

God's Experiment
Matthew 4:12-17
Series On Themes In The Bible
Archibald Wallace

This morning, before you reached this room, you made hundreds of choices. Whether to get up or not, what to wear, what to eat, whether you would come to church or not! Every day is loaded with choices, so is life: somewhere in life you had to decide where you would work, where you would live, who would you date, who would you marry, would you have children. Some of our choices are mundane, some are life changing, some we never even make—we just put it off, and that is a decision. God created us in God's image. We are a decision making machine, just like God. His were on a different level, but God too made choices, millions of them—from whether to have mosquitos or not or what to do about the destiny of the human creature, the one made in God's image.

God could have made us robots, designed to follow God, designed not to think, designed just to react to whatever stimulus God might send our way, but God didn't do that.. God created us like Him; He gave us the ability to think and to choose and to be as different from each other as we could possibly imagine. Giving us the ability to make decisions was a risky experiment. What if we chose the wrong thing or just decided to put off choosing?

Today, this idea of choosing brings us to another great theme in the Bible, one found from beginning to end. It is the theme of freedom, our freedom, our free will, and it makes us ask whether we really have free will or not, and if we do, what is it? I come out a little different from our founding father—John Calvin, but not too far. And, in order to fully answer the question of whether we have free will, or freedom, or not, we are going to have to take a walk at some theological concepts, like God's omniscience---the belief that God knows everything, the past, the present and the future, so God must know our choices, and if God knows our choices, do we really have a choice. And, there's a second theological excursion—often misinterpreted, the concept of predestination. The thinking that God chooses some but not others, and since we are in one category or the other, everything is fixed. That;s not ight and many call it fatalism—that old whatever will be will be concept.

So today, we could have chosen a lot of passages, but I want us to look at two places, two events recorded, events I submit, speak to this issue of our freedom. The first involves Joshua and a time near the end of his life. Let's listen for God's word for us from Joshua 24:14-21

Joshua 24

- 1 Then Joshua assembled all the tribes of Israel at Shechem. He summonsed the elders, leaders, judges and officials of Israel and they presented themselves before God.
- 2 Joshua said to all of the people, "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says:
(Then he recited all that God had done for Israel; when he finished headed this personal note)
- 14 Now, fear the Lord and serve Him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your ancestors worshipped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord.
- 15 But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then **choose** for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household,

- we will serve the Lord.
- 16 Then the people answered, "Far be it from us to forsake the Lord to serve other gods!
- 17 It was the Lord our God himself who brought us and our parents up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we travelled.
- 18 And the Lord drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites who lived in this land. We too will serve the Lord because He is our God.
- 19 Joshua said to the people, "(But if) You are not able to serve the Lord, (Remember) He is a Holy God! He is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins.
- 20 If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you."
- 21 But the people said to Joshua, "NO, we will serve the Lord."

THE WORD OF THE LORD!

The Joshua story of choice happened a long time after the time of Adam and Eve. Remember, Adam and Eve had a choice, obey God, don't eat the fruit of one tree. They could choose to do what God asked or not. And they chose not. Most theologians call this act, this decision to eat the forbidden fruit, original sin. Some even say it dictates that all of us will be sinners, that it is inbred in us. Because our first parents ate and disobeyed and sinned, therefore we who came from them are sinners. But think what this suggests: that all of us are doomed because of that sin, unless God does something else. That's just not right.

The Bible is full of situations where someone or some group had to choose—the big choice was God or not God, or if stated another way —not choosing God was sin. The story of Joshua's farewell is a story of choice. Joshua was telling Israel's leaders they must choose: either God, the real, the one and only God, or the things of their own making —the gods they had carved out of stone or brought from home centuries before, or maybe even the gods we like, the god of the river, the god of the weekend, the god of gossip, the god of hating those who don't agree with. Joshua told them that choosing God or not was fixed, they could say no, but if they said yes, they better mean it. Joshua was telling them: it wasn't decided for them. It wasn't inevitable. They weren't robots. They had to choose. Choose! Joshua thundered. But if you choose and then turn your back on that choice, it will be doom! So, be careful what you choose, But choose!

Let's go back to the beginning. Adam and Eve could choose. It wasn't all set and fixed.

Noah could have told God he didn't want to build an ark. Moses could have stayed in Midian and left the tribe of Israel in Egypt. Peter could have kept fishing. Lazarus could have stayed in the tomb. On and on, every person, even the country Israel, had to choose.

The Calvin approach dealt with his idea of God's grace and his reasoning that choice made us part of the equation of salvation, and that flew against his notion that salvation is totally God's gift to us, so man really didn't have a choice. God had done it for us. Predestination is what he called it. The fall of Adam took away real choice from us.

Presbyterians and Lutherans have been identified by this fatalistic interpretation of the fall by Adam and Eve. God gives us grace. We don't get to really choose. But that interpretation and that labeling of us is wrong. It is true that God has chosen some from before birth to carry out God's will. No question. But what predestination means is wrapped up in the words of Jesus in John 3:16

- 16 For God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believed in him would not perish, but have everlasting life.

True predestination is that God chosen the world, all, predestined that all might be in relationship with Him. That is the grace. God gave his son to the world. God gave salvation to the world. We can't earn it, no matter how "good " we are, But we do have a part. We have to believe. We have to make that choice. Jesus said God gave salvation to those who believed in what Jesus was saying, to those who believed in Christ. If we believe – it's our choice. The gift of salvation has been given. It was there at creation and it has been a theme repeated in every generation and brought to its highest pinnacle in Christ.

Maybe you need more convincing about this choice thing, this free will idea. In Matthew 4:12-17, Jesus addresses choice. Let's listen for god's word again.

- 12 When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee.
13 Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulon and Naphtali
14 to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah:
15 "Land of Zebulon and land of Naphtali, the way of the Sea beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles
16 the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned."
17 From that time on Jesus began to preach,
""Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come close.

THE WORD OF THE LORD!

Mark also speaks of Jesus' first sermon and in Mark 1:14, he quotes Jesus as saying:

"The time has come. The Kingdom of God has come near.
Repent and believe the Good News."

Both Gospels record Jesus' first sermon as having as its theme:" Repent, Change! Turn back to God!" If it's fixed and we have no decision to make, why would Jesus preach in essence the same thing Joshua called on Israel to do: Choose! Decide! It's up to you. The Kingdom of God, which you can see in Jesus, has come near. God has shed His grace on the world through Jesus. God has given us life, if we will but believe in Him. The choice is ours. It's not a done-deal.

There were others who took up Jesus' call to choose:

Peter at Pentecost called on the people watching the events of Pentecost to repent in Acts 2:38, and on that day over 3000 chose.

Paul tells us that in his missionary journeys in Acts 26:20, "I preached that they should repent."
Paul said choose!

The risen Christ in Revelation 2:5 tells the church at Ephesus: 'Consider how far you have fallen! Repent, and do the things you did at first!'

The Old Testament prophets preached "Repent," over and over, saying we are delivering a message from God. For example, Ezekiel writes in 18:32, "God says, Repent and you will live." Moses in Deuteronomy 30:19, just before he left them on the edge of the promised land said, "Now choose life, so that you and your children might live."

Over and over: Choose! Repent!

Any doubt now?

So, what will it be? Will you choose the gods of your own making, will you worship objects and things and places of your own making? Or, will you choose God. Moses got it right in saying, choose God and live, but if you don't, God will let you go. This idea of choosing means God was taking a big chance with us. What if we said no? God knows that many will not choose to be in relationship with Him, that many will ignore the call, and instead choose eternal separation from God, or the second death as the Bible describes it. God's great experiment in creating us with the ability to choose God and life or to say no or to pass by on the other side of the street or to ignore God's call, puts God's creation at risk. I can't imagine creating a creature that could reject me! But God did. God wants us to be together, forever, but God will not make us do it.

The choice is ours, each one of us has that opportunity, God has made life possible, God has shed His grace upon us in giving us a chance at life. And, God has done everything possible so we won't miss this gift and this choice. God chose Abram through whom God developed a people who would tell the world about God. God then commissioned Abraham's family, called Israel, to take God to the world and to bring the world to God. God repeatedly sent prophets to remind Israel to get back to work, to repent. God even sent His son, the Christ to take God's Good News to the world. God's gift of grace, of life has been given and taken to the world, and Jesus trained disciples and sent them, and those apostles trained disciple and sent them, and now we are the apostles.

So, you have a choice --- free will--will you go? Will you say yes to God's call? We are not robots. We have to choose and what we decide matters.