

Choose Life

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[0 : 00] Please remain standing for the reading of God's Word. I hope this is working. Amen.

I'm going to read from the passage I will primarily focus on, which is in the book of Jonah, chapter 4. And it says this, But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.

And he prayed to the Lord, and he said, O Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee to Tarshish, for I knew that you are a gracious God, a merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.

Therefore now, O Lord, take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.

And the Lord said, Do you do well to be angry? The Word of the Lord. Please be seated. Amen. I'm going to pray as a cantor here today.

[1 : 48] So let's pray. May the words of my mouth bring you praise.

May the songs that we sing be pleasing with your love and grace. May the things, O Lord, that I choose to say bring glory, not shame, to your name today.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts bring you praise.

Amen. Amen. I don't know if we'll have all our slides together here today, but we'll give it a try.

The title of my slide, you would see, is from my sermon this morning. It's called Choose Life. Life here now and life eternal.

[3 : 15] Choose life. So I'm going to give you some background as to how and why I came to this title looking at a passage in Deuteronomy and then a passage in Romans.

And then I want to focus on that someone that you are quite familiar with that I just read to you, the Prophet Jonah. I should tell you that I'm going to very briefly touch upon a very sensitive and important issue during this sermon.

An issue that some of you have had some direct experience with and some of you have not. So if you have any concerns, if this is too much for you, please do what you need to do.

An issue that I'm going to talk about is not often preached about, but as a pastoral counselor, this issue is one that I've had to deal with in some form or fashion for several years now.

I'm talking about suicide. Oh, what a happy subject to begin the new year with. In the Gospel of John, chapter 10, Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, tells us that he is the only true and good shepherd.

[4 : 34] He has laid down his life for his sheep. The good shepherd knows his sheep. Everyone else who has sought to make that claim is a thief and a robber.

They bring only death, but Jesus brings life. He said in John 10, the thief comes only to steal and to kill and destroy.

I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. We live in a culture that seems to want to celebrate death.

It's violent. It's unforgiving. It's destructive. We drug ourselves to death. We sell our souls on social media. We break our vows of love and marriage, even friendships.

We kill our unborn children. And some of us kill ourselves. So I'm glad, I'm glad you're here today in 2020, because some people are not.

[5 : 43] Not because of COVID, not because of accidents, not because of acts of nature, but because when given life and death, they chose death.

Why choose death? You see those names? Perhaps, if you don't, maybe you know these people, maybe you don't.

Some of them are very famous, but they're not with us. Some had reasons, they thought.

Depression, financial loss, troubles in marriage, a bad health report.

Maybe you think those are legitimate reasons. Someone like this dear doctor was so overwhelmed what was going on in her job that with all of her understanding, she decided to end her days at age 49.

There's more here you should know about. the suicide data in this country says, and this is from 19 here. You won't read, I won't read all of this, but just so that you know, there are at least over 47,000 people just in this past two years who have taken this action.

[7 : 13] it's the second leading cause of death for people who are from 10 to 14. The fourth leading cause of death for people between just 35 and 40.

A lot of young people are missing life here. And maybe you've never thought about this, but at least 10 million Americans have certainly thought about it.

Over a million have actually attempted and this is just those that report. At least 50 plus percent of people in America have some ways been affected by this issue.

I buried a few suicide victims in my 41 years of ministry. The most recent was a young boy who was involved in this church.

Maybe you remember. And there was also an active serviceman who was only 27 years old who I didn't know. Did you know that this issue has come up and increased by 15 percent in the military?

[8 : 26] Perhaps we should go back to praying for our men and women in our services here.

Praying for our doctors, praying for our nurses, praying and helping all of our first responders who put their lives on the line.

People are hurting, people are in trouble, but we are not a people that celebrates death. We celebrate life, life in Christ, life eternal.

Jesus came so that we might have life, not death, life, and that abundantly, life eternal. Verse John 5 says, and this is the testimony that God gave us, eternal life, and this life is in his son.

Whoever has the son has life. Whoever does not have the son does not have life. So I'm going to quickly look at the passage in Deuteronomy 30 here, and this is Deuteronomy 30, 19, and it says very quickly here, it's a time in which we have Moses who tries to renew the covenants of God with the people of Israel.

They stand at Moab, and he explains the blessings and the curses of the law to all the people in no uncertain terms, and now he calls them to make a choice for which he will bear witness.

[10 : 04] I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse, therefore, choose life, love, that you and your offspring may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and the length of your days.

What a wonderful passage, what a wonderful opportunity that he sets before the people of God, and he sets that still, though this historical context, yes, is for Israel, but I think it's still true for us today.

Choose life, choose blessing, why choose death? What a glorious invitation to enter into a love relationship with God, the God of the universe.

I love the phrase, for he is your life and the length of your days. He is your life. He will determine the length of your days.

Can we say that today? Can you say that today? Can you say it with hope? He is your life, I am his, he is mine. Isn't that what we confess when we listen to the Heidelberg Catechism question one?

[11 : 30] What is the only comfort in life and death? That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but I belong unto my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who, with his precious blood, has fully satisfied for all my sins and delivered me from all the power of the devil, and so preserved me so that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head, yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, and therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely willing and ready henceforth to live for him.

Yes, we choose life. If you're listening to me out there, have you done that? Have you found life in Jesus Christ?

I want to move on here to Romans. So when Moses said this law, these words, as he focused on the law of God, and obedience to God in that setting.

But Paul looked at this very same passage in Deuteronomy 30, and he says, you know what?

Jesus has even a clearer way for righteousness. This righteousness is based on faith.

There is no need to go up to heaven. Jesus has already come down. There is no need to go into the abyss, the dead. Jesus has already risen from the dead, and he is the victor over death.

[13:16] My victory, my victory. We have that victory because of Christ. We cannot even choose life unless it is by his grace.

And so Paul makes that very clear. This is a life that is made possible in Christ, and here is the key that leads up to our consideration of Jonah. It's not about race, it's about faith.

Everyone, everyone, hear these words, everyone who believes in him, no distinction between Jew and Greek, for everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

There is no distinction, for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him, for everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

But you know, right after that passage, it asks an interesting question, in fact, four questions. How will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how will they believe in him in whom they've never heard?

[14:27] And how will they hear without someone preaching? preaching? And how will they preach unless they are sent? Oh, this is a good time to talk about missions, is it not?

In this setting. And thus we come to Jonah. But you know this story, you know this story all too well. Everybody, even unbelievers know the story about Jonah. Jonah doesn't want to go to Nineveh. Jonah doesn't want to preach. Jonah can't stand the Ninevites. He fears them for their terrible reputation for destroying cities. You know the story.

He takes the ship to Tarshish instead. But God has some other plans for Jonah. Recently, Jonah got in the news a little bit again and people talked about them because there was this picture of a diver who was caught in the mouth of a whale.

It's not exactly the same thing here. A whale is not a fish, but you get the picture. I don't know if we have that picture, but maybe they'll find it somewhere along the way.

[15:43] Yes, Jonah ended up in the belly of a whale or a fish. And while he was there, he prayed some wonderful prayers. And yes, Jonah finally went to Nineveh and he walked around this city for three days calling the people to repent, to turn away from their idols and worship the true and living God of Israel, that they, these people, that if they did not do so, their great city would be overthrown.

And lo and behold, guess what? The people actually believed God. They repented. They began to fast and pray and even the king, begins to believe.

He, he makes a decree so that there's, there's mass fasting all over the country. Even the animals have to fast. Let everyone turn from their evil ways, says the king, and from the violence that is in his hands.

Who knows? God may turn his fierce anger so that he may, so that we may not perish. And you know what?

God did relent. You know, the thing about the book of Jonah, it has this great insight about who God is. And it presents both human choice and decision making on the one hand.

[17:13] At the same time, it shows the sovereign, overpowering reign of God in all things. It's a wonderful book to study that. I can't explain it here.

I just know it's there. They choose life. They choose life. And that should have been the end of the story. That should have been the end of the book.

But Jonah has a real problem, or so he thinks. And so we're going to go to that book of Jonah, chapter one. Jonah has a complaint.

He has an excuse. He has a I told you so. Did you hear it when we were reading? Now there's legitimate complaints, and then there are complaints that express ingratitude or discontent in an unjustified way.

That's the kind of complaint Jonah had. And yet, as we read this, right in the middle of this, in Jonah's complaint, we can learn some remarkable things about God.

[18:24] So, we're going to take a look at Jonah, chapter four, verse one. But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he was angry.

He was really, really angry. angry. This is the first time Jonah is angry, but it won't be the last time. The pagans of Nineveh are fasting and repenting, but Jonah is mad.

How ironic. God does what he says he will do, and he relents, and Jonah is not a happy camper. He's not a happy prophet.

God has answered his prayer, but Jonah is not satisfied. He'd rather complain. Hmm.

Has God ever answered your prayer and done exactly what you've asked him to do? Were you glad? Were you satisfied?

[19 : 35] Were you sad? Were you disappointed? what if the Lord really did save your ex? Or your boyfriend, who left you and dumped you?

Or your girlfriend? She did the same. Oh, you don't have one? Hmm. Okay. What about that boss at work? He was just a terrible supervisor.

He gives you a hard time. What would happen if he actually came to know the Lord and showed up at your Bible study for prayer?

Would you be happy? Would you rejoice? Or would you be sitting there angry? God, not him, not her.

Wow. You know, the words in Hebrew of this says that it displeased Jonah exceedingly and he was angry. You could also say it was evil to Jonah, a great evil.

[20 : 42] It was a calamity. It was evil to Jonah. It was a great wrong. So what are you angry about today? Who are you angry with?

As you go into this new year, I want you to consider your own anger and take a very close look at it. Let me encourage you to tell God about the things that anger you, things that make you mad.

And then you need to ask yourself, is there anything that I need to repent about about this anger?

Most of all, what you really need to do is remember who you're praying to.

Believe it or not, Jonah actually got this first part sort of right. Jonah prays.

This is his second prayer. He says, And Jonah prayed to the Lord, Oh Lord, this is not what I said, is this not what I said when I was yet in my country?

[21 : 52] That's why I made haste to flee to Tarshish, but this part, part B, for I knew that you are a gracious God, merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from disaster.

Wow. A gracious God, abounding in love, and relenting from disaster.

God, that's the God we serve. Most of all, what Jonah knows is really spot on.

And if you read from Exodus 34, which is where some of this comes from here, the Lord passed before him, that is Moses, the Lord proclaims his own self here, and it says, the Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgressions and sin.

do you believe that God can relent? This pandemic has been with us for quite a while here now. I don't know all the reasons why.

[23 : 27] Can it ever change? Can people really change here? God so, when you think about it, and you read that he is your life, that's who you're talking to.

And yes, God can relent. There's a Hebrew word for it, it's nacham, and it means to sigh, to sorrow, to pity, to change one's mind, comfort, and compassion.

Can God do that? Can he do that for us in our setting now? Yes, he can. The sovereign God can do anything he wants to do.

He's the Lord. But Jonah doesn't get it right. Verse three of this passage here.

It says, as he continues his prayer, this is Jonah's suicidal prayer. Therefore now, O Lord, after having said all of that, he says, therefore, now, O Lord, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live.

[24 : 47] Hmm. Better for me to die than to live? He just doesn't get it right. He wants to die. How crazy is this?

This is a complete opposite of what he had prayed already in chapter two, verse six, when he was in the belly of the well. He was so grateful to be alive. He said, you brought me out of the pit.

Why can't Jonah rejoice over the repentance and salvation of his enemies, the Ninevites? why can't Jonah rejoice over the mercy that God has shown these Ninevites?

I'll tell you why. Because it's true about us. Jonah thinks his view of justice is better than God's.

He knows better than God. He knows what's right. And these people are wrong. These people are no good.

[25 : 54] These people are enemies. These people are trouble. And God, you just don't have it right. I have a better understanding of justice.

That's a dangerous place to be. If you are angry about something, have you ever questioned that anger? Well, by the way, if you didn't know what the points of my sermon are here, I'm going to ask them to put it up for you here so that you can see it here.

It's basically is really two big ideas, two primary ideas, and that is choose life right here and now, and life eternal in Christ Jesus as God gives you opportunity.

He is our hope. I hope you've heard that already. But there's another part to it here, and it comes in with the rest of this story. As God directs you, live the life of mercy and compassion and love for others, especially for the lost, and even for people that you can't stand.

Oh, we need that this year. We need that as we go into this year and this setting. We're going to set up again. Apparently, COVID is not going away.

[27 : 21] There's going to be a row, a sigma, or whatever, and people are suffering in this new year. They're tired of this pandemic. There's going to be new variants.

There's going to be wars or rumors of wars. The persecuted church is still going to struggle. The poor are continuing to be around with no hope of ever getting a vaccine, maybe, and perhaps most egregious, the lost.

will remain lost unless the people of God show the world that same mercy, compassion, and love that God has to everyone.

Get the everyone. Jonah didn't get that. Whether they deserve it or not, and yeah, some of them don't, but neither did you.

And he saved you. The Bible says, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Did he not do that?

[28 : 28] It's interesting as this goes on, verse 4, it says, and the Lord said, do you do well to be angry? That's what I've been asking you to think about today.

Whatever is ruminating in your heart and mind, whatever you have done. Do you do well to be angry about that? Here. Have you ever questioned your anger?

What's its source? What's its history? Is it really justifiable? Oh, by the way, did you notice that God didn't answer Jonah's prayer to kill himself? Choose life, not death.

Sometimes you better be thankful that God does not answer your misguided prayers. God because we can pray some foolishness sometimes thinking that we're praying.

Oh, Lord. We certainly can. It goes on, verse 5, Jonah went out to the city and he sat in the east city and he made a booth for himself there and he sat there under the shade until he should see what was going to become of the city.

[29 : 38] I think Jonah was sitting there thinking, God's going to change his mind because he knows I'm right here. Fuming, sitting there.

You think God's going to change his mind? Truth be told, the truth be told, two decades later, the Assyrians actually do come and destroy the northern kingdom but that also was in God's plan.

verse 6 says, now God appointed a plant and made it come over Jonah that it might be a shade over his head to save him from the discomfort.

So Jonah was exceedingly glad because of the plant. Sitting out there roasting in that heat, he'd made himself a little booth but that wasn't enough.

and God sent him a plant. Aren't you glad God sends plants every now and then? When we're in distress and we're in great struggle, God sends a plant and it says here that God's going to teach Jonah something by sending him this plant, it says that in his discomfort he shows mercy and Jonah does exactly what some of us would do.

[31 : 18] He's all happy now. What happened to the guy who said, I want to die, kill me. What happened to him? Oh no, when he's blessed, now he's glad, now he's happy.

God is going to use this to teach Jonah a few things. Do you not see the great compassion that God has for Jonah?

And we're like Jonah, aren't we? Glad when God answers our prayers just the way we want.

Exceedingly glad, just like he was exceedingly mad.

And God takes care of our discomfort, and we're glad. But do we forget the giver because we're focused so much on the gift that he has given us?

Can we think about how much better we are? But did Jonah really think about this plan? Did he ever think about where it came from, how it got here? This is a blessing from God.

[32 : 22] He focused on the gift, but perhaps not the giver. Notice the word God appointed. It's a Hebrew word that means to assign, to count, to determine, to weigh out.

God appointed a plant. But we're also going to see, as through the rest of this text, as we move through it, God appoints a worm. And he also appoints a scorching east.

When? This story isn't over. You've not been put on this earth by mistake. God has appointed the times and the times for all our lives.

Everything that happens in your life will happen in your life by God's appointment. And even when you try to do a Jonah, God is not thrown off.

He is in control. Jonah tries to flee from the presence of the Lord, but he couldn't do it and neither can you. And that's why the psalmist says, where shall I go from your spirit or where shall I flee from your presence?

[33 : 35] As I ascend to heaven, you are there. If I make my bed and chill, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me.

If I say, surely the darkness shall cover me and light about me be night. even the darkness is not dark to you.

The night is bright as day, for darkness is as light to you. There's no place to run. There's no place to hide.

That's why we choose life, for he is our life. If anybody had a right to say, I want to die, that could have been Job.

Job went through all sorts of things, lost property, lost children, stuff messed with his health here. And Job instead said, and Job rose up when he experienced this, and he tore his robe, and he shaved his head, and he fell on the ground.

[34 : 48] And he worshipped. Did you get that? He worshipped. And he said, naked I came into my mother's womb, from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return.

The Lord gave, and the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. And in this, Job did not sin, or charge God with wrong. He said, shall I receive good from God, and shall we not receive? Yes, the word, same word used in this passage, evil. In this, Job did not sin with his lips. How do you deal with the worms that come in your life?

Because God appointed the plant, I'm glad, but then he appointed a worm. The worm killed the plant, and then Job was mad again.

I want to speak personally here. You know who you are, and I hope you're listening. I'm speaking metaphorically. Worms will come.

[36 : 04] Life is sometimes hard, but I urge you in Jesus' name not to give up. Do exactly what Jonah did first. call on the name of the Lord in your distress.

He will hear your prayer. He will hear your voice. He will bring you out of the pit, for he is a gracious and loving God. His steadfast, his acid love will take you through.

He has a purpose for your life. And that's why you were still breathing when they found you.

He said, an angel, just like he did Elijah, to comfort and to feed. We have an appointment, a final appointment, but that's God's decision.

Now, ours, you have a loving family. People love you. Choose life. Choose life. Choose life. Finally, here, the Lord really exposes the heart and anger of Jonah.

[37 : 23] But more importantly, he shows his amazing divine nature. He turns the tables and he puts the question to Jonah, you are so angry about the loss of a plant.

The loss of a plant, he says. A plant that you didn't have anything to do with it. I did it. I brought that into your life.

Should I not show pity, mercy, compassion, love, to Nineveh, that great city, in which there are a hundred and twenty thousand and more, and animals, animals there, should I not show love to them?

Do you get it? Do you hear it? when God looks on us, when God sees us, all sorts of people, he has just right to bring disaster and calamity, and yet he relents, because he's loving, and kind, and good, and he shows compassion.

Jesus was models for us this very thing. In Matthew it says, Jesus went through the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every disease, and every affliction, and when he saw the crowds, the people, people are more important than the plant.

[39 : 05] When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

And then he said to his disciples, the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few, therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.

And that's where we are, you and I. people need the Lord. Brothers and sisters, people that you don't like, people that you think are destroying America, people that don't know their right hand from their left, isn't that what it said in the passage here?

COVID or no COVID, he has prepared good works for you to do at his appointed time.

Salvation belongs to the Lord. And so, let's join in and rejoice in this new year.

[40 : 25] Why? Not out of fear, but out of this opportunity that we've been given. We celebrate life, life in Christ Jesus, life eternal.

Do your work, write your poems, paint your pictures, make your music, sit down with those for whom, as the poet said, life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

It's been hard. Sit down and listen to a few of these folks. This is a great opportunity for this year, with the other 363 days left, to do just that.

Let's spread the fragrance of Christ everywhere. You know, as Paul talks about it in 1 Corinthians, we have, we join this procession, and we have the fragrance of Christ, and that's the fragrance that is to people, life, life, and it's only death to those who do not, who do not embrace this fragrance.

Let's stink up the place. with the fragrance of Christ in all of what we do. Let's do it for his glory.

Let's pray.

[41 : 54] Father God, will you take now these words and challenge us, Lord, to hear, to hear from heaven that you are a loving, gracious, kind God, who for reasons we can't even fully explain, you take pity on the guilty, and you forgive.

You did it for those sailors when they repented, you kept them alive. You did it for Jonah twice. He should have drowned in that water, but you kept him alive.

You did it for the people of Nineveh when they turned to you, and Lord, we believe that you can do this for our world today, and help us, empower us, gift us, challenge us, lead us, Spirit of God, to follow you in love, and compassion, and mercy.

This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.