

Whom Will You Serve?

Deut. 30:11-20

The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA

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“Stephen Lungu clutched his bag of gasoline bombs tightly as he and his fellow gang members approached the large gathering inside the tent. It was just before 7 p.m. and a huge crowd had gathered to hear the Gospel. Stephen was the leader of a gang intent on stirring up trouble against the white government of pre-independence Zimbabwe. Tonight, they planned to blow up the evangelistic meeting. “I want everyone inside that tent to die,” Stephen told his gang friends. “At 7 p.m. I will whistle and everybody throw their stones and gasoline bombs into the tent entrance.”

Since he was several minutes early, Stephen stepped into the tent to listen. He was an angry and lonely young man, abandoned at the age of seven by his mother and left to fend for himself in the streets of Harare. His father remarried and moved away. Stephen was illiterate and slept under a bridge, scavenging food out of trash cans in the rich white neighborhoods.

Stephen was captivated by what he was hearing. A girl from Soweto, South Africa, told of forgiveness and how Jesus had transformed her life. Then a preacher from Zambia spoke about the wages of sin being death.

Stephen was being confronted with a choice: continue in his life of hatred, anger, violence and chaos, or choose life.¹

The nation of Israel was faced with making that same choice. Moses had led them out of slavery in Egypt. They had wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, as the Lord God led them by a pillar of fire at night and a pillar of cloud by day. At this point they were camped beside the Jordan River. Moses, who was 120 years old by then, reviewed God’s covenant with the Israelites and gave them final instructions. Soon Joshua would take leadership of the people as they entered the Promised Land.

Moses told the Israelites, “See, I set before you life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to Him, and to keep His commands, decrees and law; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.”

God gives each of us that choice! And because we live *after* the resurrection of Christ, we know the full meaning of “life and prosperity!” Because of Jesus’ death on the cross, “life” is eternal. It is being part of the kingdom of God. Life includes forgiveness from sin, being adopted into the family of God, release from guilt, the blessings promised in the beatitudes: of being comforted, being filled with righteousness, receiving mercy, seeing God. Life brings the gift of the Holy Spirit, who enables us to obey.

And the alternative? Death and destruction. Separation from God. The absence of all that is good. Eternal punishment for your sins, with no release from the guilt. Life with no meaning or purpose. Perhaps temporary pleasures, of wealth, or fame, or success, but then eternal death.

Moses was so used to the Israelites whining excuses that he chastised them: “What I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven... it is not across the sea...” Understanding the Bible does not require special degrees or years of theological education. Believing what God says and living according to His commands is not beyond their understanding. Moses reminded them, “The Word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.” The Word of God, the Bible, is within reach and available to help you walk in obedience.

We must make the choice between life and prosperity, or death and destruction. **What do we need to do to choose life?**

Moses said: “For I command you today (1) to love the LORD your God, (2) to walk in obedience to Him, and (3) to keep his commands, decrees, and laws.”

1. First, If you want to choose life, then **love the LORD your God**. Jesus called that “The Great Commandment” – *“to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.”*

Make it a priority to spend time with the LORD in prayer, worship and becoming familiar with God’s words and actions. God communicates to us through the Bible. What are God’s likes and dislikes? His values? What plans does God have for His people? How does God express His love for you? Realizing how much God loves you will help your love for him to grow.

I hope you have been blessed with knowing someone who loves the Lord this way, whose face lights up at the mention of his name, who radiates joy and peace even in the face of suffering, illness, or aging. I hope you know someone who is able to make you feel loved simply because they have such assurance of the Father’s love for them that His love overflows onto everyone around them. We are to love the Lord like that.

Choose life by loving God.

2. Second, Choose life by walking in His ways.

What are His ways? The Bible will show you! Turn to Psalm 145 & 146.

The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love.

The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.

The LORD is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made.

He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets prisoners free, the LORD gives sight to the blind,

The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down,

The LORD loves the righteous.

The LORD watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.

Jesus Christ is the perfect example of one who walked in the ways of the Lord. He gave us a summary in the Beatitudes of what it means to walk in God’s ways. Jesus taught: *Blessed are those who are poor in spirit, who mourn, who are meek, who hunger and thirst for righteousness, who are merciful, pure in heart, and peacemakers*ⁱ. Jesus also spoke of the reward of eternal life for those who fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed strangers, clothed the naked, visited the sick and those in prison.ⁱⁱⁱ

Merely knowing what the Bible says about God’s ways is not enough. Howard Hendricks, in his excellent book “Living by the Book,” wrote, “You can *know* and not *grow*. The Bible was written not to satisfy your curiosity, but to help you conform to the image and likeness of Jesus Christ.”^{iv}

Therefore, Choose life by walking in His ways.

3. Third, we are commanded to keep God's commands, decrees, and laws. This is where the challenge really increases, especially in the face of our 21st century culture and the increase in selfishness and anarchy.

God's laws in Exodus and Leviticus and Deuteronomy are intended to protect God's people from the threat of murder, kidnapping, or being sold into slavery. People are to be secure from slander and false accusations, or from excessive punishment for crimes. Personal property is protected; and every worker is to receive the fruit of his labors. The Marriage relationship is not to be violated. No one is to be oppressed or exploited. Women are to be protected from abuse. Everyone shall have a fair trial in court. No one is above the law, not even the king. God's people are to keep all his commands, laws and decrees, for the welfare of the society and the health of the nation.

It is true that Christians are saved by faith, not by works. We cannot earn righteousness. It is impossible for us to please God by our own efforts. But our faith in Christ, our love for Jesus, results in our obedience. In the Gospel of John Jesus taught his disciples several times, *"If you love me, you will obey what I command. If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. Whoever hears my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me."*^v

It *will be tough* trying to follow in God's ways and to live according to his commands, but we are called to do it.

In Deuteronomy 30:19 &20 God repeats: *This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.*

Moses chose life, in spite of 40 years of wandering through the wilderness trying to lead thousands of grumbling, complaining, disobedient Israelites.

Joshua & Caleb chose life, as the only spies willing to trust God over against the challenges of occupying the Promised Land.

King Solomon chose life, and was rewarded not just with the gift of wisdom, but with riches and long life as well.

Daniel chose life, refusing to pray only to Darius, King of the Medes & Persians. Although he was thrown into the lion's den for his disobedience, Daniel was protected by God and lived.

Joseph chose life, refusing to commit adultery with his master's wife. He was thrown into prison on false charges, which eventually led to his becoming the chief advisor to the Pharaoh of Egypt.

So now, what about Stephen Lungu? Which did he choose?

As the tent meeting continued, the preacher from Zambia described Jesus Christ – who he was and what he had done. "Suddenly I began to understand what Christianity was all about," said Stephan. "It was for someone like me! I could identify with this Jesus. He had suffered in all the ways that I knew so well. Poverty, oppression, hunger, thirst, loneliness. I had known all of these, and so had he..."

As Stephan went forward to the preacher, his gang members got tired of waiting. They went ahead and threw their stones and gasoline bombs, and people stampeded out of the tent into the surrounding fields. Stephan poured out his anguish to the preacher, who stayed and listened. Stephan prayed and surrendered his life to Christ. He began preaching and evangelizing the very next day.

By 2004, more than 40 years later, Stephan had learned to read and write, had gone to Bible college, and had worked his way up until he was Senior Team Leader of African Enterprise, an international ministry focused on evangelizing the major cities of Africa.^{vi}

Stephan chose life. He loved God. He learned to walk in His ways. As much as possible, he kept God's commands, decrees and laws.

Take some time today to think about your life and your faith. I know that we have plenty of excellent classes and Bible studies taking place here at Church of the Covenant on a regular basis.

Is what you are learning changing your life?

Are you putting that knowledge into action?

Do you love the LORD your God with all your heart & soul & mind & strength?

Are you able to walk in obedience to Him?

Are you trying to apply his commands, decrees and laws as you live your life?

*Choose life, so that you and your children may live
and that you may love the Lord your God,
listen to his voice,
and hold fast to him,
for the LORD is your life, ...*

ⁱ "Street Kid to African Leader", www.urbana.org/great-cloud-of-witnesses/street-kid-to-african-leader , by Jamie Morrison

ⁱⁱ Matthew 5:3-12

ⁱⁱⁱ Mt 25:34-40

^{iv} Hendricks., p. 22

^v John 14:15, 23, 21

^{vi} Intersity Urbana website, <https://urbana.org/blog/stephen-lungu> which was based on: Lungu, Stephen, with Anne Coomes, *Out of the Black Shadows – The Amazing Transformation of Stephen Lungu* (London & Grand Rapids, Michigan: Monarch Books, 2001)