moses describes how God promises he will respond to all who repent. Look at v. 9. "For the LORD will again take delight in prospering you, as he took delight in your fathers, when you obey the voice of the LORD your God, to keep his commandments and his statutes that are written in this Book of the Law." Banish the thought that you should repent simply to stay out of trouble! Repent so that you might experience the joy of being his beloved child, the joy of standing under the mighty waterfall of every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, now and for eternity!

The Lord longs to be gracious to you! He rises to show you compassion! He's on the edge of his seat – eager, ready, waiting to pour out blessing after blessing on you the moment you turn to him. Repentance isn't fundamentally about doing good things instead of bad things. It's about running home to God because he is your life!

2) ALL WHO TURN TO THE LORD ARE ABLE TO OBEY THE LORD (vv. 11-14)

In vv. 11-14, Moses deals head on with two common objections to repentance, two excuses we often make for not turning to the Lord. Look at v. 11. "For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you..." Have you ever thought that? "You know what, God. This is just too hard. I know I should repent. I know I should obey your commands. But it's just too difficult. I can't do it."

Or maybe you're walking alongside a Christian brother or sister trapped in sin. Some church members are urging them to repent. But other people are saying we just need to be patient and wait for God to change their heart. After all, if they're saying repentance feels impossible, isn't God's work the missing piece? Is it loving to urge someone to obey if obedience feels impossible to them? How should we think about Moses' instruction that obedience is not "too hard" for Israel?

Let's start by agreeing Moses isn't lying. There are some Christians who talk as if he is. It sounds like this. The whole point of the law is to prove what miserable sinners we are and how everything we do is filthy rags in the sight of a Holy God. None of us can please God, because keeping the law is impossible. But thanks be to God, it wasn't too hard for Jesus, and because he did it all for us, we're good to go!

Friend, some of what I just said is biblical, but most of it is not. Christopher Wright says it well. "The idea that God deliberately made the law so exacting that nobody would ever be able to live by it belongs to a distorted theology that tries unnecessarily to gild the gospel by denigrating the law." Am I saying any Israelite could have kept the law on their own? No. What did Moses just finish saying in vv. 1-10? "Israel, you need to turn to the Lord so that he might circumcise your heart. Only then will you be able to obey!"

Yes, the ultimate fulfillment of that promise awaited the outpouring of the Spirit under the New Covenant. But let's remember there were genuine believers among the ethnic people of Israel who trusted and obeyed the Lord even before Jesus arrived on the scene! Why does Heb 11 commend the faith of so many Old Testament saints, gentiles included? Why do the prophets applaud the obedience of King David or King Hezekiah or King Josiah as men who did "what was right" in the eyes of the Lord?

It wasn't because they obeyed perfectly or earned salvation through their obedience. The law never told anyone to do that! Deut 9:4, "Do not say in your heart... 'It is because of my righteousness that the LORD has brought me in to possess this land...'" Faith-fueled obedience has always been a response to the salvation God graciously brings to pass. It was under the Old Covenant. It still is under the New Covenant!

So if the sincere obedience of a repentant Israelite wasn't perfect, why is it commended? Because all that was imperfect in it was forgiven for Jesus' sake. The entire sacrificial system pointed to him all along! Bottom line, if any Israelite turned to the Lord, repented of their sins, and were empowered as a result to obey God's law –

not perfectly, but faithfully – they could take joy in knowing their obedience was pleasing in God’s sight, no less than your obedience today, Christian!

Brothers and sisters, if you think or speak as if every act of obedience in your life is somehow still “filthy rags” in God’s sight you’re not upholding the gospel, you’re undermining the gospel because you’re saying Jesus sacrifice is not enough for God to forgive all that is imperfect in your obedience such that he can genuinely delight in even the most faltering, baby step of obedience! And in the process, you’re demolishing one of the most powerful biblical incentives for our obedience, namely, that we can please our Father who loves us through Spirit-empowered obedience!

Col 1:10, “Walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God...” Israel’s problem was not that she could not keep God’s commands. He stood ready and willing to change her heart and empower her to obey! Israel’s problem was that she would not keep God’s commands. She was unwilling because she refused to turn to the Lord.

Friend, the same principle holds true today. Maybe you watch your Christian spouse or your Christian friends and think, “Man, living like that is just too hard.” If you are willing to turn to the Lord, it’s not, friend. “Ok, Matthew, so what should I do?” You should repent! Turn to the Lord. Cry out to him to change your heart and give you the will to trust and obey him. Acts 2:21, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

And remember this, Christian. The Spirit of Christ himself dwells in you in a far greater way than any believer enjoyed under the Old Covenant. Do not tell the Lord, or his people, that you are waiting for him to change your heart so that you can obey. He has already given you through the Spirit all the power you need for life and godliness! For a Christian, the issue is never, “Am I able?” The issue is, “Am I willing?” God’s commands are not too hard, brothers and sisters. You are able to please him. Choose life by walking in repentance.

Here's the second common objection to repentance, the second excuse we make for not turning to the Lord. V. 11, “For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off.” Why will it not work to say with the agnostic, “I know there’s a god out there somewhere, I’m not just sure who he is”? Why will it not work to say with the Bible critic, “You know, there’s just so many interpretations out there. How can we really know what’s true?” Why will it not work to say with the lazy Christian, “The Bible’s just so hard to understand! I don’t see why I should even try to!”

Friend, the reason none of those attitudes work is because they're all built on a lie! Look at vv. 12. What do ascending to heaven or going beyond the sea represent? Things that feel utterly elusive, impossibly out of reach. God's commands are not like that, Moses says. It's not "far off." In other words, it's not unknowable, unclear, or impossible to understand. V. 14, "The word is very near to you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it."

How could Moses say the Word that marks out the path of life is not "far off" in an unknowable, unclear, or impossible to understand kind of way? Because God clearly and perfectly revealed himself to Israel through his written Word, using the gift of human language, so that she could know him, turn to him, and obey him for who he is!

Yet we have something Israel did not, brothers and sisters. God has spoken to us through more than the written Word. He has spoken to us through Jesus, the Word made flesh! As Moses preached, Yahweh was bringing his Word near to Israel so she could know him and serve him. When Jesus came to earth that first Christmas, the same God brought his Word near in far greater sense. The Word of the law has been superseded by the Word of Christ!

Rom 10:8-9, "'The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart' (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

Through the work of the Spirit, God writes his Word on our hearts by giving us a new heart that sees Jesus and treasures Jesus. So we must not say the Word of life is "far off." In Christ, God has brought it near. And we must not say, "The Word is too hard." Through the indwelling power of the Spirit, you can obey him, friend. All who turn to the Lord are able to obey the Lord.

CONCLUSION (vv. 15-20)

Perhaps there's a part of you that hears all I have said today and thinks, "Well and good, pastor. It's great to know the spiritual repentance thing has benefits for those who into religion. But frankly, I'm not, and my life seems to be kicking along just fine. I have a great job. I'm living the American dream. I just don't see why the whole "repentance" thing matters if I'm not interested in being transformed from the inside out or being able to obey the Lord. No offense, but I'm pretty happy with who I already am.

Friend, Moses has a word for you in v. 15. “See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil.” Throughout all of human history, across every culture, every language, there are ultimately only two paths men and women walk. There’s a path of life and a path of death. What sets them apart? In a word, repentance. Are you turning toward the God who saves, who has revealed himself in Jesus, or are you turning away?

Turning toward God is the path of life. Turning away from God is the path of death. Why? Because he is our life (v. 20). There is no true life apart from him. Can you feel happy in this life doing your own thing? Maybe. But what will you do when you close your eyes for the last time and stand before your Maker? What will you do when you realize your life in this world was just a flash in the pan and you stand on the precipice of eternity.

You can be assured of life on that day, friend. And you can experience life in this broken world until that day arrives. It’s found in obeying Jesus, loving Jesus, walking with Jesus, and keeping his commands. V. 16, “Then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land.”

But the opposite is also true. V. 17, “If your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish.” Your life in this world is not a choose your own adventure. The consequences of the choices you make are known because God has made them known. With him, there is the blessing of life. Apart from him, there is the curse of death.

You have a real choice to make, friend. Will you turn to the Lord, or will you refuse? Will you choose life? Or will you choose death? It’s the most important choice you make every day. I implore you. Choose life. V. 19, “Choose life, that you and your offspring may live.” Life isn’t whatever you want it to be. Life isn’t the reward of chasing your dreams. Life is a person.

Is 55:6–7, “Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.”