

Pastor Kyle Mercer
Choosing Life or Death

January 8, 2023
Series: Taking Ground
Deuteronomy 30

**BIG IDEA – EVERY DAY YOU ARE CHOOSING LIFE OR
DEATH...YOU MOVE TOWARD MAKING THINGS BETTER OR
WORSE WITH EVERY DECISION**

Happy New Year's, Two Cities Church. It's 2023. It's the Michael Jordan year. Are you excited? I hope you guys are excited. When you see that video of Yi Ming (he likes to go by *Barry* as his English name), here's what I want you to know. Barry is the bull's-eye. The bull's-eye is not buildings. The bull's-eye is not a bigger budget. The bull's-eye is more Barrys, people whose lives have been transformed by the gospel.

It's a new year, so I know you're about your new schedule and your new plan and your New Year's resolutions. Here we're most excited about new life. The only thing, probably, that we get more excited about than new life is people who experience new life and then help other people experience new life, which is what you saw with Barry.

So, guys, it's 2023. Before we look forward (and we're going to do that in a second and have a whole vision time; I hope you're going to enjoy that), I want to look back and talk about Hold the Rope. Hold the Rope is our annual end-of-the-year offering. If you're new, you're watching online, you're visiting, let me tell you what this is. This is this thing we do at the end of every year. It's kind of crazy.

We basically say, "Hey, you guys are already generous, but could you give a one-time gift above and beyond what you normally give, and we're going to keep none of it. We're going to help other people go further faster, locally, nationally, and globally with this money." Here's why we do this. I just want to remind you one more time.

Why do we give money away locally? First, we love our city. Second, the ministries in our city that are doing the hardest and best work are often those ministering not just to the spiritually poor but the financially poor. You know this, but if you minister to the financially poor, they can never repay you. These ministries will never be self-sustaining, so we want to come alongside them.

The reason we give nationally is we love America, and we believe the best thing for America and the best thing for any city is more good gospel-preaching churches. When you think about Seattle or San Francisco or San Diego or San Antonio... When you think about any city, how would you pray for that city? Most people go, "I have no idea." Here's how you pray for a city: you pray for the churches in that city.

So, with the money you all gave, we're giving it away to help plant more churches in our nation. Then, finally, we want to increase our global footprint. We believe we don't serve a tribal deity who's just over Winston-Salem or just over North Carolina. We serve a global God, and we want to see the global imprint and impact of the gospel expand.

So, here's what we did. We had to make some plans beforehand of, in general, what we thought might come in so we could have some idea of what we were going to give away. We thought, "We have a \$5 million budget. Man, if our church gave 10 percent of our annual budget as one-time gifts, that would be knocking it out of the park." We kind of said, "The economy is crazy. Let's not plan for \$500,000. Let's be wise. Let's plan for a little less than that."

Well, you guys ended up giving \$718,795.49, which is so awesome. Here's why that's awesome. We're going to be able to do everything we wanted to do but give more to our partners and even increase some of our partnerships and start some new partnerships because of your generosity.

For example, Compassion International, which I want you to remember about... Many of you were there when we did our Compassion Weekend. We sponsored close to 430 kids. We reached out to them, and we basically said, "We want to do something big with Hold the Rope." They wrote us an email back. We said, "We want to do something big in Uganda," and they said, "Well, there's..."

You know how it works on this stuff. There's the silver option and the gold option, and then there's the platinum option. Right? They're like, "Well, for \$15,000 you could [X, Y, and Z] in Uganda." We were like, "That sounds good." Then they said, "For \$30,000 you could do [*this, this, this, and this*]." Then they said, "For \$60,000, you could plant a church that's going to have a Compassion Project."

Now, what we were thinking we were going to do based on what we were anticipating was the \$15,000 or \$30,000, but we're doing the \$60,000. Let's go! Thank you for helping to plant a church with a Compassion Project in Uganda. Very, very exciting.

I just want to thank you personally, because I get to make a lot of these phone calls, and it's the one time a year I feel like a super-rich person. I just call people and tell them we're going to give them tens of thousands of dollars. I called two of our partners this week. Well, I called them all, and so did some other staff.

We'll tell you more stories, but we called Thomas West, who's in London, who you saw a video of, and we called Jeremy Dager, who's in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Both of them are in a very hard place, and we were able to call them in the first week of the year and say, "Two Cities Church loves you. Here's \$75,000 each for you guys to go further faster as a church." So, I just want to say "Thank you" for your generosity.

Now, that's looking back. I want us to look forward. Grab your ministry plan for a second. (I know, a big intro today. Sorry. A little longer sermon. There's no service afterward. You guys will be okay.) Here it is. This is good language. It's a ministry *plan*. You have to know the difference in your marriage and with your kids between a plan and a promise. They're not the exact same things. A plan is more than a "maybe."

This is the direction we're headed in, and here's what I want you to know. If you open it up, on the left is a letter from me. I want to thank you in advance for both of you who are going to read that letter. That is my attempt to tell you guys the sermon series we're heading toward this year.

We don't normally do this. I'm normally 12 to 18 months ahead in where we're going as a church in the preaching schedule, but we don't normally share it. This year we decided to share it. So, we're going to be in Joshua for about 13 weeks, looking at welcoming and walking in the promises of God. We think that's great as we head toward our building.

Then we're going to be in Ephesians for 16 weeks, looking at how we strengthen the church and strengthen the family. Then, over the summer, we're going to be in Joseph in the book of Genesis, looking at his life and how to walk through suffering, how to deal with difficult family members, and how to learn to forgive and reconcile.

Then, finally, as we really begin to zone in on our future building and transition, we're going to be in the book of Hebrews, because so much is going to be changed, and we want to look at what *doesn't* change, which is the supremacy and the sufficiency of Christ.

Then on the right side, I gave you some of the big key dates. I can't go over all of the dates. You can see that March 4 and 5, J.D. Greear is going to be here. If you don't know who that is, he is the pastor of The Summit Church who helped to plant us. I'm very excited. He's going to be here preaching live all four services.

As well, you're going to see we have a men's and women's event. You go, "Why do the women get two nights?" Because there are more of them. That's why. It's actually going to be the same speaker. It's going to be the exact same talk. We just want to make sure everyone can make it in there.

The reason we're doing a men's and women's night is... We've always believed this, but we're trying to figure out, "How do we address the unique temptations, the unique challenges, and the unique identities of being a man or being a woman?" So, we're excited about that.

Mom, Dad, the reason we put all age and stage ministries and kids' ministries on there is so that you would know... We want you to know six, eight, or nine months in advance where things are happening. We think mission trips, camps, and retreats are important, so we want to remove any barrier, any boundary, or any, dare I say, excuse of why you might not or your kids couldn't be able to. We're letting you know Kids Week eight months in advance so you can be there, be present, and make it a priority.

We're bringing back our prayer nights. Those are very, very special. I hope you'll partake in those this year. Next week, we're starting a 21-day prayer emphasis. If you come next week, instead of getting a plan, you get a whole prayer guide that we're going to walk through. So, it's going to be very, very important.

Then if you flip on the back... Vision always has two components...you know this...whether you're thinking of your family or your business or yourself. It's "Where are we going, and what is my role?" Those are the two questions of vision. So, on the back we just said, "This is what every person..." Really, this is what Christians do, but this is the way we talk about what every person at Two Cities should do.

The first thing we said is *worship in person weekly*. Basically, if you're in town, please be in church. This is a little awkward for anyone watching online, but we don't believe in online church. It doesn't exist. It's not a real thing. Now, there is online content and online ministry and online teaching. There's no such thing as online church. It doesn't exist. So, we're saying, would everybody make being in church, if they're in town, a priority in 2023. That is the priority of *worship*.

Second is the priority of *community*. Would you open up your Bible? Would you open up your life? In other words, what do you have to do to fight for being a part of

meaningful community at Two Cities this year? It might mean you have to try out two or three Community Groups. It might mean you have to get in a different Community Group. It might mean you have to work on your personality. If everywhere you go it smells, maybe you're the one who stinks. Right? "Every group is so hard for me." Okay.

The third priority is the priority of *stewardship*. The priority of stewardship is "How do I leverage the time, the talent, and the treasure God has given me for his glory and the good of others?" Then, finally, it's the principle of *witness*. "Where I live, learn, work, and play, how do I know Christ and make him known? How do I invest in people who are far from God and close to me?"

Some of you have come. You're like, "This is too much for me. I'm not even a part of this church yet." Let me just encourage you. We have the Weekender coming up. Weekender is our on-ramp and inroad into the life of our church. That's going to be January 27 and 28. You'll get to hear about that.

That's a great opportunity. How do you deepen your life? You deepen your life by deepening your commitments. The Weekender is a great place to decide what you want to be committed to. So, let me pray for us, and then we're going to dive into Moses' final sermon in Deuteronomy 30.

Lord, we are so grateful...grateful to celebrate new life in Barry, grateful to celebrate generosity in our church and the ability to help people locally, nationally, and globally. We're excited for where we're headed. Lord, I pray that you would give each of us a picture of the future that produces passion in the present, that you would give us a vision for our personal lives, a vision for our families, a vision for our Community Groups, a vision for our church, and, Lord, maybe for some of us, even give us a vision for our city. We pray this in Christ's name, amen.

All right, guys. We're doing something kind of strange. We're doing a vision weekend. Not all churches do vision weekends. You don't have to do a vision Sunday. You don't have to do a vision sermon. You don't have to do a vision series. I don't even have a Bible verse for this. This is not even something we did the first three years we were here. This is something we've done for the last few years.

Why have we done a vision weekend? It's because we want to end up somewhere on purpose. Everybody ends up somewhere in life. Very few people end up somewhere on purpose. Very few people are focused and fixed and headed in a direction. Most people are floating. I mean, not you, I'm sure, but some people are.

What's interesting here is we're trying to ask the question...*Where do we want to go?* I had a pastor who said, "I think the number-one reason pastors never do a vision

Sunday is if they got up there, they'd have nothing to say." Maybe the reason most dads never have a vision dinner with their family is they have nothing to say.

Do you have a vision for your family? Do you have a vision for whatever little corner of the world God has given you to be a king or queen over? It's like, "All right. This is my responsibility, and this is my home, and this is my neighborhood, and these are my kids, and these are my employees." Do you have a vision?

What I want us to see today is the need for vision. If you'll turn to Deuteronomy 30, I'll meet you there in a minute. In Habakkuk 2:2, there's this really awesome verse on vision where God says to his prophet, "**Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it.**"

I want us to see two things about vision today, and then we're going to go to Deuteronomy 30. Vision is meant to be *plain*. Do you see it right there? "Make it plain..." And vision is meant to be *portable*. "...so that the one who has it can run with it." I want to give you a vision today.

It's not my vision. It's not Two Cities' vision. It's a vision that arises from Scripture. I hope it's going to be plain. In other words, you're going to see it. I hope it's going to be portable. That means it's memorable. Hopefully, maybe, it's emotional, and it's actually something you can take with you, and it works everywhere.

We're going to be in Deuteronomy, chapter 30. In Deuteronomy, chapter 30, Moses preaches his final sermon. In fact, the book of Deuteronomy is the first sermon series in the Bible. Every once in a while, people go, "Sermon series? That's a new idea. I've never been to a church that does sermon series." Moses was the first guy to do a sermon series.

What he does is he basically summarizes Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers into three long sermons that he preaches to simplify and summarize everything that happened, because those are hard books. Some of you have quit your Bible reading in a year right in Exodus, Leviticus, or Numbers. So, he says, "Let me summarize all this." He preaches three sermons.

We're looking at the third sermon. We're going to parachute into Deuteronomy 30. We're looking at the third sermon, and we're halfway through the sermon. This sermon... Let me just tell you where it's going to crescendo, because this is the vision. The climax of this sermon is the vision Moses is going to give us, which is the vision we're going to have this year for each individual.

I'm not giving us today a vision like, "Here's what Two Cities Church, whatever *that* means, is going to do." I'm saying this is what *you're* going to do...*you*, not your

spouse, not your kid. This is what if *you* do... And guess what. If we all do this, then Two Cities Church *did* do this. Here's what it is: *choose life and not death with your daily decisions.*

Now, it sounds kind of silly, because who's going to raise their hand and go, "I chose death"? Actually, here's how Americans think about death. Americans think death is what happens at the end of your life. Most people think, "What I do is I live, and then at some point I die. If I get sick or disabled or I go insane or...I don't know...there are a couple of things at the end of my life where I get in an accident, then maybe I have a several-weeks-to-a-year period in which I'm dying, but for the most part, I live all my life, and then death happens at the very end."

That's not what the Bible teaches. The Bible has a much more sophisticated idea. It talks about life and death as two paths we are on. This is the whole book of Proverbs. The entire book of Proverbs is a dad talking to his son, going, "Hey, listen. There are these two women. They're both beautiful. One is Lady Wisdom. One is Lady Folly. You're going to be attracted to both of them. One is leading you down a path of life. One is leading you down a path of death."

This is the way Jesus talks. "I am the way and the truth and the life." It's the language of the path, which leads to a person. So, what I want to do today is I want each of us to decide if we are going to choose life or choose death. I'm going to use some synonyms for that because it's hard to... What does it mean to choose life and death? How about *this* question: Are you making things better or are you making things worse?

I know you don't want to admit that maybe you're the type of person who has a dark side that doesn't mind making things worse sometimes because it gives you an opportunity to complain. It's not obvious to me that everybody always decides to make things better. It's not obvious to me that everybody wants everything to get better. Do you want things to get better in your marriage? That would be the first step. Do you want things to get better with your mother-in-law? That will be the first step.

01 WE CAN'T CHOOSE LIFE IN OUR OWN STRENGTH (GOSPEL)

We're getting ahead of ourselves. I can't go there yet, because what he's going to do first... In verse 1, Moses is going to do what all good gospel preaching does, which is tell us that we're the problem and we can't fix ourselves. He's going to get to "You have to choose life," but he first needs to tell you you can't choose life in your own strength. I'll show you. Look at verse 1.

"And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you..." You're like, "What is *this* about?" Again, I told you, we're parachuting in. Moses is preaching a sermon, basically telling them, "You're going to get into the Promised Land..."

This is helpful to know, because this is what happens in every generation of Christians. Whenever I drive by and see these beautiful church buildings, I always think the same thing. "Someone paid for that. Like, someone believed. Someone raised money. Why are there seven people there now?"

We know the answer. One generation believes. The next generation assumes. The next generation forgets. The final generation forsakes. We'll get into that next week. You have to work unbelievably hard against that. Like, so hard it has to be on the front of your mind all the time to create first-generation faith. It's so hard to do.

God is saying through Moses, "Guys, here's what's going to happen. You're going to get into the land. You're going to be very prosperous, and then you're going to forget about me." Here's the way *we* would say it, knowing the whole Bible now. He's going to say, "Guys, it's really exciting because the book of Joshua is coming, but then there's the book of Judges."

If you know your Bible, the book of Judges is one of the saddest books, one of the darkest books, in the Bible. So, here's what Moses is saying, and here's what I want you to hear as a weird way to encourage you in the beginning of the year. Moses, basically, in chapters 29 and 30, is going to say the problem with us is not that we don't know what to do; it's that we don't have the power to do it. I'll show you this.

There's a guy named Jacob Needleman. He's not a Christian. He wrote a book a couple of years ago called *Why Can't We Be Good?* He's wrestling with this question. He's not a Christian. He said, "Guys, I don't get it. We have all of the world religions." He doesn't understand that Christianity is unique, and he doesn't understand salvation, but he's like, "Hey, the world religions kind of tell us... I mean, they're different, but ethically, they tell us what to do."

He's like, "Not only that. We have Socrates and Aristotle and Plato. Then we have thousands of years of written-down human history." It's like, "Guys, we know how to do marriage. We know how to raise kids. The problem is not that we don't know what to do; it's that we don't have the power to do it."

In fact, here's another interesting thing. When I took biblical counseling class... I'm not a good counselor, but when I took biblical counseling, my professor taught us a hack of counseling. He said, "Here's a hack in counseling. Sit down. Don't say

anything. Just ask a couple of good questions. Be very, very quiet, and people will do two things.

They will tell you what's wrong with them. I'm not saying in the most convoluted... I'm saying, for the average person, they actually know what's wrong. They'll tell you if you will just be quiet. They'll just tell you." He said, "Here's the other interesting thing: they also know what they need to do." I've found this to be true. Most people know what they need to do; they just don't have the power to do it.

"I need to confess this to my wife, but I don't have the power to do it. I need to confront my son. I need to stop drinking so much." Wouldn't that be amazing if you could just have a conversation with yourself and you would do it? We'd all be in unbelievable shape if we could do that. "All right. Here's what you're going to do this year." None of us can do that. We are terrible bosses, and we are worse employees. That's the relationship we have with ourselves.

He's saying, "You can't do this." So, what he's going to show you... I'll show you this. We need a power outside of us. Look here. ***"...and 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..."***

He's going to talk about repentance, but I want you to go to verse 6. Drop down to verse 6. He says, ***"And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart..."*** He's going to talk about how real change happens, because he's going to tell them to choose life and death, but they can't do it in their own strength.

"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. And the LORD your God will put all these curses on your foes and enemies who persecuted you. And you shall again obey the voice of the LORD and keep all his commandments that I command you today."

Here's what he's saying. Before you can choose life, you need to experience new life in your heart. He uses the language of *circumcised heart*. Now, if you're like me and you know your Bible somewhat well or have heard this before, you may romanticize your heart being circumcised. Guys, this is gross language. We think of it as "It's so beautiful. This is the promise of the new covenant." And you're right.

Ezekiel 36 would be another place where there's this promise. "God is going to circumcise our hearts." Do you guys know what circumcision is? This is always an awkward conversation when your 10-year-old comes in. He usually goes to Mom. "Mom, what's circumcision?" and Mom says, "Ask your dad." We say here, "If you

have any question about circumcision, Pastor Dave or Pastor Caleb would love to talk to you afterward."

Circumcision is painful. It's personal. It's bloody. It's intimate. Circumcision in part says, "I'm going to be involved in the part of your life you don't want me to be involved in. I'm going to be in the closest, most sensitive, most personal areas of your life." Then *heart* is also interesting. Circumcision is this bloody, painful process, and your heart is the center of who you are. It's the sum and center and seat of your emotions, your will, and your reason.

If I could summarize it, here's what God is saying through Moses: "You need to have heart surgery if you're going to obey me." Now, who here wants to have heart surgery? After maybe brain surgery, it's probably the least likely type of surgery we'd want to have. You know, you have to have surgery on your leg. Okay. Arm, okay. Foot, okay. Heart? No, thank you.

We've had a couple of situations in our church where one of the spouses has come and said, "Hey, my wife..." or "My husband needs to have surgery, and he doesn't want to." Have you ever known a couple like that? "He [or she] needs to have surgery, but he doesn't want to." You have to get to the place to go, "My condition is so bad I need to go under the knife." That's not an easy place to get to for people.

Christianity starts with "My spiritual condition is so bad I need heart surgery." This is so helpful to know. Some of the most difficult conversations I've had in my six years of being the pastor here is talking to people who have teenagers who are rebellious. First, because it's very hard to talk to people about their kids.

Have you ever tried to talk to people about their kids? It's hard to talk to even your brother about your nephew or your niece. You're the uncle. You still don't get to talk about them. There's no talking to people about their kids until they're desperate enough to ask you.

Anyway, what happens is there are these kids, and they're rebelling, and they wonder, "Why is my son dating a nonbeliever? Why is he addicted to drugs? Why is he addicted to pornography? Why doesn't he want to come to church? Why doesn't she want to be in Christian community?"

They want to believe during all this that their kid is a Christian, because it brings up a whole bunch of other kinds of questions if you have to say, "My kid isn't a Christian." Normally... It's almost like inception. They have to discover it themselves through conversation. "My daughter is not a Christian. That's the issue." There's a heart change. "She doesn't want to get baptized. I wonder why someone wouldn't..." The issue is they're not a believer. A believer wants to testify to their faith.

"Why are my kids lying to me all the time? Why are they rebelling against me, as a parent?" That's what unbelievers do. That is not what the Spirit of God in somebody makes that person do across time. We're not saying people who have believing kids have perfect kids, but we're saying that, a lot of times, we are just willfully blind, and we won't admit the big problem with our kids is they haven't had the circumcision of the heart.

So, Moses is saying before we can choose life or death or any of these other great things we want for our lives and do New Year's resolutions and not put the resolve in our own will, we need heart surgery.

02 WE NEED THE WORD OF LIFE TO CHOOSE THE WAY OF LIFE

The second thing he says... It's interesting. He says we need something inside of us, and then we need something outside of us. Inside of us is heart surgery. We also would call that being *born again*, experiencing the new birth. The thing outside of us is we need the Word of God. Look at verse 11.

"For this commandment..." Notice he goes from the inside to the outside. ***"For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off."*** That's how the person who's not a believer views the Word of God. One of the ways you can tell if your heart has been circumcised is how you view the Word of God.

I'm a recovering Catholic. When I was a Catholic boy... In eighth grade, they give you a big red Bible. I never read it. It's not that I couldn't read. It's not that I didn't read. I read other books. I didn't have any desire to read the Bible, and when I tried to read the Bible a couple of times, I just found it hard. I found it archaic. I found it confusing. As soon as I became a believer, all I wanted to do was read my Bible, and it became something I could understand.

If someone is reading their Bible and they don't understand it, there might be some questions. First (I'm not being funny here), are you educated? Do you know how to read? Do you know how to put sentences together? It's not easy. A lot of people are afraid of books nowadays. Books are intimidating. So, that would be one question.

The other question would be: Are you really a believer? If you're a believer, you love the Bible. Maybe you need to do an audio Bible, but believers love the Bible, because the Spirit of God inside them, which circumcised their hearts, wrote the Word of God that's outside of them, and when those two meet, it's like lost friends. It's like two magnets.

So, what happens is, he says, the unbeliever thinks the commandment of God is far and hard. This is how the average American views the Bible: "It's primitive. It's archaic. It's outdated. Wasn't it written by a bunch of old, dead guys who had a very small view of the world?"

Look at what he says here. Verse 12: **"It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?'"** He says it's not in heaven. The Word of God is not something you have to go get. The Word of God is something that comes to you.

There are a couple of things... You have to go, "Well, what are the first things you have to believe about God?" It's usually one of two or three things. That he exists, obviously; that he's good; and that he would decide to speak. In fact, what we have, by the way, in Genesis 1 is the speaking God. That's what we have: the God who forfeits his personal privacy to let him be known.

Then he says this. He goes, "You don't have to go to the Word. The Word comes to you," but then look. This is an interesting verse. Verse 13: **"Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?'"** Why does he mention the sea? Well, the sea is a huge part of the story of Israel and the exodus.

What sea is he talking about? The Red Sea. He's saying, "Quit thinking the Word you need is something that happened in the past." Israel always wrestled with wanting to go back under slavery and live in Egypt. I love what I heard one pastor say. He said, "If you want to go back to Egypt, you'd better learn how to swim, because there ain't no splitting the Red Sea on the way back." There are no miracles in rebellion. There are only miracles on your way to the Promised Land in obedience.

So, here's what he says. This is, I think, a challenge to all of us. Verse 14: **"But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it."** All Christians have experienced the new birth, the circumcision of the heart, and then I think what happens is, somewhere along the way, Satan tricks us or discourages us and makes us think we cannot obey the Word of God.

I don't know exactly how it happens. It has something to do with *this*. I think we've overemphasized forgiveness and not emphasized freedom in Christ enough. You can't overemphasize forgiveness. Hear me say this. Here's what I mean. I think a lot of people view 2023, and they think something like this:

"I'm probably going to struggle with the same things I struggled with last year in mostly the same ways, maybe a little less. I'm such a broken, messed-up sinner with this old man or old woman I have to deal with, my own flesh, but thank God for the

cross, because every time I mess up, I'm going to go to the cross, and God is going to forgive me." That's half of the truth, and that's a great truth.

The other truth is Christ died to set you free, and you actually can obey the Word of God. If the Bible tells you to do something, it's going to give you the power to do it if you're a believer. People all the time read the Bible, and it says, "Forgive people," and they think, "Well, not my father." Most people think there's an asterisk next to certain verses, and they flip to the back of the Bible, and there's a picture of them. "You're the exception to this."

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is serious. Yes, that's a sermon to show us our sin, and it's a sermon to be obeyed. I think the transition that happens in a person's life is when they say, "I've experienced new life in Christ, and I actually read the Bible, and I believe that by the power of God I can obey this."

What happened at the Reformation, which I won't get into... It's a long story. The Reformation happened in the 1500s. It was basically the rediscovery of Christianity in Europe. The Gutenberg Press came out at the same time. So, the Catholic Church begins to have all of these sects of Christianity that come out of it. Luther leads one, and Calvin leads one, and all of these other things. Then these communities get their own Bible in their own language.

So we can watch. It's really neat. If you study church history, you can watch the first communities discover the Bible on their own. Like, what did the Lutherans do, and what did the Anabaptists do? Well, when you watch that, the people's lives who really changed and the people who really made an impact were the people who believed the Bible was meant to be obeyed and *could* be.

They were the ones who read it and were like, "Yeah, I think we should do what the book of Acts says. I think we should tell our friends and our neighbors." Have you ever seen somebody radically come to faith in Christ? They start doing all of the things a Christian should be doing, and we try to stop them. "No, no. You don't evangelize at work. Not like that. You don't confess your sins to people like that openly." We start to try to figure out how to live a Christianity that's more palatable.

03 THE CHOICE IS LIFE OR DEATH

He tries to set all this up to tell us one thing in verse 15, and here it is: "***See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil.***" There it is. I picked this, in part, because it's getting us ready for Joshua. I picked it, in part, because could you pick any two bigger themes than life and death?

Psychologists who study life and death basically say that half of your life you're fighting for life, and half of your life you're fighting against death, as a general rule. Until you're about 40 or 45 years old, you're trying to build life. "I need to get married. I need to find a career. I need to make some money. I need to have some kids." It's life, life, life, life.

Then you get in your mid-40s to 50s, and you start thinking, "How long am I going to do this? I should probably retire. I wonder if my kids are going to have kids. I wonder if I'm going to get sick like my mother got sick." You start to have all of these end-of-life questions. So, the first part of your life you deal with life a lot, and the last part of your life you deal with death a lot.

Well, what are life and death? Biblically, there are four types of life in Scripture. I know this is deep, but it's good to know. Paul says you have this *present life*. That's your biological life. We don't know how long this present life is for each person, but the Bible says your present life is very, very short.

Then the Bible says Christians have *eternal life*. Eternal life happens not when you die, but when you believe. A lot of people think, "I want to die and have eternal life." If you're a Christian, you already have eternal life. Eternal life, Jesus says, happens the moment a person believes.

There's *resurrection life*. That's different. *Resurrection life* is what happens when you die and go to heaven or are in the new heavens and new earth and are in your new body. Then Jesus gives us a fourth type of life in John 10:10: the *abundant life*. All Christians in this room have eternal life, but how many Christians in this room would say they feel like they genuinely, in 2022, lived the abundant life? I think the abundant life is when you choose life.

What is life? It seems to be, according to *this* passage, choosing the good...choosing good words, choosing good works. It seems to be a commitment to growth. Things that are alive grow. But how about death? Let's just compare it to death. We live in a culture of death right now in America. Where is the least safe place to live in America? In your mother's womb, not in the inner city of Chicago. There is a more dangerous place to live: your mother's womb.

The most innocent, youngest, silent, and most vulnerable people in our society can be killed legally. That's a culture of death at the beginning of life. How about suicide? Do you know suicide is now considered a leading cause of death for Americans? Last year, close to 50,000 people took their own lives. That's one person every 11 minutes. What is really interesting, when I read the studies this week, is that 1.2 million Americans *tried* to kill themselves last year.

Most suicides, thank God, are not "successful." Particularly, most women who try to kill themselves are not successful. Men are much more violent in how they'll kill themselves. Women try to take pills, and oftentimes it doesn't work. Then, at the end of life, there's assisted suicide and euthanasia. At the beginning of life, throughout life, and at the end of life, we have a culture of death.

Now what is death? How do you define death? Anytime you go against God's decree or God's design, you're going down the path of death. You'll see this. God has a design for sexuality, and God has a design for marriage. People go, "What about cohabitation?" That's not part of God's design. Here's what you're saying when you cohabit: "I am willing to try you out, and I'm okay for you to try me out, and we can get out of this if either of us finds a better person."

Whether you know that's what you're saying, that is 100 percent what cohabitation says. Now we have all the science. I love when science catches up to the Bible. Couples that cohabit are more likely to get divorced. Things do not go well the farther you get from God's original design for something. God has a design for the family: one man, one woman, one lifetime, raising kids in the fear, encouragement, and admonition of the Lord.

Have you ever been in a home where Mom and Dad love each other and know how to discipline their children and encourage them? It is about the most life-giving place you can go. Whenever you go to that home, you're like, "Can I live here? Do you have a little closet under the stairs, like where Harry Potter lived? I'll live there." That's how you feel in those homes.

Have you ever been to a home where everybody is lying all the time, where there's hiding and hypocrisy? You walk into the home, and you can almost... I don't know if it's spiritual or if it's psychological. You can almost feel it, because Mom told everybody, "There are five things we don't talk about when other people come over." You walk in, and there's an elephant in the corner, there's a snake under the rug, and there's a skeleton in the closet.

The farther we get from God's design, the more it leads to death and destruction. Another way to think about death... In relationships, death is always that which creates distance. Death is separation. It's to be separated from your soul, your body and soul. That's what happens at death. It's to be separated from God, eternal death. It's to be separated from loved ones when you die.

So, death is that which creates distance. How many of you are making decisions in your marriages or with your kids that are creating distance? Let me give you four categories where I think we choose life or death, because he says, "Choose life and good or death and evil."

I think the first category where we choose this is in our *words*. This is very biblical. The Bible says (this is a proverb), "***Death and life are in the power of the tongue...***" Are you a life-giver with your words? Do you understand how powerful words are? You saw the video. I've hung out with Barry twice. Both times he told me that story of his friend telling him he has a servant heart.

I've told you this before. People need so much encouragement in life, and they get so little encouragement. People have so few people in their life. If they didn't have a good dad or good mom, they have so few people in their life who ever tell them anything encouraging about themselves. Are you a person who uses your words...? The Bible says in Ephesians 4 to be an architect with your words. That's the Greek word.

I am somebody who uses my words to build instead of to break down. Most of us, over time, use our words more for death. Gossiping is a form of death. It's "I will kill your reputation slowly and publicly." Gossip is when we confess other people's sins. The Bible says it's great to confess your sins. The Bible says it is not your job to confess other people's sins.

For some of us, it's belittling. For some of us, it's just never saying anything. You just got back from Thanksgiving. You just got back from Christmas. How many things did you see in your family or your extended family that are an absolute mess, and you said nothing? Except when you got into your car, and then you told your wife or your husband. Wrong person, or at least not the only person.

How many things, we just watch people... It's like we're watching a car accident happen. We're like, "I know where this leads, and I'm not going to say anything, because I'm so afraid of how you're going to respond to me if I bring this up."

The second area is in our *finances*. Finances are a gift. We've told you this before. The Bible teaches that there's the godly rich and the ungodly rich, and there's the godly poor and the ungodly poor. I don't have time to break down all four of those categories, but I will say that I have watched, again and again and again, mostly men... Women do this too, but women tend to wake up more in their 30s and realize money isn't everything. Men, a lot of times, don't wake from that spell.

I've seen men make so many foolish decisions when they see money as the only dimension of their lives. Their wife is dying. "Could you work a little bit less, and could we take a little bit more vacation?" It's all reasonable requests, and the guy is like, "No, I can't. I can't." It's like, "You can't? Your kids are dying here."

"It's too expensive."

"Is it? Because your other hobbies and habits that you have are kind of expensive, but you have no problem doing them."

What happens is men, especially, see only the dimension of finances. This is why you'll see guys who are very, very successful... There's nothing wrong with being very, very successful, but then you look... This isn't always, but at least half the time, when I meet somebody who's very successful, it doesn't take me long to see what it cost them to be that successful.

It's like, "Oh, you're on your fourth marriage, and your adult children hate you, and you're unhealthy, and you're addicted. One dimension of your life is doing well to the exclusion of the other five to seven dimensions of your life that are important."

Thirdly, it's in our *relationships*. You know this. Your life is only as good or bad as your closest relationships. What does it look like to choose life in your marriage? To say, "We're going to work on this. I'm going to be a husband who serves and sacrifices and lays down his life and loves you" and "I'm going to be a wife who responds in submission and respect, and together we're going to build a family. We're going to keep short accounts, and we're going to forgive one another."

What does it mean to choose life with your kids? I've told you this before, but I don't think we talk enough about the pleasures of parenting. We joke about the burdens of waking up in the morning and, oh, how difficult. You can have the best relationship possible with your kids if you want it. You're going to know them all your life.

If you will prioritize them, if you will pay attention to them, if you will be very careful, you can have the best relationship with your children, better than you can have with any one of your friends and, potentially, almost anybody else you will ever meet in life. No one tells people this, but you have to choose it. You have to pursue it.

Finally, your *health*. How many of us are choosing a slow suicide with our health? I mean, the way you eat and drink is self-destructive. Your wife said something to you or your husband said something to you. The way you self-medicate... I'm convinced that most people use the last three to five hours of their day, so, their night... If you don't have kids, it's from 5:30 or 6:00 on. If you have kids, it's from 8:00 or 9:00 or when they go to bed.

Most people use the last three to five hours of their night not to build their life but to try to escape their life through drinking a ton, through watching six episodes of some show they've already seen, through mindlessly scrolling social media next to their husband or wife who's mindlessly scrolling social media, not connecting with one another.

Well, here's how Moses ends. Verse 16: ***"If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live..."*** A picture of life. ***"...and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it."***

Verse 17: ***"But 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."*** A picture of death. ***"You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess."***

Verse 19: ***"I call heaven and earth to witness against you today..."*** One more time, he kind of begs them. ***"...that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live..."*** One of the things you realize is that your life matters a lot more than you probably want it to. The choices you make...especially you, Dad...have a huge influence on your kids.

Some of you need to go, "I need to start choosing life right now so that in my family there's a legacy and a lineage of choosing life and not death." Some of you can look back, and you're like, "My dad and my mom... Ten years before the divorce, there was just the decision of death and distance and destruction."

You can look back on some addiction (the biblical word for *addiction* is *slavery*) that someone in your family had and how it has influenced and affected. I mean, I can look back at this in *my* family, generations back, and stories I've been told about people back in my family and how it affected people.

So, here's what I want to ask you as we close: Do you want things to get better or do you want things to get worse in your life? Do you want things to get better in your marriage? I'm not sure everybody does. I've heard stories before where someone finds out their husband was doing something or their wife was doing something, and about half of them to 25 percent of them are glad, because they weren't really into the relationship, and maybe this gives them a way out.

Do you want things to get better at your workplace? Maybe you don't, because then maybe your boss will get credit. Maybe you kind of are mad at the whole company and the whole structure, and you don't want to do your job very well. Do you want things to get better with your kids? Sometimes you don't. No one wants to admit that maybe they can be mad at their own kids.

Your kid hasn't been listening, and now he's an adult, and maybe you'd like to see his or her life... There's a dark part of you that would like to see him fail so that he realizes he's going in the wrong direction. The posture of the circumcised heart is "I would like things to get better."

Could you walk into your master bedroom and say, "Whatever represents this room, I'd like things to get better in here"? Here's what happens. As soon as you say that, a bunch of things are going to come to your mind that you're going to need to do. That's how you know you're thinking about this biblically.

If you're thinking, "I want things to get better. Here's what my wife needs to do," then you're not thinking about it rightly. If you walk into your bedroom and say, "I'd like things to get better," I know what's going to happen, because it has happened to me. Here's what's going to happen: then things about you are going to have to change.

It's going to be the worst things about you that you still love that need to change. You're like, "I'd like to be a better dad." When my kids are really young, here's what this means: I'm going to need to spend more time with them on the ground doing things they want to do. This is a biblical principle. I have to go to them because they can't come to me.

If you want things to get better in your finances, you're going to have to make decisions. I'm asking everyone today to start aiming up, to no longer aim down, to aim up. Now, why do people not aim? We know why people don't aim. People don't aim because they're afraid they're going to miss and because as soon as you aim, you actually create the conditions in which you could fail.

Say you said, "We're going to do devotions every day as a family." Great. You just created how much of a failure you could be, because then you're like, "We did it three times this week." But here's what happens if you don't aim. If you don't aim, then you fail all the time. I've seen this. If you don't aim, you fail all the time, and then you don't realize it until you're, like, 50.

Then you're like, "Oh my gosh! I've been failing for 20 years, but I kept it so I didn't see it, and then it was too much, and it overwhelmed me all at one time." So, here's where you start. You start with the things you do every day. The things that repeat every day are the most important things in your life. Would you choose life over death? Would you aim up and not down? Would you choose to make things better and not worse? Let's pray.

Lord, we thank you for the gospel. The gospel is the picture of life and death. It is actually the upside-down, inside-out picture that, Jesus, you, the author and perfecter of our faith, the author and sustainer of life, the living God, died, chose death,

embraced death, so that dead sinners like me could come alive, dead sinners like us could be made alive, Lord.

One of the things we realize is when we decide we're going to walk on the path of life, it often feels like death. It often feels like self-sacrifice. Lord, would you give us the strength to just choose one area of our lives where we need to say, "I'm going to choose life and not death"?

Lord, when we get into our car, when we go into our home, when we walk into our neighborhood, when we walk into our office, would you by grace give us this thought? "Lord, I'm aiming at making things better according to what the Bible says. Would you give me the grace to do it?" Lord, give us this vision. We believe if this happens, that type of mentality and heart is the type of mentality that changes families, churches, and cities. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.