

# God's Promise of Freedom

Presented by Pastor Scott Walters on 02/16/20

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The scripture today, written after the time of Moses, is said to be part of a long sermon Moses delivered to the Israelites right before they crossed over the River Jordan into the Promised Land. Moses lays out their choices. But he points to something other than the choice between physical life and physical death.

Pay attention to Torah, to the law that was given on Sinai, and live. Or ignore that law, ignore all of those instructions; in other words, turn away from Yahweh, and die.

These are the people who have been rescued from slavery in Egypt and who have spent long years wandering the desert. They have grumbled at times. They have been joyful at others. They have been rebellious. They have been doubtful in some weeks and hopeful in others.

They aren't that different from you and me: sometimes grumbling, sometimes joyful, sometimes rebellious, sometimes doubtful, and sometimes hopeful. There they stand, at the edge of the River Jordan, about to achieve their goal of crossing over into this land they've been dreaming about or maybe about to find out who their next pastor will be or about to leave for college or about to have surgery or buy a house or have a child or start a new job or get married or end a relationship.

They are standing at a precipice, and Moses reminds them they've got two ways to go—either toward life or toward death. Follow all God's commandments, Torah, law: life. Go the other way: death.

These are scary words when we really think about them, because you and I both know how hard it is to be faithful. We try. And we are successful to a point. But to be completely faithful, to turn away from the multitude of gods in our lives, is so overwhelming that we sometimes even forget to try. Others of us don't know how to start. I do really, really well every single morning—for at least five minutes.

It's hard to be obedient and faithful. We're a stiff-necked people. We chafe under laws. Especially when we don't know what's next.

Frederick Buechner says, "We often make the mistake of thinking that God's laws are like speed limit signs—they are just arbitrary hoops God has decided people should jump through. But as the people of God, we need to be reminded that God's laws are like gravity. They are guidelines and rules that God gave—kind of like an owner's manual for life on earth. They describe how things are.

And all in all, you will be far better off in life if you respect the law of gravity—when dealing with hammers, ladders, staircases, and the edges of cliffs."

It's the same with God's law for the Israelites. That law is meant for safety, health, and the well-being of individuals but also the well-being and health of all of society.

Loving-kindness to those closest to us and to the stranger. Attention paid to how we make decisions about money and what we buy and how those decisions affect community. Replacing the many violences within our hearts with peace, love, a sense of shalom. Being attentive to our own narcissism and aware about how much space we take up. Using well the gifts we have—gifts of service, talents, skills, time—not just for ourselves but for others, too. Covenantal understanding of social relationships.

One author spoke of "leaning toward" the right decisions, God's decisions. Maybe instead of being overwhelmed by how hard it is to be faithful and obedient to God's laws, perhaps we can just decide to practice and, as we do, to nurture our desire to be faithful.

Perhaps as we practice, we get better at "leaning toward" the right choice—and "leaning toward"

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life.

Thomas Merton, Catholic monk, wrote a prayer that speaks to this same desire to be faithful. But his prayer also lifts up the difficulty of knowing if we are on the right path.

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost, and in the shadow of death, I will not fear, for you are ever with me and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Each day we are given multitudes of choices for life and for death, to lean toward God or to lean away. The desire is within most of us, but it requires paying attention and perhaps slowing down for a bit so that we can pay attention. Time each evening or every morning to look back and take stock. Or maybe just time set aside each week to look back. Choosing life is a minute-by-minute, day-by-day process.

When it all seems overwhelming or too big, or when you feel like a failure because you can't seem to choose life all of the time and you know you've hurt someone with your words or dismissals or impatience know that forgiveness is promised, because you are God's child and God has set before you a choice that leads to life.

God is standing on that path, just a little bit ahead of where you are, beckoning you, encouraging you, to keep taking steps, one at a time, toward life. Amen.